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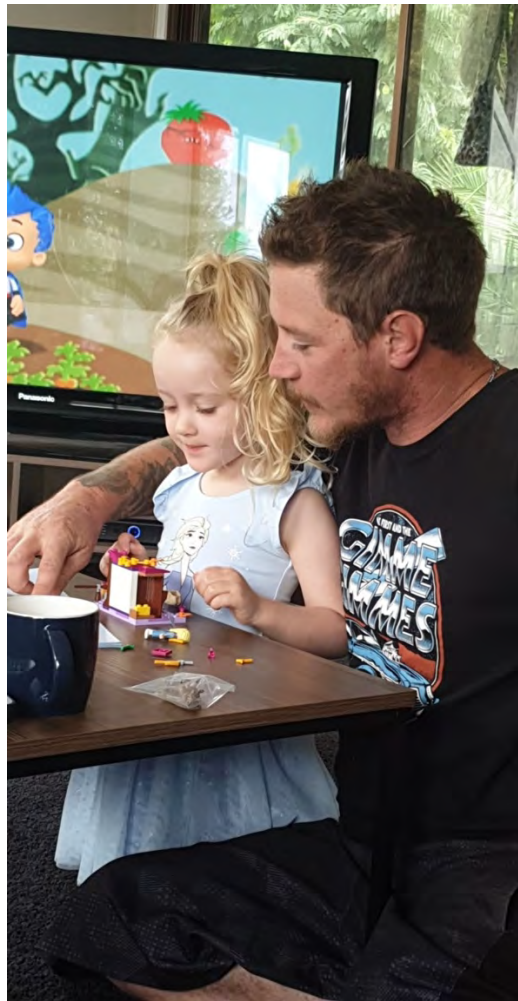
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The role of critical friends and organisational leadership in supporting teacher inquiries in ECE settings

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Abstract

The Teacher-Led Innovation Fund (TLIF) programme actively promoted the importance of external supports for the inquiries undertaken within TLIF projects. In this article we explore the ways in which two specific external supports—organisational leaders and critical friends—supported the work of the four kindergarten teams involved in the *Data, Knowledge, Action* TLIF project. Specific examples of the practical actions undertaken, and mentoring offered, are shared to illustrate how both the organisational leaders and critical friends contributed to the success of the project.

Keywords

Critical friend; external expert; organisational leaders; teacher inquiry; early childhood education; teacher practice.

Introduction

The earlier articles in this series on the *Data, Knowledge, Action* TLIF project have highlighted the success of each team as they used a range of data tools to gather information that supported their inquiries into aspects of teacher practice and children's learning. An essential factor in their success was their openness to new learning and their willingness and desire to keep strengthening their teaching practices in order to support children's learning. Alongside this openness, however, was the provision of external supports to help teams do this work. In the TLIF programme, each project as

required to partner with a critical friend to support the design and implementation of their inquiry and to have the backing of their organisational leaders to ensure that supportive conditions were in place and that teachers were able to share their inquiry findings with others (Ministry of Education, 2018). In this article we focus on how the organisational leaders and critical friends supported the work of the four kindergarten teams. We begin by considering some of what we know about the importance of these two external supports from other studies.

The importance of support from the organisational leaders is clearly made in the literature around professional learning communities (PLCs): organisational leaders are key in ensuring that there are supportive conditions—such as time and resources—and that there is a climate and culture that encourages and enables inquiry (Stoll, 2011). In New Zealand work on PLCs in ECE, Thornton and Cherrington (2014) also found that the organisational leaders had a key role in cultivating involvement and distributed leadership. Effective organisational leaders also nurture respectful and trusting relationships and promote collaborative enquiry that leads to deep learning (Stoll, 2011).

In an early article about critical friends, Costa and Kallick (1993) suggested a critical friend was "a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend" (p. 50). More recently, and in the space of EC practitioner research, the highly successful Centres of Innovation (COI) programme that ran from 2003 to 2010 utilised research associates who worked alongside the COI teams as critical friends, supporting them to develop research capability. Meade (2005) described these research associates as sustaining "the teachers when the 'tide was turning'

or challenged them to move on from their usual practices when they were becalmed" (p. 63). Hedges (2010) has also described how her role as a researcher blurred into one of critical friend as she worked with two teaching teams over a sustained period: as trust developed between them, she was able to provide data gathered in the centres to question and encourage the teachers' inquiries into their practice.

The role of organisational leadership in teacher inquiries

In our TLIF project, the key organisational leaders were the Ruahine Kindergarten Association's senior teachers: Gaylyn and Robyn. Our work was situated, however, within a wider organisational history of engagement in research activities. This research culture had been intentionally established by past and present professional leaders within the Kindergarten Association. While many activities have contributed to the establishment of a research culture that built on the capability and confidence of teachers to engage in research within the organisation, the most significant of these was the Ruahine Awards Scholarship developed in 2009. Lynda Hunt, the Lead Teacher Researcher for our TLIF project, was one of the inaugural recipients. Underpinning the organisation's focus on building a culture of inquiry is a strategic emphasis on teachers providing quality education for children, enacted through a commitment to continuous improvement and innovation. Building collaborative relationships across the ECE sector was also an important component of this work. As senior teachers, our hopes for the project were that it would help us continue on our pathway of a transformational culture of research and inquiry to promote positive outcomes for children.

Much of our work took place in the 'background' of the TLIF project and was not always seen by individual members of the project teams. For example, one key aspect was our role as mediators and connectors across different parts of the organisation and with the external partners. This included advising the governance board and CEO of the intention to apply for a TLIF grant and keeping them regularly updated on progress, along with working with the external partners. We played an integral role in the initial planning and preparation of the TLIF application, including clarifying expectations for the project and developing the selection criteria to determine which kindergarten teams would be invited to participate.

Once the project was underway, our role focused on creating a potentiating environment for both the research activities and dissemination of the inquiry outcomes. This included enabling adequate time and resourcing for the teams to engage in their inquiries and prepare for their dissemination activities. While the project funding provided for a number of release days, we worked with the teams to consider how these might be taken, including using some as 'make-up days' which acknowledged the time spent in project meetings after sessions and which provided teachers with time to complete other required tasks which would normally have been undertaken during these times. We also modified some organisational expectations, such as not requiring teams to undertake internal evaluations during the period of research, while also providing clarity around teachers' ongoing work commitments. The creation of an online team space for teams and partners to communicate and provision of meeting spaces for face to face project meetings were practical supports we provided. At a relational level, we encouraged teachers to embrace the challenges of participating in the project, display flexibility, and remain committed through more challenging times. We drew on our existing trusting relationships with the teachers to support and help mediate relationships across and within teams.

Underpinning our leadership as senior teachers was an understanding of, and support for, research. Our understanding recognised the unknown quality of undertaking research and, through our own previous engagement with research, we were able to predict and respond to obstacles with the aim of limiting or removing these. As senior teachers, we were also active in advocating with external organisations such as ERO regarding the legitimacy and place of the TLIF project as part of our teachers' work and have been able to clearly articulate the benefits of research for children, whānau and teachers to our colleagues within the organisation and to multiple audiences across the sector.

The role of critical friends in teacher inquiries

The key role for the critical friends, Tara and Sue, involved with this TLIF project was to provide guidance and support for teachers to learn the research and data skills, processes and practices that are not always held within a teaching team. In doing so, we aimed to support robust engagement with data-informed inquiry processes and practices by each of the teams. Our approach was to work collaboratively with the teachers, providing both a

mix of leadership in terms of introducing new practices and skills at the times we knew teachers would need them along with pulling back on the level of our practical support as teachers became more skilled and confident in using the different data tools. Throughout, we followed teachers' lead in terms of their inquiry questions, how they would use the information that they gained through the inquiry, and how they would integrate future use of the tools and the resulting information they were gaining into their existing planning, assessment and evaluation processes.

In this section, we present specific examples of how we worked as critical friends, both with the teacher researchers and the teaching teams. Our previous work—individually and collectively—in developing and using the data tools and in supporting the development of professional learning communities informed the guidance and support that we gave at the beginning of the project. In particular, we worked with the four teacher researchers—who knew each other but had not all worked closely together before—to establish a set of ground rules for how we would work together and actively focused on developing the trust required to engage in effective inquiry. As we had not worked with the individual kindergarten teams before, we replicated some of these ground rule and trust building actions as the individual projects began. Initial guidance for each team's individual inquiry included support with refining their inquiry questions and building in some timeline structure so that progress was made with each inquiry amongst the other demands and responsibilities that teams had.

Several of the data tools that teams used within their inquiries were unfamiliar to the teachers. Thus, considerable time was spent in the first term of the project to introduce the tools to the teacher researchers and train them in their use. We focused on what information the individual tools could be used to gather, ethical considerations (particularly around parental consent and child assent to participate) and how to collect and prepare data for sharing with the team. An important feature was the 'just-in-time' nature of the training as well as repeated opportunities to review the mechanics of the systems when needed. As the project proceeded, teacher researchers became increasingly self-sufficient in using the tools and began leading the adaptation of some tools to better fit the focus of their kindergarten's second inquiry cycle.

As critical friends, we supported the teaching teams to engage in robust inquiry in a number of ways, particularly in the early stages of the project.

Alongside Lynda, we supported the teacher researchers to plan for and facilitate data sharing and planning meetings and attended these to also support the teams' engagement with the data being presented. We offered guidance in interpreting the data through, for example, taking a 'data walk' where data collected across a group of children were examined to unpack the similarities and differences in children's curriculum experiences and their engagement with peers and teachers. We asked probing questions to explore teachers' assumptions and thinking about individual children or their own practice, and we helped facilitate discussions to unpack practice as teachers viewed their interactions as part of the GoPro video episodes shared. For each of the kindergarten teams, by the end of the first inquiry cycle, teachers were showing their expertise in analysing data and identifying key themes, using data to challenge existing assumptions, critically reflecting on their practices and taking the information that they had gained from their teacher researcher and integrating it into their assessments, planning and teaching practices. Towards the end of the project we took on one further role—supporting the teaching teams to plan for and begin to disseminate what they had learned through their inquiries and the use of different data tools.

Conclusion

Much of what we think about in relation to teacher inquiries, does so using a micro-system lens—in other words, what teachers do in the inquiry space within their team or centre micro-system. Our intention with this article has been to highlight the importance of also thinking about teacher inquiries through a macro-system lens: what supports external to the team do teachers need? While many individual teams will be capable of undertaking teacher inquiries very successfully, the complex nature and multiple demands of their work in ECE settings means that teams are more likely to be successful with their teacher inquiries, particularly data-informed inquiries, when external supports, such as those outlined in this article, and which can be offered by the organisational leadership and critical friends are built into the inquiry process from the beginning.

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