Opening Address to "THE GATHERING 2013" – 15 June, 2013

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It is my privilege and delight to give this year’s opening address for our fifth Gathering event. As I speak images from the four previous events are running behind me – I hope that they will demonstrate the principles and ideas that I share with you within this opening address.

Five years on, where have we come from and where may we be going?

Beginnings - Collaboration
When I opened the first The Gathering in 2009 the idea of holding such an event was new and untried before in Canterbury. When I first raised the idea, while interest was high among my colleagues there was a level of uncertainty that teachers would be likewise interested, and willingly give up their precious family and weekend time to gather together in an unpaid capacity to talk about research. Your presence here today shows how these uncertainties were unfounded. From our first event, where 82 teachers enrolled, to today where 140 of you are here, we have seen the event spread in interest and enthusiasm with attendance of educators growing from early childhood education across to primary school and tertiary colleagues.

The model that we have followed in Canterbury is similar to that run for more than a decade in Otago—where early childhood teachers gather together to talk about research. This Dunedin research day has been a successful event also. However, where we differ in our approach is that while the Otago model is run and managed by the University of Otago, the Early Years Enquiry Research Group, a cross-sector, multi-institutional research group, runs our events. As you have already seen and heard our group is made up of interested colleagues from our sponsor organisations: Te Tari Puna Ora o Aotearoa, Core, New Zealand College of Early Childhood Education, Kidsfirst, Rangi Ruru, and the University of Canterbury alongside members who also come from other institutions: CPIT, and the Tertiary College. Together we work collaboratively to build, support and nurture research in the early years across Canterbury. Our other point of difference is a deliberate strategy to blend early childhood education and primary education together—hence our ‘early years’ title rather than early childhood education. Just as working together as tertiary institutions in EYE builds a strong network and more collaborative opportunities to support ourselves and our students in their research, so does building the links and networks between the primary and early childhood sectors. Across the last three events where we have actively involved primary teachers in keynote addresses and parallel sessions we have noticed the interactions, the positive feedback around the cross-sector information and conversations, and the willingness for primary teachers to return to this event. This demonstrates to us that the idea of belonging and well-being is and can be supported during an early years events—we share the same children and the same
whānau, yet how often do we get to share professional development or pedagogical conversations between the sectors? Our model here, of THE GATHERING, is one to be encouraged in other organisations, in other settings, and with other colleagues. Attendees across the four events have shared these similar visions. They have told us they like:

Getting together with a range of teachers from different backgrounds and sharing discussions. (2010)

Korero with other ECE teachers. Gaining new knowledge and understanding. (2010)

Great to have an occasion for ECE & primary teachers to meet, share & find commonalties (2011)

A great opportunity to pounder/think about different aspects- appreciated networking opps Great that this is a cross sector-all EC working/learning together (2011)

Research and Investigations

Again, when planning the first THE GATHERING there was robust discussion as to the terminology that we would use: was ‘research’ the right word, or would this put teachers off, should we talk about teaching investigation? Or self-review? Or?????? Each of these terms is as loaded as the other, and brings different images of teachers and pedagogy to mind. Traditionally the idea of ‘research’ has been perceived as oppositional to pedagogy—hence the stereotypical researcher/ academic who engages in ‘research’ but wouldn’t know which way up to hold a baby? And teachers who are too busy ‘doing’ the real work to bother with ‘research’. Again, your presence here today shows that, thankfully, these stereotype images are those of the past. Teachers are more than technicians, more than doer’s. The old saying that “those who can do, those who can’t teach” can no longer be applied to teachers in the 21st century. Teaching, and those who engage in this, whatever their title (educator, carer, teacher, pedagogista), are required to understand why they do what they do at both the theoretical and the technical levels. Professor Franck, a University Vice Chancellor, in Sweden notes:

[T]eaching as profession in itself nowadays is seen as an area of knowledge, being a subject of inquiry and research. The dichotomy between head and hand is in this respect a thing of the past. Teachers should be good doers because they are qualified as good ‘knowers’. Not all teachers are expected to be scholars but all teacher students urgently need to be trained in critical thought and theoretical reasoning. This is the major task and possibility of educational research today. (Franck, 2006, p. 9)

As we’ve seen and heard from teachers across the past four events we have seen every example of educational research, investigation, review, reflection, and presentation that any research conference would expect to see—the difference here is that teachers have presented them rather than only being the audience. Our focus
for THE GATHERING each year as been for teachers to talk to teachers about investigating and researching pedagogy and in ways that encourage each other to think in new and different ways AND to get excited about research. To model this our keynote presenters have provided models of external funded partnership projects, with professional researchers, teachers working with narrative and learning stories in pedagogical settings, Canterbury professional researchers working with important pedagogical messages, and lastly our panels who presented their Earthquake resiliency and success stories, inspiring us with their commitment to children, whānau and their communities. Our evaluation forms have told us that attendees have found this variety of models valuable also. And importantly, for our planning, that the keynotes in addition to the parallel sessions have been as influential in shaping new ideas and challenging pedagogical assumptions. For example:

A fantastic, thought provoking day which has really stimulated my own thinking and has provided me with lots of ideas to take back to my own service (to use). (2010)

Great - wonderful stories. We each know our own but empowering to hear others. Every session I went to met and exceeded my expectations (2012)

The parallel sessions have provided continuity in themes and ideas across the five years, enabling teachers to follow the progress and the changes of particular teaching teams or projects. Each year we have encouraged first-time presenters and more experienced presenters to enable teachers to both gain the experience of talking to others about their ‘thinking’ and for examples of how this rethinking is a part of ‘wise practice’ and ‘good pedagogy’ and should never stop—no matter how many years of teaching experience a teacher has.

As an overview, our parallel sessions have shared across the five years, including this year, the following topics:

11 sessions on Leadership and mentoring (pedagogical, and administrative)
10 sessions on Research methods (action research, children’s consents, practitioner research),
7 sessions on Children’s thinking: Working theories, theories of the mind etc.
7 sessions on Working with family, whānau, community,
6 sessions on the Importance of play,
5 sessions on Appraisal, self-review, self-discovery,
5 sessions on Assessment and Documentation,
5 sessions on Sustainability,
5 sessions on Identity, language and culture,
4 sessions on Transitions,
4 sessions on Infants and toddlers, (including breastfeeding)
3 sessions on Inclusion and Disability,
3 sessions on Curriculum and Competencies,
2 sessions on ICT,
We have also introduced a new event or provocation each year. The first year was provocation enough I am sure. The second year we expanded to include more interdisciplinary sessions—including health and social welfare as key topics. The third year we had the privilege of Professor Liz Jones, from Manchester Metropolitan University join us and share her very provocative video on questioning how we label and perceive children who do not fit the ‘behavioural norms”. Last year, our fourth, I was delighted to launch my co-edited book: Comparative Early Childhood Education: International Perspectives. You will hear more about this book at this year’s event as it links to our first keynote presentation. This year our Fifth event is our Birthday party and we welcome you all to join the party at the end of the day for the live music and a very delicious birthday cake.

**Policy Contexts and Canterbury**

Another key strand to our events has been to reflect on the early year policy contexts, and how they relate to us in Canterbury but also to the wider educational settings both locally and nationally. Our opening addresses from Letitia Fickle (from the University of Canterbury), Sherryll Wilson (from KidsFirst) and Andy Walker (from the New Zealand College of Early Childhood Education) have all alerted us to the issues at hand both in the year they opened the event and also to encourage us to look forward.

Sherryll emphasized the need for us, as early years teachers, to be able to translate what we know and how we know it into language those others in the community will understand. She said:

> We **MUST** be able to demonstrate what we have achieved and are achieving for our children, as a result of the work we do every day. Equally we **MUST** be able to articulate the learning that occurs for children and their families in a language that all in our community can understand.

Sherryll emphasized the importance of partnership and collaborations between all the players in early years education: parents, managers, politicians, communities, and general public. She concluded:

> And so the challenge we face, as we look ahead, is how to continue to grow and extend the partnerships that are represented at events like todays. Growing these partnerships will enable us to better develop understanding amongst those who have the power to enhance further our sector . . . and the undeniable value it brings to every aspect of our society.

Andy Walker emphasized the changes that had been occurring for us in Canterbury both post-earthquake reshuffling but also post-Government Early Childhood Taskforce Recommendations. While many of us had seen all of these changes as
undermining and demoralizing Andy encouraged us to face these changes and be involved in the processes. He recommended that we remember that:

We have a tremendous opportunity here in Christchurch to innovate. The innovation will inevitably involve rationalization. But it is important to remember innovation not rationalization must be the driver, as rationalization won’t necessarily drive innovation.

How to maintain innovation within rationalization, within reshuffling, resizing, reprioritizing is our constant challenge as educators.

Andy concluded his address:

Now when I step back and think about my recent thinking—all three thought streams contain a strong theme of change. Changing financial times and the changing expectations of educational outcomes. The changing educational landscape of Christchurch. The need for teachers to influence their profession and lead change. It is easy to resist change, and it is easy to complain and protest. It is far more challenging to effect positive change— that is what leaders do. Being receptive to new ideas, discussing new ideas, challenging and refining new ideas---these are the things today is about.

As Andy says, it is easy to be overwhelmed by the changes that are occurring here in Canterbury and across the country for early years education and education more generally. Over the last twelve months some of what we have experienced has been a rationalization while ‘couched’ in innovation-speak; for example:

1. Closures and more planned closures of community schools – breaking down the last connections for communities already devastated by the rezoning of our city. Two of these schools we have heard from at past Gatherings, and they were exemplary schools for innovation in teaching and learning, and in embedding their pedagogy within their community. Many of us were moved by the stories from Freeville school over two previous GATHERINGS.
2. Closures or lack of re-opening of community early childhood centres either due to earthquake damage or no longer meeting building codes; The example of Bishopdale Preschool, whose team presented at the 2011 Gathering, is a classic example of this, albeit with a successful outcome for the whānau.
3. Teacher burnout as the stress of holding it together for children, families, and communities has become too much for many teachers;
4. The lose of jobs for teachers—both in closed and closing schools and early childhood centres, and in the reduced employment opportunities for early childhood teachers since the cut in qualification targets and regulations;
5. Falling interest in joining the teaching profession with 2013 student numbers falling dramatically across all teaching qualifications and in all cities;
6. A proposed shift to postgraduate teaching qualifications that exclude early childhood teachers despite a successful history of advocacy for parity across the sector;

8. The second year of making public ‘national standards’ that demonstrate deficit and labelling of children and communities—that don't contribute to the teaching and learning experiences for children.

These are just the tip of the changes that confront us all every day in education in Canterbury. Yet, here we are with a full day positive programme of educational innovation, of exemplars of pedagogy which we know improves the education for children, of challenges to the rhetoric we hear from the politicians and media on their perspective on teaching and teachers, and endless dedication to improving the ‘lot’ of children and their whānau on a daily basis. Together we can provide the leadership in education that will actually make a difference and I encourage you to keep this in your focus as you engage in conversations here today and to take with you in your everyday conversations with colleagues, parents, communities, and your local politicians.

**Conclusion**

I hope that this is the first five years of many more GATHERING events to come. Your willingness to come, and to keep coming, demonstrates to us, the EYE research group, that these opportunities to come together are of value to us as teachers in the early years. Keep in touch with us over the times in-between the Gatherings also, as based on our research, investigations, and reflections in Canterbury we work together to influence, lead, and shape early years education for children, whānau and community.