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Survive or thrive? Readiness to teach in early childhood centres through the lens of organisational culture.

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This article considers the influence of organisational culture in early childhood centres on the new teacher's readiness to teach. Organisational culture has not been well explored in early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand, yet my PhD research has shown it to be a powerful influence on the teaching and learning that occurs in centres (Radford, 2015). After introducing Schein's (2016) model as the framework for my discussion, I will suggest how organisational culture can impact the new teacher's sense of efficacy, belonging and wellbeing. I then draw on my research to explore organisational culture as a curriculum issue, with examples showing how children's active development of working theories from their experiences of the organisational culture of their setting may lead to unintended and troublesome learning that their teachers are oblivious to. The new teacher is uniquely positioned to notice all levels of a centre's culture, and I conclude my discussion by suggesting ways they can uncover and share this with the team to enhance not only their own readiness to teach, but to strengthen teaching and learning in the centre, supporting everyone to thrive.

Introduction

Beginning a teaching position as a newly qualified teacher can be an exciting time. Graduates have succeeded in their study, completed a number of practical hours in centres, demonstrated professional behaviours and skills, and been deemed sufficiently capable and competent by their initial teacher education provider to be recommended to the *Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand* for registration and a provisional practising certificate. These processes give confidence to both the neophyte teacher and their employer that they are ready to teach.

Typically, graduates are filled with a sincere desire to be the best teacher they can be to make a positive difference to children's lives (Breaux, 2024), and they arrive in their new early childhood centre eager to make their contribution. It is during these early days and weeks that the beginning teacher will see, hear and feel most clearly, a powerful influence that will impact their actions and decisions as a teacher, just as it is already influencing what the existing teaching team do, how they talk about and justify the everyday teaching and learning in the setting, and the curriculum that the children experience. However, this

influence is unlikely to have formed part of their preparation for teaching. Further, the people in the setting are unlikely to be consciously aware of the core of this influence, making it all the more powerful (McKenna, 2020; Schein, 2016). This nebulous yet deeply pervasive influence on teaching and learning in an early childhood centre is organisational culture.

This article draws on findings from my PhD research (Radford, 2015) to show how the neophyte teacher's readiness to teach will be influenced by the organisational culture of their new setting – a fundamental aspect currently largely ignored. I argue that by intentionally focussing on this culture, the fresh perspective brought by the new teacher provides valuable insights which can strengthen the teaching and learning in the centre. This, in turn, supports the new teacher, the children, and the existing teach team to grow and thrive.

What is organisational culture?

To develop an understand organisational culture, it is useful to begin with the wider concept of culture. This term, of longstanding interest in social sciences, is used to describe the collective values, beliefs and practices of a group of people (Jones & Mistry, 2019). Culture as a socially constructed phenomenon varies between groups, and it is significant in how people understand and engage with their worlds, influencing their actions (Schubert, 2022). It includes features such as language, rituals, history, shared meanings, how people interact, and what's considered acceptable, desirable, and unacceptable behaviour (McKenna, 2020). The term has come to be important in early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand and is recognised in the mandated early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017), which states, "This curriculum acknowledges that all children have rights to… recognition of their language, culture and identity" (p. 12).

Where the concept of culture is usually thought about in a broad, societal sense, organisational culture takes the same ideas and applies them to the smaller context of organisations. So, organisational culture varies between organisations, which have their own values, beliefs, history, ways of using language, and generally accepted ways of doing things. What people do is significantly influenced by the organisational culture of the setting (Schein, 2016). Organisational culture is sometimes referred to in simple terms as 'the way we do things around here', a description first made popular by Deal and Kennedy (1982) and popularly used since (Elsmore, 2017).

Levels of organisational culture in early childhood centres

Some aspects of organisational culture in an early childhood centre are easy for newcomers to discern (Radford, 2015). How do people dress? What resources and artefacts are provided, for adults and for children? What is displayed on the walls, and who decides this? How do teachers talk about themselves

and what they do? What is and isn't talked about with children, and with families? What is celebrated here, and how? What stories from the past are told about this place? How are leaders and managers talked with, and about? These elements of a setting's organisational culture are readily visible and audible in the setting, making them open to discussion and debate.

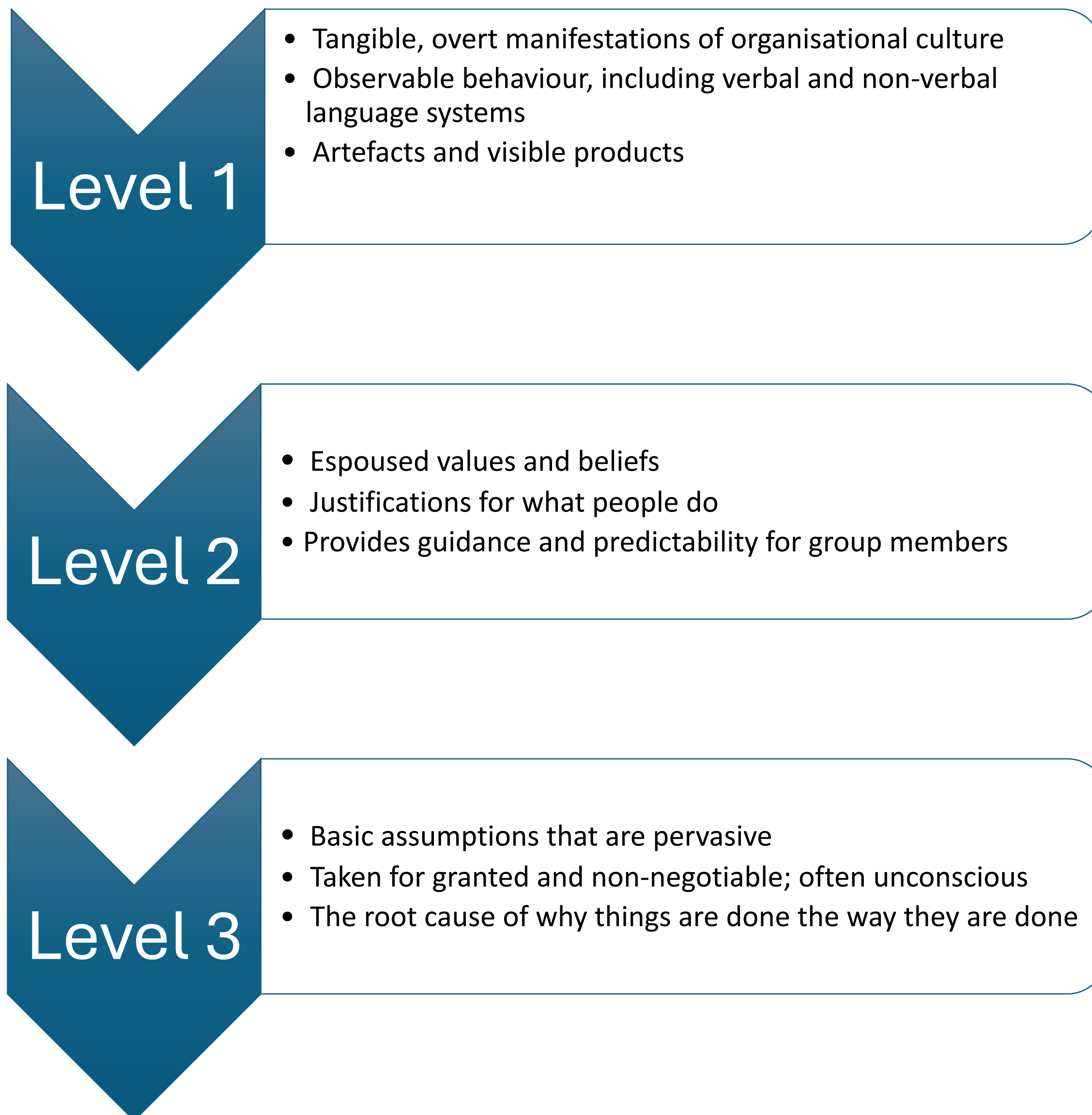
But according to Schein (2016), these are the most superficial features of an organisation's culture. Although they signal what people in the group care about, understanding a setting's culture means going deeper into the second level, where the values and beliefs that are used to justify these observable signs sit.

The espoused values and beliefs at this second level of organisational culture come about through the accumulation of shared experiences which have stabilised over time into "pattern of beliefs and values that give meaning to the daily activities and work of the group" (Schein, 2016, p. 6). They are effective in guiding group members in what is expected and acceptable day-to-day behaviour, thus providing meaning and predictability. In an early childhood centre, these espoused values and beliefs are typically found documented in the centre philosophy and local curriculum statements, which outline what is important learning here; in position descriptions, which clarify what is expected of teachers, leaders and managers; and in key policies and procedures such as the desired pedagogical strategies for growing children's social and emotional competence (Radford, 2015).

Yet in Schein's (2016) view, this still does not reach the essence of an organisation's culture. There is a third, even deeper level, which underpins the espoused beliefs and values. Schein describes this as consisting of unconscious assumptions and taken-for granted beliefs, perceptions, and ways of thinking and feeling that are buried deeply in how the group operates. In his view, these are the root causes that drive the two upper levels of an organisation's culture, and they are so fundamental and all-encompassing that they are simply no longer thought about by members of the group. He describes this level of the way things are done in the organisation as both pervasive and non-negotiable (Schein, 2016). In an early childhood centre, examples might be that teachers must be busy or they are not doing their job, that harmony and loyalty amongst teachers matter more than challenging each other's pedagogy, or that children are expected to obey adults.

Figure 1 below summarises Schein's (2016) model of organisational culture, which forms the framework for my discussion.

Figure 1. Summary of Schein's (2016) model of organisational culture



Transmitting the organisational culture of the early childhood centre to the new teacher

One of the important ways in which organisational culture is transmitted is through the socialisation of newcomers (McKenna, 2020; Schein, 2016). Typically, it is expected that adults new to an organisation will and should rapidly learn, accept and fit in with the established ways of the existing group, prioritising this over their own preferences as part of showing their commitment to their new role (Ashforth et al., 2018). Schein goes so far as to describe this willingness as “the price of admission to the group” (2016, p. 8).

To assist the beginning teacher’s transition to the early childhood centre, an induction programme is typically put in place. This formal socialisation process will usually include provision of key policies and

processes to be followed, discussion of the centre philosophy statement and local curriculum, a staff handbook, the opportunity to observe teachers experienced in the centre, and so on. These processes focus on the upper two layers of Schein's (2016) model, clarifying what people are expected to do here and the justifications for why things are to be done in these ways (Radford, 2015).

However, it is the informal socialisation that occurs as the newcomer experiences first-hand the actions of group members and hears how the espoused group values and beliefs are talked about, that draws them closer to the deeper essence and core drivers of the centre's culture (Schein, 2016). The early days and weeks in an organisation are the time that the newcomer will be particularly sensitive to the points of dissonance and incongruity within and between the upper levels of the centre's culture that are the indicators of these deeper core beliefs.

Illustrative examples of inconsistencies in the upper two levels of the culture in an early childhood centre might be:

- The centre's philosophy statement emphasises a belief in the importance of independence and self-help for children. The new teacher is instructed to cut and serve the fruit for morning tea into children's bowls and to pour water into mugs before handing one to each child.
- The teaching team constantly emphasises to children the importance of tidying the areas they have been playing in before moving off. The new teacher notices the permanent mess in the adult spaces of the same rooms.
- The centre philosophy statement emphasises the importance of encouraging children to take safe risks in the managed environment. The new teacher constantly hears teachers saying to children, "Careful, don't hurt yourself!"
- The centre philosophy statement talks of child empowerment and the value of child-led play. The new teacher notices the centre routine means there is never more than twenty minutes at a time available to children for sustained, self-directed activities.
- The importance of relationships and communication with parents is frequently spoken of in staff meetings. The new teacher notices there are no adult-sized couches or chairs for parents to use; conversations must be had standing up.

The above examples of mixed messages being received from a centre's organisational culture can serve to undermine the beginning teacher's confidence in their ability to teach as expected and required here, leaving them uncertain, discombobulated, and potentially anxious. This matters, because teacher stress and a decreased sense of self-efficacy have both been linked to lowered educational outcomes for learners (Dicke et al., 2015; Mennes et al., 2024). Additionally, the new teacher's sense of belonging in the setting is put at risk, affecting not only their own wellbeing (Gordon, 2020), but according to Arndt (2018), the overall wellbeing of the children in the setting. These impacts are intensified when existing

team members are oblivious to the core beliefs and assumptions that have given rise to the troublesome inconsistencies, meaning the newcomer's attempts to raise them for clarification may be perceived as challenging and confronting (Schein, 2016).

For these reasons, the new teacher's initial eagerness to contribute can shift towards merely coping, as they navigate the complexities of being ready to teach in *this* place.

Investigating organisational culture as a curriculum issue in an early childhood centre

Being ready to teach means knowing what is to be taught, which in early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand means implementation of the mandated curriculum *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017). Organisational culture as a curriculum issue is evident in the goal from the Belonging | Mana whenua strand, that teachers will grow children's competence in "understanding how things work here" (MoE, 2017, p. 32). This includes children's ability to predict routines and to understand what is "acceptable and valued behaviour" (ibid, p. 32) and the reasons for this. These ideas link clearly to levels 1 and 2 of Schein's (2016) model of organisational culture, as children learn what people can be expected to do here and the espoused values and beliefs that sit beneath these expectations.

In my PhD research, I was interested in exploring further, the influence of an early childhood centre's organisational culture for children's experiences. This was not something that had been previously investigated in Aotearoa New Zealand; those very few studies that investigated organisational culture in an early childhood centre were focused on the adult's experiences.

My overall research approach was a case study within a qualitative, interpretivist research paradigm, which allowed me to delve deeply into the everyday life of one early learning centre located in a suburb of a major city. The centre was licensed for a maximum of 32 children between the ages of two and five years, and it was full with a waiting list. Five of the six permanent full-time teachers were qualified, one of whom was the designated manager.

Once informed consent was received, data was gathered through individual interviews with all staff, the centre owner and founder, four children and their parents, a focus group interview with teachers, 24 hours of direct observations of life in the centre, artefact and document analysis and my own reflective notes. Data was analysed according to a grounded theory approach, including identifying enacted social norms, which were found to be fundamental to understanding the children's experiences of the centre culture.

Transmitting organisational culture to children

Just as new teachers undergo socialisation processes on joining the centre, new children also experience socialisation when they become a member of the centre community. For children, this socialisation, which transmits the existing organisational culture, occurs largely through teachers explicitly and repeatedly explaining the centre's existing social norms and supporting children's compliance with these (Radford, 2015).

Social norms are behavioural expectations shared by group members, which promote and sustain actions within the group (Bicchieri & Mercier, 2014). Thus, social norms are about the standards of behaviour that are desired, expected, permitted, tolerated, frowned upon, and forbidden within the group. In terms of Schein's (2016) model of organisational culture, they sit at both Level 1 (what people do) and Level 2 (reasons given for what people do or should do).

Analysis of my data revealed scores of social norms teachers were explicitly teaching children in the centre (Radford, 2015). I saw teachers use a variety of techniques to ensure children learned and complied with the centre's established social norms, including directly instructing them in what to do and what not to do, making suggestions, prompting their memories, praising when correct actions were noticed, gentle correction when norms were broken, explaining the reasons for a norm, role modelling compliance themselves, and acting as a public enforcer for norms (Radford, 2015).

This is not to imply, however, that being ready to teach means the new teacher need simply learn the centre's social norms for the children and then step into line with the existing team by teaching and enforcing these. My research showed that children do much more than passively accept the centre's social norms as presented to them by teachers.

Children developing working theories about organisational culture

Sociocultural theory positions children as active constructors and interpreters making sense of their worlds (Jones & Mistry, 2019). This understanding is reflected in the Exploration | Mana aotūroa strand of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), which includes the goal that teachers will provide an environment in which children can grow and refine their working theories for making sense of their worlds, including their social world.

Working theories are defined in *Te Whāriki* as "the evolving ideas and understandings that children develop as they use their existing knowledge to try to make sense of new experiences" (MoE, 2017, p. 23). Hedges (2021) characterises children's efforts to build working theories as earnest, as they strive to make sense of their experiences to enable more effective participation. Children's efforts to develop

working theories to understand the cultural values and practices of their centres has been illustrated by Davis and McKenzie (2017).

In alignment with these ideas, I noticed in my own research that the youngest, newest children, who were two years old, were actively focused on growing working theories about the social norms of the centre in order to get their needs met (Radford, 2015). For example, there were many social norms around eating times that needed to be learned to successfully participate in this essential routine: washing hands before coming to the table, learning which tables it was okay to eat at, occupying just one space at a table, remaining seated while eating, using only one cup, keeping one's body to oneself, eating within the specified time limit, and so on.

More experienced children who had been in the centre longer, however, had developed more nuanced working theories about the social norms upon which the organisational culture of the setting rested. For example, older children were increasingly able to use their knowledge of the social norms they had learned to predict when unwanted teacher attention was likely to occur. At such times, they responded with strategies of their own such as avoiding eye contact and turning their backs to avoid interaction with the teacher (Radford, 2015).

The oldest, most experienced children had developed complex working theories about the upper, visible levels of organisational culture of the centre – what teachers and children did and said was important here – and were able to deliberately and strategically employ these to get their own agendas of the moment met (Radford, 2015). Here is an example from my observational data (all names are pseudonyms):

> Brenda (the teacher) is at the table with the younger children, playing with playdough and talking to them about how it's very salty for their bodies and it's not for eating. In the background Mark and Sophie, two of the older children, are playing in the family area and Harry has drifted over from the playdough table and is trying to get in on their game. Mark and Sophie try various ways of excluding him such as turning their backs to him, ignoring what he says, telling him to go away, and even moving the equipment round as something of a blockade, but he persists. Mark goes over to Brenda and says, "Brenda, Harry was eating the playdough, he had it on his fingers and he put it in his mouth." Brenda goes over to Harry, sees playdough under his fingernails and has a long talk with him about how many germs he's just eaten. This finishes with him being escorted by Brenda to the rubbish bin to empty the playdough from under his fingernails into the bin – and a reminder that he is a role model for the little kids so he mustn't eat it.

Mark used his sophisticated working theory of an explicit centre norm that forbids eating playdough (Level 2 of Schein's [2016] model) to accurately predict how the teacher will act when made aware of an apparent violation (Level 1 of the model), thus effectively using the teacher as an unwitting accomplice to exclude another child from his play.

Children's awareness of unspoken assumptions at the deepest level of organisational culture

The examples raised so far sit at the two upper levels of Schein's (2016) model of organisational culture. They show children developing working theories as they make sense of the centre culture through known social norms, then using their knowledge of those norms with increasing sophistication. My data showed that children were also aware of some of the pervasive, taken-for-granted assumptions that sat at the deepest level of how things were done in the centre. I noticed, for example, that when older children received an unwelcome instruction or refusal from a teacher, they would commonly respond by finding a teacher who was unaware of the first interaction and trying again. Instances of this include a child at the lunch table who had been told by one teacher that she had to try tomato; she waited for that teacher to swap with another and leave the food area before telling the second teacher she didn't want to try tomato, and that teacher told her this was fine. Older children who had been told they couldn't play outside without a jacket on, would typically respond by finding a teacher who had been out of earshot and asking again, sometimes successfully. If the child was later queried about being outside without a jacket, the child could truthfully respond by saying that another teacher had said this was okay.

That children would wait and ensure the first teacher was unlikely to notice the repeat of their request to another teacher showed their awareness of an unspoken, taken-for-granted assumption sitting deeply in the centre's organisational culture, that teachers would not knowingly undermine each other's decisions (Radford, 2015).

Children's unintended learning at the core of the centre's organisational culture

My data showed that children were also developing their own unspoken yet deeply held assumptions and beliefs arising from the centre culture, that teachers remained unaware of. An example arose when three of the oldest children went outside to play after lunch, accompanied by a teacher. They were soon playing an imaginary game of 'doggies', taking each other for short walks, asking each other to sit or lie down on command and so forth. The teacher disappeared around the side of the building out of the children's view, and one of the children looked up and noticed her leaving. She quickly looked around her, noticed me as the only other adult within her sightline, and called out to me, "Hey, can you look after us? Can you look after us?"

I was initially astounded that this nearly-five-year-old, playing a low-risk game in a safe environment, felt she needed looking after. On reflection, I realised that many of the social norms the children had been

deliberately taught and that were enforced by teachers were explicitly justified on the grounds of safety. Although *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) calls on teachers to view children as capable and competent, the organisational culture of the centre, with the consistently high level of supervision experienced by children and the constant messages about safety, taught this child something different and unintended. She had developed the pervasive, unspoken belief that she was unsafe unless she was being watched by an adult (Radford, 2015).

Another example of children learning something unintended at the deepest level of the centre's culture occurred when Charlie (aged two years), Mark and Quentin (both aged four) were working quietly at an inside artinside art table. Charlie stumbled, fell over and began crying piteously. The two older boys appeared not to notice, continuing quietly with their play. After about two minutes of crying, teacher Carol came out from the sleep room and went over to Charlie, asking what had happened. Without pausing in his work, Mark told her that Charlie tripped over, and Carol comforted him.

What made this moment of particular significance was that the centre had recently completed an internal evaluation whereby the teachers thought they had established as a centre norm that older, more experienced children were to help care for and support the younger ones. Indeed, when I had earlier chatted with Mark, he had told me himself that it was his job as a big kid to look after the little ones. And yet, despite this public espousal of how things were to be done in the centre, neither older boy saw it as their role to do anything to help or comfort Charlie. This indicated to me that they had developed a deeper, taken-for-granted belief which was at the core of the centre's organisational culture, in direct opposition to the publicly espoused social norm. Despite the rhetoric, the pervasive assumption was that it was for adults to take care of crying children (Radford, 2015).

My observations had shown that teachers in this centre were usually very quick to respond to crying children; the two-minute delay on this occasion was an anomaly. Children had noticed the usual pattern of teacher behaviour when a child cried and concluded from this there was no need for them to respond. The children's own sense making of how things were done in the centre had resulted in them learning not to respond to the distress of other children, despite teachers believing they had taught the opposite. The fact that this was not only unintended learning, but that teachers believed something quite different about their teaching, makes it all the more troublesome (Radford, 2015).

This part of my discussion has shown how children make their own sense of the organisational culture of the early childhood centre, including developing pervasive assumptions and beliefs at the deepest level that their teachers are unaware of. I contend that it is not the case that these working theories are hidden. Rather, they are simply overlooked (Radford, 2015). Therefore, being ready to teach when entering an early childhood centre requires the neophyte teacher to develop their understanding of not

just what is to be explicitly taught here at the visible and espoused levels of the centre culture, but to be alive to what is being taught at the deeper core.

Uncovering a centre's organisational culture

I have argued that applying an organisational culture focus to the notion of readiness to teach in an early childhood centre is crucial for the new teacher's own sense of efficacy and wellbeing, and to understand more clearly the curriculum the children are experiencing. Importantly, the early days and weeks in the centre, before their own socialisation has taken full effect, provide a unique window of opportunity for uncovering elements from all levels of the centre's culture, along with the sense children are making of this. Making deliberate use of this period to uncover those aspects can be a valuable and significant contribution from the new teacher.

A useful starting place is to focus on visible signs of the centre's culture by reflecting on questions such as: what is the first thing you see, hear, feel and smell when you walk in the front door? What is in big letters on the walls? How do people move, and what does their body language say? What documented information are you given as a new teacher, and what is given to enrolling parents? It is insightful to crouch down to child height: what do children see when they enter the centre? What do they have ready access to, what can be seen but not reached, and what is out of sight?

To get closer to the deeper essence of the centre's culture and the sense children are making of this, the new teacher can look for patterns: what happens in the spaces of the centre that are continuously occupied, or rarely used, by teachers and by children? What gets a teacher's positive or negative attention here? What is it okay to laugh at, for children and for adults? What happens if someone (adult or child) voices a different view? What are the phrases teachers use repeatedly to children, to parents, and to each other? What does money gets spent on and who decides this? What does and doesn't get talked about by teachers in front of children, families, and leaders/managers? Once such patterns are identified, further insights will emerge from noticing any instances of an anomaly.

It is also important to engage in shared thinking with the children, encouraging them to express verbally and non-verbally, their understandings about how things are done here. A mindful approach is needed to avoid dominating or hijacking the children's perspective, instead listening intently with eyes as well as ears to become aware of children's working theories.

In my view that the greatest benefits of the new teacher paying such deliberate attention to the centre's organisational culture will be realised when they are encouraged and empowered to share their observations and perceptions with the wider team as wonderings. For this to be possible, leaders must establish a safe space where existing team members understand and accept that the intention is not to challenge. Rather, the aim must be to collaboratively analyse the information offered by the new teacher

to see what it reveals about the centre culture and the sense children are making of this. I contend that engaging in this collective critical inquiry - delving deeply into the mixed messages, the underlying assumptions that have slipped out of awareness, and the children's working theories – will inevitably lead to new insights. It will foster a deeper curiosity about children's learning, uncover what teachers may unknowingly be teaching through their actions, and prompt a critical evaluation and potential enhancement of pedagogy. In these ways, teaching becomes better informed with more intentional and purposeful responses to children, children's learning is better understood and enriched, and the whole centre benefits from a stronger shared purpose.

Conclusion

Applying the lens of organisational culture to readiness to teach expands that notion to consideration of what is being taught and learned in this place. This matters for the neophyte teacher's sense of efficacy, belonging and wellbeing, as they are faced with navigating the inconsistencies and mixed messages that arise from the various levels of the organisational culture of their new setting. Further, it is a curriculum issue, as ignoring the influence of organisational culture on children's development of working theories means closing one's eyes to a significant part of the children's learning. The examples from my research have illustrated how this can result in unintended and potentially problematic learning.

By taking organisational culture for granted, teachers miss its effects on teaching and learning (Radford, 2015). The neophyte teacher who has not yet been fully socialised into the way things are done in a centre is in a unique position to raise a fresh awareness. Centre leaders and teaching teams who recognise this critical window of opportunity and harness new teachers' perspectives support their readiness to teach in the centre while also making possible a significant strengthening of both teaching and learning in profound and impactful ways. This meaningful change supports teachers and children to thrive.

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