Communication in Early Childhood Centres: What Are We Talking About?

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Abstract

This paper explores issues of communication that emerged in a study which employed the concept of organisational culture to examine leadership and management skills perceived by research participants to be used in a small sample of early childhood education and care centres in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Licensees, supervisors, some staff members and some parents in ten centres indicated that communication was the most important aspect of leadership and management in their centres. Participants in the study described two main areas of communication. One involved communication between centre personnel and whānau. Participants also indicated that communication between centre personnel was vitally important, linking it to notions of teamwork. However, licensees, supervisors, staff members and parents defined communication between centre personnel differently, indicating possibilities for potential miscommunication between staff groups. The ramifications of these issues will be discussed and suggestions offered for addressing them within the organisational cultures of early childhood centres.

Introduction

This paper is drawn from a larger study (McLeod, 2002) that used the concept of organisational culture to identify leadership and management practices currently used in early childhood education and care centres, to explore participants' perceptions of the quality of those practices, and to identify what constituted good practice. The term “communication” was used by 92 percent (n=53) of the participants to identify what they perceived to be the most important feature of leadership and management in their centres. In this paper, the project, its research sample and its methodology will be outlined briefly. The communication category that emerged will be explained with links to teamwork and the literature on both teamwork and communication, and, finally, suggestions for policy, practice and research regarding communication and teamwork in centres will be made.
The Conceptual Framework of the Study

The lens of organisational culture was used to examine leadership and management practices in the original project. Goertz (1973) defined culture as a "shared fabric of meanings" (p. 145) that emerges as group members interact with one another. Corbett, Firestone and Rossman (1987) indicate that

...culture describes the way things are. It provides the contextual clues necessary to interpret events, behaviours, words and acts, and gives them meaning. Culture also prescribes the ways in which people should act, regulating appropriate and acceptable behaviours in given situations. (p. 37)

The culture of an organisation is shaped by a variety of intangibles: meanings, norms, values, attitudes and beliefs which are constructed, maintained and reproduced by people, who are in turn influenced by the wider sociocultural contexts within which they live (Hatherly, 1997) and work.

Organisational culture supports and is supported by organisational structure and activities (O’Neill, 1994). Organisational structure focuses on the pattern of roles, relationships and lines of authority in an organisation, while organisational activities are the "...the official curricula ...and other broader areas of activity which collectively make up the organisation’s whole curriculum" (O’Neill, 1994, p. 102). In the larger study, the three concepts - culture, structure and activities - formed a conceptual triangle which framed eight categories that were considered by participants in the study to be what leaders and managers in centres did in practice. The categories that participants identified involved organisational culture and structure, leadership and management (which mostly comprised administrative functions), communication, teamwork, management of change and professional and pedagogical issues. The category of communication and its relationship to teamwork will be explored in this paper.

The Study: Research Sample and Methodology

The 53 participants in the study were drawn from ten early childhood education and care centres (hereafter called centres) within the childcare service funded by the Ministry of Education. The centres were selected from three of the four "categories of authority" (Education Review Office, 1996) that are used to describe the legal basis under which early childhood services operate: private/private trust, community, and corporate/ institution (the fourth category of authority, Te Kohanga Reo was not sampled). In each centre the licensee, the supervisor, two staff members and two parents were interviewed. Sixteen of the 35 centre personnel were qualified teachers with a Diploma of Teaching (ECE) or higher qualification.

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore participants' views of leadership and management practices. The interviewees were given pseudonyms (which are also used in this paper), and the interviews were transcribed, checked by participants and amended where necessary, then entered in NUD.IST software.
and coded and categorised using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A core category (concerning the image held of the child) and eight other categories emerged as a result of the constant comparison and analysis of data.

In addition, supervisors kept diaries which were self-analysed and discussed with the researcher. Education Review Office (ERO) reports on centres were examined and analysed, demographic data questionnaires were completed by all participants, and artifacts such as planning sheets, meeting notes and newsletters were collected or observed and recorded. These supporting research methods were used to triangulate with data obtained in the interviews.

**Communication: What Is It?**

According to participants in this study, both oral and written communication were used between centre personnel and parents and whanau, while oral communication between centre personnel was identified as a vital component of centre functioning.

Centre personnel and parents/whanau: communication and/or partnerships?

In the early childhood curriculum document *Te Whaariki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) the claim is made that “links between home and early childhood education programmes are considered important” (p. 18). The guiding principles of the revised Desirable Objectives and Practices (DOPs) (Ministry of Education, 1998) mention the notion of partnership, suggesting that management and educators should work together “in partnership with parents, guardians and whanau by acknowledging the parents as first educators and by working collaboratively to develop shared goals and expectations” (p.14).

Neither *Te Whaariki* nor the DOPs includes a definition of partnership, so it is possible that there is not a common understanding of the term across centres or the early childhood sector. MacNaughton and Hughes (1999) consider that the possession of power determines the status of parent; staff relationships, and that staff members are likely to hold what they term “expert power” over parents. Keesing-Styles (2000) advocates for partnership to be “a sharing of power, not merely a sharing of information” involving:

> ...trust, mutual respect, open reciprocal communication, common goals which both parties understand, mutual recognition of contributions and strengths of each other, shared decision-making, sensitivity of perspectives of the other, teamwork, and absence of rivalry. (p. 5)

**Oral communication**

Although the relationships articulated by participants in this study varied widely, the notion of equal or even of reciprocal partnership was rhetorical rather than actual. Partnership as a sharing of power with parents, as promoted by Keesing-Styles (2000), was not the relationship described by most participants. Most
communication between staff and whanau was oral, to do with children, and undertaken on a casual daily basis. What follows is a range of participant perceptions about oral communication between staff and parents and whanau.

Jeanne, a supervisor, said she considered the *Family and Community: Strand 2 Belonging* goals of *Te Whariki* in her concern to provide for parents and children. Her perspective on the relationship between staff members and parents was thus:

I think it’s really important [to talk to parents] even if it’s just a minute. It actually shows that they are valued and because the child that’s coming is part of the family and that culture, and also when you’ve got a child they’re watching you speaking to their parents, that actually makes them feel like they belong and that it’s a safe place to be. And the parent, bringing that knowledge – it also makes it feel like it’s a safe place where they can be themselves.

Claire, a licensee/supervisor, considered that parents needed to be reassured that individual attention had been paid to their child when she articulated reasons for speaking to parents. She said:

All staff are encouraged, even Susan and Helen [an unqualified staff member and a person on work experience respectively], to speak to the parents every time they see them and say one positive thing about their child and their day. So even if you have some pet phrases in the back of your mind... if you can’t think of anything else positive, there’s always something. But generally, yeah “they built this wonderful tower today” or “his favourite friend today, he played with someone different”. So there’s always something to say.

Donna, an unqualified staff member, indicated that most parents wanted to talk about their child’s day. She said that sometimes this was difficult for staff members:

...yeah, parents will [want to talk] – a lot of parents can be really nit picking about a lot of things. But we have to be diplomatic, I suppose.

Staff members, more than other centre personnel, were specific about the types of communication skills that are required to support good oral communication. They suggested that good listening skills, the ability to be supportive, empathetic, caring and flexible were of paramount importance. Parents, on the other hand, judged centres on whether or not they perceived that staff members were “open” and “up front” in the way staff communicated with them. Parents also made it quite clear that they often sought out specific staff members with whom to discuss particular issues, basing their selection on their assessment of the staff member’s knowledge.

**Written communication**

Written communication, in the main, provided information for parents from staff. Centre matters and routines, excursions, social events, information and education
evenings were addressed in notices on the notice boards of all centres. Half of the centres in the study also provided a regular newsletter for parents.

One centre offered parents of infants the opportunity to receive and write a daily report on their child. Six centres provided collections of children's work for parents to take home at regular intervals. Called "portfolios" or "folders", these were receptacles to hold work. Staff had usually dated and named each piece, but there was no other written communication with them, and no agreed process for reciprocal sharing of information about the child's learning.

Another centre provided a "wish tray" for written parental suggestions to be made anonymously. In one other centre, where no formal channels existed for parents to contribute to decision-making, flyers were pinned to the door through which parents entered so they could read about changes and plans. Apart from complying with regulations governing attendance and provision of medication by using sign in/out and medication books, few reciprocal opportunities for written communication other than those already noted were available in centres.

Using combinations of written and oral communication

In a few instances, centre personnel reported using combinations of oral and written communication. Staff in one centre, for example, scheduled "parent interviews" for parents to discuss their child's folder of work with staff members. In another centre, the charter was being re-written. A newsletter had been sent to all parents asking for written input, and the supervisor also made a point of speaking to all parents or guardians about the draft charter to ensure that they were able to comment.

Communication between centre personnel

For centre staff, two issues were of major importance when they considered communicating with each other. One involved communicating at staff meetings and the other related to effective interpersonal, day-to-day communication between those who worked closely together.

Communicating via staff meetings

Licensees made little comment about staff meetings, while supervisors spoke about using staff meetings and providing free access for staff members to add to meeting agendas as two of the ways in which they communicated with staff. Six of the twenty staff member participants supported the supervisors' notions. For example, Donna said:

We have an agenda which we write down for the staff meeting, all of us if we've got things to pick up on or want to discuss we do it at the staff meeting. It's good – it's all we need.

However, some staff in five of the ten centres in the study indicated that, on some occasions, they felt too intimidated to either add items to meeting agendas, or to participate in discussion at meetings. Mary, for example, said:

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If I say something towards the management that's where I think I feel I don't get listened to, it just gets brushed away, or I'm not sure. Certain people will talk, but it's always the same people who will sit back and not say anything, and I think they need to, maybe they are scared.

Sandra thought that successful communication at staff meetings depended on who was present:

I guess it's a matter of feeling comfortable about speaking up. I find that quite hard sometimes, depending on who's there.

Meda explained that some communication papers she had completed helped her to communicate more effectively in meetings. She said:

[The papers] helped me deal with uncomfortable situations where people are angry or upset. Before training I would've just backed off completely and passed it on to someone else, so I'm quite happy [now].

Staff meetings were thus viewed differently by different participants in the larger study. All supervisors and six of the 20 staff members considered that staff meetings were an appropriate vehicle for communication, but staff members in half of the centres considered that they and others were not always able to raise issues or concerns in a staff meeting.

Interpersonal communication between personnel in centres

Staff members commented more on the value they placed on good communication skills than on any other aspect of leadership and management skills in their centre. Three staff members commented on the supervisor’s ability to guide and support because she listened to their needs, and seven admired the ability of their supervisor to remain open to suggestions and seek the opinions of others. Some of the other communication skills they noted were that the supervisor responded quickly to staff issues, that she chaired staff meetings on a regular basis and therefore understood issues, that she maintained frequent contact with parents, and that she was caring and supportive.

Eleven staff members commented on the importance of appropriate systems of communication in centres. They used the words “up front”, “honest”, “direct” and “open” to discuss the communication attributes they admired in working in close physical proximity to other staff members, parents and children. Marion explained her view of what underpinned sensitive communication processes with other staff members when she said:

I guess we are kind of flexible with each other and quite comfortable working with each other. You know it's not to prove a point or to prove yourself - it's just knowing that you have your limits and you have a little bit of an idea how to help too.

The comments that staff members made reflected some of the seven principles advocated by Bertacchi (1996) in her description of “relationship-based” (p.3)
work. The organisational model espoused by Bertacchi encompasses principles such as respect for the person, sensitivity to context, open communication and mutuality of shared goals. She also notes that work with infants, toddlers and young children “engages the heart as well as the mind, the emotions as well as the intellect” (p.5). Centre personnel, she says, must maintain an openness and commitment to examining their reactions and feelings toward participating families and the staff who serve them.

Respectful communication with children and others
Few writers discuss the role of centre supervisors communicating with children as part of leadership and management. However, Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) are amongst those who do advocate for all centre personnel to communicate closely with children in order to foster relationships that promote learning, critical thinking and problem solving in children. They consider that when the human encounter (relationships) is seen as the basis for pedagogy, communication is seen as the key to children’s learning.

Edwards, Gandini and Forman (1998), Katz (1994), Mallaguzzi (1993), and Rinaldi (1994) also value meaningful communication with children in their accounts of their teaching or observations of organisational culture, organisational structure and teaching in the pre-primary schools of Reggio Emilia in Italy. Katz (1994) describes a strong sense of shared responsibility for children in Italian society which supports collaborative and collegial cultures in centres. Children are seen as competent learners who use opportunities for “sharing, experimenting, revolting, building theory, and constructing knowledge about the world in which they work” (p.34).

In Te Wahaariki, the aspiration that children will become confident learners and communicators is articulated clearly. The importance of children having responsive, reciprocal and collaborative relationships with adults and peers is emphasised. In spite of centre personnel in all centres in the larger study espousing their use of Te Wahaariki, only two participants (both supervisors) articulated the importance of communicating with children. Melanie said her first priority was to communicate with children, while Jeanne said:

[Communication] has to be open, it has to be honest, it has to be in a safe environment and it has to be respectful. And it is [between] children and children, children and parents, parents and educators, educators and educators, so it's many different relationships.

It may be that one of the main features of the role of educational leader in an early childhood service should be to ensure that communication between staff and children is undertaken in ways that enhance the learning of all. Jeanne articulated a number of different relationships that exist in a centre; beginning with these could provide a focus for reviewing, reflecting on and improving communication processes with and between adults and children.
The links between communication and teamwork

Teamwork is predicated on effective communication (Larson & LaPasto, 1989); most definitions of teamwork are reflective of a democratically oriented organisational structure and culture that encourages and rewards participation. For example, Sergiovanni (1992) includes collegiality (an intrinsic motivation to maintain a professional orientation to give and expect support from others) as an important component of teamwork. Bloom (2000) emphasises participatory decision-making, while Cardno (1990) nominates collaboration, involving partnership, cooperation, agreement, consent and working in combination to accomplish institutional objectives.

How did the participants in this study view teamwork? Six of the 16 parents and all but three of the 35 centre personnel discussed the term. Perspectives on teamwork differed between four groups of participants. Licensees and licensee/supervisors considered that they governed and managed opportunities to which others contributed. Supervisors, who spent more time than licensees or licensee/supervisors teaching children and participating with staff in daily routines, perceived that they also provided opportunities for others to communicate, but also incorporated in their discourse a clear understanding of daily issues faced by staff and children. Staff members' work required them to interact more closely and intimately with each other and with children than occurred in the other groups, so their definition of the “team” was mostly restricted to a small group of colleagues with whom they worked in a room or area. Parents’ comments about teamwork related to the manner in which they and their children were treated by staff.

Licensees' views of teamwork
Licensees and licensee/supervisors were generally positive about their staff groups being “teams”. They offered no ideas for improving on the teamwork in their centres. They mostly considered that they were part of the teams and that their roles mainly involved consulting staff members about decisions through, for example, being available to staff members most of the time and by providing open access for staff to place items on the agenda for staff meetings. Claire, a private centre licensee/supervisor said:

They [staff] come in with the ideas and it’s up to them, a lot of it, if they want change it’s their job, you write me a list and they’ll write the list and I’ll get on to the next stage.

Supervisors’ perspectives on teamwork
Supervisors concurred with the views of the licensees and licensee/supervisors about staff meeting agendas, but also included some insights into the daily demands of working within a staff team. They mostly spent much more time teaching than did licensees or licensee/supervisors, and thus participated in the day to day routines of the centres with other staff members. Wilma, a supervisor,
indicated that she and other staff shared and rotated areas of responsibility and decision-making:

We all have areas of responsibility, we change every term, like the nature table, the books and puzzles and the art and if someone wants to make a major change then is their time to do it. Or they can do it during - when it’s not their time, they could say – but do it diplomatically...

Staff members and teamwork
Staff members’ views of teamwork differed from those already outlined. Because staff members (with one exception) were not also supervisors or licensees, their perspectives on teamwork related to the staff members with whom they worked most closely. Their interpretation of the “team” frequently consisted only of the people working within their room. Sometimes the team included the supervisor, but rarely the licensee. They spoke about being in a team and being part of it on a daily, hour-by-hour, minute-by-minute basis. Their definitions of teamwork were based on issues such as sensitivity to each other’s needs and being able to ask for help in difficult situations. Rita described how, when a team member was having trouble, or had an accident,

...you just go run and help them out or what ever you need to do, and having that back-up and support is really important.

Kath indicated that:

We are always flexible, we have our different areas and rosters. If someone is not well or there could be a problem and they have to go to the office or they have to go inside and use the phone, then we always close down or help to cover their areas; we all work in together.

Staff members were less confident about participating equally in centre decision-making than licensees and supervisors contended they were. Issues of perceived unequal power relations sometimes prevented the full participation of staff members. Staff members also provided a number of ideas about developing or maintaining positive team environments which were not mentioned by supervisors or licensees. These included delegation of tasks by leaders (with professional development to enable staff to undertake the tasks), fair and clearly defined workloads and job descriptions, and good role models.

Staff in the three community centres and in one corporate/institution centre attached to an institution of learning reported less difficulty with teamwork and communication issues than did the four private and two other corporate/institution centres. This may have been attributable to the organisational structure of centres, as the private and two corporate/institution centres all had more hierarchically ordered structures than did one corporate/institution centre and the three community centres, which were organised with flatter structures in which power was more evenly distributed.
Parents' views of teamwork
Of all participants, parents commented least on the topic of teamwork. Their perceptions of teamwork reflected how they and their children reacted to staff and centre issues. Parents commented on staff dispositions (such as “happy”) and skills (“good communication skills”) to judge the level of teamwork in centres. This was possibly due to the fact that they mostly dealt with just one or two staff members working with their child, and were not in the centre for long periods of time to observe many staff interactions on a consistent basis.

Implications for Practice, Policy and Research
Individually, participants in this study made it clear that communication is extremely important and is the essential “glue” that holds centres together. They indicated also that teamwork depends on open communication. Across the whole sample, however, some differing and sometimes contradictory perceptions about communication and teamwork were evident. For example, most centre personnel perceived that communication between them and parents and whanau was important, but different views of the communication relationship were held. The views varied from valuing communication between whanau and centre personnel because it provided an opportunity for staff members to ensure that children and their families felt as if they belonged, to staff members feeling threatened or discouraged when parents spoke to them about a child.

In addition to the differing views that were identified in this research with regard to participants' perceptions about communication between centre personnel and whanau, the revised DOPs (Ministry of Education, 1998) use the term “partnership” (p.14) to denote the relationship between home and early childhood services. As already noted, this term can be defined in a number of ways that imply different levels of power sharing. It would be useful for centre personnel to share an understanding of the complexities of communication between themselves and with parents and whanau. Similarly, shared definitions of what the DOPs statements might mean in the reality of day-to-day centre practice would enable staff, parents and whanau to consciously determine what types of relationships would best enhance opportunities for children.

The issue of communication with children as a component of centre leadership and management is one that few participants in the larger study commented on. Given that one of the foundational aspirations of Te Whāriki is that children will grow up “as competent and confident learners and communicators” (p.9), and that communication comprises one of the curriculum’s five strands, this omission was noticeable. Further close examination of aspects of individual centre culture (including the values and beliefs of personnel), centre structure, and centre activities could support or contradict the findings of the larger study. If communicating with children is not found to be of importance within a centre, steps might be needed to consider making changes. These could include supporting staff to improve qualifications, professional development for personnel, and changing centre structures and activities to promote and value positive and
reciprocal communication between children and all others with whom they come in contact on a daily basis.

The notion of teamwork was discussed by most of the centre personnel in this study. Staff used the term “teamwork” to describe the ways in which relationships, based on communication between centre personnel, were enacted. Definitions of the term varied according to centre structures and participants’ roles. Licensees and licensee/supervisors across all centres in the study shared one view of teamwork. Supervisors held views that were similar to those of licensees and licensee/supervisors, but which were tempered also with more pragmatic considerations of daily centre activities. Staff members viewed teamwork in relation to their own roles of being with children and a few other adults during most of every day. Parents held opinions about teamwork that reflected the ways they viewed their child’s treatment and interactions at the centre.

Reflective questions about the communication and relationship issues upon which teamwork is based might provide a starting point for further research that leads to the examination of policies and practices within services. Staff workshops, professional development activities, literature searches, action research projects and policy reviews are all opportunities for asking questions, exploring current practices and considering different processes. Questions that could trigger investigations and important changes to communication and teamwork practices include those about the purposes of communication with parents and whānau, with children, and between centre personnel. The effectiveness of individual centre cultures and structures could be explored. Reflecting on the notion of partnership with whānau and parents is another example of research or professional development that could be helpful in developing centre policy and making adjustments to practices.

Conclusion

In this paper, some of the complexities of the concepts of communication and teamwork in early childhood centres have been highlighted from a larger study that examined issues of centre leadership and management against a framework of organisational culture, structure and activities. Issues of partnership between centre personnel and parents and whānau (including communication, a variety of definitions of partnership, and power relationships) have been raised. Common perceptions about communication and teamwork processes held by those in similar roles across centres (e.g. all supervisors) were identified and compared with the different views of those who held other roles (e.g. staff members). Communication with children has been identified as an aspect of leadership and management that requires further research.

The findings of this study have indicated that organisational culture and structure may have a major impact on the quality of what is provided for children in a centre. It has been suggested here that a variety of research and professional development activities could be undertaken by centre personnel and others to theorise and further develop understandings of the communication and teamwork
issues that were identified by participants in this study as important to centre functioning.

The findings and results of such activities could then be used to assist in informing future policies and practices. The findings and results would also enhance our understanding of many other influences on educational opportunities for children, such as the management of change, and the professional and pedagogical issues that comprised the other categories of the larger study. In order to better equip early childhood services and personnel to enhance children’s learning, there is a great need to research, explore, debate and learn about ways of communicating and working in teams, so that we do, indeed, know what we are talking about.

References


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