

Transforming learning at Wilton Playcentre

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Executive summary

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Wilton Playcentre was designated as a Centre of Innovation in 2003. This report focuses on the findings from baseline and final phase data collection, and 2½ years of action research. The research was undertaken by Wilton Playcentre parents, with the assistance of the research associates.

Wilton Playcentre's research questions were to provide an investigation and analysis of:

- pedagogical approaches, especially the use of schemas and Learning and Teaching Stories with their focus on dispositions for learning, and children's learning progressions;
- how Wilton Playcentre maintains continuity and quality across playcentre sessions and between home and playcentre; and
- parent engagement and sustaining a community of learners.

The aspirations for children and four principles of *Te Whāriki* (empowerment, holistic development, family and community, and relationships) form the basis of Wilton Playcentre's philosophy, values, and educational practice. They are equally applicable to parents and children. These aspirations and principles framed our Centre of Innovation project, and are highlighted in this report. Our main pedagogical emphases, schema learning theory, and dispositions for learning, were the focus for analysis of children's learning and learning progression. As the Centre of Innovation project developed, these two aspects were brought together in ways that enriched our understanding and insights. We also examined interactions between children, between adults and children, and between adults, that support, enrich, and extend children's and adults' learning.

We investigated the research questions through five cycles of action research. Baseline and final data collection enabled us to track change over the course of the Centre of Innovation project. The action research was participatory and involved collaborative critique, with most playcentre

members having involvement in gathering data, examining and critically discussing it, and planning and acting. Data included much documentation of learning and teaching (Learning and Teaching Stories, observations, ratings of process quality, photographs, video recordings, samples of children's work), questionnaires, interviews, group discussions, and parent reflections recorded in notebooks to find out views and experiences of playcentre parents and the wider playcentre community. In analysing the data, we triangulated evidence from different sources, and drew on our theoretical framework to analyse learning progression for adults and children.

Connecting schemas and learning dispositions

Through the Centre of Innovation project we drew on two different theoretical approaches: schema learning theory derived from developmental psychology, and learning dispositions fostered by a sociocultural approach. Schemas are cognitive structures or forms of thought, indicated by repeatable patterns of behaviour. They commonly progress through several levels from action to abstract thinking. Schemas are part of children's motivation for learning. We found that children displaying a strong schema interest/s showed a drive to know and experiment across different areas of play and in different contexts.

Carr's (1998) framework of learning dispositions is "a set of five broadly based behaviours, closely linked to the strands of Te Whāriki, within which a topic or activity typically develops as a sequence—to find an interest here (Belonging), to be involved and attentive (Wellbeing), to tackle difficulty and uncertainty (Exploration), to express their ideas (Communication), and to take some responsibility in joint attention episodes with others (Contribution)". Observations based on this framework are known as Learning Stories. "Each part of a Learning Story has the potential to become a learning habit or 'disposition', a combination of knowledge, skill and inclination that sets up expectations and motivations about being a learner that will influence learning in later life" (Carr, 1998, p. i).

We used the two approaches to complement each other, working on the challenge of making connections between schemas and learning dispositions throughout the project, particularly in our approaches to assessment, planning, and evaluation, where we developed common frameworks. Our findings provide evidence that knowing about, carefully observing, and identifying children's schemas enabled us as parent educators to understand children's behaviour, support their schematic interests, and so extend their learning. We found associations between schemas and learning dispositions: supporting children's inner-directed schema interests provides conditions for positive learning dispositions to flourish. Our understanding and insights were enriched when we considered children's schemas and dispositions together.

Children’s learning, and what contributes to it

Throughout the project, we had a common focus on children’s learning progression and what contributes to it.

Early literacy schematic interests and pedagogy

Our first action research cycle aimed to enhance our provision of a print-saturated environment, and storytelling in which adults made links with children’s experiences and actively encouraged children to join in and contribute ideas about characters, behaviour, and motivation. We also wanted to enhance cognitively challenging interactions, specifically adults asking open-ended questions and adults adding complexity and challenge. Playcentre members collectively agreed on this focus after analysing and discussing ratings from observations of the environment, education programme, and interactions within the playcentre setting. We used the guidelines of the New Zealand Council for Educational Research/Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust early childhood education quality rating scale as a tool to help us make these ratings.

The main findings were:

- Adding meaningful literacy opportunities enhanced literacy learning experiences for children.
- Open-ended questioning offered opportunities for children to think deeply and come up with their own answers. Adults’ encouragement through listening carefully to children and allowing them to take their time, supported children to develop their own ideas.
- Children with strong and persistent schema fascinations clearly show evidence of the schemas in their mark making. Schemas are a direct reflection of children’s interests and lead to children engaging in exploring concepts associated with them.
- Children regularly took a leading role in creating continuity across time and space for themselves and others through persistently following their own schema interests at home and playcentre and in the different playcentre sessions. These interests were also sustained through challenging interactions with adults and the literacy opportunities being offered.
- Adults functioning as facilitators and co-learners helped children’s interests to remain central within the education programme.

Social aspects of schemas

One parent, Ainsley Simmonds, undertook an action research cycle to investigate social aspects of schemas.

Some schemas being explored at home were found to differ from those explored at playcentre or those explored when in the company of other children.

Other observations indicated that children may explore different schemas depending on whether they are playing on their own or with other children, and whether they are at home or at playcentre.

There was also evidence of children with persisting interests in social concepts such as rescuing.

Children with similar schema fascinations were seen to play together exploring that schema. Observations indicated that children with different schemas played independently of each other, although may play together if their schema-related play is compatible. Ainsley suggested that when children with the same schemas play together, it might be that they have the same early set of mental models and so are able to add to each other's understandings of the schemas. Younger children drawn to older children who have the same schemas might be expected to make larger cognitive advances. Practice implications are that adults, knowing how children contribute to each other's learning, can arrange for groups of children with similar schema interests to play together, can provide a range of opportunities for individual children to pursue their schema interests and choose their own partners in learning, and provide opportunities for younger children to play with older children.

Continuity and progression in children's schemas and dispositions

Five parents undertook case studies of their own children, analysing data from home, playcentre, and other settings where applicable. Each case study shows progression in the children's schema development, and functional dependency ("If I do this then that will happen") and possibly abstract thought occurring at quite young ages, when other writers have found this hard to identify. Hand in hand with the children's determination to explore their schema interests, was seen their dispositions of curiosity, playfulness, being involved, engaging with challenge, perseverance (sometimes in the face of difficulty), expressing an idea or feeling (verbally or non-verbally), and taking some responsibility for their own actions in joint attention episodes with others. These case studies provided evidence of links between schemas and dispositions, and of continuity in schema interests across settings. Adults' knowledge and understanding of schemas was a key factor in enabling adults to appreciate children's interests and provide extra content and possibilities for extension.

Assessment, planning, and evaluation based on schema and learning dispositions

In our fourth action research cycle we revised and trialled assessment, planning, and evaluation forms to bring schemas and learning dispositions into a single usable framework. The new forms were shown to be valuable in leading adults to identify and make plans to assist learning progression and to examine and plan for continuity. The forms could be of value to other practitioners who draw on both these approaches.

Sustaining a community of learners

A range of features supported Wilton Playcentre to operate as a “community of learners” where adults and children learn through their participation with each other in shared endeavours. We found a fit between the idea of participation in a community of learners and schema learning theory that holds that children actively explore their own innate interests. Our knowledge of schema learning theory enabled us to notice, understand, and respond to schema interests. In this way, even pre-verbal children make plain their interests.

The playcentre philosophy which sees adults and children as competent self-directed learners and formal systems of playcentre training, mentoring, and session evaluations contributed to building a community of learners. Our research showed that having a common purpose—to provide and participate in the education of our children—provided the strong base for our community. Informal features also supported parent engagement and sustaining a community of learners. These were:

- adults learning from each other as they participate as members of the session teams;
- informal conversations between adults about children that influence thinking; and
- friendships that endured outside of playcentre.

Adults are encouraged to learn by a culture that takes pedagogy seriously, the many opportunities for informal communication and development of relationships amongst members of the community, and the wisdom of experienced members, including life members, being passed on to newer members. Policies are flexible, enabling account to be taken of members’ personal circumstances and any pressures on them. Tasks are shared and members develop a sense of responsibility. These features contribute to learning progression for adults.

Processes and conditions contributing to learning

Processes and conditions that seemed to contribute to learning throughout the Centre of Innovation project included:

- analytic tools—the New Zealand Council for Educational Research/Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust process quality rating scale;
- technological resources—a digital camera, iBook, computer, digital video camera, and printer;
- conditions to support ongoing learning and experimentation; and
- professional and research support.

There were also issues and challenges, including those created by the practicalities of doing the research, the volunteer workload for parents, and the changing membership of the playcentre as old parents left and new parents joined up. Despite issues, the overwhelming view of parents was that the Centre of Innovation experience had been valuable and positive for themselves and their children.