

Early Education



Volume 65 Spring / Summer 2019

- Politics of funding for Playcentre
- Walking the talk: Leadership in ECE
- Te Whariki and inclusive practice
- Soft skills of collaborative reading
- Joining a Kahui Ako
- Quality in ECE in China



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Contributions

Contributions of articles and photos are welcome from the early childhood community.

Early Education welcomes:

- Innovative practice papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words and up to five keywords.
- Research informed papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words, and up to five keywords.
- Think pieces with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Commentaries on management matters with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Book or resource reviews with a maximum of 1000 words.

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Building Bridges

Developing an ECE presence in Kāhui Ako

Christine Bailey

Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world. (Nelson Mandela, 2003)

Kāhui Ako provide kaiako with opportunities to collaborate with other professionals and to learn about and collaboratively address the educational challenges reflected in the community. (Ministry of Education, 2017)

These two quotes exemplify my thoughts about working within a Kāhui Ako (Community of learning). What a wonderful and interesting perspective: to work collaboratively with other professionals for the benefit of learners within one's community. It sounded ideal to me. In this paper I will talk about some of my experiences of joining a Kāhui Ako.

Joining a Kāhui Ako

Two years ago a serendipitous opportunity emerged for me to be part of the newly formed Mt Albert Kāhui Ako, as an early childhood education (ECE) representative. After some investigation I decided to attend a leadership meeting to see what it was like and if I could see a place for me there, as the idea of working alongside schools, sharing ideas for the benefit of our ākonga (students) really appealed to me.

My first meeting in the wood panelled board room of Mt Albert Grammar, steeped in history, felt so removed from the hub bub of kindergarten life. I sat on a leather chair as principals from local schools gathered. I watched as they shared pleasantries, smiling politely in my direction, but not knowing who I was or why I was there.

As the meeting progressed, I watched the determination and passion of these individuals as they spoke about their world, and tried to

fathom how their world could work in collaboration with ECE. I felt a quintessential outsider, as we often do when representing the ECE sector. Data collection and accountability were themes high on the agenda at these meetings. As I settled into my role as ECE person at the board table, I tried, very gently, to find how we could advance the voice of ECE within this group. Shelley Mickell, from Auckland Kindergarten Association (AKA), with her wealth of knowledge, supported me as I tried to find my way in this new milieu.

The importance of the critical friend to the Kāhui Ako

The Mt Albert Kāhui Ako had engaged Professor Christine Rubie-Davies from the University of Auckland as a expert partner, as Christine was working on developing her research around the 'theory of improvement'. The Kāhui Ako were keen to have some research happening within schools and centres, so it was seen to be a mutually advantageous relationship. Rubie-Davies's involvement is part of a research-practice partnership, aimed at building a clear pathway in which to positively influence all students in their quest for quality education. It would involve all sectors working together to implement high expectation principles, and collaborating to raise student achievement.

As I read about Rubie-Davies's (2014) work on 'theory of improvement', I was so excited because it seemed to link so beautifully with my understanding of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017). Rubie Davies (2015) argues that to have high expectations of learners, we must also have a positive image of the learner. The data the Kāhui Ako had previously collected made it clear that more work needed to be focused on supporting Maori and Pacific learners, which was also a theme of Rubie-Davies' research. As Rubie-Davies (2015) argues,

There is clear evidence that low academic expectations—evident in

the classroom, in structural features of schools, and in societal bias—can limit the educational opportunity of minority groups who are stigmatised. Educator (teacher and principal) expectations and beliefs become translated into practices that open or close doors to students and provide messages about the perceived ability of students.

Thus, educators can directly affect the life chances of students by either enriching or constraining opportunities to learn. These opportunities then become self-fulfilling prophecies—students learn what they are given the opportunity to learn, and thereby meet teachers’ expectations for them, high or low. As Ken Robinson (2011) states, “What we become as our lives evolve depends on the quality of our experiences here and now” (p. 36).

Rubie Davies also suggested that there would be potential to reshape the pedagogy offered, based on evidence collected. There could potentially be changes to school design and programmes, so that they best met the needs of all students, including underserved and low-income students. Using the high expectation principles from Rubie-Davies’ research, the Kahui Ako determined to focus on the following key principles:

- effective pedagogy,
- visible learning,
- learner agency,
- transitions,
- whānau engagement,
- collaboration,
- cultural intelligence.

Building an ECE voice through hui

As part of the ECE component of this work, it was suggested that I hold an ECE hui (meeting), but the challenge for me was to identify who do we invite to this initial hui. Many of the services within our area attract tamariki (children) from all over Auckland, so their learning pathway wasn’t clearly defined within our Kāhui Ako schools. In the end we formally invited the various local services to our kindergarten that did have small groups of learners who went on to local schools. This seemed like a reasonable place

to start, although we left the doors open to all interested ECE services.

The first ECE hui included leaders from the local schools. The Kāhui Ako lead shared the vision for the Kahui Ako and described progress, as well as formally welcoming the ECE contribution. It was a very powerful moment for me because at this hui the ECE voice was heard by the compulsory sector. ECE kaiako (educators) passionately shared their experiences and thoughts with the meeting.

I was then joined by Harriet O’Sullivan at the leadership table. Harriet is now one of our Area Leaders for the Auckland Kindergarten Association. Together we held further ECE hui to advance collaboration and grow relationships, sharing our developing knowledge on the ‘theory of improvement’. It became clear that as the Kāhui Ako was still forming, and the ECE services that attended were challenged to see their place within it, none of us really knew how it would come together.

In the pursuit of being inclusive of all ECE services we were getting little engagement. I thought long and hard on how to increase interest, and eventually came up with a manageable plan which I thought was worth a try. I invited AKA kindergarten teams from within the area to a hui. I suggested that it is through relationship we could make this work, so I suggested they buddy up with an Early Learning centre they already had a relationship with and to bring them along to the next hui to see if we could make a connection that way.

A small scale collaborative project

As Rubie Davies’ focus had been on primary school education prior to our involvement, she engaged Dr Maria Cooper from the University of Auckland, an ECE researcher, to work alongside us. Maria suggested it was important to include ECE in the research data collection, so it was decided to include a very small development research project based on the views of six 4-year-old children from our kindergarten. Our research question was:

- What are the perceptions of young children about their teachers’ expectations in relation to three key high expectation principles: ability grouping, class climate, goal setting?

This small study showed us that all the children enjoyed coming to kindergarten. They saw the environment as offering them interesting and different opportunities for learning. The children expressed that what they could do with their friends was what they enjoyed the most. The study showed that most of the children perceived their families were included, not excluded, on special trips and excursions.

While it was clear that the six children enjoyed their relationships with their teachers three children identified some things they did not like about being at kindergarten. These included the following:

- other children being mean to them,
- getting sand in ones' shoes,
- and not having white boards to write down things at the swings, the cranes and the making area.

These results have given us some things to reflect on as we promote high expectations of all children. Perhaps we also need to purchase some more white boards!

Moving forward

Following the completion of this project, the lead teacher of the Kāhui Ako changed, bringing with her new relationships and new values. The idea to engage with all ECE centres that have clear student pathways into the Kāhui Ako was no longer the driver. Geographical placement and interest in being involved became the new way forward, so the new lead teacher, who had existing relationships with ECE services, invited other services to join. Now we have five ECE services in our Kāhui Ako. One of the teachers from these services also joins me at meetings.

About this time the Ministry of Education formalised ECE involvement in Kahui Ako by offering some funding we could apply for. This policy shift seemed to be a bit of a game changer. The funding expressed the Ministry's recognition of the importance of having ECE involved.

The funding has allowed us to attend PD the Kāhui Ako has organised. I was delighted to attend the Effective Leadership workshop based on Vivian Robinson's research. We also used some of our funding to hold a informative PD evening for both ECE and schools, at which

teachers from Mangere Bridge Kindergarten shared their research on transition.

As you can see this is a process of learning between educational groups; it is a living thing that evolves and changes as we continue to develop collaboration and build relational trust. In this way, we can support schools in their preparation for our young learners who will be coming through. As Sir Ken Robinson (2010) argued, "We have to recognise that human flourishing is not a mechanical process; it's an organic process. And you cannot predict the outcome of human development. All you can do, like a farmer, is create the conditions under which they begin to flourish".

The next step for our five ECE services will be to come up with a further research question, related to the Theory of Improvement, which we could co-jointly investigate. I am excited to see what form this group will take next.

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