He Kupu
The Word
Volume 7, Number 4 – October 2023

"Sink or Swim" - Mentoring Beginning Teachers.

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This article is based on my master's research project (Knight, 2022) which looked at the support that newly graduated teachers receive in enacting Te Tiriti o Waitangi (TTOW) principle of participation. Semi-structured interviews with newly graduated teachers revealed that gaps in existing mentoring programmes may not be limited to mentoring around TTOW, but may in fact reflect gaps in all aspects of the mentoring programme. This lack of clearly structured mentoring programmes for many new graduates will be my focus here. Based on the literature and findings of my master's research, I will argue that in order for teachers to be both retained in the sector and effectively grown as professionals, effective mentoring must be considered and prioritised. Of additional interest is teachers' emotional wellbeing. The article is framed in the 'pūrākau' lens, developed by Wirihana (2012). Due to limited availability of existing research on beginning teachers' experiences in the Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood education (ECE) context, a number of articles relating to beginning teachers' experiences come from international and /or compulsory-sector contexts. This may reflect a need for further research into this topic in the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE context.

Pū – Introduction

Wirihana's (2012) approach to the idea of pūrākau played a significant role in informing the methodology of my master's research project, and likewise informs the format of this article, which is based on my master's research. Wirihana (2012) considers the word 'pūrākau' through four constituent kupu. These are: pū, rā, ka and ū. Pū is viewed as the root or base of an issue. For example, Lee (2005) interprets 'pūrākau' as pū/rākau – the base of the tree. Rā is a kupu that refers to the sun or day, and in the context of the pūrākau methodology, is used to conceptualise, shining a critical light of examination on a particular issue or challenge (Wirihana, 2012). Ka is a kupu that can indicate events occurring in the past, present or future (Wirihana, 2012). In the context of this article, it used to refer to changes which occur over time – in this case, examples of how growth has occurred, or can occur. Ū is understood as bringing forth from within (Wirihana, 2012), and so focuses on personal and subjective matters. Here I will consider the recommendations and conclusion of my research. The experiences of teachers were key in my previous research study (Knight, 2022) and will be considered here too.

My master's research study entitled: "*How do the beliefs of ECE teachers in leadership roles impact the support that newly graduated teachers experience in upholding the Te Tiriti o Waitangi principle of participation in early childhood education settings?*" (Knight, 2022) is a mixed-methods research project incorporating the pūrākau methodology outlined above. ECE teachers in leadership roles were surveyed to gather data relating to their beliefs toward Te Tiriti o Waitangi (TTOW) and their responsibilities in mentoring newly graduated (provisionally registered) teachers. Five newly graduated and provisionally registered ECE teachers were then interviewed, using

a semi-structured interview style. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using the pūrākau approach outlined above.

After graduating from an initial teacher education (ITE) programme, teachers are required to undergo a period of provisional registration, before being eligible to be fully registered. This period of provisional registration is a minimum of two years long and during this time, provisionally registered teachers are expected to be mentored by a fully registered teacher, usually within their ECE setting (Education Council, 2015). Mentoring is a key aspect of a newly graduated teacher's professional and personal development (Education Council, 2015). Providing mentoring for newly graduated teachers is part of the responsibilities of those in leadership roles in ECE centres and those who are not in leadership roles, are also expected to provide indirect mentoring and support (Education Council, 2015). In other words, it is a responsibility for everyone.

Teaching is understood to be a demanding profession (Voss & Kunter, 2020), and the Education Council (2015, p. 4) describes the job as "demanding and highly complex". The early years of a teacher's career are seen as some of the most crucial, and beginning teachers often feel overburdened during this time (Sikma, 2019). Given that there is currently a growing shortage of ECE teachers, being able to retain these teachers is an important step in addressing staffing issues – perhaps even more important than recruitment (McDonald & Flint, 2011). Attrition is a significant cost for the education sector (Hannan et al., 2015), and it is argued that effective mentoring can help to mitigate this (Hannan et al., 2015; McDonald & Flint, 2011), however, this is challenged by Ingersoll (2012). Ingersoll's (2012) argument centres on the idea that systemic challenges in the teaching sector (due to the demanding nature of teaching outlined above) will cause some beginning teachers to leave the profession entirely, regardless of mentoring. Effective mentoring is at least viewed as reducing teacher movement between organisations (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017), and accordingly, organisations are encouraged to take measures to support and retain new teachers (Sikma, 2019).

Emotional support and supportive relationships make up a key element of effective educative mentoring programmes (Hannan et al., 2015; Jonson, 2008; McDonald & Flint, 2011). Empathy was found to be valued by newly graduated teachers (McDonald & Flint, 2011), and Sikma (2019) identified emotional support as perhaps the most important of five key aspects of mentoring. 'Emotional exhaustion' has been identified as a contributor to the attrition rate in new teachers (Voss & Kunter, 2020), so it seems reasonable to view emotional support as an important component of mentoring. Additionally, while the *New Zealand Teaching Council | Matatū Aotearoa* emphasises educative mentoring, which focuses primarily on the professional development required for teachers to become fully registered (Education Council, 2015), the guidelines do include "enjoy teaching and be a positive member of the profession" (p. 4) as one of the five outcomes for 'high-quality' and 'well-structured' mentoring.

In considering newly graduated teachers then, it is difficult to ignore the importance of their emotional wellbeing and subsequent longevity. It stands to reason that if beginning teachers do not "enjoy teaching" (Education Council, 2015, p. 4) then we are likely to struggle to retain them. The literature strongly emphasises the importance of emotional support for newly graduated teachers, especially when the challenges of teaching are considered. Emotional exhaustion is a reality for many new teachers (Sikma 2019), and a robust mentoring

programme is an appropriate place to start addressing this. The question then, is what is standing in the way of this happening?

Rā – Examining the issue

As part of my master's research project (Knight, 2022), I interviewed five newly graduated (provisionally registered) ECE teachers. These interviewees were asked about their experiences with mentoring, and it emerged that of the five interviewees, only two had been provided with a structured mentoring programme within their ECE setting. For the remaining interviewees, it was clear that there were significant gaps in the structure and substance of their mentoring experiences. Structurally speaking, the interviewees' mentoring programmes often lacked regularity and were frequently subject to staff availability, which has become a significant challenge for the sector; particularly in the wake of Covid-19.

Issues encountered with current mentoring programmes

In terms of substance, expectations were often unclear, and interviewees found that they were often left to their own devices. Interviewee Kiki (pseudonyms were used for the participants) shared that "you either sink or float pretty much" (Knight, 2022, p. 71) in relation to her experience of the entire mentoring process. Katarina shared that she had "no idea really what I'm meant to be doing" in terms of the expectations of the registration process (Knight, 2022, p. 72). Kiki shared candidly that a lack of clear expectations had also been a confounding factor for her: "And then it would come to your mentor meeting, you haven't done your stuff because you actually have no clue what you're doing" (Knight, 2022, p. 73). This led to unproductive use of the provisional registration period and in Katarina's case this resulted in "six months plus now wasted" (Knight, 2022, p. 73). "How was I meant to do this and figure it out on my own?" lamented Piper (Knight, 2022, p. 73).

In considering the structure of the mentoring experienced by the interviewees, this was also an area where three of the interviewees experienced significant challenges. Katarina shared that she had "approach[ed] my boss a number of times… And was just told she'd get to it" (Knight, 2022, p. 72). She described her mentoring programme as "vague, and not really structured". In the case of Piper, the closest thing she found to structure was "a checklist at the end of the year" (Knight, 2022, p. 73). Kiki concurred, saying of her mentor "She's like, 'right, have you done this', checks it off, that's it…" (Knight, 2022, p. 73). Kiki had articulated her assessment of her own needs, telling her mentor "I need support here – someone needs to be monitoring my practice" (Knight, 2022, p. 73). Piper described the mentoring programme as "glazed over" and had identified that there were "definitely gaps" (Knight, 2022, p. 73).

Kiki and Katarina both reflected on support that other beginning teachers and students in their centres were experiencing. "They just aren't getting the support" Kiki explained (Knight, 2022, p. 73), while Katarina explained that two provisionally registered teachers in her centre had "told me that they're winging it" (Knight, 2022, p. 72). This may suggest that issues around adequate support for student teachers and newly graduated teachers are more widespread.

Staffing issues have become an increasingly pressing issue in the ECE sector in recent times. For two of the interviewees, Arani and Himene, staffing issues had not affected their mentoring programmes, and perhaps it is not a coincidence that these two interviewees had had the most positive experiences with the process. For the remaining three interviewees, the picture was quite different. Kiki shared that staff changes had led to mentoring happening "whenever there's time" (Knight, 2022, p. 82). This was further compounded by a lack of fully registered teachers (who are eligible to mentor provisionally registered teachers): "There's six provisional. And four fully registered, and then we've got three students… we have four unqualified. (Knight, 2022, p. 82)." A precursory glance at those numbers means that each fully registered teacher would have to mentor 1.5 provisionally registered teachers. This meant that mentoring meetings could only happen "pending we have enough staff" (Knight, 2022, p. 82).

Piper shared a similar experience: "We're on a time limit, we're bringing in a reliever… there's just no time to do the things that they want us to do" (Knight, 2022, p. 82). Echoing Kiki's experience above, Katarina shared a lack of staff meant that: "She could have been doing [mentoring] for three of us… it all fell onto one person essentially… A lot of stuff seems to fall back to her, because she's it" (Knight, 2022, p. 82).

Enthusiasm and passion were also factors in the mentoring experience. Kiki felt that her mentor "doesn't want to do it… she calls it homework… it's sort of like it's a bother to her" (Knight, 2022, p. 74). Kiki had subsequently enlisted unofficial support from a person outside of the centre and noticed "a huge difference" between the approaches of these two mentors. Kiki explained: "She's Māori, so she definitely wants me to succeed" (Knight, 2022, p. 74).

In my research, newly graduated teachers were quite frequently asked to take on informal (and in one instance, formal) leadership roles within their centres. One of the interviewees, Arani, had been moved into the role of lead teacher immediately upon graduating. Of the five interviewees, four had become a kind of go-to person for bicultural knowledge within their centres. In referring to bicultural practice, Arani shared: "I'm the one driving it in our centre" (Knight, 2022, p. 76). Himene's experience was very similar, stating that upholding *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* was "driven by one person… that would be me" (Knight, 2022, p. 76).

In some cases, this had a utilitarian aspect to it, as Katarina shared: "People would come to me for, 'Am I saying this right? Am I spelling it right?'". For Katarina, there was a feeling that she had become "that almost token person that would know it" (Knight, 2022, p. 76). Kiki too, felt quite isolated in attempting to lead and drive change in a bicultural direction in her centre: "Other than saying 'run with your initiative' there's been no support" (Knight, 2022, p. 76). Himene referred to the teaching standard *Te Tiriti o Waitangi Partnership* (Education Council, 2017) saying: "In that aspect with mentoring, I haven't been mentored… we're growing together but she's not mentoring me as such on that standard" (Knight, 2022, p. 77). This is an area where the sector has been identified as needing further development (Williams et al., 2012), so the absence of *active* support for all the interviewees is a potential cause for concern. As a counter point, it should be noted that in most cases, the newly graduated teachers were receiving passive support, that is colleagues were generally receptive to implementing bicultural practice, even if they were not able or willing to drive it (Knight, 2022).

Emotional Support

As discussed in the introduction, impact of emotional exhaustion on beginning teachers is significant (Voss & Kunter, 2020). Emotional support is also identified as a key component of successful mentoring programmes (Sikma, 2019). There is literature support for the role of effective mentoring in retaining teachers (McDonald & Flint, 2011; Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017), a crucial task particularly in a context where attrition is high. I will also argue that in order for a mentoring programme to be complete, the emotional component of the teacher must be considered. This is especially crucial during the early years of a teacher's career, where emotional stresses are often the most acute (Education Council Matatū Aotearoa, 2015; Sikma, 2019). Emotional support was not specifically discussed with interviewees during my research, as the study focussed primarily on mentoring for bicultural practice. Nonetheless, it can be reasonably deduced that if only two of the five interviewees had a structured mentoring programme, then it is less likely that those newly graduated teachers without a mentoring programme are receiving a high level of emotional support.

Ka – Experiencing Growth

When mentoring programmes are functioning well, meaningful growth can result (Education Council, 2015). Arani shared her experience: "We've got a… induction and mentoring policy for provisionally registered teachers" (Knight, 2022, p. 85). Arani recalled that her mentor has "given me the chance to really become familiar with [the teaching] standards. And to understand… linking those documents with my practice, *Tātaiako, Tapasā, Te Whāriki, Te Whatu Pōkeka*… she's an amazing mentor" (Knight, 2022, p. 85). Arani was also encouraged to focus on "what's my why?... values and beliefs… And how they align with… our philosophy." Clear expectations were also provided: "at least one reflection a term, but more is better" (Knight, 2022, p. 85).

The central place of relationships in successful mentoring experiences is highlighted in the literature (Jonson, 2008; McDonald & Flint, 2011), and Arani's experience clearly reflected this dynamic: "the support is definitely… there and I think that also comes down to having that solid relationship… that's really important" (Knight, 2022, p. 85). Kiki had also experienced a robust mentoring programme in her previous setting and described this as including "strong support" and "weekly check-ins" (Knight, 2022, p. 85). The importance of a clear structure is highlighted here.

Where the mentoring process in a student's own setting is either not fully in place, or is lacking certain components, two of the interviewees had found value in engaging an external mentor. For Kiki, this was an unofficial mentor, who supported her in an informal, but regular, capacity. Himene on the other hand, made a conscious decision to seek a mentor outside of her setting. "I purposefully chose a mentor outside of my centre… Because I was really excited by her growth mindset…" (Knight, 2022, p. 86). Himene had identified that "you're only ever going to be as good as your mentors" (Knight, 2022, p. 86). The Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand | (2022) does allow for this under certain circumstances, and a mentor based in an external setting can take on the official duties of mentor teacher for a provisionally registered teacher.

For Kiki and Himene, the experience of working with an external mentor seemed very positive. Himene shared: "My mentor is fantastic. Excellent. Challenges me, inspires me and is… super organised and super connected" (Knight, 2022, p. 86-87). For Kiki, the time that was given by her unofficial mentor was significant, particularly in contrast with her 'official' mentor. "It's a lot more… like a few hours at the library… and that's her own time" (Knight, 2022, p. 87). This contrasted with the more reluctant attitude of Kiki's in-centre mentor as mentioned in the previous section.

In conducting a review of the literature for my master's research project, another crucial element of mentoring emerged. That is a constructivist approach to the mentoring process appears to be an important element in a successful mentoring experience (Richter et al, 2013; Wang et al., 2008). A constructivist approach seeks to build on teachers' existing knowledge, with a focus on collaboration and relationships. In order to build on a beginning teacher's existing knowledge, it is crucial for a mentor to have at least a perfunctory understanding of where the beginning teacher is at, especially when it comes to relationships. This constructivist approach may also assist in mediating beginning teachers' emotional exhaustion (Voss & Kunter, 2020).

Ū – Recommendations and Conclusion

The Teaching Council recommends professional development for mentor teachers (Education Council Matatū Aotearoa, 2015). This is important, because experienced and capable teachers will not automatically make good mentors, as mentoring requires specific skills in and of itself (McDonald & Flint, 2011; Sikma, 2019; Wang et al., 2008). Katarina expressed that her mentor was "not getting that guidance to be able to then pass on her guidance to me. So it is a flow on effect" (Knight, 2022, p. 74). Similarly, Kiki felt that clear guidance and outcomes for mentors would be helpful: "Then everybody would hold themselves to that standard, but there's just nothing there" (Knight, 2022, p. 74). While resources are available for mentor teachers via the Teaching Council website, a much more structured and uniform provision of this information might be helpful in ensuring all mentor teachers have adequate access to appropriate professional development.

The findings of the survey of teachers in leadership roles in ECE centres from my master's research project indicated that there was a strong (>90%) agreement with the statement: 'ECE teachers in leadership roles should support newly graduated teachers to enact the TTOW principle of participation' (Knight, 2022). Because my research focused on upholding TTOW, the questions around mentoring focused on mentoring in this particular area. Nonetheless, if teachers in leadership roles recognise their responsibility to support newly graduated teachers in this area, it seems reasonable to imagine that they also recognise their responsibility to mentor newly graduated teachers.

Survey participants were then asked two questions in response to the following statement: 'I support (or have supported) newly graduated teachers in enacting the TTOW principle of participation….' Again, in both cases the average response was a higher than 90% agreement. This may suggest that teachers in leadership roles predominantly believe they are *already* supporting newly graduated teachers in an adequate, or more than adequate, way. This belief that the status quo is sufficient may act as a filter to conflicting incoming data (Voss & Kunter, 2020) and may cause teachers in leadership roles to be resistant to implementing changes (Rau, 2010). It

may then be useful for teachers who are mentoring new graduates to compare their mentoring programmes with the suggestions below and make an honest assessment of any variances.

Successful educative mentoring programmes foreground the relationship between the mentor and mentee (Jonson, 2008). This includes providing emotional support (Hannan et al., 2015) as well as professional guidance for beginning teachers, who may be experiencing 'reality shock' (Voss & Kunter, 2020). Kiki shared the importance of having a mentor who was deeply *invested* in her success. Without this investment, and passion on the part of the mentor teacher, there is a risk that mentoring meetings become check-box exercises and lose much of the educative and relational richness that is required for transformative growth in newly graduated teachers (Education Council, 2015; McDonald and Flint, 2011).

Secondly, having a clear structure is important in creating a successful mentoring experience for newly graduated teachers (Sikma, 2019). Sikma (2019) also points out that where mentoring programmes are not clearly structured, confusion may result. This confusion can ultimately cause mentoring efforts to become counterproductive. Another risk of unstructured mentoring time is that mentoring meetings may be underemphasised, or even cancelled altogether (Sikma, 2019). Dedicated time that is structured and purposeful is an essential aspect of a successful mentoring programme (Education Council, 2015; McDonald & Flint, 2011; Sikma, 2019). Setting aside structured, consistent time to mentor newly graduated teachers can be difficult in the current climate, and centres may have concerns around the costs involved. I would argue however, that the potential benefits of staff retention (McDonald & Flint, 2011; Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017) could go a long way to countering these costs, as retraining teachers is a significant expense in and of itself (Hannan et al., 2015).

Further to the points above, educative mentoring is a requirement of the Teaching Council (Education Council, 2015). This places obligations on both the mentee and mentor teachers. Effective mentoring needs to support beginning teachers to develop skills and professional knowledge (Richter et al., 2013), and must ensure that provisionally registered teachers progress to meet the Teaching Council's standards (Education Council, 2015). ECE settings tend to be unique environments, even when compared to other ECE settings, and so requirements that relate to a specific environment also need to be communicated clearly (Sikma, 2019). This may include aspects such as a centre's unique philosophy, rituals, or processes. Without this crucial learning, a beginning teacher's kete of knowledge is likely to be incomplete. The argument could also be made that the mentor teacher, in this scenario, is not fulfilling their role in supporting the new graduate.

Conclusion

Teachers' progress during their first and second years of teaching especially, are intricately linked with effective mentoring processes (McDonald & Flint, 2011). Effective mentoring processes include strong relationships between the mentor and mentee (Jonson, 2008), regular time set aside for mentoring meetings (Education Council, 2015), specific and clear feedback (Hannan et al., 2015), and emotional support (Sikma, 2019). The vast majority of teachers in leadership roles indicate that they believe they are providing mentoring support to beginning teachers (Knight, 2022), however, of the newly graduated teachers I interviewed, three out of five

reported not having a structured mentoring programme in place. This aligns with McDonald and Flint's (2011) findings, that the majority of newly graduated teachers were not receiving sufficient mentoring.

The beliefs of teachers in leaderships roles (that they are already providing sufficient mentoring) may cause them to ignore contradictory data (Voss & Kunter, 2020), meaning that it may be more difficult for mentor teachers to recognise gaps in existing mentoring programmes effectively. Beliefs and theories relating to practice are also not always reflective of practice itself (Mao & Crosthwaite, 2019). Nonetheless, in order to achieve effective educative mentoring (Education Council, 2015), a close and honest assessment of existing mentoring processes may be required. In situations where a robust mentoring programme is implemented, significant growth is likely to occur (Education Council, 2015) and staff retention may also be improved (McDonald & Flint, 2011; Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). In addition, the provision of substantive educative mentoring is a requirement of the Teaching Council (Education Council, 2015).

Beginning teachers, while new to the profession, can bring significant new skills to their teams (Knight, 2022). Retaining and nurturing these teachers during the challenging early years of their career is an important and necessary investment of time and knowledge (Education Council, 2015). In order for beginning teachers to become equipped, complete, and mature in their practice, a constructivist, supportive and scaffolded mentoring programme is essential (Education Council, 2015; McDonald and Flint, 2011). Likewise, mentor teachers must uphold their mentoring obligations (Education Council, 2015). This will involve seeking professional development to strengthen the skills specific to mentoring and a more structured and clear set of guidelines and support for mentor teachers may be a key aspect of ensuring this occurs consistently (Knight, 2022).

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