

# in the moment

## NEWSLETTER

### TEACHER TALK THAT CHANGES PRACTICE

*Some things you can't avoid because they are mandated. Some you can't mandate, though they shouldn't be avoided.*

*Collaborative conversations, for example...*

Perhaps the most important question for school and early childhood leaders today is not which priority should come next – curriculum refresh, Te Whāriki in daily practice, explicit instruction, cultural responsiveness, assessment reform, or the balance between play-based learning and intentional teaching? As important as these are, the deeper question is this: **what kind of professional conversations are happening between teachers?**

Every principal or centre manager knows the scene. Kaiako gather in a meeting room with coffee cups and laptops. Someone shares a useful worksheet, learning story or observation note. Another mentions a student concern. A few administration issues are sorted. Everyone nods appreciatively. Then the meeting ends.

The atmosphere was positive. *But did anything truly shift?*



### From meeting together to learning together.

Increasingly, research suggests that what distinguishes schools and centres that improve from those that stagnate lies in the quality of professional talk. Not how often teachers meet, but what they actually **do** when they meet.

The uncomfortable reality is that many collaborative conversations remain stuck at the level of coordination, resource-sharing and pleasant agreement. Productive professional dialogue, by contrast, pushes into evidence, inquiry, experimentation, and challenge. It asks not merely, *“What are we doing?”* but *“What impact is this having on learners?”* and *“What needs to change?”*

I well remember the struggle some departments had to tell me what wasn't working in their classrooms, yet that was the conversation they needed to have – if not with the principal, at least amongst themselves. To treat their meetings as workshops for improving practice, not showrooms for polishing the departmental silver.

One New Zealand principal recently described sitting in on two different curriculum team meetings in the same week. In the first, staff spent 45 minutes discussing who would organise a shared Google Drive folder and whether Year 9 reports should be uploaded before Friday. Efficient? *Maybe*. Collaborative? *Technically*. Professionally transformative? **Not remotely**.

In the second meeting, teachers brought samples of student writing from different classes. They debated why ākonga in one cohort were producing significantly weaker arguments than another.

One teacher admitted that her modelling process *“probably wasn't explicit enough.”* Another challenged whether they were assuming too much prior vocabulary knowledge. The discussion became probing, analytical, and slightly uncomfortable – in the best possible way. *“That,”* the principal said later, *“felt like professional learning.”*

### WARMTH IS NOT ENOUGH

Research across New Zealand, Australia, Europe, Singapore and the OECD consistently points to the same conclusion: productive collaboration happens when relational trust combines with disciplined inquiry. Trust matters enormously, but trust alone is not enough.

This is where many schools and centres inadvertently stall. Leaders work hard to create psychologically safe cultures – and rightly so. Staff need to feel respected, valued and able to speak honestly. But some teams confuse collegiality with effectiveness. Conversations become so cautious and affirming that nobody ever interrogates practice deeply enough to produce change.

Conversations focused mainly on ‘sharing ideas’ and affirming colleagues rarely produce significant improvement in teaching. What makes the difference is inquiry-focused dialogue where teachers analyse learning processes, challenge assumptions, and stay with difficult problems for long enough to rethink practice.

In other words, productive teacher talk needs both warmth and edge. Aroha and assertion. Tumuaki and centre managers play a crucial role in creating that balance.

## FROM GOODWILL TO GOOD STRUCTURE

One of the strongest findings in the research is that collaboration improves when leaders make it part of the organisation's instructional architecture rather than an optional extra. Schools and centres often say collaboration is important, but then bury it beneath operational clutter. Staff meetings become consumed by notices, compliance updates, and organisational housekeeping. Inquiry gets squeezed to the margins.

A recurring theme identified in New Zealand ([PLC ERO Report 2024](#)) is the gap between schools' commitment to collaboration and the practical realities of school life. While collaboration is widely valued, teachers frequently report insufficient protected time for the sustained inquiry, reflection and professional dialogue that lead to improvements in practice. The first challenge for principals is to provide protected time for meaningful professional dialogue.

But simply providing meeting time, is not enough. International evidence shows that collaborative time only becomes powerful when it is structured carefully. That means conversations need focus, protocols, and shared problems of practice.

I learned this lesson the hard way. Simply creating time for collaboration is not enough. Without clear purpose and facilitation, conversations can quickly shift from teaching and learning towards behaviour issues, venting frustrations, sharing war stories, and other tangents that limit the impact of the time together.

As demonstrated in an international study undertaken in 2024 ([Christensen et al.](#)), high-performing collaborative teams tend to work on something concrete. Student writing samples. Assessment evidence. Video of classroom teaching. Misconceptions emerging in mathematics. The conversation revolves around evidence rather than opinion and calls for leadership which orients the conversation explicitly toward teaching and learning.

For ECE teams, the concrete artefacts may look different: patterns in learning stories, transition-to-school notes, assessment documentation, whānau feedback, observations of peer play, or evidence about how well routines support children's agency, language, belonging, and social-emotional learning.

Australian studies of collaborative action research in schools (e.g. [Lynch et al.](#)) find that teacher dialogue becomes significantly more productive when teams repeatedly cycle through evidence, analysis, experimentation and review. The key word here is **repeatedly**. Deep collaboration is rarely achieved through one-off sessions. It develops through disciplined habits over time.

### Team Leaders as conversation shapers

In the school context, middle leaders become particularly important in this process. In many schools, the actual experience teachers have of collaboration is shaped far more by team leaders, curriculum leaders, and heads of department than by principals. Yet New Zealand research ([Highland et al.](#)) suggests that middle leaders often view their collaborative leadership more favourably than the teachers they lead. The largest gaps are not usually in goodwill or relationships, but in the practical work of improvement, such as using evidence effectively, building professional learning, and creating the conditions that enable teachers to improve their practice.

Strong middle leadership requires more than subject expertise or administrative efficiency. Facilitating productive professional dialogue is a learned skill. It involves asking probing questions without humiliating people. Redirecting vague discussion back toward evidence. Knowing when to challenge and when to support. Keeping teams focused on learners rather than personalities. Implications from New Zealand research ([Professional Collaboration Y7-10 teachers](#)) and elsewhere suggest that middle leaders should be developed explicitly in facilitation, feedback, conflict resolution, and evidence use, because the studies show that these capacities cannot be assumed from curriculum and pedagogical expertise alone.

It also means resisting the temptation to rescue conversations too quickly. Some of the most productive professional discussions feel slightly messy. Finnish researchers have highlighted the value of conversations that remain open to possibility – conversations where teachers stay with uncertainty and unresolved dilemmas long enough for deeper thinking to emerge. Teaching teams that rush prematurely toward quick consensus may lose the very learning they seek.

Of course, collaboration can also become deeply unproductive. The warning signs are remarkably consistent across the research. Meetings dominated by updates and administration. Constantly changing priorities. Poor consultation. Excessive hierarchy. Leaders overloaded with managerial tasks. Educators attending meetings physically while disengaging mentally.

Perhaps most dangerously, some schools and centres confuse busyness with improvement. Kaiako can spend hours collaborating without ever improving learning. OECD research suggests that the benefits of teacher collaboration depend less on whether teachers collaborate and more on how they collaborate.

### Making professional talk worth the time

Collaborative activities focused on joint inquiry, examining evidence, and improving practice are more strongly associated with professional growth than simply spending more time together. The message for principals and centre managers is clear: don't just create time for teams to meet; **help team leaders make that time professionally worthwhile.**

One practical starting point is to establish norms for productive challenge. Team leaders may need your permission, language, and confidence to ask questions that move the conversation beyond comfortable agreement: *"What evidence supports that?" "What might we be missing?" "What would someone who disagrees say?" "How will this improve outcomes for learners?"*

The goal is not more meetings. Most teachers would revolt – understandably. The goal is better meetings. Fewer conversations about administration. More conversations about learning. Fewer vague reflections. More disciplined inquiry. Fewer polite monologues. More evidence-rich dialogue.

A useful test is whether collaborative conversations consider: *"Which learners are we talking about, what evidence do we have, what do they need from us, and what will we do differently?"*

In the most effective schools and centres, professional dialogue is not treated as something that happens after the real work is done. Nor is it postponed until teams have reached some sort of collegial nirvana. Teacher conversations need to work even when people would not naturally choose to work with each other, when trust is still developing, when perspectives differ, and when the conversation feels uncomfortable. Hard professional work often happens under imperfect conditions.

That is why principals and centre managers need to ensure their team leaders have structured protocols for difficult conversations, case analysis, evidence review, and professional disagreement. The question is not, *"Are our teams getting along?"* The better question is, *"Are our teams learning together in ways that change practice and improve outcomes for learners?"*

When collaborative conversations move beyond coordination and into curiosity, challenge, evidence, and experimentation, kaiako stop merely working alongside one another, they begin crystallising their collaboration into classroom strategies that accelerate learning.

This issue of *In the Moment* was written by Stephen Hensman. Please look out for our next issue coming August 2026.