CORE EDUCATION
Tātai Aho Rau

TRANSFORMING EVERYDAY 'CHATTER' INTO PROFESSIONAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

eFellow's Research Paper

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Introduction

As part of my <u>Dr Vince Ham eFellowship</u> (2016) through CORE Education I had the opportunity to undertake a research project which I have called "Transforming everyday 'chatter' into professional learning opportunities".

My workplace is a not-for-profit, community based early childhood centre with a roll of 100 children per day and up to 25 teachers. As Education Manager, my role involves mentoring teachers and leaders in their learning and development, as well as working alongside management to plan and facilitate our whole centre professional learning programme. Professional learning for teachers is highly valued and encouraged by management, and there is a strong culture of teachers as researchers in the centre. Relationship is at the heart of who we are in our centre. The well-being of our teachers is nurtured alongside that of our parents/children. Over the years we have worked towards creating an inclusive culture where people feel valued, enriched, and have a place to be and become.

For the purpose of this research I have intentionally chosen to use the word 'chatter' in the title as opposed to professional or pedagogical conversations. I wanted teachers to become aware of the difference it could make to their thinking and practice when they transform their everyday 'chatter' into everyday professional or pedagogical conversations.

The impetus for my research topic came from an experience I had one year while leading a group of teachers through an inquiry. Over that year I began to notice two teachers 'stepping up' and facilitating discussions, supporting and encouraging their colleagues (including myself), and a noticeable increase in their motivation. This particularly stood out to me because one of these teachers was unqualified and the other one was in her first year of teaching. It was the leadership of these two teachers more than mine which resulted in the inquiry being an overall success.

The other interesting thing that stood out for me during this year was how team meetings seemed to invoke passion and motivation in teachers whenever they were being provoked to think differently. Questions were discussed and debated, ideas flowed freely and teachers seemed energised by these conversations. However, I was curious to find out why this same level of discussion was not transferring into the day to day life of teachers. It felt like teachers were storing their ideas, questions or challenges to be discussed at the three-weekly team meeting, rather than engaging in these conversations on a daily basis. Outside of staff meetings, the interactions were mostly focused around children's routines, the rosters or whatever was happening at that moment.

Based on these two experiences I decided to investigate and develop the idea of transforming everyday conversations into professional learning opportunities for teachers.

I was also interested in exploring the concept of Tuakana-Teina relationships[1] as an alternative way of viewing leadership in my context. In the Māori world, Tuakana is viewed as the older or more expert person and the Teina is viewed as the younger or less expert person. One of the reasons I have chosen to use the concept of Tuakana-Teina is because of the way these roles are easily interchangeable. One moment you may identify in the role of a Tuakana (or leader) due to the expertise you have in a particular area, and the next moment you identify as a Teina (or learner) because someone else with more expertise has stepped into the role of Tuakana. My hunch was that this idea of attributing leadership according to expertise rather than an appointed role, would be more inclusive, rewarding and in the end more effective for everyone.

My own experience of being a leader had at times made me feel uncomfortable or out of my depth due to the expectations others have had of me. Some of my greatest learning experiences have been influenced by beginning and/or unqualified teachers who I believe are rarely acknowledged for their leadership abilities due to their status of being new or unqualified.

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[1] Ministry of Education. Tuakana Teina. Retrieved on January 20, 2017 from <u>http://tereomaori.tki.org.nz/Curriculum-guidelines/Teaching-and-learning-te-reo-Maori/Aspects-of-planning/The-concept-of-a-tuakana-teina-relationship</u>

Methodology

I chose action research as a framework for my inquiry as it is a form of research that we were already familiar with in the centre. Gregory Hine (2013) refers to action research as being participatory in nature and offering multiple benefits for professionals working within the teaching profession[2]. One of those benefits is that it facilitates the professional development of teachers and increases teacher empowerment. It is also known to bridge the gap between research and practice.

Fourteen teachers from our centre were participants in my inquiry. We met as a group three times throughout the year long research project. At the first meeting, I shared the aim of the research and invited participation. To get us underway, teachers were asked to write a reflection once a week (over four weeks) about a conversation that encouraged them to:

- Think differently.
- Discover something new.
- Clarify their thinking.
- Understand a different perspective.
- Challenged their own perspective.
- Or a conversation that has inspired, motivated or excited them.

I wanted teachers to use these ideas as points of focus for writing their reflections. The aim was to focus their thinking and to capture more succinct responses about their conversations.

At a second meeting, I shared with the teachers some of my initial thoughts that were emerging from their reflections before introducing a second activity. I could already see that the very exercise of teachers reflecting was changing the type of conversations I was hearing and I wanted to know if the teachers were also aware of this. I therefore created a questionnaire in which teachers were asked to evaluate the kinds of changes they were seeing in themselves. These are some examples of the questions they were asked.

- Have your conversations changed since starting the research? (frequency, type of conversations, people you talk with).
- Did you find it beneficial to reflect on your conversations? If yes, please explain.
- Prior to the research, did you view 'everyday conversations' as professional learning? Has this view changed in any way since you have been a participant in the research?

What did I learn?

It's OK to talk about teaching and learning

Within days of introducing the project to teachers there seemed to have been a new energy around the place:

- Teachers were excited to share with me how they were engaging in interesting discussions with their colleagues.
- They were surprised by how easily these conversations could occur throughout the day.
- One-on-one conversations transformed into spontaneous group discussions.

I too was surprised by how quickly and frequently the teachers started to engage in everyday conversations about pedagogy. As I started to receive teachers' reflections, there were some clear similarities and a few surprises that I hadn't considered prior to the research.

It became evident that everyday conversations focussed on teaching and learning started to take on a new purpose. Rather than talking about children's routines or the day to day running of the centre, teachers

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[2] Hine, G.S. (2013) The importance of action research in teacher education programs. Cited in; Issues in Educational Research, 23(2), 2013: Special Issue.

started to become more reflective about their own practice and each others. These are some of the comments teachers were saying:

> *"I am appreciating the knowledge of my peers more."*

> *"The more we discussed and reflected, the more we became open to different perspectives."*

> *"I am starting to understand the reasons behind some of my colleagues' practices."*

One teacher commented that it felt good to be able to talk about her own learning without feeling guilty because she wasn't talking about the children. This left me wondering if the teachers felt that the research had given them permission to talk with each other about their teaching and learning? Did they not feel they should and could engage in these conversations prior to the research?

There are preconditions to having thriving learning conversations

As teachers reflected individually on their conversations, I noticed that the teachers were engaging in the research differently. My participants came from two separate groups, one group had had a number of staff changes and were still consolidating as a team. Getting to know each other and learning to work together was a priority for this group, and understandably this seemed to have taken over the research.

The other group have worked together for quite a while and were familiar and comfortable with each other. This group was constantly talking about how the research was impacting on them individually as well as overall as a team, they became more energised which was widely noticed. This highlighted the importance of teachers feeling comfortable and familiar with each other before expecting them to engage in learning conversations which at times can be confronting.

In order for everyday conversations to occur, teachers identified two necessary conditions which enabled them to converse in a more professional manner with their colleagues:

- Prioritise time for professional conversations. Rather than saying they never have time to talk, teachers started to realise there were many opportunities available to them throughout the day.
- Giving each other permission to think and talk about their own teaching and learning.

How perceptions interfere with being a valued contributor

As I started reading through the reflections and questionnaires I noticed one particular name mentioned a number of times by her colleagues. They were commenting on how she was provoking and encouraging them to see things from a different perspective. It was also mentioned how respectful and non-judgemental this teacher was. The reason this person's name stood out to me was the fact that she was genuinely surprised about the impact she was having on her colleagues, as she didn't have a lot of confidence in herself as a teacher and was often reserved in team meetings.

One teacher commented on the fact that she had only thought of Tuakana-Teina relationships in relation to children and hadn't considered how this concept could also apply to teachers. She went on to talk about a colleague who recently thanked her after they had a conversation which had helped clarify a troubling dilemma. This teacher was surprised that she was able to 'help' a colleague who she considers to be more experienced and knowledgeable than herself.

During the research, I had a teacher who kept coming to my office to talk about a project she was working on. She mentioned that since she had started reflecting on her conversations with her colleagues she had become more motivated and energised in her practice. I asked if she would like to start sharing her project with the rest of the team as I thought it would be beneficial for everyone to hear what she was doing. Instantly, I noticed a change in her body language and the excitement seemed to drain from her face as she explained that she is still trying to get her head around her ideas and isn't quite ready to share these yet. A few weeks down the track (when she was ready) she presented her ideas to the rest of the team and this resulted in ongoing discussions between teachers.

This led me to think about how often we are asked to share or discuss our thoughts when we are not necessarily ready. As much as I wanted this research to increase the amount of conversations teachers were having with each other, I hadn't really considered the fact that teachers also needed to have the freedom to think without feeling pressured to speak. There have been many times when I have sat silent because I didn't want to say something that I wasn't sure about.

> *"How often do we stop ourselves from sharing our thoughts or ideas with others because we don't want to be judged for what we say or believe at a particular point or time? When we 'think' something it can remain our own. But as soon as we 'speak' something, are we made to own it?"* (Personal journal)

Where to from here?

When I started this research, I wanted to encourage teachers to become more consciously aware of how everyday conversations could be used as an opportunity to enrich their own and others' thinking and practice. I was hoping that, through my action research, teachers would see that learning isn't only reserved for formal settings such as team meetings or professional learning workshops.

My hunch was that some teachers don't like to position themselves as a leader because it can seem too formal or permanent. A concept like Tuakana should be explored in our centre because it is temporary and less formal. For, as one teacher put it, 'All teachers have a lot to share and learn from one another.'

I felt that teachers just needed to talk more and the learning would happen automatically. I hadn't given much thought to the importance of listening or what it means to be a good listener, until a couple of teachers referred to this as a challenge in their reflections. We all know what it feels like when we're not really being listened to. How often are we competing with a mobile phone or device to get the full attention of someone? How often do we nod our head in agreement, but don't really know what we're agreeing to? I started to realise that talking and listening goes hand in hand. In order for conversations to be effective in supporting teachers learning, more development is needed around the art of being an effective listener.

One of the challenges teachers often referred to throughout the research was trying to keep the momentum going over a long period of time. As one teacher puts it, 'I stopped reflecting once the research stopped.' Another teacher said that after the research project was over she '...found herself getting tied up in routines and not indulging in conversations as often.' In order for teachers to embed this new way of thinking or working into their practice, it needs to become an overall aspiration for the whole organisation. Rather than seeing this as a research project which has a start and a finish, we now need to think of ways in which we can embed this into the centre's culture. This is not just a matter of asking teachers to talk more throughout the day, but rather addressing some of the other outcomes which emerged from my action research. These include creating a safe, trusting and respectful environment for conversations to occur, re-looking at the way we position leaders and leadership and creating time, space and freedom for teachers to talk and debate their learning.

I believe this research has given teachers an opportunity to rethink the way they currently view professional learning. I believe my research has encouraged teachers to see themselves and others differently and hopefully enabled them to think about leadership within our centre in a new way. I would like to delve deeper into some of these possibilities with teachers and continue working towards re-imagining professional learning and leadership in our setting.

References

Hines, G.S. (2013) The importance of action research in teacher education programs. Cited in; Issues in Educational Research, 23(2), 2013: Special Issue.

Ministry of Education. "The-concept-of-a-tuakana-teina-relationship". Retrieved on January 20, 2017 from http://tereomaori.tki.org.nz/Curriculum-guidelines/Teaching-and-learning-te-reo-Maori/Aspects-of-planning/The-concept-of-a-tuakana-teina-relationship