

Circle of Knowledge: Engaging Strategies for Teaching and Learning

Ako Aotearoa Research and Innovation
Agenda Research Project (AARIA)

Adult and Community Education
(ACE Aotearoa)
2025

By Dr. Cherie Chu-Fuluifaga

Acknowledging the Navigators: Honouring the Participants and Partners of ACE Aotearoa

This research would not have been possible without the generous contributions, insights, and lived wisdom of the adult and community educators and organisations who partnered in this journey. These individuals and groups are the navigators of our collective vaka, those who hold deep knowledge of the tides, the weather, and the needs of the communities they serve. Their willingness to share their experiences, challenges, and aspirations has provided the heart and soul of this study.

In many ways, this research is not about them, it is with them. The voices of educators, facilitators, and coordinators are not data points to be analysed from afar, but relationships to be honoured, stories to be listened to, and knowledge to be elevated. Their mahi reflects years, often decades of commitment to equity, empowerment, and education that transforms lives. Through Teaching and Learning Circles (TLCs), they model what it means to learn together, to reflect deeply, and to teach with compassion, humility, and courage.

Special acknowledgment is due to the ACE Aotearoa providers who welcomed this research into their settings with open hearts. These are places that may not always appear in policy briefs or academic journals, but which are foundational to the wellbeing and flourishing of our communities. Their work is often done quietly, relationally, and with limited resources, but it is no less powerful for that. This research seeks not to speak for them, but to create a platform where their voices can rise and be heard in the places where decisions are made.

To all the participants: thank you for your time, your trust, and your truth. You are the steady hands on the vaka, the ones who navigate by both memory and moonlight. It is a privilege to journey alongside you.

A special thank you is extended to the navigators of ACE Aotearoa - Hannah Pia Baral (CEO), Tai Samaeli (Sector Capability Manager), and Jennifer Leahy (ACE Teaching Standards Advisor). Your guidance, wisdom, and steadfast commitment have steered this project with

both strength and care. Like stars guiding the vaka across unknown waters, you have illuminated the path forward, weaving together the voices and visions of our learning community. Your presence has anchored our collective journey, ensuring that every insight is honoured and every contribution uplifted. We are deeply grateful for your leadership and unwavering dedication to the kaupapa of adult and community education.

We also wish to express our gratitude to Ako Aotearoa - Dr Marvin Wu (Programme Manager, Research and Innovation) and Saylene Ulberg (Pacific Advisor), whose steadfast support has been integral to the unfolding of this mahi. Their belief in the value of adult and community education has provided essential wind to our sails, nurturing the conditions for innovation, courage, and shared discovery. Ako Aotearoa's enduring commitment to fostering excellence in educational practice, coupled with Dr Wu's and Saylene's guidance and encouragement, have enabled this voyage to reach new horizons.

As we draw this phase of the project to a close, we are mindful that the journey does not truly end here. In the spirit of Māori wisdom, we invoke the whakataukī: "He waka eke noa"—we are all in this canoe together. Rather than arriving at a destination, we find ourselves at the mouth of a new river, where fresh currents await and the landscape before us shifts into possibility.

Our collective voyage continues, propelled by the confluence of experiences, insights, and relationships woven throughout this work.

Contents

Bringing Worlds Together: Academia and Adult Community Education	7
Valuing Qualitative Research	8
Navigating the Ocean: Stars as Our Guide	8
Historical Context	10
TLCs and Adult Learning	11
TLC and Peer Review of Teaching	13
Conclusion	14
Reimagining Teaching and Learning Circles: From University Origins to Community Contexts	16
The Central Role of Relationships in Adult and Community Education	17
Guided by Relationships: Charting the Course with Trusted Navigators.....	18
Continuing the Voyage: Building on a Strengths-Based Legacy	19
Research Aim.....	21
Research Objectives	21
Research Questions	22
Background: Far North REAP.....	23
Background: Hagley Learning Centre, Christchurch	24
Navigating the Waters: A Vaka Journey of Facilitating Teaching and Learning Circles ..	25
Co-Navigators of Teaching and Learning Circles	26
Background: Preparing the Vaka	28
Building Relationships: Launching the Vaka.....	28
Approaches That Enabled the Vaka to Stay Afloat	29
Key Insights: Navigational Learnings	29
Data Collection Methods	30
Walking with the Vā: Research and Talanoa Process	31
Christchurch Site: A Chorus of Voices	31
Far North REAP: Intimate Depth and Contextual Richness.....	32
Reflections as Researcher: Holding the Vā	33
Data Analysis	34
Ethical Considerations and Relational Accountability	34
1. Deepened Reflection on Teaching Practice	35

2. Feedback Grounded in Care and Mana-Enhancement.....	35
3. Strengthened Professional Relationships.....	36
4. Emergence of New Ideas and Confidence in Practice	36
5. Professional Growth Through Relational Depth.....	37
1. Reflective Practice and Peer Observation	38
2. Navigating Challenges in Educational Environments	38
3. Diverse Learning Needs and Inclusive Strategies.....	39
4. Creative Pedagogies and Applied Learning.....	39
5. Communication, Process, and Collaborative Planning.....	40
6. Remote and Cross-Contextual Learning	40
7. Emotional and Relational Dimensions of Teaching	40
8. Professional Identity and Teaching Backgrounds.....	41
9. Incremental Improvement and Systemic Support.....	41
10. Cultural Responsiveness and Teaching Philosophy	42
Conversations and Feedback	43
Pedagogical Shifts.....	44
Moving towards learner-driven community education	45
Embedding cultural and local knowledge	45
Responding to digital and life-skills needs	45
Context-Driven TLCs in ACE Aotearoa Contexts	46
Fluidity and Flexibility in ACE Aotearoa Contexts.....	47
Diversity and Cultural Responsiveness.....	47
Demands and Constraints on Professional Development.....	47
The Role of Trust in TLCs.....	48
Implications for Practice.....	48
Relational Trust and Reflective Dialogue	49
Contextual Constraints and Logistical Realities	49
Modifying TLCs for ACE Values and Realities	50
The Role of Leadership and Organisational Support	50
Collaborative Professional Inquiry and Educator Wellbeing.....	51
Recommendations for Future Research and PLD in ACE Contexts	52
Charting a Course Toward Relational, Culturally Grounded Professional Growth	54

Sustainability: Embedding TLCs as a National Framework.....	57
Dissemination of Findings	58
Conclusion	60

Introduction

Teaching and Learning Circles (TLCs) are an inclusive and collaborative form of professional learning that prioritise reflection, dialogue, and shared inquiry. Unlike traditional top-down professional development, TLCs cultivate relational trust and collective wisdom, creating flexible spaces where educators critically examine their practice. This is particularly valuable in adult and community education (ACE), where learners bring diverse life experiences and educators must respond with adaptive, learner-centred pedagogy.

This report examines the implementation and impact of TLCs in ACE contexts. Drawing on literature and practice-based evidence, it highlights how TLCs contribute to educator growth, enhance teaching quality, and support culturally responsive practice. The analysis offers insights and recommendations for educational leaders, facilitators, and practitioners committed to developing reflective and contextually relevant professional learning communities.

The main findings were:

- **TLCs strengthen educator identity and professional growth** through reflection, feedback, and collaboration.
- **Relational trust and cultural values** are central to their effectiveness.
- **TLCs create space for innovation** while also supporting resilience in the face of challenges.
- **Impact ripples outward:** improvements in practice benefit not only teachers but also learners, communities, and wider ACE systems.

Bringing Worlds Together: Academia and Adult Community Education

Adult and community education in Aotearoa New Zealand is community-driven, culturally grounded, and transformative. Yet it remains marginalised in scholarship and underfunded in policy, often treated as peripheral to formal education. This study addresses that gap by

bringing together the worlds of academia and ACE, recognising the sector's role in equity, inclusion, and lifelong learning.

ACE Aotearoa plays a pivotal role in this space, providing programmes that range from literacy and digital skills to cultural workshops and wellbeing initiatives. Its philosophy of lifelong learning reflects values such as *va fealoaloa'i* (respectful relationships), *alofa* (compassion), and *teu le vā* (nurturing relational space). These principles align strongly with Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations, positioning ACE as a site where partnership, self-determination, and equity are actively enacted.

By situating TLCs in this environment, the study affirms that ACE is not “alternative” but a vital contributor to educational innovation. It challenges academia to recognise community knowledge, honour diverse pedagogies, and partner with ACE in shaping the wider educational ecosystem.

Valuing Qualitative Research

This project is grounded in qualitative inquiry, which is essential for understanding the relational and cultural dimensions of ACE. Quantitative measures can capture outcomes, but they cannot explain why learners return, how trust fosters confidence, or what pedagogies ignite change.

Using *talanoa* and reflective dialogue, the study privileges educator voices and lived experiences. It recognises stories as data and relationships as evidence, ensuring that research is not only rigorous but also ethical, humane, and responsive. Qualitative methods allow us to see how equity and wellbeing are enacted through everyday teaching practice, positioning ACE educators as knowledge-holders rather than subjects of analysis.

Navigating the Ocean: Stars as Our Guide

This research adopts the metaphor of ocean navigation, where the *vaka* (canoe) represents TLCs and the stars symbolise guiding principles such as Te Tiriti o Waitangi and *Pasifika*

values. Just as navigators read the winds and waves, educators chart learning pathways through dialogue, reflection, and cultural knowledge.

The metaphor is not ornamental but a reminder that professional learning is a collective voyage. ACE educators already practise wayfinding—teaching with humility, courage, and care. TLCs strengthen this practice, offering vaka that carry educators safely across shifting tides of policy, pedagogy, and community need.

This study affirms that adult and community education is not an ‘alternative’ or ‘informal’ sector, but a vital, generative site of educational innovation and cultural reclamation. By creating research that is co-constructed with adult educators and grounded in Tiriti obligations and Pacific ways of being, this project aims to reposition adult and community education as a critical partner in the educational ecosystem. It challenges the academy to widen its gaze, honour diverse knowledge, and commit to research that uplifts the margins rather than reproduces the centre.

Literature Review

Teaching and Learning Circles (TLCs) are small, collaborative groups of educators or learners who are committed to working together, fostering a supportive and nurturing environment, and providing a reflexive space through meaningful interactions, feedback, and dialogues with colleagues about the scholarship of teaching and learning over a period (Hutchings, 1996; Rogers et al., 2019). This study presents a systematic review of teaching and learning circles including their historical context and origination, application in adult education within the community, and integration with peer review of teaching in fostering professional growth and support.

Historical Context

The concept of learning circles originated with Indigenous communities such as First Nations in Canada, Native Americans in the US, and Aboriginal groups in Australia. Sharing circles is an indigenous teaching and learning system that involves gathering, sharing, and imparting knowledge, storytelling, and decision-making based on open dialogue and mutual respect (Oppliger et al., 2024; Tachine et al., 2016). Native Americans believe in the sanctity of the circle as a symbol that represents power, relation, peace, and unity (Bazylak, 2002). Progressive educators such as John Dewey and his views on reflective thinking (Dewey, 2012) ushered in a change away from traditional teacher-centred learning and towards a more experiential, democratic, and student-centred approach. These concepts go nicely with the collaborative and introspective. These principles align well with the collaborative and reflective nature of learning circles. By the mid-20th century, learning communities, professional community of learners, communities of practice, or communities of continuous inquiry and improvement emerged as professional development tools engaged toward effective staff development, increasing students' outcomes, and improvement of the whole school (Hord, 1997b). Such change is attributed to teachers working and learning together to enhance their learning and effectiveness primarily to benefit the students (Hord, 1997a).

Today, Teaching and Learning Circles is known by various names in the literature such as professional circle or learning circles (Collay et al., 1998), faculty learning group or teacher research groups (Grimmett, 1995), learning community or communities of practice (Wenger, 1999) faculty learning community or teacher networks (Lieberman, 2000), and inquiry communities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). They may feature some differences in structure, activities employed, or types of members, but they all share a common goal of enhancing teaching practice, providing a forum for professional development, and fostering support, collaboration, and collegiality (Macchione, 2014).

The teaching circles approach is promoted by the American Association for Higher Education as part of its project on the peer review of teaching (Blackwell et al., 2001; Hutchings, 1996). There are a lot of benefits in working together collaboratively and collectively. Ferriter (2005) states that Professional Learning Circles (PLC) has the capability to improve staff, student and school through recognition of the power of collaborative work and the value of trust among fellow staff. Stone and Cuper (2006) present a collection of stories of teachers across America who lived up to the ideals of PLC. The significance of PLCs radiates in their narrations as an effective tool in achieving excellent results on staff and student learning and school development. Their stories progress based on common themes, which include staff collaboration, hands-on and collective learning, and teacher and student empowerment. Leo and Cowan (2000) reveal themes arising from the analysis of Co-Developers' and school personnel's actions in making the school a professional learning community. It highlights modelling shared decision-making and instructional practices, supportive leadership and organisational structures, staff initiative and commitment, and collaborative learning and collegial relationship in schools. Schmoker (2005) mentions PLCs, as an approach, is the most effective way of improving schools. He points out the value of frequent feedback, strong staff collaboration, collective autonomy and purposeful application of knowledge and learning are evidence of effective and working PLCs.

TLCs and Adult Learning

Teaching and Learning Circles is a professional development tool that promotes collaboration, reflective practice, and professional growth, particularly in an adult learning environment.

Adult learners bring a wealth of life experiences and practical knowledge to the learning environment. They have deeper insights and understanding of social issues and human dynamics. Through TLC, adult learning is enriched creating an environment that empowers learners to achieve their personal and professional goals. The Teaching and Learning circles initiative focuses on investigating peer observation of teaching practice and culture at a university. Nineteen university teachers participated. The findings suggest positive experiences and outcomes for participants in enhancing their teaching through collegial conversations, reflection of teaching practice, and non-evaluative teaching feedback (Rogers et al., 2019). Similarly, Sutherland et al. (2020) describe the successful implementation of TLC at one New Zealand university. Forty-four university teachers participated in 11 teaching and learning circles that ran for a year. The study shows positive results on teacher confidence, collegiality, and competence. The case study on the implementation and impact of TLC among Palestinian English language teachers suggest positive views and impact on teacher instructional practices and professional development. TLC encourages collaborative culture, a safe and supportive environment, and discovery of new methods and techniques to support their instructional practices (Dajani & Mohammed Yousef, 2014).

TLCs is used as an alternative learning model for professional development of adult learners. Learning circles is used as an approach for advanced professional development in evaluation. Experienced practitioners joined together in a structured collaborative learning cycle for almost a year to talk about eight potential topics and report on what is learnt. Four types of learning outcomes are identified: high learning, comfort, refreshment, and disgruntlement (Kishchuk et al., 2013). Using quality learning circles, five curriculum secondary school leaders participated to identify mentoring skills that focus on key adult learning principles. The findings highlight the importance of collaborative learning within a safe and supportive environment or group. Key findings on mentoring skills include deliberate talk, teacher agency, developing mentoring practice tools, and curriculum leaders' leadership role recognition (Aman, 2014). Through learning circles, school leaders, department curriculum officers, and university teachers find powerful opportunities for professional development, professional renewal, and learning conversations (Le Cornu, 2004). Using quality learning circles, teachers with eight to 24 years of experience adopt a reflective practice approach to describe, identify, and explore meanings and ways to improve the quality of their professional

learning. Findings indicate that teachers value teacher agency, give importance in sharing their teaching strengths and review their teaching practices, and signify the efficacy of open dialogue regarding teachers' shared values and beliefs about teaching (Lovett & Verstappen, 2004).

TLC and Peer Review of Teaching

Peer review of teaching (PRT) is an effective approach for improving teaching performance and student learning. The peer review process allows educators or teachers to reflect on their teaching skills and learn from one another (Drexel University, 2025). Peer review of teaching is not only limited to classroom observations, where a colleague observes the teaching of fellow colleague in a classroom or learning setting but also include a review and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data such as teaching materials, student artifacts, self-evaluative statements, teaching portfolio, and learning management system course shell (Drexel University, 2025).

Peer review of teaching is valuable for both the teacher and student experience. Jenkins et al. (2021) findings show that through peer review of teaching, teachers gained confidence, anticipated improvement in teaching, and are likely to discuss their teaching with colleagues in the future. In the study of Lim et al. (2021) preservice teachers participated in critical feedback on teaching demonstrations and looked at the effects of the feedback model using peer review of teaching. Findings suggest that PRT creates safe, sensitive, and engaging learning opportunities for preservice teachers.

Peer review of teaching is used as a system or framework to improve teaching quality. Esterhazy et al. (2021) use the empirical findings of 48 qualitative literature on peer review of teaching to create the collegial faculty development framework that supports teacher professional development through the guidance and expertise of fellow colleagues. To encourage autonomy and growth through quality feedback, a peer review of teaching system was created. Known as Peer Review Form Builder (PRFB), it allows faculty and peer reviewers to interactively access observations and feedback based on evidence-based faculty development and teaching setting (Longtin et al., 2024). Peer-supported Teaching Practice is a programme based on the principles of peer review of teaching that aims to evaluate and

enhance teaching practice and promote teacher wellbeing. It places value on colleagues or peers to support, question, and mutually develop “self-in- practice” (Hansen et al., 2023, p. 1).

Conclusion

The underlying principle behind the teaching and learning circles is rooted in indigenous knowledge and culture making it culturally responsive and inclusive. The literature surrounding TLCs emphasises the ideas of collaborative learning, reciprocal learning, a tool, system and framework for professional development, reflective practice, adult learner empowerment, and improvement in learning outcome.

The heart of TLC is collegial collaboration. It fosters a supportive environment for adult and community education learners to engage in meaningful conversations, share experiences, and co-create knowledge. The collaborative approach encourages active participation, self-reflection, and engagement. TLCs is rooted in the idea of ako involving the reciprocal learning between teachers and learners. Collaboration between educators and learners through exchange of knowledge, perspectives, and ideas promotes a learner-centred approach to adult education.

Based on this literature review, TLCs are commonly utilised for professional development among educators in adult learning contexts. It offers a platform for ongoing learning, reflection, and improvement. TLCs help educators improve their instructional practices, obtain fresh insights, and enhance teaching methods, approaches, and techniques. TLCs process involves self-reflection among participants. It encourages reflective practice that enables both teachers and learners to critically analyse their own views, knowledge, assumptions, and teaching practices. This exercise promotes continuous professional growth and development. Consequently, adult learners are empowered through TLCs. As a process, TLCs value the views and experiences of adult learners. It promotes learner’s agency and recognises ownership of their learning journey. Findings in the literature review suggest positive results impact on adult learning outcomes. Through TLCs nature of collaborative and reflective learning, students improve their learning engagement, critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and overall learning satisfaction.

Rationale for the Study

The dynamic and increasingly diverse landscape of adult and community education calls for professional learning approaches that are responsive, reflective, and collaborative. Traditional models of professional development, often characterised by one-off workshops or expert-led seminars, frequently fall short in fostering sustained changes in teaching practice. In contrast, TLCs offer a dialogic, practice-oriented model that promotes critical reflection, peer learning, and collective problem-solving which are qualities essential for meaningful professional growth in adult education.

Despite growing international interest in TLCs as a mechanism for strengthening teaching practice, there remains limited empirical research examining their implementation and impact specifically within adult education settings. Much of the existing literature focuses on school-based or tertiary environments, with less attention given to the unique needs, constraints, and strengths of adult educators and their learners. This gap is particularly pronounced in culturally and linguistically diverse contexts, where relationality, cultural responsiveness, and educator agency are vital to learner success (Wright & Hornblow, 2008).

This study responds to that gap by investigating how TLCs function as a professional learning strategy in adult and community education, with a focus on their capacity to enhance pedagogical practice, build professional communities, and support culturally inclusive teaching. By examining both the processes and outcomes of TLCs, the research seeks to generate insights that inform policy, strengthen educator development, and ultimately improve learner experiences in adult education. The findings aim to contribute to a growing body of knowledge on sustainable, context-sensitive professional learning models that are grounded in the lived realities of adult and community education practitioners.

Reimagining Teaching and Learning Circles: From University Origins to Community Contexts

TLCs first gained traction within university environments as a model for peer-driven professional development. Designed to foster reflective dialogue and critical inquiry among formal tertiary educators, TLCs provided a structured yet collegial space for discussing pedagogy, sharing teaching experiences, and enhancing academic practice. Grounded in principles of adult learning and practitioner-led inquiry, TLCs offered an alternative to traditional, often hierarchical professional development models within higher education institutions.

While TLCs have proven valuable in university settings, their application has frequently remained within formal academic boundaries that are shaped by institutional calendars, research outputs, and discipline-specific frameworks. As such, the richness of TLCs as a flexible, relational, and responsive professional learning model has not yet been fully explored in other sectors. This study seeks to reposition TLCs within the unique landscape of ACE Aotearoa, where learning is deeply embedded in community relationships, cultural contexts, and social justice imperatives.

In adult and community education settings, educators are often not academics by title, but they are educators in the deepest sense, teaching with heart, cultural knowledge, and a profound understanding of their learners' lives. By situating TLCs within these environments, this research acknowledges the need for professional learning approaches that are not only dialogic and reflective, but also culturally sustaining, flexible, and anchored in community. Here, TLCs are reimagined not as imported tools from the university, but as adaptable vessels that can be shaped by local winds and guided by Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Pacific values, and the everyday realities of ACE Aotearoa educators.

This contextual approach to TLCs embraces a more expansive definition of teaching and learning as it honours the collective, centres relational practice, and recognises diverse ways of knowing. It challenges the notion that professional learning must be formal, credentialed, or top-down to be legitimate. Instead, it affirms that powerful pedagogical growth can and

does happen in community halls, marae, church basements, and neighbourhood centres, where TLCs can thrive as living, breathing processes of connection, criticality, and care.

The Central Role of Relationships in Adult and Community Education

At the heart of adult and community education lies a deeply relational ethos. Unlike formal education systems that often emphasise standardised outcomes, ACE Aotearoa prioritises connections between people, cultures, histories, and aspirations. In this space, relationships are not simply a means to effective teaching and learning; they are the foundation upon which education is built. These environments are shaped by a commitment to *ako*, a reciprocal approach to teaching and learning where everyone has something to teach and something to learn. Whether in a community hall, a church space, or a neighbourhood centre, ACE Aotearoa educators and learners co-create learning experiences grounded in trust, respect, and shared purpose. These relationships foster a sense of belonging and emotional safety, allowing learners, many of whom may have experienced marginalisation in traditional education settings to re-engage with learning in affirming and empowering ways.

Relationships in the sectors of ACE Aotearoa are also profoundly cultural. Māori and Pacific values such as *manaakitanga* (hospitality and care), *whakawhanaungatanga* (relationship-building), *teu le vā* (nurturing relational space), and *alofa* (compassion) are lived out daily in the way educators welcome, support, and walk alongside their learners. These values create methods where learning is holistic, attending to the spiritual, emotional, and social dimensions of wellbeing. This relational orientation extends beyond the classroom. ACE Aotearoa educators are often deeply embedded in the communities they serve. They are mentors, advocates or *kaiāwhina*, cultural connectors, and trusted allies. The strength of these relationships often determines the success of learning initiatives, as trust enables deeper engagement, honest dialogue, and collective problem-solving (Alkema, 2014).

In this study, relationships are not treated as a background condition but as central to the design and success of Teaching and Learning Circles. These circles (see Diagram one) mirror the relational fabric of ACE Aotearoa itself, as they rely on openness, reciprocity, and a

collective commitment to growth. By recognising and honouring these relational foundations, this research affirms the uniquely human and culturally grounded power of adult and community education.



Diagram one: The Interconnections of Relationships

Guided by Relationships: Charting the Course with Trusted Navigators

In keeping with the metaphor of ocean navigation, the journey of this study was charted not through formal maps or institutional directives, but through the steady guidance of

experienced navigators - ACE Aotearoa facilitators and educators who hold long-standing relationships with the communities they serve. These educators, deeply embedded in their respective learning environments, played a pivotal role in shaping the voyage of this research by identifying and engaging sites where the winds of trust, purpose, and shared values could carry us forward. Rather than arriving as outsiders seeking entry, this study was welcomed into places where relationships had already been cultivated over time through shared teaching, collaboration, cultural connection, and community care. The facilitators acted as wayfinders, drawing on their local knowledge and lived experience of adult and community educators to identify sites where the kaupapa/philosophy of the study aligned with the values, needs, and aspirations of the educators and learners.

This process was not transactional, but relational. It unfolded through *kōrero*/conversation, *Talanoa*/discussion, and mutual recognition of the value of reflecting on practice together. Invitations to participate were extended through existing connections that are anchored in trust, respect, and a shared commitment to transformative learning. The presence of the facilitators who are already part of the educational and cultural life of these sites, meant the study could be introduced not as a research imposition, but as a continuation of the collective learning journey already underway.

In this way, the sites involved in the study became part of a fleet of *vaka* distinct in its context and purpose, yet united by a common horizon. It is through these relationships, grounded in cultural understanding and lived histories, that the study was able to travel meaningfully, respectfully, and with integrity.

Continuing the Voyage: Building on a Strengths-Based Legacy

The adoption of a strengths-based, appreciative inquiry (AI) approach in this study is not incidental, rather it is a deliberate continuation of a long-standing research and practice philosophy that underpins Cherie Chu-Fuluifaga's work as a Pacific educator and researcher. Over the past two decades, research has consistently centred on the belief that transformation in education arises not from identifying what communities lack, but from

recognising and amplifying what they already hold: resilience, wisdom, cultural depth, and relational strength. This study builds directly on that foundation. In earlier work, I have explored how Pacific and Māori students thrive when their identities, values, and community connections are recognised as assets, not obstacles. I have advocated for learning environments where cultural intelligence is honoured, where *vā* is nurtured, and where education is not imposed from above, but co-created through mutual respect and shared power. This strengths-based orientation is deeply informed by both Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Pacific ways of knowing, including *teu le vā*, *alofa*, and collective flourishing.

Just as navigators draw on ancestral knowledge to read the stars and seas, this research draws on the compass of past work to steer a purposeful course forward. It reflects a commitment to research that is not only ethical and inclusive but empowering and positioning educators and communities as co-navigators in the journey toward meaningful, enduring educational transformation. Much like wayfinding across the vast Pacific, AI does not dwell on what is broken or lacking. Instead, it seeks out the stars: the shining points of strength, wisdom, and potential that already exist within communities and practices. It is from these stars that we chart a course for transformation, one that is hopeful, relational, and co-constructed.

Appreciative inquiry (AI), as developed by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), is rooted in the belief that organisations and communities evolve in the direction of the questions they ask. Rather than beginning with a problem to fix, AI asks: *What gives life to this system when it is most alive?* In ACE Aotearoa settings, this means attending to the stories of resilience, the relationships of trust, the pedagogies of care, and the cultural values that sustain meaningful learning. This orientation is inherently aligned with Indigenous and Pasifika worldviews, which understand that knowledge and growth emerge not from deficit, but from deep relational engagement and collective strength (Vaioliti, 2016).

In this research, appreciative inquiry becomes the sail that catches the wind of possibility. The study does not seek to critique ACE Aotearoa from a distance but to voyage alongside it and to learn from those who are already navigating its waters with skill, courage, and cultural wisdom. Educators were invited to reflect on what works well in their teaching, where they find meaning in their practice, and how teaching and learning circles amplify these strengths.

The focus on TLCs as a relational and dialogic practice aligns with the AI 4-D model: **Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny** (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). In this study:

- **Discovery** involves uncovering the best of adult and community education practice through storytelling and shared reflection.
- **Dream** invites participants to envision what culturally sustaining and relational professional learning could look like.
- **Design** co-creates the structures for TLCs that reflect local values and pedagogies.
- **Destiny** supports the embedding and envisioning of these approaches in ways that are organic, evolving, and owned by communities.

By choosing to navigate this research with appreciative inquiry, the study resists deficit narratives that often characterise adult education. Instead, it affirms the strength already present in communities and asks how we might sail further together, towards a horizon of equity, innovation, and flourishing.

Research Aim

To explore how Teaching and Learning Circles (TLCs) function as a culturally responsive and strengths-based professional learning approach within Adult and Community Education (ACE Aotearoa) settings, and how they contribute to relational practice, educator development, and learner success.

- To facilitate the implementation of TLCs in ACE Aotearoa sites to foster the practice of ako/teaching and learning.
- To explore the role of TLCs in empowering akonga/learner.

Research Objectives

1. **To examine** how TLCs are experienced and enacted by ACE Aotearoa educators within diverse community contexts.
2. **To understand** how relational, cultural, and Aotearoa-based values shape professional learning in ACE Aotearoa environments.

3. **To identify** the perceived benefits, challenges, and transformative potential of TLCs for adult educators and their communities.
4. **To contribute** to the literature on culturally sustaining, community-led professional development models in underrepresented sectors of education.
5. **To inform** future practice and policy by elevating the voices and lived experiences of ACE Aotearoa educators as co-constructors of knowledge.

Research Questions

Main Question: How does the implementation of TLCs in adult and community education sites influence teaching and learning practices?

Sub-Questions:

1. How do ACE Aotearoa educators experience and interpret their participation in Teaching and Learning Circles within their specific community contexts?
2. In what ways do relational and cultural values influence the design, facilitation, and outcomes of TLCs in adult education settings?
3. What insights do TLCs offer about culturally responsive, strengths-based approaches to professional learning in non-formal education environments?

Context of Community

Background: Far North REAP

Far North REAP (Rural Education Activities Programme) is a cornerstone of lifelong learning and community development in Te Tai Tokerau, Aotearoa New Zealand. Far North REAP, founded in the late 1970s, has supported the educational and social needs of rural communities like Kaitia and Hokianga in the region. Its work is underpinned by a kaupapa of equity, access, and whanaungatanga, particularly in areas where educational provision is historically under-served.

The organisation delivers a broad spectrum of programmes spanning early childhood education, adult and community learning, digital literacy, whānau wellbeing, youth development, and professional learning support for educators. Central to its approach is the integration of Māori and Pacific values, which inform both the relational practices of its staff and the culturally responsive pedagogy it supports in the community.

Far North REAP is known for its deeply embedded relationships across iwi, hapū, schools, and community providers. Its team of dedicated educators, facilitators, and navigators work across geographic and social boundaries, often travelling long distances to ensure that access to education is not determined by postcode. The emphasis is not just on learning delivery, but on building capability, trust, and sustainable community partnerships.

In recent years, Far North REAP has invested in strengthening professional development opportunities for kaiako/teachers and community educators. Initiatives such as the Teaching and Learning Circles (TLCs), delivered in partnership with national research projects, reflect the organisation's commitment to reflective practice, mana-enhancing pedagogies, and educational transformation from within.

Participation in the TLC project built naturally on Far North REAP's existing culture of collaboration. Staff were already accustomed to working in close, supportive teams, and had a strong appetite for reflective, relational professional development. The TLC model which prioritised trust, peer observation, and strength-based dialogue aligned well with the

organisation's own vision of empowering educators through shared learning and culturally grounded practice.

Through its ongoing engagement in initiatives like this, Far North REAP continues to be a vital enabler of educational equity and innovation in the Far North. It plays a key role in not only supporting learners of all ages but also nurturing the professional resilience and reflective capability of the region's educators.

Background: Hagley Learning Centre, Christchurch

Hagley Learning Centre, formerly known as Hagley Adult Literacy Centre, is a long-established and well-respected provider of adult and community education based in Ōtautahi Christchurch. Located within Hagley College, a school renowned for its inclusive ethos and commitment to lifelong learning. Hagley Learning Centre provides flexible, responsive educational opportunities that cater to a diverse community of adult learners, including recent migrants, refugees, parents, career changers, and those returning to education after extended time away.

Guided by a strong equity and inclusion mandate, Hagley Learning Centre focuses on removing barriers to learning and enabling each learner to reach their potential. The centre offers programmes in literacy, numeracy, digital skills, ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), employment readiness, and personal development. Classes are learner-centred and built around creating safe, welcoming environments where whanaungatanga (relationships) and ako (reciprocal learning) are central.

The organisation has a strong foundation in relational teaching and culturally responsive practice. Many of the tutors and staff are experienced in working with learners from a wide range of cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds. This inclusive approach is reflected in Hagley Learning Centre's commitment to professional development that values reflection, diversity, and care.

Hagley Learning Centre's participation in the Teaching and Learning Circles (TLCs) initiative was a natural extension of its existing pedagogical values. The TLC process, with its emphasis on trust, peer dialogue, and mana-enhancing feedback, closely aligned with the centre's

kaupapa of collaborative learning and mutual respect. Educators were eager to engage in the initiative, recognising it as an opportunity to reflect more deeply on their own practice, learn from their colleagues, and further enrich their relationships with learners.

A key strength of Hagley Learning Centre's involvement in the TLC project was the strong backing of leadership. The centre's management team demonstrated a clear commitment to supporting staff development, by making time and resourcing available. This practical support sent a clear message that professional learning and relational practice are core priorities, not optional extras.

With a culture already attuned to responsiveness, equity, and learner wellbeing, Hagley Learning Centre embraced the TLCs as both a professional and relational journey. Participation in the initiative further strengthened collegial trust and helped embed sustainable practices of reflective dialogue and peer support. In doing so, the centre reaffirmed its role as a leader in adult learning innovation, where educators are not only skilled practitioners but also reflective co-learners who model the values they seek to instil in their communities.

Navigating the Waters: A Vaka Journey of Facilitating Teaching and Learning Circles

A critical factor in the successful uptake of the Teaching and Learning Circles (TLC) professional development was the way in which Jennifer Leahy and Tai Samaeli utilised their long-standing, trust-based relationships within the Adult and Community Education (ACE Aotearoa) sector. Both facilitators brought with them not only extensive experience in professional development delivery but also deep relational capital with connections built over years of collaborative work, shared kaupapa, and reciprocal engagement with ACE Aotearoa providers.

Rather than issuing formal or impersonal invitations, Jennifer and Tai reached out through well-established channels of trust. Their approach was relational, grounded in mutual respect and shared commitment to quality learning. This enabled the TLCs to be framed not as an external intervention, but as an opportunity co-aligned with each organisation's values and

goals. For example, Jennifer had previously worked alongside educators at the Hagley Learning Centre, Christchurch in adult literacy initiatives, and Tai had been involved in delivering cultural competency, and adult educator training sessions across several ACE Aotearoa settings, including Far North REAP. These histories created familiarity and relational warmth. When they approached these sites to introduce the TLC project, the invitation came not from a place of authority, but of whanaungatanga, as relationships grounded in shared purpose.

Their invitations were often framed as talanoa or informal conversations— “Let’s have a kōrero about what this might look like for your team.” This approach affirmed the autonomy and mana of each site, with Jennifer and Tai positioning themselves as partners rather than external facilitators. It was not about recruiting participants but about recognising shared aspirations for professional growth and reflective practice. Their credibility as facilitators was not only based on their expertise but on the trust they had nurtured over time. In these conversations, Jennifer and Tai emphasised how the TLC process could be tailored to each context, highlighting the flexibility of the framework and its grounding in relational and strengths-based principles. This reassured leaders and educators that their voices and experiences would be central to the process.

Furthermore, their continued presence and follow-up and checking in, offering support materials, and staying responsive had signalled to sites that this was not a one-off event, but a sustained relationship. The result was high engagement and a sense of collective ownership from participating educators. In essence, the TLCs were carried into each site not just through a professional offer, but through the existing vā/relational space that Jennifer and Tai had carefully stewarded over time. Their ability to extend these relationships with care and integrity demonstrated how culturally informed leadership and relational continuity are powerful enablers of system change in ACE Aotearoa environment

Co-Navigators of Teaching and Learning Circles

Within the Teaching and Learning Circles (TLCs) initiative, the role of skilled facilitation proved foundational to fostering authentic dialogue and professional growth. Jennifer Leahy is a seasoned adult educator with a background in adult literacy and teaching adults in prisons,

communities, and universities. Her facilitation style is characterised by calm, empathy, and clarity. She approaches professional learning as a collaborative journey, where trust and reflective inquiry lead to real shifts in practice. Tai Samaeli brings extensive experience in vocational and community learning environments, with deep roots in Pacific education and youth mentoring. He holds relationality—*teu le vā*—as central to his pedagogy and is widely respected for his ability to engage diverse groups with warmth, humour, and cultural humility.

Together, Jennifer and Tai formed a strong facilitation partnership. Their collaboration was not simply about shared delivery; it was based on mutual trust, deep listening, and a commitment to shared leadership. They role-modelled the very principles underpinning the TLCs of relational accountability, peer learning, and respectful dialogue. Their teaching was not scripted but responsive, co-adaptive, and sensitive to the dynamics of each group.

They began each session by creating safe and welcoming settings. Jennifer would often open with gentle reflection prompts, allowing participants to ease into the space with intention and calm. Tai complemented this with his dynamic energy, welcoming participants with humour and cultural affirmation, acknowledging identity and community as strengths. Together, they brought balance: Jennifer grounding the process, and Tai lifting the *wairua* (spirit) of the room.

Their ability to scaffold learning was particularly evident during peer observation workshops. Jennifer introduced observation protocols with clarity and care, ensuring participants understood the purpose and felt confident to engage. Tai extended this with personal stories and examples drawn from his facilitation work, making abstract concepts feel relatable and grounded. They took turns modelling feedback conversations, showing how to speak into someone's practice with respect and honesty. Participants repeatedly commented on how their co-facilitation "felt like a conversation" rather than a workshop, an environment where learning was mutual and safe.

What set Jennifer and Tai apart was their attentiveness to relational depth. They followed up with participants, remembered details of their contexts, and celebrated small wins alongside them. Their relational leadership enabled TLCs to flourish as trust-based settings, where educators could show vulnerability, share success, and reflect honestly on challenges.

In many ways, Jennifer and Tai were the vaka's co-navigators, guiding the journey, supporting the crew, and ensuring that each participant had what they needed to paddle forward. Their partnership reflected the core of ACE Aotearoa values: collective strength, care, adaptability, and a belief in the potential of every learner and educator to grow.

Background: Preparing the Vaka

This reflection recounts Jennifer and Tai's experience as navigators and crew in the facilitation of Teaching and Learning Circles (TLCs) at Far North REAP and Hagley Learning Centre (formerly Hagley Adult Literacy Centre). Much like preparing a vaka for ocean travel, the TLCs were crafted to create a safe, mana-enhancing space where educators could journey together through reflective practice, peer learning, and professional dialogue. The collective aim was to steer toward shared understanding and deeper professional trust.

Building Relationships: Launching the Vaka

Before embarking on the journey, they gathered as a crew: educators, facilitators, and leaders grounding in whanaungatanga/relationships to establish relational depth and connection. This phase was critical for ensuring a calm sea ahead:

- **Initial Trust Building:** We honoured each participant's presence through manaakitanga/support, nurturing a space where stories, challenges, and successes could be shared with respect.
- **Setting Intentions:** We clarified that TLCs were not voyages of judgement, but of discovery and personal growth was our guiding star.
- **Participant Voice:** Just as a crew co-navigates the vaka, participants co-designed aspects of the TLCs, setting shared intentions and anchoring a sense of agency.
- **External Perspective:** Having observers from outside the immediate team was like inviting new navigators aboard, offering fresh winds and new directions for reflection.

Approaches That Enabled the Vaka to Stay Afloat

Jennifer and Tai drew on practices that enhanced the collective voyage:

- **Role-Modelling Non-Judgemental Practice:** We modelled the giving of feedback as gentle currents framed in learning and empathy.
- **Mana-Enhancing Feedback:** Feedback was relational, affirming strengths and exploring new horizons rather than identifying shortcomings.
- **Interactive Sessions:** Sessions were not lectures but voyages of co-inquiry, filled with conversation, laughter, real examples, and shared sense-making.
- **Adaptability:** When unexpected tides arose, they simply adjusted the sail and continued forward.
- **Organisational Support:** Far North REAP and Hagley Learning Centre Managers acted as steady winds, resourcing and valuing the TLC process, including paid time for staff participation.

Key Insights: Navigational Learnings

From the journey, they gathered these navigational stars:

- **Safety First:** Psychological safety enables honesty, vulnerability, and growth.
- **Balance of Structure and Flexibility:** A clear process supported confidence, but flexibility ensured relevance to each crew's local sea.
- **Confidence Through Tools:** Resources served as stabilisers, helping participants lean into new experiences with more assurance.
- **Celebrate Small Wins:** Sharing moments of success buoyed morale and fuelled further progress.
- **Strengthened Professional Trust:** TLCs created space not just for improved teaching practice, but for deeper connection and relational trust among peers.

Methodology: Relational Inquiry

This study adopts a qualitative, strengths-based methodology rooted in the metaphor of ocean navigation, an approach that honours the ancestral wisdom of wayfinding and the importance of relational knowledge systems in education. Just as skilled navigators chart courses by reading the stars, currents, and skies, this research charts a course through the lived experiences, insights, and relationships of adult and community educators.

At the heart of this methodology is a relational research paradigm (Wilson, 2008), which recognises knowledge as co-constructed, situated, and embedded in relationships between people, communities, cultures, and the land. In this paradigm, the researcher is not a distant observer but a participant-navigator, accountable to those with whom they journey. To explore the professional development practice of Teaching and Learning Circles (TLCs), this study draws on the theoretical foundations of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) and Participatory Action Research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). These frameworks emphasise dialogue, reflection, and shared meaning-making, positioning participants as co-navigators rather than subjects of study. The Appreciative Inquiry lens ensures that the research foregrounds strengths, relational dynamics, and aspirations.

Data Collection Methods

Data was gathered through methods that reflect and respect the cultural and relational values of the communities involved:

- **Talanoa and Kaupapa Kōrero:** Open-ended, culturally grounded conversations with educators and facilitators involved in TLCs, allowing space for storytelling, reflection, and shared learning.
- **Observations:** Where appropriate, the researcher joined TLC sessions to observe relational dynamics, pedagogical processes, and the cultural contexts in which these circles unfolded.
- **Collaborative Hui:** Group dialogue sessions to collectively make meaning from the data and validate interpretations in culturally appropriate and participatory ways.

Walking with the Vā: Research and Talanoa Process

This research journey was deeply grounded in relational methodology and an ethics of care. As the researcher, I was privileged to walk alongside adult educators at two very different ACE Aotearoa sites: one in Christchurch and the other in Kaitia. Rather than conducting the research from a distance, I chose to engage in person, visiting each site to build relationships, observe, talanoa, and experience the learning environments first-hand. This was more than data collection; it was a process of relational immersion, guided by Pacific research ethics and Māori principles such as whakawhanaungatanga (relationship building), manaakitanga (care and hospitality), and teu le vā (nurturing sacred relational settings).

Christchurch Site: A Chorus of Voices

At Hagley Learning Centre eight adult educators participated in the research talanoa. The site had a vibrant, multi-lingual, and highly diverse staff group, with experience in teaching ESOL, digital skills, literacy, and pathways for newly arrived learners. Before engaging in formal research activities, I spent time with the staff over kai and informal kōrero. These early conversations were not "data" in the traditional sense, but they were essential for building trust and mutual understanding. I introduced myself not as an outside evaluator, but as a fellow educator and learner. This laid the foundation for open and reflective talanoa.

The talanoa sessions were audio recorded and took place at the classroom of Hagley Learning Centre. The session was guided by open-ended prompts designed to draw out participants' experiences of the TLC process: What did they notice about themselves as teachers? What surprised them during peer observations? What did it feel like to receive feedback from a colleague? And how did the TLCs affect their confidence, relationships, and practice?

Importantly, the Christchurch site had a rhythm of collaboration already embedded into its culture. The TLCs added a layer of intentionality to what was already a relational teaching environment, making the implicit values of trust and care more visible and structured.

As a researcher, I left Christchurch with deep gratitude for the way they let me into their stories, their classrooms, and their reflections. The process was reciprocal. I learned from them, just as they shared their insights with me.

Far North REAP: Intimate Depth and Contextual Richness

In contrast, Far North REAP had a much smaller group. Only two educators were available to participate in the TLC and the research process. However, the small number did not equate to lesser insight. In fact, the intimacy of the setting allowed for deep, rich, and uninterrupted talanoa. The Kaitia context is unique. Situated in Te Tai Tokerau, this site serves highly rural, geographically dispersed communities. The educators often work across roles, as teachers, mentors, community liaisons, and navigators of systems. Their learner's range in age and come with diverse life experiences, including intergenerational disconnection from formal education.

When I arrived in Kaitia, I was welcomed with genuine manaakitanga. Over warm conversation, the relational space was established. The two educators had already participated in one round of TLCs and were enthusiastic to reflect on their experiences. The talanoa was held in a quiet office space, with time set aside so we would not be rushed.

Here, the reflections were characterised by depth, humility, and grounded insights. Themes included:

- **Isolation and the Power of Connection:** One educator spoke candidly about how rare it was to receive professional feedback in a remote context. "Most of the time we just do our best and hope we're doing it right. The TLC made me feel like someone was walking alongside me."
- **Mana-Enhancing Feedback:** The process of receiving feedback in a respectful and strengths-based way was described as transformative. "I didn't feel judged. I felt encouraged."
- **Contextual Responsiveness:** Both educators emphasised that the TLC framework needed to be flexible and context-aware. They adapted the reflective questions and

observation format to better align with their learners' needs and local teaching rhythms.

In Kaitaia, I was reminded that research is as much about listening as it is about collecting. With only two voices, the talanoa went deep. There was time to pause, revisit moments, and allow stories to unfold naturally. The rural setting created challenges like limited resources, distance, multi-role demands, and a strong commitment to community and student achievement.

Reflections as Researcher: Holding the Vā

Across both sites, my role as researcher was less about extracting information and more about holding space for reflection, vulnerability, and connection. Talanoa, as both method and relational practice, allowed for this. It broke down hierarchical dynamics and opened a space where we could all learn from each other. I was intentional in ensuring the talanoa process honoured the cultural values of each site. I adapted my approach in Christchurch to allow for group sharing and playful energy, while in Kaitaia, I offered more time, silence, and slow pacing. Rather than treating the research as a static snapshot, I viewed it as part of a broader relational continuum, a living dialogue that extends beyond the project itself. My hope is that the process affirmed the expertise of adult educators and demonstrated that their voices, experiences, and reflections are not only valid but vital to shaping meaningful professional development. This research journey was anchored in talanoa and grounded in relationship. It demonstrated the diversity, richness, and complexity of educator experiences across Aotearoa's adult and community education sector. Whether in the vibrant collegial setting of Christchurch or the intimate, community-rooted space of Kaitaia, the TLCs acted as vessels for reflection, renewal, and connection. As the researcher, I carry deep respect for the educators who participated. Their stories, questions, laughter, and honesty have left an imprint on this work. Their willingness to reflect and engage is a testament to the power of culturally grounded, relational professional learning.

In walking with the vā, we do more than gather knowledge, we grow it together.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted using an inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), supported by culturally grounded interpretation. Rather than reducing narratives to categorical data, themes were developed with care, honouring the metaphorical and metaphor-rich nature of storytelling in ACE Aotearoa settings. The process involved multiple phases of reflection and collaborative sense-making, ensuring that findings remained connected to the lived realities and aspirations of those who contributed.

Ethical Considerations and Relational Accountability

Ethical practice in this study is guided by relational accountability (Wilson, 2008) and Tiriti-centred research principles. This includes informed consent as an ongoing conversation, shared ownership of findings, and ensuring the research process is mana-enhancing and respectful. The study has been shaped with and for the communities involved, recognising that educators are experts in their own contexts. In this ocean of educational possibility, this methodology enables a purposeful, respectful, and strengths-based voyage, one that honours the wisdom of those who teach and learn in adult education environments, and which contributes to more just, inclusive, and culturally grounded professional learning systems.

Findings: Deepening Reflective Practice through Teaching and Learning Circles

Below, four key findings from Far North REAP, and offer commentary on how culturally responsive professional learning models can deeply impact practice when relationships are held at the centre.

1. Deepened Reflection on Teaching Practice

The TLC experience allowed the educator to step back from their day-to-day teaching and engage in *whakamāramatanga*, a process of clarifying and making meaning through reflection. Prior to participating in TLCs, like many experienced educators, they had relied on instinct and familiarity to guide their practice. However, the act of being observed by a trusted colleague, followed by a *korero* conversation, prompted them to reflect more consciously on the intentions, rhythms, and patterns of their teaching. During the feedback session, they were invited to consider not just what they were doing, but why. For example, a colleague noted how students responded positively when the educator used humour to break down complex content. This simple observation sparked a deeper conversation about the use of relational strategies to foster engagement. They later reflected, “Through the feedback from my colleagues, I saw parts of my teaching that I hadn’t noticed before.” This moment speaks to the power of *ako*, where learning is reciprocal, and the educator becomes a learner again, not through formal evaluation, but through relational reflection.

2. Feedback Grounded in Care and Mana-Enhancement

A defining feature of this TLC experience was the tone and structure of the feedback itself. Rather than positioning feedback as a critique, colleagues offered observations grounded in *manaakitanga* that was reaffirming, respectful, and uplifting. Feedback was not about identifying deficits or prescribing solutions; it was about noticing strengths and opening

possibilities. For instance, rather than saying “you should ask more open-ended questions,” a colleague might say, “When you asked that question about their home experiences, I saw a real spark in the group, so how might you do more of that?” This mana-enhancing feedback model created a space of psychological safety. The educator felt encouraged, not exposed. They could listen with openness rather than defensiveness, because the feedback was shared with empathy and a belief in their capability to grow. This is aligned with Pacific and Māori values of *teu le vā* and *tiakitanga/guardianship*, the ethical care of the relational space between people. In this way, feedback becomes not just an exchange of ideas, but a reaffirmation of trust.

3. Strengthened Professional Relationships

The TLC process also had a clear impact on the relational dynamics among educators at Far North REAP. Through the peer observation and reflective dialogue, deeper layers of *whanaungatanga/kinship* emerged. Colleagues who may have only worked alongside each other in passing were now engaged in meaningful conversations about practice, values, and shared hopes for their learners. This shift moved the culture from collegiality to relational trust. It was no longer about working next to each other, but about learning with and from each other. The TLCs became what one participant called a “*marae of conversation*”, a space where ideas, identities, and experiences were brought together with respect and purpose. Importantly, the educator noted that this trust extended beyond the TLC sessions. Having experienced the power of non-judgemental observation and feedback, staff began to seek out each other’s perspectives more regularly. The circles created ripples, not only in pedagogy, but in team cohesion and professional resilience.

4. Emergence of New Ideas and Confidence in Practice

A further outcome of the TLC experience was the educator’s renewed sense of curiosity and creativity around their teaching. With the encouragement and insights of their peers, they began to experiment with new approaches, such as embedding more personal storytelling into lessons, scaffolding open-ended questions, and varying group configurations to foster

peer learning. These changes were not the result of prescriptive training, but rather, the natural result of being in reflective dialogue. They described the process as “seeing my teaching from the outside, but in a way that felt safe and helpful.” This mirrors the Māori concept of **whakamārama** as gaining clarity not just through internal thought, but through interaction and shared sense-making. Importantly, the TLC model validated the knowledge that already existed within the team. Rather than relying on external expertise, the process recognised that colleagues themselves were sources of insight, innovation, and affirmation. In this way, professional development became **collective**, not individualistic, a co-navigated vaka rather than a solo voyage.

5. Professional Growth Through Relational Depth

The Far North REAP educator’s experience in the TLC process highlights how professional learning rooted in cultural responsiveness and relational ethics can lead to transformative growth. Teaching and Learning Circles, when done well, are not just about improving technique, rather they are about restoring trust in the self, trust in colleagues, and trust in the process of learning itself. This case reinforces a growing understanding in Māori and Pacific education research: that meaningful change happens not through compliance or top-down critique, but through relational practice, peer dialogue, and collective reflection. When feedback is shared through manaakitanga, and when learning is approached through ako, educators flourish in confidence and connection. For Far North REAP, the TLC initiative not only strengthened individual teaching practice but also supported the organisation’s wider commitment to equitable, holistic education. It reaffirmed that whanaungatanga and reflective inquiry are not side elements of professional development—they are the very foundation upon which responsive, culturally sustaining practice is built.

Key Findings from Hagley Learning Centre: Insights from Teaching and Learning Circles (TLCs)

The Teaching and Learning Circles (TLC) process at Hagley Learning Centre surfaced a wide range of observations, challenges, and innovations in practice. Drawing from talanoa, reflective observations, and participant feedback, several key themes emerged relating to peer observation, classroom dynamics, collaborative work, and educator development. These findings demonstrate the value of culturally responsive, relational approaches to professional learning in diverse adult education settings.

1. Reflective Practice and Peer Observation

Educators at the Hagley Learning Centre engaged deeply in reflection, supported by structured peer observations. Initial hesitation, due in part to previous negative experiences was often replaced with appreciation for the positive, strengths-based feedback approach embedded in the TLCs.

- Peer observation encouraged teachers to reflect critically on their teaching and classroom strategies, leading to self-awareness and professional growth.
- Feedback was framed constructively, often highlighting what educators were doing well, and offering gentle suggestions for further enhancement.
- Tutors valued the opportunity to observe varied teaching styles, and several described the process as confidence-building and enlightening.

2. Navigating Challenges in Educational Environments

Hagley Learning Centre's TLC process also revealed practical challenges that impacted teaching and learning, particularly in the context of adult education and community-based learning.

- Time constraints and staff absences often disrupted planned sessions, requiring tutors to adapt quickly.
- Scheduling difficulties exacerbated by part-time contracts and substitute teacher requirements were a recurring issue.
- Learner variability and merged classes introduced complexity in managing classroom energy, content level, and learner expectations.

Despite these obstacles, educators showed resilience and adaptability, underscoring the importance of flexibility in both lesson planning and peer observation processes.

3. Diverse Learning Needs and Inclusive Strategies

Participants observed significant variation in learner needs, which required a tailored and inclusive approach to lesson design and delivery.

- Peer-to-peer correction (e.g., pronunciation and spelling) was seen as both a learning tool and a relationship-building strategy.
- Classroom noise and energy were managed using agreed signals, compared metaphorically to conducting an orchestra, helping to foster focus without stifling engagement.
- Educators reported increased awareness of the need for differentiated instruction and noted that one-on-one support and small group configurations worked well to maintain inclusivity.

4. Creative Pedagogies and Applied Learning

Participants highlighted the use of applied and game-based learning methods, which supported engagement and practical skill development.

- Observations noted the use of simplified games incorporating days of the week, adjectives, and sentence-building, supporting contextualised language acquisition.
- A planned café visit was used as an authentic learning environment, enabling students to practice real-life English in a social setting.

- Feedback highlighted the value of creating space for students to assist one another, reinforcing peer learning and leadership.

5. Communication, Process, and Collaborative Planning

Some participants expressed challenges around communication and process clarity, particularly in planning collaborative sessions or post-observation debriefs.

- Unclear timelines and expectations occasionally led to confusion or underprepared sessions.
- Educators indicated a need for more structured time to meet, reflect, and shape collaborative learning strategies.
- Team meetings, when well-resourced and regular, were seen as highly valuable for both part-time and full-time staff to connect, share, and plan.

6. Remote and Cross-Contextual Learning

One peer observation involved a remote team session, offering insights into digital collaboration and the diversity of teaching practices across settings.

- While adapting university-designed software proved challenging, educators valued the learning and adaptability required to contextualise tools for adult learning.
- Reflections highlighted the complexities of applying uniform processes across different environments and learner cohorts.

7. Emotional and Relational Dimensions of Teaching

Several reflections focused on the emotional labour of teaching and the importance of relational dynamics in effective education.

- One-on-one interactions often revealed deeper interpersonal insights, such as overlooked classroom power dynamics or subtle learner disengagement.
- Self-reflection was prompted not only by formal feedback but also through personal anecdotes, quiet observations, and informal kōrero with colleagues.
- Strong, trusted relationships among educators were seen as protective against burnout and key to creating psychologically safe environments for peer observation.

8. Professional Identity and Teaching Backgrounds

Participants brought a wealth of experience from various sectors, which influenced their teaching approaches and classroom philosophies.

- Tutors with industry or health education backgrounds often drew on real-world experience, adding richness to their classroom delivery.
- Some frustrations were expressed about institutional recognition of international qualifications, such as postgraduate teaching certificates earned overseas.
- Despite diverse backgrounds, there was strong collegiality and mutual respect, particularly during shared reflection and storytelling.

9. Incremental Improvement and Systemic Support

Tutors noted that small, consistent improvements—what some described as a “1% better every day” approach had a cumulative and empowering effect.

- Observations and feedback helped educators implement modest changes that significantly improved learning outcomes over time.
- The TLC process created space for collective goal-setting and continuous improvement, supported by an external facilitator.
- These moments of growth were often enhanced by community building and shared purpose among educators.

10. Cultural Responsiveness and Teaching Philosophy

Finally, several participants spoke to the importance of culturally grounded teaching and the responsibility of educators to create learning environments that reflect learner identities and needs.

- Observations revealed the value of relational pedagogy—building trust, recognising learners’ lived experiences, and adapting teaching accordingly.
- The non-linear, adaptive nature of adult and community education at Hagley Learning Centre allowed teachers to explore holistic and ecological approaches to teaching, often drawing on cross-disciplinary ideas and metaphors (e.g., the classroom as an ecosystem).
- Teaching was seen as a relational act, where care, clarity, and connection were just as important as curriculum.

Discussion: Analysis of Teaching and Learning Circles

This section presents a detailed discussion of the key findings from two Adult and Community Education (ACE Aotearoa) sites: Hagley Learning Centre and Far North REAP. These sites participated in the Teaching and Learning Circles (TLC) initiative as part of the Circle of Knowledge project. Drawing on talanoa, observational data, and educator reflections, this discussion explores the complex dynamics of implementing TLCs in ACE Aotearoa environments. It analyses the effectiveness of TLCs, examines contextual challenges, and considers how culturally responsive modifications and sustainable frameworks are needed to ensure their success.

TLC Exemplars in Practice

Conversations and Feedback

The positive impact of the TLC process shines through practical examples of conversations, peer feedback, and meaningful classroom transformations that emerged during the initiative. At Far North REAP, for instance, a tutor initially shared concerns in a TLC session about student engagement in a class. Through supportive and reflective dialogue with colleagues, they were inspired to try a new strategy: incorporating pair-sharing before whole-group discussions. This small yet thoughtful adjustment was implemented in their classroom and led to a remarkable increase in student participation. Learners became more actively engaged with the material, and the tutor experienced a stronger sense of connection and responsiveness from the group. These examples highlight how TLCs foster a collaborative and encouraging space where teachers can confidently address challenges, explore innovative ideas, and implement effective practices with real results.

Peer feedback offered within TLCs also exemplifies the power of strengths-based and relational observation. During a Hagley Learning session, an educator received feedback from a colleague who had observed that learners responded with heightened interest when the teacher incorporated real-world examples into the lesson. The observer highlighted this positive dynamic, which the teacher had not fully recognised during the class itself. The feedback not only affirmed effective practice but also guided the teacher toward embedding more contextualised case studies in future lessons. This example illustrates how feedback in TLCs operates through *manaakitanga*, affirming teachers' strengths while gently encouraging refinements that enhance student engagement.

Pedagogical Shifts

TLCs also fostered concrete pedagogical shifts to support inclusive practice. One challenge identified was ensuring equitable participation for learners with English as an additional language. Circle discussions generated ideas for using visual scaffolds, such as images, diagrams, and bilingual keywords, to supplement instructions. When these strategies were implemented, teachers reported smoother lesson delivery and improved learner independence. Learners became more confident in following instructions without repeated clarification, which reduced classroom disruption and created more time for meaningful learning interactions. This illustrates how collaborative problem-solving within TLCs can directly inform classroom strategies that improve inclusivity and equity.

These pedagogical shifts, emerging from TLC participation, reflect a growing emphasis on reflective practice and collaborative inquiry among adult educators. Educators reported that engaging in regular dialogue with peers encouraged them to critically examine their assumptions, experiment with new strategies, and share both successes and challenges in a supportive environment. As a result, educators became more responsive to learner needs and were more willing to adapt their instructional methods. This ongoing process of reflection and adaptation not only enhanced teacher efficacy but also contributed to a more dynamic and inclusive learning environment.

Moving towards learner-driven community education

In a community learning circle, adult educators noticed that their sessions were too content-heavy and tended to replicate school-like delivery styles. Through shared reflection and observation, they experimented with shifting from instructor-led sessions to approaches that empowered participants to bring their own knowledge and experiences into the learning process. For example, a literacy tutor trialled co-designing reading activities based on participants' daily lives, such as workplace forms and community newsletters. The circle's feedback affirmed that this adaptation increased learner motivation and relevance. This process of collective inquiry helped adult educators reconceptualise themselves as facilitators rather than sole knowledge providers, making their teaching more responsive to adult learners' realities.

Embedding cultural and local knowledge

Another community TLC emphasised the importance of culturally grounded pedagogy. Educators reflected on the barriers adult learners from diverse backgrounds often face in mainstream settings, and together they identified strategies to honour cultural knowledge and lived experience. One facilitator, for instance, integrated Pacific community practices of *talanoa* (open dialogue) into her sessions, allowing learners to explore numeracy concepts through storytelling and shared examples. Feedback from peers highlighted how this adaptation not only improved participation but also created a sense of belonging and validation for learners. This exemplar demonstrates how learning circles can be spaces of renewal, encouraging educators to adapt their practice by embedding cultural frameworks into community education.

Responding to digital and life-skills needs

A third TLC focused on the growing demand for digital and life-skills learning among adults

in the community. Many educators initially expressed anxiety about integrating new technologies, but through collaborative trial and error they redesigned learning activities to meet learners where they were. For example, one community tutor adapted a budgeting workshop by incorporating a simple mobile app, enabling participants to track household expenses in real time. Peers in the circle offered constructive suggestions to refine the task, balancing technological demands with accessibility. The collective process gave educators confidence to adopt blended approaches, showing how TLCs support adaptation to shifting social and technological contexts in adult learning.

Finally, the TLC model strengthened professional confidence, particularly in areas where educators initially felt less capable. One tutor, for example, expressed hesitation about incorporating digital tools into her teaching. Through collegial dialogue, she was encouraged to trial a single, low-risk tool—Padlet—as a means of supporting collaborative brainstorming. At the subsequent TLC session, she reflected on the success of the activity and her learners’ positive response, which encouraged her to adopt additional digital practices. This incremental confidence-building demonstrates how the relational and iterative structure of TLCs supports educators to take manageable risks, extend their professional repertoires, and adapt to evolving learning environments.

Taken together, these exemplars highlight the concrete ways in which TLCs enabled reflective dialogue, encouraged peer feedback, and fostered innovative teaching practices. They demonstrate that the impact of TLCs lies not only in broad shifts in professional culture, but also in the specific, contextually grounded changes that ripple outward into classrooms and learning communities.

Context-Driven TLCs in ACE Aotearoa Contexts

Adult and Community Education (ACE Aotearoa) operate in environments characterised by fluidity, diversity, and demands, which necessitate a context-driven approach to Teacher Learning Communities (TLCs). As Benseman (2013) highlights, ACE Aotearoa educators work with highly diverse learner populations, many of whom face systemic and educational barriers. These barriers include socioeconomic challenges, language difficulties, and limited prior educational opportunities. In such environments, a one-size-fits-all approach to

professional development (PD) and TLCs is insufficient. Instead, the unique characteristics of each ACE Aotearoa site must inform the design and implementation of TLCs to ensure they are relevant, effective, and sustainable.

Fluidity and Flexibility in ACE Aotearoa Contexts

The fluid nature of ACE Aotearoa contexts, including fluctuating learner demographics and staffing changes, demands flexibility in TLCs. For instance, Hagley Learning Centre serves a diverse cohort of adult learners, including migrants, refugees, and second-chance learners. This diversity requires educators to adopt culturally responsive teaching practices and adapt their methods to meet the varied needs of their learners. TLCs in such contexts must prioritise flexibility, allowing educators to share strategies for addressing the unique challenges they face. This aligns with the findings of Timperley et al. (2007), who emphasise that effective PD is context-specific and responsive to the immediate needs of educators and learners.

Diversity and Cultural Responsiveness

Diversity is a defining feature of ACE Aotearoa contexts, and it necessitates culturally responsive practices within TLCs. For example, Far North REAP operates in a geographically isolated region, supporting rural communities with limited access to formal education. Educators in this context must navigate cultural nuances, including the needs of indigenous populations and rural learners. TLCs must provide a platform for educators to exchange culturally relevant teaching strategies and build trust within their communities. As Gay (2010) argues, culturally responsive teaching is essential for fostering meaningful learning experiences, particularly in diverse and under-resourced settings.

Demands and Constraints on Professional Development

While the demands of ACE Aotearoa contexts highlight the need for robust TLCs, these same contexts often impose constraints on PD. Limited time, staffing fluctuations, and logistical barriers can hinder the implementation of TLCs. For instance, educators at Far North REAP

may struggle to attend regular TLC meetings due to the geographic isolation of their communities. Similarly, Hagley Learning Centre educators may face time constraints due to the high demands of their diverse learner populations. To address these challenges, TLCs must be designed with practicality in mind, incorporating flexible scheduling, virtual meetings, and asynchronous learning opportunities. This approach aligns with the work of Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), who advocate for PD models that are adaptable and accessible to educators in diverse contexts.

The Role of Trust in TLCs

Trust is a critical component of effective TLCs, particularly in contexts where educators often work in isolation or under challenging conditions. Building trust within TLCs allows educators to share their experiences openly, seek support, and collaborate on solutions. For example, educators at Hagley Learning Centre and Far North REAP may benefit from TLCs that foster a sense of community and mutual respect. As Bryk and Schneider (2002) note, relational trust is a key factor in the success of professional learning communities, as it encourages risk-taking and innovation among educators.

Implications for Practice

The analysis of adult and community education contexts underscores the necessity of letting context drive the design and implementation of TLCs. Key implications for practice include:

1. **Contextual Relevance:** TLCs can be tailored to the specific needs and challenges of each ACE Aotearoa site, considering factors such as learner demographics, geographic location, and resource availability.
2. **Flexibility:** TLCs should incorporate flexible structures, such as virtual meetings and asynchronous learning, to accommodate the demands and constraints faced by educators.
3. **Cultural Responsiveness:** TLCs must prioritise culturally responsive practices, providing educators with the tools and strategies needed to support diverse learner populations.

- 4. Trust-Building:** Building trust within TLCs is essential for fostering collaboration and innovation among educators.

Relational Trust and Reflective Dialogue

A shared strength across both sites was the willingness of educators to engage in honest, reflective dialogue. Peer observation, when introduced with care and relational ethics, created a safe space for educators to reflect on their practice, receive affirming feedback, and explore areas for growth.

At Hagley Learning Centre, the TLC process involved eight educators who shared a commitment to inclusive teaching. Many spoke about the value of receiving feedback in a non-judgemental way. As one educator noted, "It made me realise we're not alone in the challenges we face." Similarly, in Far North REAP, even with just two participants, talanoa created a powerful place for reflection. The educators appreciated the opportunity to feel seen and supported, especially given the isolated nature of their work. This aligns with what (Chu-Fuluifaga, 2021) describes as "relationally grounded professional learning" that builds trust through culturally sustaining approaches. The TLCs provided a mechanism for educators to develop collective efficacy (Bandura, 1997), fostering a sense of shared responsibility for improving teaching practice.

Contextual Constraints and Logistical Realities

Despite the positive outcomes, both sites experienced significant challenges. Scheduling TLC meetings was difficult, particularly at the Hagley Learning Centre where many staff work part-time or across multiple programmes. Staff absences, merged classes, and substitute teaching requirements created disruptions. Far North REAP faced similar challenges, compounded by geographic dispersion and multi-role responsibilities.

Moreover, while the TLC model was well-received, its implementation often extended beyond the scope of a typical PD programme. Observations, feedback discussions, and follow-up required time and emotional labour. Educators noted that one-off workshops were insufficient to embed practice change.

This raises important questions about the sustainability of TLCs. As Berryman et al. (2018) argue, effective PD must be ongoing, context-responsive, and embedded within the everyday practices of educators. Without structural support, including resourcing, time allowances, and leadership buy-in initiatives like TLCs risk becoming performative rather than transformative.

Modifying TLCs for ACE Values and Realities

The findings suggest that TLCs must be adapted to reflect the values, rhythms, and constraints of individual ACE sites. At the Hagley Learning Centre, educators appreciated flexible peer observation templates and the option to co-construct focus areas. Visual aids, simplified observation tools, and informal feedback sessions helped reduce anxiety and build confidence. In Far North REAP, relational trust was especially critical. The educators valued conversations over written templates, preferring storytelling and shared examples. They noted that observation protocols felt unfamiliar at first but became more meaningful when adapted into a strengths-based, culturally resonant dialogue. These adaptations echo the call by Reynolds and Chu (2020) for "flexible, relationally anchored frameworks" in PD design. TLCs need not be standardised; instead, they should offer guiding principles that allow for co-design, contextualisation, and cultural responsiveness.

The Role of Leadership and Organisational Support

A notable enabler at both sites was the commitment of leadership. Management supported staff by allocating time for TLC participation which was a key factor in uptake and follow-through. Staff appreciated this recognition and reported feeling more motivated to engage. At Far North REAP, leadership played a relational rather than logistical role. Managers encouraged participation through informal conversations and by affirming the professionalism of staff. Both approaches underscore the importance of relational leadership in ACE, as articulated by Macfarlane et al. (2008), where leaders nurture environments of trust and learning rather than impose top-down accountability.

Collaborative Professional Inquiry and Educator Wellbeing

One of the most powerful findings was the impact of TLCs on educator wellbeing. Many tutors described feeling validated, encouraged, and reconnected with their professional purpose. The act of being observed by a peer and receiving mana-enhancing feedback restored a sense of worth and community. This aligns with the Pacific concept of "teu le vā" (Anae, 2010), which calls for the nurturing of relational settings. In both sites, TLCs created moments of reconnection allowing educators to pause, reflect, and listen to each other. Such practices are essential for sustaining morale in challenging environments. Collaborative professional inquiry also surfaced practical teaching strategies. Observations at the Hagley Learning Centre revealed effective classroom management tools, peer-to-peer learning, and inclusive pedagogies that could be shared more widely. In Kaitaia, educators shared context-specific adaptations that honoured learner diversity and local values. These exchanges underscore the potential of TLCs as a platform for sharing good practice and strengthening collective pedagogical knowledge.

Toward a Sustainable TLC Framework for ACE Aotearoa

The findings from Hagley Learning Centre and Far North REAP point to a need for a flexible, values-based framework for TLCs in ACE Aotearoa settings. Such a framework needs to be co-designed with educators, grounded in relational practice, and supported by structural enablers.

Key components might include:

- **Relational Foundations:** Begin with whakawhanaungatanga and talanoa to establish trust and connection.
- **Contextual Flexibility:** Allow for co-construction of observation focus areas, formats, and feedback methods.
- **Time and Resource Allocation:** Recognise the time needed for observation, reflection, and follow-up; provide paid time where possible.
- **Culturally Responsive Tools:** Use adaptable templates, visuals, and storytelling methods that reflect the values of each site.
- **Leadership Support:** Ensure that organisational leaders model and resource relational professional learning.
- **Ongoing Practice:** Position TLCs as part of an ongoing cycle of professional inquiry, not a one-off event.

Recommendations for Future Research and PLD in ACE Contexts

Based on the findings from Hagley Learning and Far North REAP, several recommendations emerge for future research and the design of professional learning and development (PLD):

- **Expand Research on Culturally Responsive PD Models:** Further qualitative and participatory research is needed to explore how culturally grounded practices like

talanoa and whakawhanaungatanga can be integrated into PD across diverse ACE environments.

- **Explore Long-Term Impacts:** Longitudinal studies need to track the sustained impact of TLCs on educator practice, learner outcomes, and staff retention, particularly in rural or under-resourced areas.
- **Examine the Role of Leadership in Enabling PD:** Research needs to consider how different leadership models (e.g., relational, transformational) support or hinder professional learning and reflective practice in ACE settings.
- **Develop ACE-Specific PLD Frameworks:** PLD programmes should be tailored to the specific needs and constraints of ACE providers. This includes shorter, modular formats, community-based facilitation models, and collaborative inquiry approaches.
- **Support Communities of Practice:** Encourage the formation of ongoing educator learning groups or "communities of practice" where educators can share, reflect, and co-develop solutions across sites.
- **Policy-Level Recognition and Resourcing:** Advocate for dedicated funding and policy support for relational, culturally responsive PD in the ACE Aotearoa sector, recognising the unique contribution of ACE Aotearoa educators to lifelong learning.
- **Build Educator Capability Through Co-Facilitation:** Involve experienced educators in co-designing and facilitating TLCs to build leadership and ensure the professional development is contextually embedded.
- **Embed Reflection into Everyday Practice:** Design simple, sustainable tools and routines (e.g., weekly check-ins, talanoa circles) that allow reflection to become part of daily teaching life.

These recommendations reflect the need for future professional learning in ACE Aotearoa to move beyond event-based training toward embedded, relational, and co-constructed approaches. A shift in mindset is needed: from delivering content to building capacity; from external directives to internal inquiry; and from isolated efforts to collective movement.

Charting a Course Toward Relational, Culturally Grounded Professional Growth

Teaching and Learning Circles, when grounded in the values of ACE Aotearoa and adapted for context, offer a powerful tool for professional growth. The experiences at Hagley Learning Centre and Far North REAP demonstrate that reflective dialogue, when supported by trust, flexibility, and care, can transform not only practice but also educator identity and wellbeing.

However, these processes require more than goodwill. They need time, resourcing, and a commitment to cultural responsiveness. If embedded sustainably, TLCs have the potential to become a key part of professional development in ACE Aotearoa, as a practice that is not imposed from above but grown from within, anchored in relationships, and driven by shared commitment to learner success. The experience of educators participating in Teaching and Learning Circles (TLCs) can be likened to navigating a vaka (canoe) through the vast ocean of professional growth and community learning. Each educator brings their unique paddles—shaped by their personal and professional contexts to propel the vaka forward. Within their specific community settings, educators interpret their participation in TLCs as a journey of shared discovery, where the collective rhythm of paddling fosters collaboration, mutual respect, and the co-construction of knowledge. The vaka becomes a vessel of empowerment, carrying educators toward deeper understanding and more effective practices.

Relational and cultural values serve as the vaka's guiding stars, influencing its design, facilitation, and direction. These values ensure that TLCs are not just professional development tools but also ways of belonging, where relationships are nurtured, cultural identities are honored, and learning is deeply rooted in the lived realities of participants. The vaka's course is charted by these values, ensuring that the journey remains inclusive, meaningful, and aligned with the needs of the community.

Finally, TLCs offer profound insights into culturally responsive, strengths-based approaches to professional learning in non-formal education environments. They demonstrate that when the vaka is steered with an appreciative inquiry lens, focusing on strengths rather than deficits. It becomes a powerful vehicle for transformation. TLCs highlight the importance of flexibility in navigating diverse waters, the strength of relationships in weathering challenges,

and the value of cultural responsiveness in ensuring that every educator feels seen, heard, and valued. Together, these elements create a vaka that not only carries educators forward but also leaves a lasting wake of innovation, equity, and community-centred growth in its path.

Broader Outcomes: Towards Learner and Community Impact

While the current report highlights the professional development benefits of Teaching and Learning Circles (TLCs) for educators, there is scope to further strengthen the case by explicitly addressing outcomes for learners and communities. Research in adult and community education consistently demonstrates that teacher professional growth has multiplier effects, shaping not only classroom practice but also learner confidence, participation, and achievement (Benseman, 2014; Schweisfurth, 2013). In the TLC initiative, shifts in pedagogy—such as the use of inclusive strategies, culturally sustaining approaches, and applied learning opportunities—had visible effects on learner engagement and agency. For example, the incorporation of real-world contexts and collaborative learning structures allowed learners to experience education as relevant, empowering, and socially connected.

Beyond the classroom, TLCs hold potential to foster wider community outcomes. As educators adopt practices grounded in *whanaungatanga* and *ako*, they strengthen connections between learning centres, families, and local communities. This echoes findings in Indigenous and Pacific education research, which argue that relational pedagogies are not confined to the classroom but extend into the community fabric (Airini et al., 2010; Anae, 2016). By documenting and disseminating these broader outcomes, the TLC initiative could strengthen its claim for policy-level recognition, positioning ACE not merely as a site of remedial or vocational provision, but as a driver of social cohesion, cultural affirmation, and community wellbeing. In policy terms, such evidence underscores the unique role of ACE in achieving equity and inclusion goals set out in government strategies for lifelong learning and skills development.

Sustainability: Embedding TLCs as a National Framework

The sustainability of TLCs is central to their long-term value. While the current project has demonstrated proof of concept across two sites, further elaboration is required on how

TLCs might be institutionalised as a national professional learning framework for ACE. Sustainable impact depends on moving beyond project-based interventions to embedding practices in ongoing professional development structures, supported by both policy and funding mechanisms.

Sustained professional learning requires three key conditions: continuity over time, collaborative structures, and institutional recognition. TLCs align with these principles but need systemic support to become part of the professional fabric of ACE. A national framework could, for instance, establish regional TLC hubs, facilitated by experienced practitioners, and supported through ACE Aotearoa as a coordinating body. This would allow for consistency of practice while enabling local adaptation to diverse learner and community contexts.

Furthermore, sustainability requires investment in facilitator training, digital infrastructure for remote participation, and mechanisms for sharing resources and outcomes across sites. Embedding TLCs nationally would not only consolidate professional learning but also provide a coherent structure for evaluating impact across the ACE sector. Such a framework would address longstanding concerns about the marginalisation of ACE in policy by demonstrating that professional learning in this sector is systematic, relational, and outcomes focused. In doing so, TLCs could become a cornerstone of ACE professionalisation, enhancing both educator practice and the sector's visibility within national education policy.

Dissemination of Findings

As a way of disseminating the main findings, there will be academic publications and conference presentations. To maximise the value of the TLC initiative, a clear and structured dissemination plan is required. Such a plan ensures that the insights generated reach diverse audiences, contribute to scholarly dialogue, and support practice and policy development in adult and community education.

1. Academic Publications

Findings from the TLC research are well positioned to contribute to journals focused on adult education, teacher professional learning, and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Potential outlets include:

- *International Journal of Lifelong Education*
- *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*
- *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*

An initial publication could present an analysis of TLCs across the Far North REAP and Hagley Learning contexts, highlighting themes of reflective practice, cultural responsiveness, and educator identity. A second article could focus on methodological innovations, particularly the integration of talanoa and relational feedback processes.

2. Conferences

The initial plan to present the Teaching and Learning Circles (TLC) project at the 2025 **ACE Aotearoa Conference** was adjusted due to the conference theme, *AI / Artificial Intelligence and Ancestral Intelligence*, which did not align with the focus of the TLC workshop. However, the commitment to acknowledge and include project participants at the conference was upheld in recognition of their valuable time and contribution to the research. This engagement evolved into a **professional development opportunity** for participants.

As part of the dissemination plan, the researcher, **Dr Cherie Chu-Fuluifaga**, will present the findings of the Teaching and Learning Circles (TLC) research at selected national and regional conferences over the next year. These presentations will focus on sharing the project's outcomes, highlighting effective models of professional learning, and exploring the role of culturally grounded approaches in adult and community education. Through these engagements, Cherie aims to strengthen dialogue across the sector, connect the TLC findings to broader research on teacher development and collaborative practice, and contribute to advancing Pacific-centred and inclusive pedagogies within adult learning contexts.

ACE Aotearoa remains committed to showcasing the project and will deliver a dedicated workshop at the **May 2026 conference**.

Ongoing Dissemination Plan (2025–2026)

The dissemination of the TLC research will continue over the next year through multiple channels:

- **Article** in the *ACE Aotearoa Quarterly Newsletter* (December 2025 issue) sharing the key research findings.
- **Submission** of an academic article to the *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*.
- **Webinar** hosted by ACE Aotearoa in early 2026 to present outcomes and invite sector engagement.
- **Workshop presentation** at the *ACE Aotearoa Conference*, Auckland, May 2026.
- **Inclusion** of the project and its findings in the *2025 ACE Aotearoa Annual Report* (to be published June 2026).
- **Internal dissemination:** The AARIA project has been shared and reported to the Board, staff, TEC, and other key stakeholders.
- **Public visibility:** Project information is available on the ACE Aotearoa website and was featured in the *Autumn 2025 Newsletter*, which introduced the research to the wider adult and community education sector.

Conclusion

A clear dissemination strategy is vital to ensure that the learnings from the TLC project extend beyond the immediate research sites. By combining academic publications, conference presentations, and practitioner-focused outputs, the project can strengthen its contribution to knowledge, practice, and policy in adult and community education.

Reference List

- Alkema, Anne. (2014). *Success for Pasifika in tertiary education: Highlights from Ako Aotearoa-supported research*. Ako Aotearoa.
- Aman, A. (2014). *Mentoring: Professional learning in a quality learning circle* [University of Canterbury]. University of Canterbury. Education. <https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/items/3516abca-f84d-4a86-9981-b0bbb64a9e0f>
- Anae, M. (2016). Teu le va: Samoan relational ethics. *Knowledge Cultures*, 4(03), 117-130.
- Bazylak, D. (2002). Journeys to Success: Perceptions of Five Female Aboriginal High School Graduates. *Canadian journal of native education*, 26(2), 134.
- Benseman, J. (2013). Adult education in New Zealand. In B. Budd & J. Benseman (Eds.), *Re-imagining lifelong learning* (pp. 85–98). NZCER Press.
- Berryman, M., Eley, E., & Copeland, D. (2018). Listening and learning from rangatahi Māori: The voices of Māori youth. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 53(1), 41–53.
- Blackwell, R., Channell, J., & Williams, J. (2001). Teaching circles: a way forward for part-time teachers in higher education? *The International Journal for Academic Development*, 6(1), 40-53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13601440110033652>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Chu-Fuluifaga, C. (2021). Shape-shifting connections, relationships and Pacific education in the uncharted waters of a global pandemic. *The New Zealand Annual Review of Education*, 26, 168–174. <https://doi.org/10.26686/nzaroe.v26.6932>
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (1999). Relationships of Knowledge and Practice: Teacher Learning in Communities. *Review of research in education*, 24, 249-305. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1167272>
- Collay, M., Dunlap, D., Enloe, W., & Gagnon, G. (1998). *Learning Circles: Creating conditions for professional development*. Corwin Press, Inc.

- Cooperrider, D. and Srivastva, S. (1987). Appreciative inquiry in organizational life. In R. Woodman and W. Pasmore (Eds.), *Research in organizational change and development*, Vol. 1, pp. 129–169.
- Dajani, F., & Mohammed Yousef, M. (2014). Learning circles: Promoting collaborative learning culture for teacher professional development. *Arab World English Journal*, 5(3), 142.
- Dewey, J. (2012). *How We Think*. Dover Publications. Pp 21-55.
- Drexel University. (2025). *Teaching and learning centre*. <https://drexel.edu/teaching-and-learning/resources/peer-review-of-teaching>
- Esterhazy, R., de Lange, T., Bastiansen, S., & Wittek, A. L. (2021). Moving Beyond Peer Review of Teaching: A Conceptual Framework for Collegial Faculty Development. *Review of Educational Research*, 91(2), 237-271. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654321990721>
- Farrelly, T. & Nabobo-Baba, U. (2014). “Talanoa as empathic apprenticeship.” *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 55(3), 319–330.
- Ferriter, B. (2005). The day I was very wrong: A lesson in professional learning communities. *The Journal of Staff Development*, 26(3), 72.
- Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*. Teachers College Press.
- Grimmett, P. (1995). Developing voice through teacher research: Implications for educational policy. In J. Smyth (Ed.), *Critical discourses on teacher development*. Cassell.
- Hansen, L., Chambers, T., & Hamilton, D. (2023). Peer-supported Teaching Practice: Embodying a Relational, Practice-Led Approach to Enhancing Educator Wellbeing and Practice. *Student success*, 14(3), 65-77. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.2780>
- Hord, S. (1997a). *Professional learning communities: Communities of continuous inquiry and improvement*. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED410659>
- Hord, S. (1997b). Professional learning communities: What re they and why are they important? *Issues about change*, 6(1). <https://sedl.org/change/issues/issues61.html>
- Hutchings, P. (1996). *Making teaching community property: A menu for peer collaboration and peer review*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003445852>
- Jenkins, E., D'Aoust, R., Elias, S., Han, H. R., Sharps, P., & Alvarez, C. (2021). Faculty peer review of teaching taskforce: A quantitative descriptive research study for the peer review process. *Nurse education today*, 106, 105055-105055. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2021.105055>

- Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (2005). Participatory action research: Communicative action and the public sphere. In Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research (3rd ed.)*.
- Kishchuk, N., Gauthier, B., Roy, S. N., & Borys, S. (2013). Learning Circles for Advanced Professional Development in Evaluation. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 28(1), 87-96. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjpe.028.005>
- Le Cornu, R. (2004, July 7–10). Learning Circles: Providing spaces for renewal of both teachers and teacher educators. In S. McLeod (Ed.), *Making spaces: Regenerating the profession: Proceedings of the 2004 Australian Teacher Education Association National Conference* (pp. 141–148). Charles Sturt University.
- Leo, T., & Cowan, D. (2000). *Launching professional learning communities: Beginning actions*. SEDL. <http://www.sedl.org/change/issues/issues81/issues-8.1.pdf>
- Lieberman, A. (2000). Networks as Learning Communities: Shaping the Future of Teacher Development. *Journal of teacher education*, 51(3), 221-227. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487100051003010>
- Lim, W., Son, J.-W., & Kang, S.-H. (2021). How Reducing Discomfort Impacts Peer Assessments of Preservice Teachers. *Sustainability*, 13(11), 6435. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13116435>
- Longtin, K., Hobson, T., Holley, M., Van Note Chism, N., Dankoski, M. E., & Palmer, M. M. (2024). A Faculty Growth Perspective on Peer Review of Teaching: An Institution-Wide, Customizable Approach to Peer Review. *Journal of clinical psychology in medical settings*, 31(4), 750-760. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10880-024-10043-3>
- Lovett, S., & Verstappen, P. (2004, 01/01). *Improving teachers' professional learning: The quality learning circle approach*.
- Macchione, J. E. (2014). *Searching out loud together: Reflections from a faculty learning circle* [ProQuest Dissertations & Theses].
- Macfarlane, A., Glynn, T., Cavanagh, T., & Bateman, S. (2008). Creating culturally-safe schools for Māori students. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 37(Supplement), 65–76.
- Mila-Schaaf, K., & Sampero, D. (2008). *A well written body*. WeMilallington, N.Z: Huia.

- Oppliger, K. M. P. H., Blair, S. M., Price, R. P. E., Nahanee, M. B. A. E., Nahanee, D. B. S. W. E., Duncan, R. T. R. B. K. K., Lamont, E., Beverly, A. A. A. E., Dawson, A. M. A. K. K., & Conklin, A. I. P. M. P. H. (2024). Promoting Sihánaŋ Sḱwálwen (Indigenous Women's Heart Health): Findings From Sharing Circles With Squamish Nation. *Journal of nutrition education and behavior*, 56(8), 509-520.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2024.04.003>
- Rogers, T., Wass, R., Timmermans, J., & Golding, C. (2019). *A framework for enhancing teaching culture and practice*. Ako Aotearoa. <https://ako.ac.nz/knowledge-centre/teaching-and-learning-circles-a-framework-for-enhancing-teaching-culture-and-practice>
- Schmoker, M. (2005). No turning back: The ironclad case for professional learning communities. In R. Eaker, R. DuFour, R. DuFour, R. Eaker, & R. DuFour (Eds.), *On common ground: The power of professional learning communities*. National Educational Service.
- Stone, R., & Cuper, P. H. (2006). *Best practices for teacher leadership: What award-winning teachers do for their professional learning communities* (1 ed.). Corwin Press. Pp 99-121.
- Sutherland, K., Elgort, I., & Tennent, E. (2020). *Teaching and learning circles: Developing reflective practice and enhancing teaching culture*. Ako Aotearoa. <https://ako.ac.nz/knowledge-centre/developing-teaching-and-learning-circles>
- Tachine, A. R., Bird, E. Y., & Cabrera, N. L. (2016). Sharing Circles: An Indigenous Methodological Approach for Researching with Groups of Indigenous Peoples. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 9(3), 277-295.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/irqr.2016.9.3.277>
- Vaiolati, T. M. (2016). Talanoa Research Methodology: A Developing Position on Pacific Research. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 12(1). doi:10.15663/wje.v12i1.296
- Wenger, E. (1999). *Communities of practice: learning, meaning, and identity* (First paperback edition. ed.). Cambridge University Press. Pp45-66.
- Whitney, D., & Trosten-Bloom, A. (2010). *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change* (2nd ed.). Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Fernwood Publishing.

Wright, S., & Hornblow, A. (2008). Emerging needs, evolving services: The health of Pacific peoples in New Zealand. *Kotuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online*, 3(1), 21–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1177083x.2008.9522430>