Is what we teach who we are?
Teacher authenticity and professionalism in ECE in Aotearoa/New Zealand.
Who is the self that teaches? (Palmer, 2007)

- At the heart of the RIE© approach is an authentic child – “one who feels secure, autonomous and competent” (Gerber, 2002, p.2) – supported by an authentic adult.

- What does it really mean to be authentic as an early childhood teacher?

- How do being authentic and professional work together?
Being honest, real and true to yourself – Stories of authenticity in early childhood teaching

• Eight fully registered early childhood teachers.
• Rachael, Petula, Kate, Beth, Taylor, Hanna, Elizabeth and Jean.
• Community kindergarten and two privately owned early childhood centres.
• Narrative or story-telling methodology with myself as a participant researcher.
• “…we as researchers are in the picture that we are painting. There is no research from the outside, no microscope or petri dish in researching early childhood practice“ (Urban & Dalli, 2012, p.172).
I think that [authenticity] is sometimes something that people maybe don’t have straight away and I don’t know if I had that when I first started teaching ... it took me a little while to feel completely comfortable in myself and in my role as a teacher ... (Taylor)

I would suggest that the depth of authenticity comes after, or comes with experience and knowledge ... I think a lot of the professionalism we can learn and we can talk about and reflect on, and built into that becomes the authentic teacher. But I think you probably build on that more than you build on the professionalism. I think within a few weeks you’ve got that [professionalism], but this authenticity can just grow and grow and spiral on ... (Kate)
authenticity in teaching

- self awareness
- relationships
- living a critical life
- influence of context

(Cranton & Carussetta, 2004, 2005)
Self-awareness is knowing who we are and coming into relationship with our ‘self’

Developing self-awareness requires us to have the courage to stop the busyness of our ‘doing’ and to become aware of who we are, what we believe and then to consider how that is evidenced in what we do.

... working with your culture and what is real for your centre and for you. And re-examining all the time what you are doing. I think that is a big thing ... you do have to ... put your energy into making sure it is what you would like it to be and it is authentic for what you want to say and do. (Elizabeth)

... you make mistakes all the time, and you don’t always do things the way you would like to do ... you have to pull yourself back and remember, this is not the way I want it to be ... (Beth)
Self-awareness and inauthenticity

“Our deepest calling is to grow into our authentic self, whether or not it conforms to some image of who we ought to be”.

(Palmer, 2000, p. 16, original emphasis)

I do feel if you’re enculturated into a centre, even if it goes against what you believe in, you start to practice in the way that you see others [doing] and some of your old value systems might fall away. (Hanna)

Feelings of inauthenticity are often the price of ‘fitting in’ and avoiding the social disapproval that can come if teachers fail to teach in ways that are “measureable, manageable and standardisable” (Duhn, 2010, p.52).
You have to have certain standards yourself that you are not prepared to compromise on. (Beth)

Teaching to your beliefs ... It’s probably about being true to what you believe in and ... trying not to change your beliefs to fit someone else’s expectation, being true to yourself. (Elizabeth)

I think there must be an awful lot of teachers out there that do things that they really don’t like doing or just do them because somebody told them that they should be doing it ... it is hard to challenge sometimes when you see things happen, that you don’t think should be happening. (Elizabeth)
For me it doesn’t come naturally to be guarded about me and about my life. And if I am being truly authentic, I would be very, very open. Not that everyone wants to know all the details, but in general terms I am that way ... The nature of the work requires that you are a bit more open I suppose is the only way I can put it ... you need to be able to make connection. (Petula)

I think in order to be a truly effective early childhood teacher you have to be prepared for people to know you. (Petula)
I try to keep home home, and I am a great one for saying to people “You put your lipstick on, you walk in the door and that’s it, you leave the crap behind.” And it doesn’t mean I’m not sympathetic to someone that has come in and had a row with her husband or something. We’ll have a quick chat and I’ll go “Are you okay? I’ll make you a coffee; hang out in the staffroom for half an hour, then get back to it.” Because I think that’s about building relationships too and recognising that we are all different. (Kate)

I don’t think that necessarily means that you are being insincere by holding something back, you know, and I link the authenticity to sincerity ... the real you. (Petula)
The emotional work of teaching

People that give a lot often have a much better personal wellbeing. And my husband always says I do too much, I give too much, and I’m like I only do it because I want to do it. I don’t do it because I feel I have to do it. It makes me feel good when I do it, but I don’t expect any payback ... There is actually scientific evidence now to say that it’s really good for my wellbeing to give and be allowed to give and do. (Elizabeth)

“Total selflessness on the part of the caregiver may actually impede her ability to care, as she loses her self in the process” (Leavitt, 1994, p. 88 original emphasis)
The influence of context on authenticity

We are each a river with a particular abiding character, but we show radically different aspects of our self according to the territory through which we travel.

(Whyte, 2009, p.32)
It became that I didn’t feel like I was an authentic teacher because I was trying to give, it’s almost like you’re trying to tell them what they want to hear and so you’re looking for those moments when the children will say something that you’re wanting to hear ... And it changed your whole way of teaching as well because you’d be so narrow minded with what you were looking for ... you wouldn’t be open to different ideas and you were losing the interest of the children. (Taylor)

The centre you’re in can affect how professional you are, sometimes... it depends too who you have as managers ... you can get like stuck into the systems and routines ... then teachers start to lose their professionalism because they are unhappy with that way of doing things but they can’t change it ... they become unprofessional in what they’re doing because that’s almost like they’re trying to rebel on things. (Taylor)
Authentic communication

I see that it’s an on-going process that you kind of try and work alongside people that might have different views, but with some kind of similarities as well. So as long as you kind of work through and find some kind of common ground in dealing with particular issues. (Rachael)

Sometimes it is hard to articulate what you feel ... you just have to articulate and explain ... talk amongst the team [about] how you feel ... if you feel really strongly about it, really goes against your values, then obviously you would have to move on because you can’t expect everyone else to change. But it’s still important to put forward your values and ideas. (Beth)
I was very lucky to have a very dedicated associate teacher who really inspired me to look more deeply into my thoughts and theories around infants and toddlers and ... not dumb things down ... I found that it inspired me to look deeper and to share more information with parents and create a partnership where you weren’t seeing a child as say a cute one dimensional infant, but as a whole person with prior knowledge and learning traits, dispositions that they already had rather than something that was waiting to happen. (Hanna)

Reflective practice. We all talk about it. It’s one of those wonderful little banners that you get to hold when you are training, and then when you get out in the real world it’s not such an easy thing to do. Or rather, maybe not to say that it’s not such an easy thing to do, but it’s not such an easy thing to maintain because then you actually get bogged down by the reality of dotting the I’s and crossing the T’s. (Petula)
Being authentic is being true to yourself, being an integrated whole person who is present with their practice ... there is a unity between who you are ... kind of unity between being and doing ... you walk the talk as they say. (Jean)
References

Brown, B. (2010). *The gifts of imperfection: Let go of who you think you're supposed to be and embrace who you are*. Center City, MN: Hazelden.


