

**A battle for hearts and minds?  
Getting past 'performance development' in continuing professional learning  
in early childhood education.**

Keynote presentation to the Early Childhood Winter Research Hui  
Victoria University of Wellington  
*Early Childhood Professional Learning: Growing the Profession, Growing the Community*  
22 June 2013

**Joce Nuttall, PhD<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract**

The edicts of neo-liberal public policy have pervaded education workplaces for the last twenty years, leaving behind a trail littered with professional development plans, individual appraisals, and key performance indicators. But there is little evidence that these modes of governing the work of educators have made a serious contribution to the development of practice in early childhood education. I will argue that the neo-liberal focus on individual development in workplaces of the last twenty years has been misguided, particularly in professions where there is high staff turnover, where resources for individual coaching and mentoring are extremely limited, and where cultural worldviews privilege the community over the individual. I will draw on recent research with early childhood educators in Australia and New Zealand to argue that effective professional learning must move beyond the battle for individual hearts and minds to embrace the notion of *collective zones of proximal development*, in order to genuinely serve the interests of young children and their families.

*Tena koutou. Nga mihi nui kia a koutou. Warm greetings from colleagues across the Tasman at Australian Catholic University and thank you for the invitation to be part of this hui today.*

**Introduction**

Earlier this year I was invited to contribute a blog posting to the online space shared by members of the Critical Perspectives in Early Childhood Education Group at [www.childhoods.net](http://www.childhoods.net). My post was called 'The loneliness of the long-distance researcher' and it began by reflecting on the process of filling in my individual performance development plan. Within the posting I wrote:

The valorisation of the individual is a marker of neo-liberal economics, both the individual-as-economic-unit and in its 'Robinson Crusoe' version: the (masculine) individual-as-hero, alone against a savage world. Workplaces everywhere abound with technologies that reinscribe these narratives. And the discourse of performance is so pervasive that the noun – 'performance management' – has become a verb – to 'performance manage'.

Today I want to unpack with you the arguments behind what I was trying to say in this blog post and what those arguments might mean for professional development in early childhood education. In particular, I want to share with you some of the experiences of childcare centre

---

<sup>1</sup> Director and Principal Research Fellow, Centre for Early Childhood Futures, Faculty of Education, Australian Catholic University. Email: [joce.nuttall@acu.edu.au](mailto:joce.nuttall@acu.edu.au)

Directors I've been working with in a pedagogical leadership development project in Melbourne. I've structured what I want to say around three themes – the individual, the collective, and the zone of proximal development.

My first theme is a reflection on the long-standing dominance of notions of the individual within contemporary English-speaking societies. If you've ever handed in an individual assignment, or filled out an individual performance plan, or had your individual appraisal, you'll know what I'm talking about. We need to understand that, although we take these structures for granted, they aren't naturally occurring but are socially constructed within a certain set of assumptions about how society works. Over the last few decades, these ideas have become even more sedimented under the influence of economic theories that treat the individual as the basis of workplace life. As I signalled in my blog post, these ideas aren't new. In the 1800s Marx described the 'Robinson Crusoe' notion of the individual (male, of course) cast adrift on the seas of society, engaged in a heroic pursuit for survival. It's from this view of how the world works that we draw notions of individual appraisal and performance management.

This is not to say there is no such thing as individuals, or individual minds, but as Vygotsky reminds us, we need to be aware that society precedes the individual. We are born into a pre-existing world of cultural norms and expectations. When we enter a profession, such as early childhood education, we are also being 'born again', if you will, into a pre-existing world. We become enculturated into this world through our participation in its practices and the resulting internalization of its modes of thought and action.

Let me return to my blog post. It continued with the words of Amanda, one of the Melbourne centre Directors, speaking at the beginning of the project about the issue of individual staff:

There are a couple of other staff members who are, yeah part of the original team who are just a bit, I have to say this, a bit of laziness there, there's just a bit of hesitation to jump on board the integration bandwagon. Whereas I just need a bit more, quite often I need more. I need the basics to be done a bit more enthusiastically ... just really getting in there and doing it with gusto, whereas sometimes it's the bare minimum. And it's not enough that you can sort of performance manage it, it's just under the radar there. [Amanda, Centre Director]

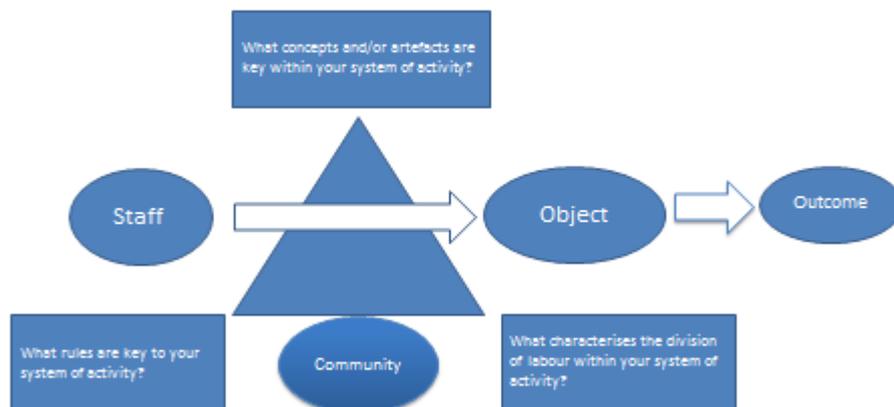
My blog post continues:

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu recognised the world in which Amanda is immersed. For him, it was characterized by "the struggle of all against all at all levels of the hierarchy, which finds support through everyone clinging to their job and organisation under conditions of insecurity, suffering, and stress". For Bourdieu, neoliberalism was "A programme for destroying collective structures which may impede the pure market logic." It doesn't matter whether you're working in an early childhood centre, a school, or a university: wherever you work, it's lonely inside the neoliberal project.

These words from Amanda show how at the beginning of our work together Amanda was struggling to motivate educators who are not working in the way Amanda would wish. I think we can also hear in Amanda's words the deep sense of responsibility she feels as a leader to promote effective practice in her centre. And we also hear how notions of performance management are failing to offer her a way forward.

The alternative way of understanding centre life, which we have been exploring together in our research, is to understand the centre *system* as the focus of leadership. This has meant a profound shift in the thinking of the Centre Directors, from seeing staff as a group of individuals to be shaped one-by-one, to seeing staff as participants together in a set of distinctive cultural practices that we call early childhood education. The question then becomes not ‘How can I get you to change?’ but ‘How can we work together to change the way we do things around here?’ But how do we move away from a focus on practice as individual performance, to a view of practice as something to be worked on by the collective; in other words, by a group of individuals?

In the project methodology we’ve been using, which is known as Developmental Work Research and developed by Professor Yrjo Engestrom at the University of Helsinki, the Directors began by mapping the cultural norms of their centre: What are its dominant rules about how people should think and behave? How does the group organise itself to make sure everything that needs to be done gets done? What are the important artefacts that the group uses to mediate important tasks (such as children’s portfolios, or rosters, or copies of *Te Whariki*)? The most important questions, however, are: What is it that we are trying to achieve here (the outcome)? And what are the tasks we need to work on to realise what we want to achieve (the object)?



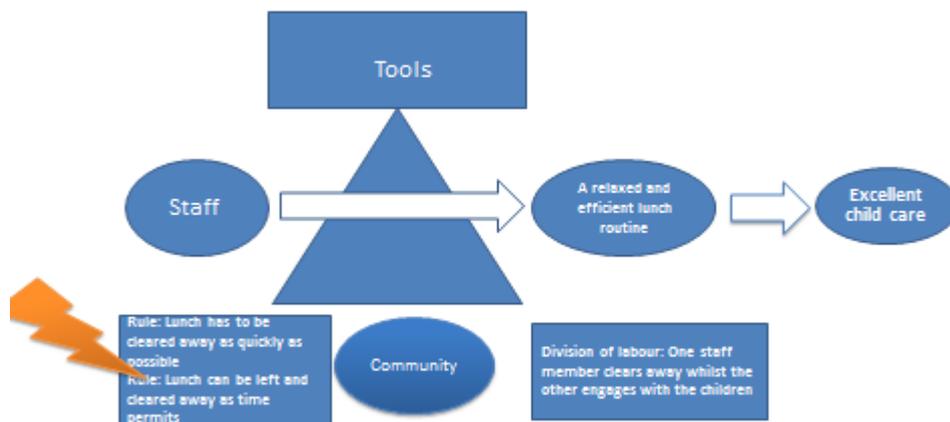
Practices in collaborative workplaces such as early childhood centres basically involve carrying out the tasks that are characteristic of what the group is trying to achieve. These practices tend to be regular and in centres they include things like changing toddlers’ nappies, circle time before children depart the kindergarten, meal and snack times, and setting up and packing away. They can also be more subtle, such as engaging in extended conversations with children or observing each other’s practice as a form of peer coaching. Either way, every one of these tasks is governed by cultural understandings about who does it, the rules that apply to how it’s done, and the use of key artefacts to get the job done. In centres these artefacts can be as diverse as portfolios, the Regulations, centre furniture, indoor-outdoor rosters, and so forth. The process of enculturation into a specific centre setting is the process

of internalizing these rules, tools and divisions of labour, to the point where an educator can participate seamlessly in centre practice. To recall how stressful this can be, try to remember the first few days of any practicum placement you've ever had as you tried to figure out how everything worked in *this* particular centre.

A second feature of practice settings is that they all contain structural tensions. These can be small, such as being annoyed that someone leaves the door open every time they go outside, to large, such as staff meetings grinding to a halt because everyone is afraid to offer an opinion. These structural tensions are basically anything that impede the achievement of the task at hand. In the project methodology, after mapping current practice, the next step was for the Centre Directors to identify some of these persistent tensions. Some Directors came up with a few; some came up with pages of notes. Some of these tensions were long-standing, whilst others were relatively recent.

It's important to understand that I'm not talking here about conflict or personality differences or differences in teaching philosophy or style. I'm talking about underlying structural tensions within or between centre rules, tools, and divisions of labour. These sometimes appear as differences in teaching philosophy or style or get interpreted as personality differences, but these interpretations aren't actually very helpful for thinking about the development of practice.

Here is an example of a persistent structural tension from Heather's centre:



The two educators working with the toddlers were applying different rules to how the lunch clear-away should happen. The room leader, who serves the lunches, usually took some of the children aside for a quiet story and allowed the rest to move freely around the room. The other educator was in a floating role, and came into the room for just half an hour after lunch. Her practice was to bustle around, clearing away, and during this time she found the children got under her feet. These differences were causing significant friction in the room and each educator had approached Heather separately with an appeal to try to get the other educator to change. The problem with such an approach is that it positions the *other person* as the task to

be worked on, instead of the real task, which is having the best possible lunch routine for the children.

So how did Heather move from ‘You need to change’ to ‘How can we change together?’ Heather’s solution during the project was to bring the two educators together and say: “I’m aware you have some differences around the lunch routine. What is it we are trying to achieve?” In no time at all the educators agreed the main task was to have a relaxed and efficient lunch routine. Heather then asked for their ideas about how to achieve this. In an individualised, performance-oriented culture, Heather’s job would be to then say: “Do you agree? Do you like that idea? Could you work with that?” Instead, she took a task-oriented, collective approach by responding to every suggestion with the same question: “If we go with that idea, will it lead to a more relaxed and efficient lunch routine?”

There are at least three important features of this way of thinking about the development of practice. First, it is task-oriented, not person-oriented. This has the effect opening up a space where it’s safe to share the good ideas educators have kept suppressed because of evaluation apprehension. Second, this way of thinking about structural tensions understands them as a *good* thing, because it brings them to the surface and treats them as a source of productive dialogue, not as a source of stress and insecurity. Third, by working in this way, the distributed thinking of the group and all its experience and creativity is brought to problems of practice.

By persistently focusing on the work to be done, Heather’s question liberated everyone’s ideas. Heather had learned to think about her centre as a place where people come together to engage in distinctive and negotiated cultural practices, rather than as a place where staff make individual and sometimes idiosyncratic decisions about practice. Heather didn’t know the answer to how this tension would be resolved and, even more importantly, she didn’t *need* to know the answer, because she trusted the answer would be found somewhere within the distributed thinking of the group<sup>2</sup>.

This leads me to my second theme, which is to reflect a bit more on what I mean by the collective. The work of professional learning in ECE is sometimes about individual learning, and that’s important. I want to stress that I’m not simply saying doing everything in groups is the answer. But, increasingly, we see that the most effective professional learning happens on a whole-centre and even a whole-system basis. In other words, individual learning doesn’t cause centres to learn, any more than whole-centre learning causes individuals to learn: individuals and centres *co-evolve* in their development.

Let me return to my blog post to give you an example of what this looks like in practice. First, let me explain a little of the ‘back story’ to this example. Some of the Directors in the project had been discussing a persistent contradiction that had spread across several centres: increasing numbers of children were arriving in the morning without having had breakfast but their parents were helpfully supplying boxes of cereal and suchlike for educators to serve. The Directors were happy to support parents in this way but some of the centres didn’t have sufficient space to store the breakfast foods. The Council’s solution to this had been to suggest to Directors that they tell parents that children had to have their breakfast before they came to the centre, because too many risk issues around storage and food handling were

---

<sup>2</sup> By the way, I’m not going to tell you how the tension was resolved – have a think about it and see how many ideas you can come up with.

going to arise. This had upset several of the Directors, who were keen to support parents in this way.

Shona, one of the Directors in this situation, had at first seen it as a ‘Robinson Crusoe’ moment, a problem that she had to womanfully fix as Director. But by using the project methodology, she came to see her task in a different way:

[The methodology] has helped from really small, tiny, little conversations we’ve been having Centre based to the current one at the moment, about the whole breakfast thing, and that’s more of a network [issue]. So there’s a couple of us that are actually jumping on board with this and taking that step further to higher [City] management and going, ‘Well, this is what you want, but how are we going to achieve it?’ ... having this tool [the model explored during the research] has given me the confidence to actually go, ‘No, this what I’m seeing and can I get some help with it?’ It’s not just about me always having the answers and saying ‘Yes, it’s what I’ve said, what are you going to do for me and how are we going to achieve this outcome if we’ve got different rules?’ So, the [development model] has definitely been a huge benefit throughout this whole program. [Shona, Centre Director]

Shona hasn’t just learned that she doesn’t have to always have the answer. She also now understands that she is working on the boundary where *multiple* systems overlap: the system of the centre; the system of the City Council; and the systems of centre families. Each of these systems is working toward the same object – getting a nutritious breakfast into each child – but each is working on it with different rules. Families are working on the task of getting to centre and work on time; Council is working on minimising risk; and educators are working on advocating for families who face the morning juggle. Not only are the three systems applying by different rules and bringing different sets of expectations about who does what and why. By being able to think about the situation in this way, Shona has found a way past thinking that she has to solve it on her own. She came to understand that the situation could not be resolved by movement within just one system but that all three systems had to co-evolve. As Shona has described, toward the end of the project she and her colleagues decided to reframe the task as a system-to-system issue and throw it back onto the collective consciousness (and therefore the shared creativity and potential) across all three systems.

Of course, within Shona’s Centre there was also a range of views amongst staff about how to manage the breakfast issue, which brings me to my third theme, that of collective zones of proximal development. It is this notion of a collective ZPD that explains how this co-evolution of the individual and the group occurs. Throughout my research career I’ve essentially be interested in solving the same puzzle: How can educators in childcare settings, who come together with a huge variety of qualifications, personalities, cultural backgrounds, and experience make childcare happen in such apparently seamless ways? And, given such huge variation amongst individuals, how can whole-centre development even be possible? I’ve now come to understand that these individual variations matter much less than I originally thought in relation to the development of centre practice.

I’ve come to believe that worrying about variation is actually a bit of a trap for centre leaders and for professional developers, and that the idea of getting everyone ‘on the same page’ can actively work *against* whole-centre development. This has been an argument that’s been slipping through my fingers for a long time and I haven’t quite got a proper hold of it yet. But I think I’m starting to find the answer in the dominance of the concept of *teamwork* in early childhood education.

I spoke earlier about the need to resist individual constructions of practice and development. In every study of professional development I've conducted, early childhood educators have pushed back against the dominance of the individual by employing the concept of teamwork. Here are examples, from different Directors in the Melbourne study when asked about the main challenges facing their leadership:

I think it would be bringing your team together and really working together as a team because what we would see as working as a team and successfully working as a team isn't always going to be the same thing as other people see.

They're very passionate about their job, but I'd like to see them work a bit more together ... I think you need to be seen as being uniform and work on these things together and I think that would be great if we could come together.

There are a whole variety of reasons why this focus on teamwork is a problem. First, because talk about teamwork is sometimes actually a proxy for wanting to achieve or maintain 'harmony', so that becomes the task centres are working on. The earlier example of Heather and the difficult lunch routine shows why a focus on teamwork isn't the same as a focus on practice. Second, like an ill-matched group of trampers, there is a risk that the group is always stopping to wait for the slowest (or most resistant) traveller to catch up. Third, even a modest rate of staff turnover means that groups premised on teamwork have to pause in their development to accommodate the views of new members as they blend in, otherwise they risk implying that the new educator has no place in the team. I believe a reliance on teamwork is actively holding back the development of practice in many settings, because it is treated as a *pre-requisite* to development, rather than as *consequence* of development.

So where does this leave us for thinking about whole-centre development? I think I'm beginning to understand that whole-centre development isn't about everyone being on the same page, but about everyone's pages moving in the same direction. This movement demands a kind of collective consciousness, where each contributes according to what they bring from their idiosyncratic and individual life histories, not where we strive to get everyone thinking in the same way but, together, individuals and systems can move *together* within a collective zone of proximal development.

But where does that leave us in terms of individual performance development? For those of us who are strongly introverted, time to be alone, to concentrate amidst peace and quiet, is essential. And there is no question that individuals can do things differently and therefore make subtle shifts in centre culture. For me, as for everyone who works with notions of collective development, the challenge isn't to identify how individuals develop or how groups develop. The challenge is to identify what happens at the point where the individual and the group meet each other. Having a collective consciousness means that, even when we work alone, we are motivated by thinking about the whole. So what might individual performance development mean if we begin with the question: What is the relationship between your practice and the development of the whole centre? Of course, this is still a peculiarly Western question. There are cultural groups where the collective always precedes the individual and, indeed, where there is literally no concept of individualism, where the individual physical mind and body is always understood to be at one with the community.

In conclusion, I want to return to why I gave this presentation the title 'A battle for hearts and minds?' There is a danger in what I've presented that I am representing professional development as some kind of rational, purely cognitive process, and that by understanding systems in a systematic way we can understand the rich and complex nature of our humanity.

I don't believe this is so. In our work we aren't only motivated by the tasks we have to undertake but by the values and aspirations we bring to those tasks. It isn't enough to say we want the children in our care to learn and develop; nor is it enough to say we want to learn and develop as educators. *How* do we want to develop? In what *direction* do we want our development to take us? If we think about movement in collective zones of proximal development, where is that movement heading? These are questions that return us to the ethical heart of our work with others. We have chosen a profession where our principal task is to change other people: that's what educators do. This is both an exciting and a terrifying responsibility. All I can say is, thank goodness we don't have to do it on our own.

*No reira, tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.*