

# Using Action Research to Develop a Professional Development Programme in an Early Childhood Setting

Lorraine McLeod

Auckland College of Education

**ABSTRACT:** *Developing a professional development programme (PDP) which meets the needs of staff, management and young children in early childhood centres can be facilitated by the use of action research. This paper will define action research based on Kemmis and McTaggart's (1988) model, and describe the process of using action research in planning a PDP in early childhood settings. A theoretical base for the development and implementation of a PDP by staff will also be outlined. The base uses aspects of Stewart and Prebble's (1985) Professional Development Consultation Cycle and Smyth's (1989) model of reflective practice as ideas from which a PDP could be constructed. Finally, some considerations which may need to be addressed prior to the implementation of an action research programme will be provided.*

## INTRODUCTION

### Action Research

The action research model developed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, p. 7) is an appropriate method of planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating a professional development programme (PDP) because it is based on the notion of the teacher as researcher, encouraging teachers to “live with the complexity of real experience, while at the same time striving for concrete improvement”. Action research enables participants to seek new understandings of the organisation in order to bring about change, growth, and greater effectiveness. Action research “seeks to illuminate social realities, human perceptions, and organisational realities” (Owens, 1987, p.181).

The action research model outlined by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) was based on Kurt Lewin's work in 1946. Action research involves four collaboratively-organised activities; planning, action, observation and reflection. The model is depicted as a spiral to emphasise that the four components are dynamic processes, not static steps. The rationale is “tested by the group in practice; each proposition in the rationale can be checked against practice and against other parts of the rationale” (Kemmis &

McTaggart, 1988, p. 15). Changes are sought in three different aspects of individual work and the culture of groups; they are changes in the uses of language and discourses, in activities and practices, and in relationships and organisation.

The planning stage must take account of risks involved in social change (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) and empower practitioners to develop their practice. Language must be developed to enable the implementation and analysis of the programme, so staff collaboration is an important feature. Action to implement the programme, guided by planning so that it is critically informed, but flexible and open, is combined with or followed by observation of the implementation. Careful observation allows for an understanding of the constraints, contexts, and circumstances of the implementation and allows for critical reflection, which is evaluative and descriptive and leads (again, through collaborative processes), to the second cycle and revised planning. Collaboration and collegial support strongly underpin this action research. It is particularly appropriate in early childhood settings, where good staff relationships which result in greater stability and satisfaction impact on the quality of interactions with children (Malasch & Pines, 1997). The collaborative process means that educators and managers affirm the importance of each other's work and will lead stakeholders to acknowledge each other's special attributes and skills (Ministry of Education, 1998).

### **Advantages**

The advantages of action research include:

- The value of participants being collaborative researchers and therefore having a vested interest in the research and its outcome;
- The mutual interaction of research and action; research can point the direction for action and increase its credibility as well as evaluating its effects ( Kelly, 1985);
- Action research takes place in naturalistic settings and is directly relevant to teachers' practice;
- Possibilities of obtaining both qualitative and quantitative data.

## **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN: A THEORETICAL BASE**

### **The professional development cycle**

Designed with schools in mind, Stewart and Prebble's (1985) Professional Development Consultation (PDC) Cycle provides a useful base from which to work when developing and implementing a PDP. Stewart and Prebble's ideas can easily be

adapted for use in early childhood settings, and are provided here for that reason. There are three important points to consider.

First the PDC Cycle was designed as part of a school development process, that enables stakeholders to develop the capacity to reflect on the nature and purpose of their work together (Stewart & Prebble 1989). The process involves data-gathering and analysis, collaborative problem-solving, structural change, programme planning and curriculum development. Stewart and Prebble's (1989, p.9) emphasis is on the process of arriving at a school's "own answers to its own questions" and not merely the end result. Implicit in the process is a concentration on collegial and collaborative practice. Second the process is unlikely to happen quickly. It can take a year or more to implement because staff need to initiate and maintain a critical discourse to ensure the success of the development of the programme. Third a number of important spin-offs occur. According to Stewart and Prebble (1989, p.48) one spin-off is that implementing a PDC Cycle can be used as "a framework of team leadership" at centre or team level. Another is that the PDC Cycle is based on the type of holistic, collegial and collaborative work practices that early childhood teachers say they engage in (Kagan, 1994). Yet another spin-off is teachers developing as reflective practitioners (Schon, 1983). Let us examine this concept more fully.

### **Reflective practice**

Schon (1983) described reflection as a way in which teachers construct the meanings and knowledge that guide their actions, which is an important element in professional growth. Francis (1993, p.229) suggests that reflection is more intellectually challenging than is generally recognised, and that teachers are not offered enough help to assist them "observe, think through, reconstruct and deeply understand the process of personal theory building". She uses Smyth's (1989) model of personal and professional empowerment to help student teachers describe their professional ideas and beliefs, and to be aware of conflicts and links when they construct knowledge from theory, practice, and their personal backgrounds.

Reflective practitioners "integrate experience with theory and research in the formulation of solutions to unique problems of practice that are complex or unique" (Kirby & Teddlie, 1989 p. 45). Belenky et al. (1986) explain that reflective practice benefits from facilitating dialogue among practitioners and note that, in the process of describing one's own experiences, opportunities for communication and collaboration develop. Such dialogue can lead to new knowledge and a greater understanding of others as well as an understanding of self. Thus, through "mutual stretching and sharing, the group achieves a vision richer than any individual could achieve alone" (ibid p. 115). Reflective practice can be considered a professional development technique that enhances organisational and individual performance.

## **Summary**

The concept of a cyclical programme designed to assist in personal and professional development, driven from within, and built loosely on Stewart and Prebble's (1989) concept is a useful one when it is paired with the notion of reflective practice (Smyth, 1989). The theoretical concepts provided by Stewart and Prebble's and Smyth's models allow the staff of an early childhood setting to build a strong base from which they can implement a professional development plan.

## **PREPARATION FOR DEVELOPING A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME.**

The Revised Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices (DOPs) for Chartered Early Childhood Services in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 1996) states that “management should implement personnel policies which promote quality practices including appointment of staff, staff appraisal and professional development for both management and educators”. It is noted that these policies should “value and support management and educators” (Ministry of Education, 1998, p. 74) through effective communication systems and styles, and through processes of consultation.

Developing and implementing a PDP involves stakeholders considering setting-specific factors that include:

- Supervision;
- Evaluation, assessment and appraisal;
- Needs analyses for teachers, management, children and whanau;
- Preparing for problems;
- Organisational culture;
- Implementing the programme;
- Evaluating the programme.

## **Supervision**

Supervision of teachers' practice involves the implementation of “systems designed to make teachers more directly accountable for their work” (Stewart & Prebble, 1993, p. 21). Stewart and Prebble claim that teacher competence is one of the most important determinants of educational quality. They emphasise the importance of a professional orientation to supervision, which recognises that teachers need to be exposed to new techniques and understandings about their practice, but must have the opportunity to test them, reflect on them, and perhaps modify them in order to make the most effective use of them.

McQuarrie and Wood (1991 cited in Vartuli & Fyfe, 1993), summarise the process of supervision as one of teachers adapting, adopting and refining teaching practices within a helpful and supportive environment. Collegial, rather than hierarchical structures, are much more appropriate in such a system (Prebble & Stewart, 1981). Little (1993 cited in Prebble & Stewart, 1993, p. 24) suggests that collaboration with colleagues enables teachers to “gain instructional depth, range and collegiality”. Day (1989, p.9) suggests that encouraging “critical friendships” (or practical partnerships) based upon a “relationship between equals and rooted in a common task or concern” can assist in enhancing reflective practice.

### **Evaluation, assessment and appraisal**

McLellan and Ramsey (1993) discuss the implications of evaluating or assessing teachers' performances as a basis for rewards, as opposed to teacher appraisal which is on-going peer monitoring, and refer to the two as the assess/assist dilemma. Vartuli and Fyfe (1993, p.5) refer to summative and formative evaluation; summative involves decisions about tenure, pay, dismissal and transfer, while formative evaluation “targets improvement and assists teachers in modifying practices”.

Day (1989) offers another view of the differences between summative and formative appraisal by suggesting that the two forms of appraisal can also be defined as the product and process models. The product model provides data for promoting, remediating or educating teachers, while the process model seeks to stimulate learning which is unique to the individual practitioner and to the specific context.

Appraisal schemes “should recognise and capitalise upon the teacher's capacity to be self-critical” (Day, 1989, p. 7), and be based on “performance and not personality” (Ministry of Education, 1998, p. 76). The Ministry of Education also notes that appraisal schemes should be on-going, planned, documented, and constructive, leading to professional growth and job satisfaction.

### **Needs analyses**

#### **(a) Teachers**

Areas of personal and professional development are difficult to separate and teachers need to be the key decision-makers about both, rather than have decisions imposed from outside (Graham & Spackman, 1993). Self-evaluation is a self-initiated form of appraisal which is action-oriented and descriptive and involves self-knowledge and reflection (McLellan & Ramsey, 1993). Teachers have differing levels of skill in beginning and continuing to self-evaluate. Support needs to be tailored to fit the needs of teachers as they identify, plan, justify, and implement decisions.

The notion of teachers moving through developmental stages, defined by Katz (1977) as survival, consolidation, renewal, and maturity may be an important consideration in a needs analysis for teachers. Survival is described as the first year or two of teaching, when support, comfort and guidance are needed from someone on-site to assist the beginning teacher through the period of feeling inadequate and ill-prepared. Consolidation (end of first to third year of teaching) sees the beginning of a focus on individual learners and behaviours, and a requirement for continued on-site support as the teacher begins to use other professional resources. Renewal, in the third or fourth year, is a process of exploration, as the teacher joins professional organisations and meets other teachers, while maturity is Katz's term for the teacher who has had three to five years of teaching experience, who searches for insight and perspective, and who may work on advanced studies and participate in teacher conferences.

McLellan and Ramsey (1993) discuss the novice, technician and extended professional stages originally outlined by Fullan (1988). They suggest that teachers in different developmental stage phases of teaching may require a system of differentiated appraisal; that in-class supervision may be appropriate for the novice, assisted self-evaluation could be more suitable for the technician, and professional development through peer counselling may be the best method for the reflective, self-critical practitioner who is in the extended professional stage.

#### **(b) Management**

Within some organisations, financial managers adopt a market mechanisms approach (Ouchi & Price, 1978) by attempting to determine prices and cost-benefits by calculating the value of a teacher's services. Control is then maintained by relating the provision of differing ratios of resources to different teachers.

Sometimes, fears about the summative aspects of a manager's perceptions of why a teacher may request certain resources can also be real. Teachers sometimes note that they fear to state the areas of their practice they wish to develop in case those areas are seen as weaknesses (McLeod, 1994). They are afraid that such admissions may cause them to be demoted, lose tenure, or be otherwise disadvantaged. Therefore, while respecting the financial and market-driven needs of management, teachers need mechanisms which will protect them, as well as providing support for personal and professional development.

Resourcing a professional development programme is a direct concern for management, who need to retain control over dollars spent and the costs involved in resources of skills, time, courses and information (Graham & Spackman, 1993). McLaughlin and Pfeifer (cited in Hickox, et al, 1988) assert that teachers are unlikely to maintain motivation or to invest time and energy in an evaluation system which does not supply resources to support effective resolution of identified areas of need.

Teachers therefore need to be assisted to understand the issues involved with budgeting for PDP costs, while management requires communication systems which facilitate such understanding.

**(c) Children and their whanau**

Children are the third group for whom a needs analysis should be made. A wide range of data can be collected from within the setting - about teaching techniques, how individual children are responding to the programme, and how they are constructing new knowledge (Stewart & Prebble, 1993). Data may also be collected from multiple sources such as peers, environment, administrators, etc. (Vartuli & Fyfe, 1993).

Whanau can articulate their own needs and those of their children by a variety of means, including personal interviews with staff, focus meetings where a group of parents examine a particular issue, anonymous questionnaires about the early childhood setting, and suggestion boxes. Teachers can select appropriate methods to elicit information from their work with children and their families which would be helpful to their particular PDP focus.

**(d) Preparing for problems**

Some aspects about appraisal may make teachers feel uneasy, threatened or resistant (Day, Whitaker & Wren, 1987). For example, disclosure (which is the need to discuss personal or difficult elements of a job with a colleague) can seem threatening. Therefore, personal relationships are important, as teachers must feel that their colleague will remain confidential, considerate and understanding. Skills of active listening, supporting and facilitating are important prerequisites, and the freedom to choose an appropriate colleague can assist in facilitating a trust relationship.

Ninety-seven percent of early childhood settings in New Zealand are staffed by women (Ministry of Education, 1998). Helgeson (1990, p. 41) describes the structure of women's organisations as a "web of inclusion" which has a flat management style that permits communication channels to travel in, out, and around the "web". By contrast, men are more likely to manage and staff an hierarchical system with a defined chain of command. While making a horizontal management structure work requires great skill in collaborative leadership from the supervisor or head teacher, and greater commitment from staff if a high degree of effectiveness is to be achieved (McLellan & Ramsay, 1993), it may be an easier task to meet the needs of all participants in a women's organisation than in one dominated by men.

Lack of time and energy are often barriers to professional development. Teachers often "have little time or energy to reflect systematically on their thinking and practice" (Day, Whitaker & Wren, 1987, p. 24). Lack of time may also cause teachers to short-cut the PDP processes, thereby limiting their potential.

A further difficulty, perhaps more peculiar to early childhood full-day centres than other educational organisations, is the fragmented nature of staff attendance. Staff are often differently rostered each week, with some staff rarely meeting others who work part-time or at the other end of the day. Designated staff meeting times are often difficult to arrange in these circumstances; some staff are excluded even from staff meetings because they live a long way from their work and cannot return for an out-of-shift meeting time. This situation impacts on time available for collegial support, reduces the base of expertise available, and means that those who cannot attend meetings cannot access the PDP on the same basis as other staff.

**(e) Organisational culture**

Moss and Pence (1994) note that in order to plan and implement any programme within an early childhood setting, it is necessary to examine the culture. Culture is defined by Kilmann (1984, p.4) as “the shared values, attitudes, assumptions and norms” of the organisation. Schein (1986, p.130) suggests that culture is a “deep phenomenon merely manifested in a variety of behaviours”.

It is important to understand the power of the culture of an educational place; it permeates pervasively and manifests itself covertly on the lives of staff, children and whanau. It is essential that the power be harnessed positively, and by design rather than accident. Setting-specific issues such as absentee owners, influences of parent organisations such as Kindergarten Associations or owners of chains of centres, considerations about aspects of funding which is provided by committees who do not directly work in the setting (i.e. some church groups) are all examples of issues particular to individual settings.

Deal and Kennedy (1982) suggest that the development of strong cultural bonds can be forged by strengthening the values, beliefs and other aspects of a culture. They suggest that major changes or minor adjustments are more easily made if such aspects are fully understood; they provide avenues for change and development. Change can, however, be threatening to staff. Neville (1992) advocates that change is managed carefully with staff participating in decision-making at all levels and stages. She cites Fullan (1986), who suggests that staff anxiety over change can be reduced if the supervisor or head teacher is supportive and if continuous appropriate professional development is provided. Fullan also claims that the aims and values of the organisation and of roles within it need to be made clear to all stakeholders if change management is to be effective.

**(f) Implementing the programme**

Decisions need to be made about how the PDP will be developed once the initial considerations about preparation have been undertaken. Using staff meetings as a forum for focus and discussion is one method of developing an action research



process. The staff of each setting need to identify the best possible method for their own needs; some other ways of working include regular small group meetings which feed into occasional full ones, or a series of regular 10-minute focused lunch time meetings which provide a time to discuss pre-read material. The introductory meetings usually take longer than subsequent ones, especially if staff work mostly with self-selected mentors once the PDP is in place.

**(g) Evaluating and reviewing the programme**

The PDP works well when it is designed and evaluated by all the stakeholders. Evaluation and review processes need to be planned carefully so that they are transparent to all participants in the programme. Staff involvement in the action research enables evaluation and review processes to be fully understood and to be scheduled into the programme design.

## CONCLUSION

The development of a professional development programme in an early childhood setting requires careful planning and setting-specific consideration. Action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1989) provides practitioners with a process to facilitate such planning. Stewart and Prebble's (1985) Professional Development Cycle and Smyth's (1989) model of Reflective Practice offer theoretical underpinnings upon which a professional development programme could be constructed. Many issues may need to be considered as planning proceeds; a number of these have been outlined. Collaborative and collegial involvement of stakeholders is central to the successful development of a professional development programme. Use of the theoretical models provided in this paper will facilitate the planning and implementation of such programmes, resulting in enhanced individual and organisational practice which benefits children.

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