Professional learning in ECE: Challenges and possibilities

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Policy context for ECE professional learning:

- MoE Licensing requirement: 47(e) all reasonable steps are taken to provide staff employed or engaged in the service with adequate professional support, professional development opportunities, and resources.
- MOE Licensing criteria – *C4 Adults’ knowledge* provides the following statement for guidance:

  The early childhood education knowledge-base is constantly being revised and developed. Professional learning helps us to keep up-to-date with these changes. Participating in professional development opportunities (formal and informal) and professional reading helps us to continuously build on our understanding. Educators should take opportunities to discuss and debate ideas and theories, and identify meaningful ways to put their new knowledge into practice.
NZTC Registered Teachers Criteria:

• teachers “demonstrate commitment to ongoing professional learning and development of personal professional practice” (criterion 4)

• teachers “use critical inquiry and problem-solving effectively in their professional practice” (criterion 12)
ERO’s self review document for services includes:

– How do you decide your priorities for professional learning and development (PLD)?

– What impact has recent PLD had on your service’s ability to promote positive outcomes for all children?

• ERO’s new evaluation indicators regularly reference PLD as contributing elements towards quality ECE
Ministry of Education-funded PD:

- 1997 – 2010: PD funding based on each ECE service accessing in-depth PD every 3 years

- 2010 – 2013: Major reduction in overall PD contracts budget and introduction of targeted approach to MOE-funded PD provision.

- 2013 – 2015: RfPs reflect greater shift towards targeted PD with 9 separate programmes, including:
  - Indepth PD within targeted locations
  - PD focused on supporting services to engage with specific communities
  - National programmes focused on infants and toddlers, mathematics, early literacy, Māori leadership, Pasifika leadership, leaders in ECE, and Whakapiki i te reo
Engagement in PLD influenced by:

- The degree to which the service (or its umbrella organisation) actively sought PL tailored to its needs or waited for providers to approach them

- Teachers often making spontaneous decisions to engage in PLD in response to advertised opportunities

(Cherrington & Wansbrough, 2007)
• 45 opportunities for PD in ECE across the country
  – 36 are short one-off seminars and workshops
  – 1 three-day conference
  – 2 one-day conferences
  – 5 scholarship opportunities, predominately in special education
Registered teachers:

- July 2002: 4242 registered teachers in ECE (34.7% of the teacher-led workforce)
- July 2012: 15666 registered teachers in ECE (73% of the teacher-led workforce)
- Overall increase of 11424 registered teachers over 10 years
A key challenge:

- When there are:
  - increased expectations that practitioners engage in ongoing professional learning
  - many more registered teachers required to demonstrate such engagement
  - increasingly limited access to MOE-funded PD

how do we as EC practitioners create opportunities to engage in effective professional learning that makes a difference to our practice and to children’s learning?
• What we know about effective professional learning in EC and the wider education sector
• Professional learning communities (PLC) as a model for EC
• Research findings from recent New Zealand studies on PLCs in EC.
Professional learning v professional development

- Professional Development:
  - emphasises delivery of content by experts
  - teachers and educators positioned in a passive receptive role
  - often unconnected to teachers’ workplaces and practices

- Professional Learning:
  - positions teachers as life-long learners
  - takes account of teachers’ experiences
  - located in or related directly to teachers’ contexts
Characteristics of effective PD in EC:

1. The professional development incorporates participants’ own aspirations, skills, knowledge and understanding into the learning context
2. The professional development provides theoretical and content knowledge and information about alternative practices
3. Participants are involved in investigating pedagogy within their own early childhood settings
4. Participants analyse data from their own settings. Revelation of discrepant data is a mechanism to invoke revised understanding
5. Critical reflection enabling participants to investigate and challenge assumptions and extend their thinking is a core aspect
6. Professional development supports educational practice that is inclusive of diverse children, families and whānau
7. The professional development helps participants to change educational practice, beliefs, understanding, and/or attitudes
8. The professional development helps participants to gain awareness of their own thinking, actions, and influence

(Mitchell & Cubey, 2003, p. xi)
Features of successful CPD:

- Establishing clarity of purpose at the outset in CPD activity
- Specifying a focus and goal for CPD activity, aligned to clear timescales
- Including a focus on pupil outcomes in CPD activity
- Ensuring participants’ ownership of CPD activity
- Engaging with a variety of CPD opportunities
- Including time for reflection and feedback
- Ensuring collaborative approaches to CPD
- Developing strategic leadership of CPD
- Understanding how to evaluate the impact of CPD

(Porritt & Earley, 2009, pp. 136 – 137)
Collaborative approaches:

- “the opportunity for teachers to participate actively and collaboratively in professional communities is an essential component of high quality professional development” (Borko, Jacobs & Koellner, 2010, p. 550)

- Research on collaboration has considered “the interplay of individuals, communities of teachers, and specific contexts …when these elements come together and a learning community emerges, the participating teachers are more likely to discuss problems, strategies, and solutions. Changes in teacher behaviour then becomes an ongoing, collective responsibility, rather than an individual one” (Opfer & Pedder, 2011, p. 385).
Teacher communities often suffered from weak leadership and that “mandated coaching and collaboration often turned genuine teacher inquiry into rituals of contrived or enforced collegiality that actually made teachers inclined to collaborate less” (Hargreaves, 2010, p. 290).

“The intensity of collaboration becomes an important determinant – too much collaboration and learning are stifling, too little collaboration and teacher isolation inhibit growth, just enough collaboration and teachers receive the stimulation and support from colleagues necessary for change” (Opfer & Pedder, 2011, p. 386).
Useful “impact evaluation” questions:

– What have we achieved (as a result of engaging in CPD activity) that is making a difference to the practice of the staff, the school and to the learning of the children?

– What evidence is telling us that we are making this difference?

(Earley & Porritt, 2009, p. 8)
Categories of CPD impact:

• Classroom practice:
  – changes in subject/process knowledge; changes in classroom practice

• Personal capacity:
  – improved existing skills/practice; learned new skills/practice; changes in staff confidence & self-esteem; more positive attitudes/behaviours; happier & more motivated; improved reflection on practice; greater ability to participate in change initiatives

• Interpersonal capacity:
  – working together more effective; changes in the practice of colleagues; more confidence in sharing good practice & managing and influencing colleagues; greater willingness & ability to contribute productively to debate in staff meetings; greater ability to question alternative viewpoints
Teachers as learners:

– Teacher beliefs and experiences influence their attitudes towards and engagement in learning.

– Dissonance and cognitive challenge are important to prompt change

– “A teacher’s orientation to learning has an extremely strong influence on how and what he or she learns… unfortunately, the orientations brought to teaching and learning are not easily altered” (Opfer & Pedder, 2011, p. 389).
Conditions that support effective PL:

• “… teachers need time to develop, absorb, discuss, and practice new knowledge… activities that effectively support teachers’ professional learning need to be sustained and intensive rather than brief and sporadic” (Opfer & Pedder, 2011, p. 384)

• PD that involves significant numbers of contact hours over a long period of time is typically associated with effectiveness (Guskey, 2000)

• School norms about professional learning influence the extent to which teachers can implement new practices.

• Schools as learning organisations
  - Schools must have a learning culture where colleagues talk about learning and teaching more than anything else. Need a shared vision of what effective PD looks like and ask at the beginning of their PD, “What difference will it make?” (Francis, 2009)
A challenge for us as teachers and as members of teaching teams:

• We need to consider and understand the influence of:
  – individual teachers’ learning orientations
  – our centre/service’s collective learning orientation
  – existing support structures
in order to understand how and whether the professional learning we engage in makes a difference to what happens for children.
A PLC is defined as:

- “professional educators working collectively and purposefully to create and sustain a culture of learning for all students and adults” (Hipp & Huffman, 2010, p. 12).

- “a group of educators who meet regularly to engage in professional learning for the purpose of enhancing their practice as educators in order to help all children succeed as learners” (Easton, 2011)
Registered Teacher Criteria

A key indicator of one of the professional relationships and professional values criterion in the RTC is that fully registered teachers should:

• “Actively contribute to the professional learning community”

(New Zealand Teachers Council, 2009)
Three big ideas:

• ensuring that ALL children learn;
• a culture of collaboration;
• a focus on results.

Characteristics of PLCs

Dufour & Eaker, 2008
- Shared mission, vision and values
- Collective inquiry
- Collaborative teams
- Action orientation and experimentation
- Continuous improvement
- Results orientation

Hipp & Huffman, 2010
- Shared and supportive leadership
- Shared values and vision
- Collective learning and application
- Shared personal practice
- Supportive conditions: relationships and structures
In PLCs, the focus is not just on individual teachers’ learning but on:

• Professional learning;
• Within the context of a cohesive group;
• That focuses on collective knowledge;
• That occurs within an ethic of interpersonal caring that permeates the lives of teachers and children.

(Stoll & Louis, 2007)
PLCs in New Zealand ECE:

- Thornton and Wansbrough (2012) argue that PLCs are important in NZ ECE:
  - Application of the NZTC Registered Teacher Criteria applies to registered teachers in ECE as well as the primary and secondary sectors
  - ECE teachers are expected to work collaboratively within teams and with parents/whānau to ensure that children’s learning needs are supported
  - Working in a close physical space can make it challenging for ECE teachers to engage in critical discussions
  - Developing a critical culture is often difficult
• Thornton and Wansborough (2012) suggest that the following aspects of PLCs are of particular importance in ensuring that teachers are focused on collaborative practice that supports learning for all:
  – provision of feedback and coaching and mentoring;
  – building strong relationships with family/whānau in order to support children’s learning;
  – embedding change into the culture of the service; and
  – prioritising time for shared reflection and meaningful conversations around learning and teaching.
PLC project case studies:

- Pīwakawaka ELC: E&C centre that focused on strengthening the inclusion of te reo me ngā tikanga Māori in their programme
- Riroriro ELC: E & C centre that investigated how they could make the most of rituals and routines to include all children and create a peaceful environment in the centre? (specifically lunchtime routines)
- Leadership cluster
- Reflective practice cluster
Leadership cluster:

– Hioho Kgtn: What leadership strategies do teachers need to use to empower children to practice Ako?
– Miromiro ELC: How can the Miromiro ELC teachers help lead the development of a collaborative community planning process, around working together to ensure: 'School readiness for our children'?
– Korimako ELC: How can we encourage leadership amongst our teaching team?
– Mohua ELC: How can we develop leadership in the teaching team?
– Whio Kindergarten: How does our practice recognise and foster children's leadership?
Reflective practice cluster:

– Ocean Kindergarten: How effective is our culture within our team meeting to enable us to critically look at our own and each other’s practice to enhance learning and teaching?

– Ngā Putiputi ELC: How can we enhance our team's critical reflections on our investigative project approach to strengthen intentional teaching?

– Totara ELC: How can we enhance our teaching practice to support children’s social competence?
Riroriro PLC:

- Diverse team - culturally, prior experience, qualifications.
- Senior staff proactive with effective leadership evident.
- Process of data collection and analysis described by one teacher as “a ‘gift’ to educators because it slows the pace enough for them to reflect”.
- Teachers paid attention to relational aspects, resulting in greater trust and sense of teamwork.
- Management provided supportive structural conditions.
- Evidence of more peaceful lunchtime routines
- Greatest changes were in how team worked together: “the model of that review process is something that will stay with each of us”
Reflective practice cluster PLC

- 8 teachers from 3 EC centres
- Overarching focus on reflective practice shaped how participants worked together – critical reflective practice was a key activity in each meeting:
  - Engaging with each other through questioning, clarifying, asking questions, posing challenges, and supporting each other to be critically reflective
- Group quickly established trust and effective norms for working together, and teachers willingly de-privatised their practice
- Shifts in practice:
  - Totara ELC - teachers developed wider repertoire of strategies that were used more deliberately; children used greater range of strategies to negotiate turn-taking and were more responsive to other children’s requests
  - Ngā Putiputi ELC - shifts in individual and collective reflections, and team worked together more cohesively and openly. Teachers consciously engaged in intentional teaching, and actively shared teaching and reflections with parents
  - Ocean Kindergarten experienced success and disappointment and at one stage they “were just flying. We were having robust debates”. Staff changes during the project impacted negatively on their new critical team culture
What we learnt about PLCs in EC:

- Each PLC made progress with their action research investigations and in developing towards a PLC.
- Insufficient timeframe for each group to demonstrate the characteristics of, or develop into, a self-sustaining PLC.
- Structural aspects were particularly influential on these PLCs.
- Relational aspects of trust and issues of power and group dynamics were also important.
- The model of PLCs has potential for improving teachers’ professional practices and for enhancing children’s learning within the ECE sector but developing PLCs in ECE is likely to require:
  - Shifts in teachers’ thinking and ability to engage in robust data collection and critical reflection.
  - A shift in emphasis towards paying “unrelenting attention to student learning success” (Hord & Sommers, 2008, p. 10).
Creating opportunities for professional learning:

• Critical that EC teams take control of their professional learning.
• A commitment from management to resource professional learning adequately is essential.
• Pay attention to, and develop skills and dispositions for being critically reflective about our own and each other’s practices.
• Practical strategies:
  – Partnering with other EC services to undertake PD together
  – Identifying someone who can be our ‘critical friend’
  – Working with researchers in universities and other tertiary institutions on research projects that focus on aspects of our practice
• Develop our centre teams as PLCs in which we:
  – Develop the relational conditions necessary to be an effective PLC
  – Engage in collaborative examination and improvement of our practices
  – Undertake self-reviews
  – Develop skills in collecting and analysing robust data about our practices and children’s engagement in learning