UNMASKING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION



ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVES

LATA RANA, PAULINE BISHOP,
GALINA STEBLETSOVA & RANGITUOHU NATHAN

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Editors:

LATA RANA, PAULINE BISHOP,
GALINA STEBLETSOVA & RANGITUOHU NATHAN

School of Community Studies, MIT and Unitec

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Edited by Lata Rana, Pauline Bishop, Galina Stebletsova and Rangituohu Nathan, School of Community Studies, MIT and Unitec.
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Tēnā koe, and thank you for taking the time to read our book.
Te Ara o Wairaka – it is celebrating us.

This publication acknowledges Te Ara o Wairaka, or the pathway of Wairaka, recognising the Ngāti Awa ancestress after whom Unitec – Te Whare Wānanga o Wairaka – is named.

This book has been the result of the lecturers, senior lecturers, researchers, kaiako, associate teachers and wise women of early childhood education (ECE) putting pen to paper to describe, examine and research issues of importance for ECE in Aotearoa and beyond.

We would like to thank Tūāpapa Rangahau, the research office here at MIT and Unitec, for their encouragement and editorial support. This book would not have happened without the foresight of Dr Lata Rana and Emeritus Professor Marcus Williams, and the teamwork between the editors, our Programme Monitor, Professor Sue Cherrington, and Gwynneth Porter and Marie Shannon of ePress.

We were inspired through discussions with our beloved colleague, the late great Dr Helen Wrightson, and by the research she carried out; by the many professional conversations held with partnership ECE centres; and with the amazing associate teachers who support our students.

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This book has been years in the making. Many of its chapters have come from an absence of local research and commentary on contemporary issues in ECE. We believe it will inform the ongoing conversations that are fundamental in the teaching of skilled and culturally aware early childhood teachers in Aotearoa.

— The editors

Foreword

He taonga te mokopuna, kia whāngaihia, kia tipu, kia rea.
Children are treasures to be nurtured, to grow and to flourish.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, early childhood education (ECE) is deeply rooted in this philosophical truth. Guided by the pioneering bicultural curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, our early learning settings are vibrant spaces where care and education weave together, empowering tamariki to become confident, capable learners, secure in their own identity and culture. Foremost are the guiding principles of our founding document, te Tiriti o Waitangi, encouraging us as ECE practitioners to ensure that partnership, participation and protection are embedded within our work as we care for our taonga – our tamariki mokopuna.

The unique approach to the care and wellbeing of our tamariki mokopuna in Aotearoa functions as a holistic, play-based journey that respects the holistic mana of the child. By championing Tiriti-based practice, child safety and wellbeing, reciprocal relationships, culturally responsive teaching and outdoor exploration, our ECE sector lays a crucial foundation.

Drawing on the passion, expertise and experience of current practitioners and leaders within the ECE sector in Aotearoa, this collation of thoughts, ideas and recommendations reveals why the authors have chosen to contribute to this book. Attention was given to how each of the chapters, by drawing on current research and practice, might support our woven curriculum document, *Te Whāriki*:

He whāriki hei whakamana i te mokopuna, hei kawe i ngā wawata.
A whāriki that empowers the child and carries our aspirations.

Readers are encouraged to consider how these chapters might be helpful to them as they engage in the important work of caring for and nurturing our tamariki mokopuna. As passionate practitioners and leaders in ECE in Aotearoa, the authors of each chapter in this book are committed to the present and future wellbeing of our tamariki mokopuna.

— Rangituohu Nathan

Editors' Introduction

Lata Rana, Pauline Bishop, Galina Stebletsova and Rangituohu Nathan,
School of Community Studies, MIT and Unitec

We live in a complex world, marked by rapid technological transformation that creates new opportunities, transforming societies and social structures, while also presenting a number of ethical, social and psychological challenges. From a tertiary teaching point of view in Aotearoa New Zealand, early childhood education (ECE) sits at the intersection of these global shifts. This volume seeks to reveal and critically examine several pressing issues currently unfolding within the ECE sector, foregrounding voices, perspectives and concerns central to our community of practice.

Conceived by ECE teaching staff at Unitec in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, prior to its amalgamation with MIT in 2026, this book was developed as a locally focused and conversational resource for practical ECE teaching and learning. It addresses a wide range of contemporary issues: advocacy for children's rights and the value of high-quality education in a world affected by war, pandemics, political upheaval and rapid technological growth. Chapters explore United Nations and governmental policy, the importance of play, Treaty-based principles, bicultural and multicultural curriculum development, professional learning, mentoring and leadership, and reflective practice in ECE.

Contemporary policy contexts are increasingly driven by accountability, standardisation and measurable outcomes. Such discourses often narrow educational priorities in ways that overlook relational, cultural and psychosocial dimensions of early learning. This volume offers a re-examination of what quality in ECE might mean, and advocates for educational approaches that extend beyond market-driven imperatives.

Each chapter includes a review of relevant theory and research, implications for practice and references to support further study. Researchers internationally have drawn attention to emerging concerns in ECE settings, including the quality of interactions between children, adults and fellow teachers. This volume contributes to that body of work by highlighting selected issues of particular relevance to Aotearoa while situating the research within global educational debates.

In **chapter 1**, "Signposts for Children's Wellbeing: Using the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to advocate for children's rights in the early years", Amanda D'Souza, Sarah Te One and Jacqui Southey examine how the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) treaty can guide policy development in ECE in Aotearoa.

The authors argue that, as a signatory to the UNCRC, the New Zealand Government has a responsibility to uphold, implement and report on children's rights. They frame this responsibility in light of the United Nations' call for urgent action on structural discrimination, child poverty and abuse, and support for disabled children, Indigenous communities and children affected by the justice system.

The chapter highlights how neoliberal, market-driven ideologies have reshaped ECE services, contributing to high costs, inconsistent quality and reduced attention to children's and families' rights. The authors advocate for policy processes that centre children's voices, prioritise their wellbeing, and actively involve families and communities. They emphasise the social significance of quality early-years learning in children's development.

Te Whāriki, Aotearoa's world-renowned early childhood curriculum – issued by the Ministry of Education in 1996 and revised in 2017 – recognises Māori (tangata whenua) and Pākehā perspectives together, reflecting the principles of te Tiriti o Waitangi. In **chapter 2**, "Comparison of the 1996 and 2017 Versions of *Te Whāriki*, the Tiriti-based Early Childhood Curriculum: Gains and losses", Chris Jenkin offers an examination of how the 2017 refresh of *Te Whāriki* reshaped the curriculum's Tiriti-based foundations.

Drawing on both scholarship and professional experience, the chapter highlights that while the refreshed curriculum includes valuable additions – such as stronger visual design, increased use of whakataukī (proverbs) and clearer bicultural elements in some of its structural Strands – these meaningful gains sit alongside considerable losses of value in terms of bringing te Tiriti principles into practice.

This chapter provides a clearly evidenced argument that while the refreshed *Te Whāriki* offers important advances, it also contains structural and conceptual shifts that may unintentionally weaken the presence of te Tiriti principles in ECE work. It makes a strong case for renewed commitment to bicultural integrity, leadership, teacher capability and the protection of Māori language, knowledge and spirituality within the ECE curriculum in Aotearoa.

The chapter suggests that there is a shift towards a more generic multi-ethnic orientation in curriculum delivery, in which Māori culture tends to be treated as one among many rather than Indigenous partner with constitutional status. The chapter's strength is its detailed comparative analysis of changes across the Principles and Strands in the curriculum document *Te Whāriki*, showing precisely where Māori concepts have been strengthened, weakened or removed.

A highlight of the chapter is the author's reflective narrative, which grounds the critique in decades of teaching, research and professional learning. This adds depth and authenticity to the concerns raised about practitioner capability, curriculum coherence and the future of Tiriti-based practice in ECE. She hopes that we will see tamariki (children) who have grown up in Māori-immersion education moving up the ranks of leadership to influence various spheres of mainstream education in the future.

In **chapter 3**, "Ko Ngā Kete Manaakitanga: He huarahi mā tātou, ā, he anga whakamua", Rangituohu Nathan and Siobhan Nathan explore the development, purpose and transformative impact of the Ngā Kete Manaakitanga courses in the Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood Education) programme at Unitec. Grounded in mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge), the three kete – Manaaki Tangata (year one), Manaaki Whenua (year two) and Manaaki Taonga (year three) – scaffold ākonga (students) into Tiriti-honouring practice through engagement with concepts such as manaakitanga (the process of showing respect), whanaungatanga (relationship), hauora (health and wellbeing), kaitiakitanga (guardianship) and tikanga (Māori ways of doing).

This chapter offers a rich and deeply grounded exploration of the conceptual, pedagogical and cultural foundations of Ngā Kete Manaakitanga within the Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood Education) programme. It weaves personal whakapapa (genealogy), professional practice and mātauranga Māori into a cohesive narrative that highlights the transformative potential of culturally grounded teacher education.

Each kete – Manaaki Tangata, Manaaki Whenua and Manaaki Taonga – is detailed with theoretical grounding, practical application, and reflective narratives that illustrate how ākonga (students) come to embody Tiriti-based practices. The authors draw effectively on key Māori

frameworks such as Te Whare Tapa Whā, Te Wheke and tikanga marae (processes that guide how things are done on the marae), demonstrating how these pou (pillars) nurture holistic learning for both ākonga and kaiako (teachers).

The chapter is further enriched by powerful anecdotal illustrations of identity discovery, intergenerational learning and the emotional depth of engaging with ngā taonga tuku iho (heritage). These narratives highlight the relational and affective dimensions of bicultural teacher education, accentuating the significance of whanaungatanga and culturally safe pedagogies.

This work contributes meaningfully to the discourse on Māori approaches to early childhood teacher education. It provides a compelling model for how institutions can embed mātauranga Māori authentically, honour te Tiriti o Waitangi, and cultivate culturally confident, reflective practitioners. The chapter stands as both a scholarly contribution and a heartfelt testament to the enduring value of kaupapa Māori (Māori methods) in shaping future early childhood kaiako.

In **chapter 4**, "The Many Faces of Play: Play after the war zone", Galina Stebletsova and Barbara Scanlan discuss the value of play in supporting children's recovery from trauma experienced while growing up in environments torn by war. They seek to generate knowledge about the type of play children might engage in after transitioning to the supposedly peaceful shores of Aotearoa. They also emphasise the importance of tamariki having a sense of belonging and cultural identity, and describe how kaiako can build children's resilience by creating an environment that allows exploration and healing through play.

The experience of hostilities, terrorism and violent attacks on communities can have serious consequences for children and families, including post-traumatic stress symptoms and increased anxiety and stress. The authors stress the need to adapt ECE teaching to this war-torn world and develop strategies to work with children and families who have experienced trauma, displacement and migration due to conflict and violence. They emphasise the value of play in helping children work through trauma, and believe children are wired to play from the moment they are born.

Through play, children share their ideas and communicate with others around them. Play helps children become calm and work through anxieties and nervousness when facing challenges and trauma. The focus of any intervention needs to be holistic and take into account the physical, mental and emotional safety of children – kaiako and support workers need to provide a sense of safety and predictability. These values are strongly supported by *He Māpuna te Tamaiti* (Ministry of Education, 2019), with its emphasis on whanaungatanga, manaakitanga and care for each other.

The authors reiterate the need for kaiako to support families and children to get expert support and resources. This would mean withholding judgement, providing opportunities for individual support, and acknowledging children's culture and identities. The chapter is a timely discourse about play as a transformative mechanism for the holistic wellbeing of children and families in today's troubled world.

In **chapter 5**, "A Conversation on Mentoring", Lee-Anne Turton, Katie Farrimond and Sue Emerson offer a thoughtfully constructed exploration of mentoring as a central dimension of leadership in ECE. Framed as a conversation interwoven with theory, Māori leadership

principles and the practical wisdom of an experienced mentor–leader, the chapter aligns conceptual understanding with lived professional practice.

A strength of the chapter is its grounding in socio-cultural perspectives, positioning mentoring as reciprocal, relational and context specific. Concepts such as ako, tuakana–teina (elder sibling–younger sibling, mentor–mentee) and whanaungatanga are integrated practically rather than symbolically, demonstrating a genuine commitment to culturally responsive pedagogy. This aligns well with the principles of *Te Whāriki* and the Education Council's Educational Leadership Capability Framework (2018), reinforcing the need for mentoring practices that honour relational ethics, collaboration and reflective dialogue.

The chapter's conversational structure is effective in bringing theoretical ideas to life. The mentor–leader's reflections illustrate the complexity of leadership work in ECE, and illuminate abstract principles through authentic examples. The emphasis on humility, emotional intelligence and active listening provides a nuanced understanding of the interpersonal dimensions of mentoring. The discussion of mentoring as both formal and informal practice is also valuable, recognising the distributed and fluid nature of leadership in ECE settings.

The chapter makes a valuable contribution to the discourse on mentoring in ECE, bridging theory and practice effectively, foregrounding cultural responsiveness, and offering actionable strategies grounded in relational pedagogy. Its emphasis on reciprocity and collective growth positions mentoring as not simply a professional requirement but a transformative, community-building practice central to high-quality early childhood education.

In **chapter 6**, "Navigating Teaching and Learning During Covid-19: Implications for future practice", Lata Rana, Yvonne Culbreath and Michelle Johnson provide a clear and reflective account of how the Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood Education) programme navigated the sudden shift to online learning during the Covid-19 lockdown. Drawing on lecturer and student experiences, the chapter highlights key challenges such as inequitable access to digital tools, the blurring of personal and professional boundaries, and the loss of in-person practicum opportunities. These issues are thoughtfully connected to international research, strengthening the chapter's academic grounding.

A notable strength of the chapter is its emphasis on relational practice and the pedagogy of care, showing how maintaining student wellbeing has become central to teaching practice. The chapter also demonstrates how educators adapted creatively – using digital tools, collaborative activities and flexible assessment approaches – to sustain learning under unprecedented conditions.

The discussion of disrupted tauira kaiako (student teacher) identity formation and reduced practicum opportunities provides an important critique, reinforcing the value of authentic, in-person early childhood experiences. The chapter offers a useful blend of personal narrative and scholarly insight, contributing meaningfully to wider conversations about educational resilience and future-focused pedagogy. The chapter serves not only as a historical record of the Covid-19 teaching experience, but also as a guide for educational resilience and transformation.

In **chapter 7**, "Voices of Reflection", Pauline Bishop and Tahera Afrin offer a thoughtful and contextually rich exploration of reflective practice in Aotearoa ECE. Professional Learning is one of the standards for teachers identified by the Teaching Council, and teachers have professional responsibilities to carry out reflective practice and inquire into their practice in an ongoing

way. The chapter successfully blends theoretical perspectives with authentic practitioner voices, illustrating how reflection is deeply personal, socio-emotional and culturally informed.

The use of real kaiako narratives adds depth and demonstrates the diverse ways reflection shapes identity, pedagogy and decision making. A strength of the chapter is its commitment to contextualised reflection, drawing on Māori concepts such as tau utuutu (reciprocal exchange), wairua (spirit) and the relational nature of place. This anchors reflection within our cultural ecology and highlights how culturally informed frameworks can enhance professional growth.

The chapter emphasises the importance of kaiako reflecting on how they respond to neurodiverse tamariki, and of building capability, pedagogy and praxis. The discussion of the Professional Growth Cycle also usefully contextualises the value of reflection. The chapter is engaging, reflective and well grounded in both practice and scholarship. It makes a valuable contribution by foregrounding kaiako voices and advocating for reflective models that honour cultural, emotional and relational dimensions of early childhood teaching in Aotearoa.

As a result of globalisation and migration of people from different parts of the world, the ethnic composition of early childhood centres in Aotearoa has changed tremendously. The teachers, children and families that engage in ECE come from different cultures, languages, identities and socio-economic backgrounds. In light of this, in **chapter 8**, "Working Effectively in Teaching Teams in Early Childhood Education", Veronica Griffiths, Erin Hall, Fleur Hohaia-Rollinson, Jenny Malcolm, Kerry Purdue, Jackie Solomon and Donna Williamson-Garner focus on diversity and inclusion in ECE centres.

Concerned with promoting a sense of belonging and wellbeing among the kaiako in ECE teams, the chapter highlights the significance of diversity awareness in creating an inclusive team culture. The authors argue for strong, culturally responsive leadership that supports collegiality and values the diverse perspectives of kaiako. They explore strategies to maintain successful diverse teams, including whanaungatanga, trust building, regular communication and access to professional learning.

The authors highlight the need to build trust and appreciation of the qualities and skills team members bring with them. The authors suggest it is important for leaders to observe how people in teams interact with each other, and the importance of having regular catch-ups individually and in a team. The team also needs to be aware of policies that guide their profession and programme, and of teachers' rights. Creating a positive work environment requires hearing all the voices in the team and giving the opportunity for all to share their different perspectives and cultures.

The importance of diversity training is also highlighted, to make sure kaiako have access to information, literature and resources to develop their cultural competency and knowledge of diverse perspectives. The authors also emphasise the need for ECE centres and teachers to uphold Treaty principles, and value and respect kaupapa and mātauranga Māori in Aotearoa as a bicultural nation. When a diverse range of perspectives is valued and discriminatory attitudes challenged, centres can build inclusive teams and safer work environments where all thrive and grow together.

The aspirations of Pacific families are for their children to succeed in education. It is well known that children's first experiences at school can have a lasting impact on their learning. Key to educational success for Pacific children is recognising that effective education is

culturally located. In **chapter 9**, "Soso'o le Fau ma le Fau / Connect the Fibre with Another Fibre: Supporting transitions to school for Pacific children", Ruta McKenzie, Glenda Albon and Sarah Te One share their research using the stories of Pacific āiga (families) and their tamaiti (children) as they navigated changes moving from one learning environment to another.

This chapter presents findings from a two-year, community-led action research project exploring how Pacific children and their āiga experience the transition from Pacific-immersion early learning services to mainstream primary schools. The research was influenced by Pacific methodologies such as talanoa (shared stories), teu le vā (caring for the sacred relational space) and the kakala (Tongan necklace) model. Guided by the metaphor 'soso'o le fau ma le fau' (connect the fibre with another fibre), the study focuses on relational, cultural and spiritual dimensions of learning.

The authors highlight persistent systemic inequities that undermine Pacific children's identities, languages and cultures during the transition to school. Through storytelling and partnership with schools and āiga, the project demonstrates how Pacific-informed pedagogies strengthen belonging, improve teacher practice and empower families. Key themes reveal the importance of love-based pedagogies, listening to often-silenced Pacific voices, collaborative relationships and culturally grounded teaching approaches.

The chapter argues that sustainable, transformative change requires deep community involvement, recognition of Pacific values and a system-wide commitment to culturally responsive education. This research highlights Pacific approaches in which respectful, reciprocal relationships are crucial for learning and engagement. Significantly, it opens the door for non-Pacific kaiako to begin to develop culturally responsive teaching practices.

The book addresses various aspects of ECE in Aotearoa, bringing a critical lens to different issues related to teaching and learning in early childhood. It has a specific focus on children's rights; play and professional teaching practice; teaching and learning during a pandemic; mentorship and leadership; reflective practice; and inclusive pedagogy in ECE. It captures the voices of practitioners and academics working with student teachers, and provides a range of perspectives from across the ECE sector.

ECE in Aotearoa is unique in being guided by the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi and *Te Whāriki*, the Aotearoa early childhood curriculum. This book recognises the values and principles of this Treaty-informed curriculum document to support tauira kaiako, kaiako and ECE educators. Two themes that emerge from the chapters collectively are the socio-cultural context of ECE in Aotearoa, and professional knowledge building.

In response to these foundational documents, the ECE sector is mandated to develop practice that is innovative and reflects kaupapa Māori, Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and promotes cultural safety. The issues explored in this volume highlight the dynamic and challenging landscape of ECE. Future research could productively investigate STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and the arts in ECE, responses to neurodiversity, sustainability, domestic violence, child poverty, and ongoing threats to te Tiriti o Waitangi – all of which have significant implications for the wellbeing and learning experiences of young children in Aotearoa.

Signposts for Children's Wellbeing: Using the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to advocate for children's rights in the early years

Amanda D'Souza, Sarah Te One and Jacqui Southey

Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations Office of the Human Rights Commissioner [UNOHRC], 1989) is a human rights instrument that can guide Aotearoa New Zealand towards its aspiration for all children to thrive, recognising that they contribute to society from birth. This book's title, *Unmasking Early Childhood Education*, is particularly apt: we have long argued that the potential of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is unrealised because it is not visible enough in policy and service development, resource allocation decisions, and in wider society (Children's Rights Alliance Aotearoa New Zealand [CRAANZ], 2022; Collins, 2019; D'Souza et al., 2017; D'Souza, 2023; Maurás, 2011).

Early childhood is a challenging stage for tamariki in twenty-first century Aotearoa, and here we apply a children's rights lens to 'unmask' some key current issues. The architecture of the Convention provides a framework for engaging with children and their whānau in all aspects of their lives. If 'unmasked', the principles and articles of the Convention, alongside te Tiriti o Waitangi and *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), provide tangible signposts for future policy direction that prioritises children and equity in childhood.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child

> The Children's Rights Convention's holistic, unifying vision of children's rights provides child advocates, professionals working with children, and policy makers, with a direction and moral imperative for improving policies and practices for children. (Smith, 2016, p. 155)

Since the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted in 1989, it has had a pervasive influence on the way we think about children and childhood in relation to legislation, policy and practices (Breen, 2006; Doek, 2014; Sandin, 2014). The Convention is based on a view of the child as actively engaged in the world, with a claim to individual and collective human rights. Children are recognised as citizens in their own right, and they contribute to societal wellbeing, which builds social cohesion (Sandin, 2014; Taylor & Smith, 2009; Smith, 2016).

The Convention sets out the rights of all children under the age of 18 years. Alongside these rights are the responsibilities of States parties (governments). The New Zealand Government ratified this Convention in 1993 and recommitted to it in 2019. This means that past and present governments have a binding international obligation to promote, respect and fulfil the rights of all children.

As well as the Convention, our government has signed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA], 2007). This human rights treaty recognises the unique status of Indigenous peoples and, while not legally binding in the same way as the Convention, it establishes a moral responsibility. The UNDRIP refers to the rights of Indigenous children, and in the case of Aotearoa, this set of rights is bolstered by the Crown's obligations to honour the articles and principles enshrined in te Tiriti o Waitangi. From a Māori worldview, a child is

taonga (Rameka, 2016, cited in Te Puna Rangahau o te Wai Ariki Aotearoa New Zealand Centre for Indigenous Peoples and the Law, 2022, p. 5). All policy development and implementation about children should recognise the significance of te ao Māori:

> Connections to past, present and future are integral to relationships for Māori. This includes relationships to tīpuna who have passed on and connections through whakapapa to, for example, maunga, awa, moana, whenua, and marae. (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 21)

There is another human rights instrument to add to this suite: the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNDESA, 2006). This, too, includes children and their rights to reasonable accommodation to ensure the full and equal enjoyment of their rights, which will enable them to participate fully in society.

The architecture of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is a holistic framework consisting of 54 articles that apply to all children under 18, at all times (Hodgkin & Newell, 2007). These articles are grouped into nine different categories covering all aspects of children's lives; for example, there are rights specifically about education, justice, cultural identity and health, to name a few. Four articles represent the underpinning general principles of the Convention, and they apply across all the other articles:

- Non-discrimination – the right to be protected from all forms of discrimination, regardless of their parents' or guardians' ethnicity, colour or social origin (Article 2).
- Best interests – the right to have their best interests as a primary consideration in all actions (administrative and legislative) that affect them (Article 3).
- The right to life, survival and development to reach their full potential (Article 6).
- Children's views – the right to express their views in all matters that affect them, including in judicial and administrative proceedings (Article 12).

The final section contains a suite of articles about how to implement the Convention "to the maximum extent of available resources" (Article 4). Referred to as the "general measures of implementation", these articles and the General Comments (UNOHRC, 2003) provide guidelines for governments to ensure compliance with the Convention in an ongoing, progressive manner. Article 4 requires States parties to take "all appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures" for implementation of the rights contained therein to ensure the realisation of all rights for all children within a government's jurisdiction. Additionally, governments are required to make the Convention widely known to children and adults (Article 42). Therefore, as signatories to the Convention, governments are obligated to:

- Implement rights for all children.
- Make children's rights widely known.
- Regularly report on progress of implementation.

These obligations require our government to report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on the state of children's rights in Aotearoa every five years, although this is expected to change to an eight-year cycle (Hodgkin & Newell, 2007). These reports are considered alongside civil society reports, and once the CRC has considered all the evidence, it publishes its *Concluding Observations*. The *Concluding Observations* summarise the key issues and the expectations of the CRC in terms of ongoing, progressive realisation of children's rights in Aotearoa. We will now examine the recommendations in the most recent *Concluding Observations* for Aotearoa, published in 2023 (Committee on the Rights of the Child [CRC], 2023).

Recent Concluding Observations on implementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Aotearoa New Zealand

Despite some progress under previous governments, in 2023 the CRC identified many recommendations for action and emphasised seven interrelated issues of deep concern that require urgent action (CRC, 2023, pp. 1–2). These seven issues reflect long-standing childhood inequities and systemic shortcomings that detract from our nation's aspirations for all children to thrive:

- "Structural discrimination against children", specifically addressing racism and discrimination against Māori and Pacific children, children with disabilities and those in out-of-family care (para. 16).
- High rates of abuse, neglect and violence experienced by children (para. 24).
- The rights of children in out-of-home care, including the policies and procedures related to removing children from their family (para. 28).
- The rights and needs of children with disabilities (para. 31).
- Inadequate living standards, especially the high rates of childhood poverty, food insecurity and severe housing deprivation (para. 35).
- Upholding the right to identity for Māori children, implementing a national action plan against racism and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, and addressing "the root causes" of inequities (para. 40).
- Bringing the child justice system in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (para. 43).

All seven urgent recommendations are especially relevant for early childhood. The issues either directly impact on young children during a vulnerable period in the life course or, in the case of child justice, may impact on vulnerable teen parents. The *Concluding Observations* also include a specific section on education, which contains five recommendations. While only one recommendation specifically addresses early childhood, all aspects of the Convention are interrelated; hence there is relevance to early-years settings. Briefly, the education recommendations cover:

(a) Increasing children's input into decisions that affect them at school, including regarding curriculum updates and governance structures, and strengthening independent dispute resolution mechanisms.

(b) Strengthening the right to inclusive education in law and policy, and adequately resourcing the national learning support network plan 2030.

(c) Addressing "racism, discrimination, stigma and bias experienced by Māori and Pasifika children in school, including by strengthening efforts to promote and foster the Māori language, cultural identity and history in education" (CRC, 2023, p. 12).

(d) Reducing bullying of students, especially for students with disabilities and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex students.

(e) Raising "awareness of the government subsidies available for childhood care and education for children from 0–5 years old, targeting families from lower socio-economic backgrounds" (CRC, 2023, p. 12).

As we have illustrated, the *Concluding Observations* help to unmask the issues confronting children at present, the interconnectedness of these issues and their relevance to early childhood. Further, the recommendations identify actions that could make a difference to children's lives and, crucially, they set out the duty of our government, and agents of the Crown, to do their best for children to the maximum extent possible.

Children's rights in the early years

It is beyond dispute that the early years are significant (Bakken et al., 2017; Shonkoff et al., 2021). The benefits of early childhood education (ECE) are well known and, if services are of good quality, the evidence shows that long-term wellbeing outcomes are particularly enhanced for children from low socio-economic backgrounds (Heckman et al., 2010; Wylie & Thompson, 2003). There is a wealth of research confirming the foundational importance of the early years for learning and development (Bakken et al., 2017; Garcia et al., 2021; Phillips & Lowenstein, 2011; Wylie & Thompson, 2003). How children learn, and how to teach children, remain central topics of interest that attract attention from a wide range of disciplines, not just in education but also in public health, social sciences, economics and justice.

In the early learning sector in Aotearoa, we have a long, rich tradition of ECE (May, 2007; Ritchie, 2018). Historically, we were early adopters of the learning through play movement and were among the first in the world to produce a curriculum policy document, *Te Whāriki* (Lee et al., 2013; Ministry of Education, 2017; Ritchie, 2018). Socio-cultural theories, intertwined with Indigenous aspirations, are clearly articulated in the principles, strands and learning outcomes. In 2017 a refresh of the curriculum confirmed the sector's commitment to a bicultural paradigm and for the rights of *all* children to equitable learning opportunities (Ritchie, 2018). In the refreshed version, te Tiriti o Waitangi is foregrounded, and the document is now enriched with whakataukī alongside explanations of te ao Māori views of children.

Further, threaded throughout the refreshed *Te Whāriki* curriculum in 2017 are references to children's rights, including, for example, the rights of infants: "Recognising their rights as children, kaiako are respectful of infants and, where appropriate, enable their agency" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 13). This renewed curriculum goes further than the original document in that it positions children as rights holders, and explicitly states the roles and responsibilities of kaiako and services to implement the curriculum in day-to-day practice (Ministry of Education, 2017). Setting out the responsibilities of adults to ensure that children's rights are enacted

in ECE in this way is consistent with a children's rights approach and recognises the human rights concepts of rights holders and duty bearers (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Unmasking the current issues

There are several issues that interrupt the aspiration for all children to realise their rights and to participate equitably in our society. We recognise that ECE of good quality has long-term benefits, not just for the individual, but also for society. In this section, we identify some of the circumstances impacting the early childhood sector, including the wider policy context. The rapidity and scale of recent changes to the public sector is unsettling. For example, the impact of some initiatives, such as the Treaty Principles Bill 2024 (TPB) and Regulatory Standards Bill 2025 (RSB), has the potential to threaten social cohesion, Indigenous rights and the wider public interest (Jones et al., 2024; Boston et al., 2025). Both these bills were part of the ACT Party coalition agreement with the National Party. Together with the New Zealand First Party, these political parties formed a coalition government in November 2023. National and New Zealand First had publicly declared they would not support the TPB past its first reading. In contrast, in the coalition agreement, National has committed to enacting the RSB in early 2026. These bills have generated widespread concern for iwi Māori and Pākehā allies and esteemed bodies such as the Waitangi Tribunal, alliances of faith-based leaders and the Kiingitanga. At the time of writing, after public consultation, the TPB was rejected at the second reading and select committee hearings were underway for the RSB.

It is important to consider how the current political climate and the raft of changes to social policy impact children, families and communities. Key examples directly impacting young children include the recent major changes to Oranga Tamariki, Whānau Ora and disability support-service contracts. The Office of the Auditor General's (2025) inquiry into Oranga Tamariki contracting especially highlights serious concerns about the poor processes involved and the lack of consideration of the impacts on vulnerable children and whānau. While some initiatives may not directly target early childhood, such as the previous examples of the TPB and RSB, the indirect impacts may profoundly affect young children. There are some key questions to be unmasked: Is raising children a private concern? To what extent is children's wellbeing a collective responsibility? Is ECE a public good? And, finally, do existing regulations protect or hinder ECE provision and the realisation of young children's rights?

Raising children: A private concern or a public good?

Neoliberal perspectives emphasise that the choice to have children is a private matter and that responsibility for raising children should rest with parents rather than the state. This argument positions children as a cost, and that cost should be borne, predominantly, by parents; the incurred costs include ECE (Bourne & Shackleton, 2017). It is evident that fees in Aotearoa are among the highest in the OECD (OECD, 2022). For example, a working couple with two children spends 33% of their income on ECE, whereas the average for OECD countries is 10%; the cost for families in Aotearoa is 23% higher than the OECD average (OECD, 2022).

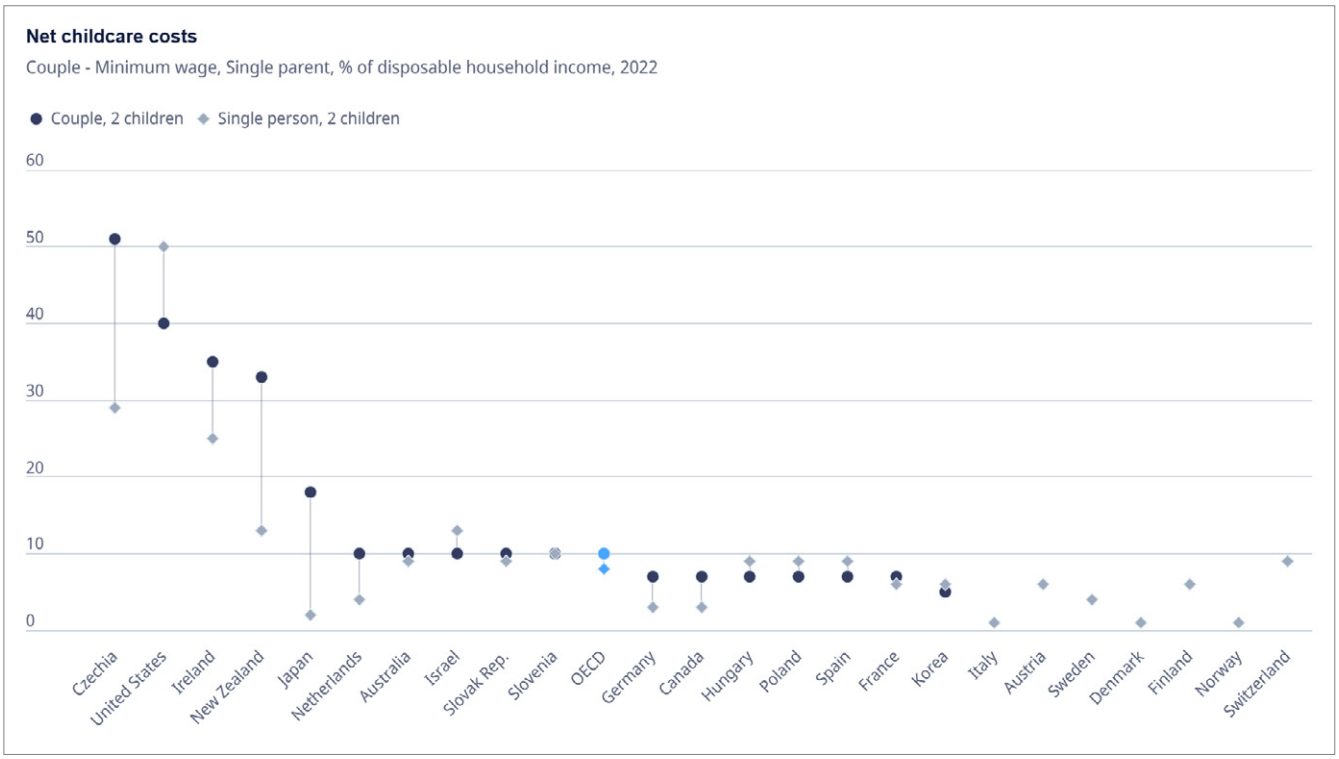


Figure 1: Net childcare costs in OECD nations in 2022 (source: OECD, 2022). Use of OECD data is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution BY 4.0 licence (see https://www.oecd.org/en/about/terms-conditions.html).

There are layers to the issue of expensive ECE, not the least of which concerns choices about raising children in the current economic climate, which necessitates participation in the labour market. The affordability of ECE is an issue, as is the availability of ECE services, not to mention the quality and suitability of these services.

Shared care – in whose best interests?

The modern reality for many families in Aotearoa is that both parents will need to work while their children are very young. Because most families use some form of ECE, the responsibility for raising children is arguably shared between the service and the family. Shared care is not a new concept in ECE, but over time, as the choice for parents – usually mothers – to return to work or not is less viable, the roles and responsibilities of partners in the care of children assume greater importance. Whether it be informal arrangements with grandparents or other family members, friends and neighbours, or formal contracts between families and service providers, the fact remains that many children are cared for in a tapestry of arrangements while their parents work.

In formal ECE, the notion of shared responsibility is confined to the relationships between users (parents and whānau) and the ECE kaiako and management. Relationships between kaiako and whānau are critically important, especially when pēpi under two are involved. Regular communication about their wellbeing is shared as both parties aspire to a common purpose – to nurture the child's wellbeing and to support their learning and development.

For the most part, when parents work, the onus is entirely on them to find suitable ECE. Why is that the case? One answer could be to give parents the choices they want. However, a key explanation is that children and their care are largely regarded as a private concern during the early years and before enrolment in the school system (D'Souza, 2023, p. 184; Mitchell, 2019b). It is important to recognise that the early years are foundational to children's learning and development. Even though employers do not, for the most part, actively involve themselves in arrangements for childcare, they claim a stake in educational outcomes later on when it comes to seeking skilled workers. If the importance of early learning were accorded greater policy priority, equitable access to high-quality ECE could be improved and the imbalance between the needs of children and families and the demands of the labour market could be more effectively redressed.

We have established that costs of ECE, even when subsidised, are eye-wateringly high. The *Concluding Observations* (2023) highlight the need to raise awareness of the available subsidies for ECE in Aotearoa, designed to support low-socio-economic families. In 2024, the Coalition Government introduced the FamilyBoost childcare rebate policy to help with the cost of living for families earning under $180,000 per annum. Acknowledging the scheme has failed to deliver as promised and is administratively complex, especially for parents, the Government has recently proposed changes to the eligibility thresholds, abatement rate, and the amount that can be claimed (Inland Revenue Department, 2025; Moir, 2025; Palmer, 2025a, 2025b).

A market-driven approach to ECE policy and service development quickly comes into conflict with the Government's duties under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, during an especially critical period for children's learning and development. We agree with other scholars, and reject the assumption that the market can adequately provide for the holistic early learning needs of children (Gallagher, 2020; Neuwelt-Kearns & Ritchie, 2020). In a market-driven model, the key determining factor is profit; unless appropriately regulated to do so, the market will have little interest in the public good or the wider benefits of socialised care and education.

One key issue is that the market does not provide equitably to all locations, especially for children in disadvantaged areas for whom quality ECE is particularly important (Duff, 2023; Gallagher, 2020; Mitchell, 2019a, 2019b; Neuwelt-Kearns & Ritchie, 2020). If a purely market approach is prioritised, the assumption is that the market will determine that cost and, more than that, the market will determine where ECE services are located. Further, a marketised ECE sector, where services are regarded as for-profit business ventures, has resulted in prioritising participation rates and privileging teacher-led service at the expense of nurturing the diversity offered by community-led services such as Kōhanga Reo and Playcentre (Fleet, 2020). In some instances, ECE centres in low-socio-economic areas are unaffordable for most of the people in the communities where they are built. This issue will likely worsen now that Aotearoa is seeing a concerning increase in child poverty rates (Stats NZ, 2025).

A related issue is that ECE services in Aotearoa are increasingly viewed as an investment opportunity and a real estate venture (Gallagher, 2020). Absentee owners can buy and sell their shares on the stock market. Sometimes the services do not last, and it is not unheard of for ECE services to close at very short notice, placing children and families under great pressure.

We have highlighted some limitations and consequences of a market-based ECE model, and the low and inequitable uptake of subsidies designed to mitigate the problems of this model. In such a model, crucial ECE policy and service-planning decisions sideline the best interests and rights of young children, families and communities. We argue that properly resourced not-for-profit community-based ECE is more consistent with a children's rights approach.

Do early childhood regulations protect or hinder education provision?

It is of great concern to read that a market-based approach to service provision is a desired outcome of the Coalition Government's ECE regulatory review (Ministry of Education, 2024). Mixed private–public early childhood education provision is more vulnerable than any other sector to the exigencies of the free market (Gallagher, 2020; May, 2014; Mitchell, 2019b; Neuwelt-Kearns & Ritchie, 2020). Far from being a leveller, the free-market approach has resulted in uneven provision of available services of mixed quality (Duff, 2023; Gallagher, 2020; Neuwelt-Kearns & Ritchie, 2020). There have been instances where services have closed almost overnight as a result of overseas investors withdrawing their funds. The impact of profit-driven decisions undermines the public benefits of community-based ECE services and is a reminder that public policy for children should not be centred on commercial interests.

At the heart of this debate is a view of children as a cost to the public purse, rather than being considered a public good. Neoliberal arguments position children and families as firmly in the private domain, therefore the cost incurred for childcare and education should be personal. Social investment in ECE is downplayed, even though there are numerous, long-term benefits that manifest at all levels of society. The argument that having children is purely a personal decision is short-sighted and does not account for their contributions to a socially just society, now and into the future (Ritchie, 2025).

Research reveals that an overpowering neoliberal, economic imperative has influenced policy development for children in Aotearoa:

> It's driving ideology through policy … We tend to value things like economic performance and productivity and economic growth more than we value the wellbeing of children … and that would be both sides of the House (Participant 9, public servant). (D'Souza, 2023, p. 264)

Further overshadowing policy development for children are the ongoing impacts of colonisation and racism (D'Souza, 2023; King et al., 2018). From a children's rights perspective, implementing the rights of tamariki Māori requires the best-interests principle to be conceived of collectively, taking whakapapa into consideration. Maintaining the best interests of the child and the integrity of Indigenous families and communities should be primary considerations in policy development, social services, and health and education programmes affecting Indigenous children (Te Puna Rangahau o te Wai Ariki Aotearoa New Zealand Centre for Indigenous Peoples and the Law, 2022).

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is designed to support governments to address the wider social, economic and policy contexts that impact learning and equity in the early years (Bakken et al., 2017). In the ECE sector, there is an obligation that policy responses to issues such as poverty be informed by our understanding of the Convention and the *Concluding Observations* (CRC, 2023). For example, are adequate learning environments provided for children who experience poverty? Are kaiako supported to understand both learning and developmental concerns associated with child poverty, and to view these as relevant to children's rights to survival, development and to their identity? The concept of ako is relevant here; observing the child's interest determines the kaiako response, taking into account whānau and community, and mana whenua aspirations of local iwi and hapū (Ministry of Education, 2017).

The notion of ako has synergies with the socio-cultural theories promoted in *Te Whāriki*. These theories are based on learning with and alongside others, in a community of learning (Ministry of Education, 2017). If some children are excluded or unable to participate (Education

Review Office, 2022), this may constitute a breach of their rights to participate, and to develop to their full potential.

The early years sector is part of a bigger social-service system. When considered together, the issues we have identified risk shifting from child-focused, play-based, interest-led education to a more authoritarian, adult-led model where content is highly prescribed and narrow. In the latter model, teaching and assessment methods are more likely to be determined externally with little or no engagement with or consideration of context. In the current context, those most impacted will likely be excluded groups, and especially tamariki and whānau Māori, whose place 'at the table' is under threat by ongoing legislative and policy changes that have undermined te Tiriti o Waitangi (Waitangi Tribunal, 2024a; 2024b).

Signposts to the future

Unmasking the issues outlined above offers some insights into the current circumstances, which in turn could lead to ways forward. If children are placed at the centre of policy development, different priorities will emerge.

Make children a policy priority

The relationship between research, policy and practice is well established. Fragmented, disjointed policy development detracts from effective and efficient delivery of outcomes and, as we have experienced in Aotearoa, dramatic changes to social-service policy can have negative impacts on child and family wellbeing. D'Souza's case-study research reveals the challenges for the public service, as this interviewee explains:

> The public service can get battered around by political whims and commentaries. It's really important that the public service holds on to its stewardship role and not get sent down one direction when maybe that's not in the long-term interests of the people we're trying to serve (Participant 5b, public servant, Aotearoa New Zealand; D'Souza, 2023, p. 292).

Case-study research (D'Souza, 2023, pp. 351–362) reveals an alternative to our current policy-development processes. In Sweden, for example, a century of advocacy has influenced policy and public attitudes towards children, resulting in broad societal consensus about their importance. Children's rights have been progressively institutionalised, and government processes protect child policies from political whim and dramatic changes that can result when governments change. The Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights instruments, combined with sustained community action and advocacy, and political and organisational leadership, embed the status of children as important in society and, therefore, in public policy:

> Children are valued very [highly], and that's independent of political mind or conflicts (Participant 40, Social Democratic political advisor, Sweden). (D'Souza, 2023, p. 117)
>
> Children are prioritised in the debate when we make decisions in Sweden (Participant 44, centre right politician, Sweden). (D'Souza, 2023, p. 103)

The Swedish example shows that prioritising children's rights is possible in Aotearoa. In our context, this will require a high-level consensus that the best interests of children should be the primary driver in early childhood policy and decision making, that childhood equity is foundational, and that the dignity and agency of children, whānau, communities and mana whenua are respected.

Enhance awareness and understanding of children's rights

In general, because of a lack of systematic children's rights training and support, both in communities and in the policy-making world, awareness of and understanding about these rights and what they mean in practice remain low. There is now a great deal of literature about children's rights, mostly focused on agency and on their rights to a voice. But, as we have described, the Convention on the Rights of the Child has much more to offer, and extensive guidance is available to support policy and practice (Collins, 2019; Hodgkin & Newell, 2007). The ECE sector is familiar with the metaphor of a whāriki, so the architecture of the Convention on the Rights of the Child as a set of interrelated, interwoven constructs can easily be applied.

The Convention, te Tiriti o Waitangi and *Te Whāriki* share principles and intentions (Ministry of Education, 2017). Combined, they present a formidable framework to guide high-quality ECE, especially for underserved groups (see Table 1). Applying the strengths-based values in all three documents elevates an image of every child as having agency and being connected to family, to people, to places and across time (UNICEF, 2023). This is especially true in te ao Māori, where whakapapa embeds the child as a taonga tuku iho – a gift.

At every level, there are opportunities in the day-to-day lives of children in ECE services to enact the principles set out in all three documents.

Table 1. Common principles supporting children's rights.

Children's rights	Te Tiriti o Waitangi	Te Whāriki
Protection rights	Tino rangatiratanga	Family and community
Provision rights	Partnership	Holistic development
Participation rights	Protection	Empowerment
	Participation	Relationships
	Equity	

Applying the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's *Concluding Observations* to early childhood education

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's *Concluding Observations* apply to governments, the public sector, businesses and to civil society (CRC, 2023; UNOHRC, 2013). They are signposts for day-to-day operations, ongoing policy and service development, and wider advocacy. There is an opportunity now to consider how they can apply in ECE services.

If, as part of our everyday practices, we think about children's rights issues and the recommendations for Aotearoa, we can plan how to take action. The table below sets out the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child alongside the Mana Mokopuna Children's Commissioner's summary (2024a) of the recommendations for urgent action from the 2023 *Concluding Observations* (CRC, 2023). The third column summarises the key actions specific to the ECE sector from these guiding children's rights documents.

The signposts are very clear and grounded in a rich evidence base. They lift our gaze from the immediacy of working with and alongside children in ECE to taking into consideration some of the big-picture challenges children and their whānau face in their daily lives, including poverty, racism, violence and social exclusion. Our children's rights signposts clearly direct attention to achieving equity in ECE and addressing systemic barriers. Following these signposts may be challenging in an increasingly market-driven sector for which there are multiple roadblocks to realising these goals. For example, in a market model there is less focus on supporting families experiencing disadvantage; places for mokopuna whaikaha are especially vulnerable. A recent Education Review Office report (2022) found that 26% of higher-needs children had experienced exclusion or been actively discouraged from attending ECE.

However, addressing these issues is critical for ECE. The Convention on the Rights of the Child provides a practical, holistic and collaborative framework for action. The challenge is to foreground these issues and establish their relevance to the profession, which will require courage in a political climate where the fundamental values underpinning our society are being critiqued in unprecedented ways.

Table 2. Applying children's rights signposts in early childhood education.

Follow the signposts		
Understand the Convention on the Rights of the Child All mokopuna* have all rights all the time. Protect all mokopuna from discrimination. Act in the best interests of mokopuna. Empower all mokopuna to have a voice. Advocate for all mokopuna to have a good life. Commit to continuous improvement for children's rights.	**Do better for:** Mokopuna Māori and Pacific children. Mokopuna who face discrimination. Mokopuna who experience violence. Mokopuna living away from their whānau. Mokopuna whaikaha (children with disabilities). Mokopuna living in poverty. Mokopuna in youth justice (including the rights of children of parents in youth justice contexts).	**Understand how to:** Strengthen the rights of mokopuna to have their views heard and acted on. Ensure the rights of mokopuna whaikaha (children with disabilities) to experience all learning opportunities in ECE. Address racism, discrimination, stigma and bias experienced by Māori and Pasifika and others. Strengthen efforts to promote and foster te reo Māori, cultural identity and history in education. Take targeted measures to reduce bullying, starting in ECE by building inclusive discrimination-free learning environments. Raise awareness of the government subsidies available in ECE. Find out more about the Convention on the Rights of the Child; request training and support sessions. Network with others to highlight systemic child rights issues; plan together to address these.

* For these signposts we use the term 'mokopuna' to refer to all children in Aotearoa, to acknowledge their whānau context and intergenerational connections; this term is used by the Mana Mokopuna Children's Commissioner (2024b).

Summing up

The title of this book, *Unmasking Early Childhood Education*, has provided a platform to identify some of the issues currently unfolding in the early childhood sector. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is presented as a signpost through the upheaval of rapid changes to education policy. The issues facing children reveal significant challenges. The high personal and whānau costs of ECE and a market-driven approach to its provision have exacerbated disparities and revealed inequitable access to services. Additionally, the current focus on achievement in the education sector leans heavily towards standardised testing and may pose a threat to the early childhood sector's long-standing commitment to learning through play.

Neoliberal policies and ongoing impacts of colonisation and racism are influencing these shifts, posing a threat to culturally responsive, community-focused education, particularly for Māori children and whānau, children with disabilities and those in marginalised groups. Addressing these issues requires a shift towards viewing ECE primarily as a public good and investing in equitable, high-quality education for all children and for wider society (Ritchie, 2025).

To effectively address current issues in ECE, it is crucial to centre policy development around children's rights. Integrating the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, te Tiriti o Waitangi and *Te Whāriki* can create a cohesive framework that advocates for high-quality ECE, particularly for underserved groups. These commitments and documents collectively emphasise the rights of children to connect to family, community and heritage, recognising their inherent value and the importance of equitable, culturally responsive education.

Enhancing awareness of children's rights by referring to the recommendations in the *Concluding Observations* from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2023) can influence policy decisions to ensure that ECE services are sufficiently resourced, accessible to all, adaptable to diverse needs and of high quality.

To avoid the negative impacts of fragmented policy changes, a long-term, consistent approach, as seen in the Swedish example, prioritises children's rights and shields them from the extremes of political shifts. Achieving this requires broad societal consensus and active involvement of children, their families and communities in policy-making processes.

Afterword

Since we first wrote this chapter, the political climate has continued to change rapidly. Even though the Treaty Principles Bill did not pass its second reading, the Regulatory Standards Bill is now law. Already, the ECE sector has been the subject of regulatory reform. In November 2025, the Education and Training (Early Childhood Education Reform) Amendment Act came into force. An outcome of that Act was to establish a Director of Regulation (Early Childhood Education) who sits within the Ministry of Education. The Regulatory Review of Early Childhood Education in 2024 did not recommend the establishment of a Director of Regulation. With the ink barely dry on that Act, on 15 December 2025 an amendment proposed that regulatory functions for ECE shift from the MoE to the ERO. This, too, was vociferously opposed by the sector. In addition, the latest child poverty data from Stats NZ (2026) reveals that 169,000 children live in material hardship: 14.3% of all children. Alarmingly, these rates are much higher for tamariki Māori, Pacific children, and children with a disability or who live with a disabled family member. The high rates of children living in material hardship have not improved over

the last ten years and have worsened since 2022. The UN *Concluding Observations* highlight child poverty and childhood inequities as urgent issues to prioritise. Without a doubt, children attending our early childhood education services will be impacted by the high cost of living experienced by so many families.

This situation demands urgent action and political accountability for ensuring that all children live in conditions in which they can thrive. There is much work to do. In our considered view, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child together with the UN *Concluding Observations* provide a framework and scaffolding for action for politicians, policy makers, practitioners, advocates and all those wishing to do better for children.

Glossary

ako	learning and teaching
awa	river
hapū	subtribe
iwi	tribe
kaiako	teacher
mana whenua	power associated with possession and occupation of tribal lands
marae	the open area in front of the wharenui, where formal greetings and discussions take place; often also used to include the complex of buildings around the marae
maunga	mountain
moana	sea
mokopuna whaikaha	child/children with disabilities
pēpi	infant
tamariki	children
taonga	a prized treasure
taonga tuku iho	heirloom, something handed down, cultural property, heritage
tīpuna	ancestors
te ao Māori	the Māori world
whakapapa	genealogy
whakataukī	proverb
whānau	family, extended family
whāriki	mat
whenua	lands

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Authors

Dr Amanda D'Souza is a public health physician and Senior Lecturer at the Department of Public Health, University of Otago Wellington, and is the Chair of Children's Rights Alliance of Aotearoa New Zealand (CRAANZ).

Dr Sarah Te One is an independent researcher and a member of the CRAANZ Steering Committee.

Jacqui Southey is Child Rights Advocacy and Research Director at Save the Children New Zealand and is the Secretary of CRAANZ.

Comparison of the 1996 and 2017 Versions of *Te Whāriki*, the Tiriti-based Early Childhood Curriculum: Gains and losses

Chris Jenkin

Introduction

The national early childhood education (ECE) curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996; 2017a), has provided ways for the sector to meet its obligations under te Tiriti o Waitangi to protect Māori taonga and kaupapa Māori education. My aim is to consider the Tiriti-based (bicultural) curriculum with a view to unmasking the losses and gains apparent in the refreshed version (Ministry of Education, 2017a). The authors of *Te Whāriki* have indicated that the updated version gives more prominence to te Tiriti (McLachlan, 2019), achieved by including whakataukī, learning dispositions that reflect kaupapa Māori, a link to kaupapa Māori in the section explaining the theoretical perspectives underlying *Te Whāriki*, and a reo Māori version of the ECE curriculum.

The title *Te Whāriki* can be translated to mean 'the woven mat'. The concept of the mat comes from the format of the curriculum, which, rather than having prescriptive content, is composed of four Principles and five Strands, each of which is derived thematically from Māori worldview principles (Jenkin, 2010, p. 15). This enables each early childhood service to adapt the curriculum to meet their philosophy by the way they weave it into their practices.

The 2017 version of *Te Whāriki*, however, includes fewer references to te ao Māori in the body of the curriculum, and fewer reflective questions and statements that prompt kaiako to consider kaupapa Māori values. Troublingly, there is a move towards viewing Tiriti-based considerations as part of a range of options in a broad multi-ethnic curriculum. By comparing and analysing Tiriti-based aspects of the 2017 and 1996 versions, changes to *Te Whāriki* will be discussed, including its structure and design, that impact the presence of te Tiriti in the curriculum, and have implications for implementing and honouring te Tiriti in ECE. This research is the result of a longstanding evolution that navigates my own childhood and career.

Personal research journey

I coined the phrase 'te Tiriti-based' (rather than bicultural) in my doctoral thesis (Jenkin, 2010), to reflect the historical contract embedded in te Tiriti o Waitangi between the Crown and Māori in 1840. The incorrect translations from English to te reo Māori in te Tiriti and the differing Māori and Crown understandings of the document have been sources of colonial conflict in Aotearoa New Zealand for over two centuries (Orange, 1987). This injustice has contributed to the erosion of Māori language and culture, and has led to poorer health, education and economic outcomes for Māori.

The early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, represents recognition of the sector's Treaty obligations (Ritchie, 2003), such as the rights of tangata whenua, protecting te reo Māori and ensuring all children in Aotearoa "develop knowledge and an understanding of the cultural heritages of both partners to te Tiriti o Waitangi" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9). ECE was the first sector in Aotearoa to develop a Tiriti-based curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996; 2017a) in close partnership with Māori.

Importantly, the curriculum content was organised around Māori child-development concepts such as empowerment, holistic development, family and community, relationships,

wellbeing, belonging, contribution, communication and exploration, rather than subjects such as water play, carpentry, music, puzzles, dough, blocks, numeracy and literacy. The uniqueness of *Te Whāriki*, based in its strong consultative process and Indigenous content, led to international acclaim (Farquhar, 2015).

I was brought up with a strong commitment to social justice, fairness and inclusivity, which was where my interest and journey in te reo Māori, te ao Māori and Tiriti-based curriculum education started. I began primary teaching in 1967 and did my utmost for Māori children to bring them into Pākehā ways. In hindsight, I realise the earnest assimilation style of teaching I provided was neither valid, useful, effective nor meaningful for Māori children. I acknowledge that discrepancies between outcomes for Māori and Pākehā children were noticeable throughout my teaching career. While my initial approach was aligned with the prevailing educational philosophies and practices, teaching on the frontline led me to question that perspective. In the 1980s my consciousness of these issues was raised through involvement with Playcentre, where the unmasking for me was realising the hidden biases in ECE. The norm seemed to be assimilation of Māori into Pākehā ways of being, and this was not securing success for Māori children.

By the mid- to late-1970s in Aotearoa, breaches of te Tiriti o Waitangi, racism and the reasons for state-determined statistical failures for Māori in education were being discussed. With the protests against the 1981 Springbok rugby tour, debates around racism became pervasive in Aotearoa, and Playcentre was no exception. While the organisation had started building relationships with Māori prior to this, the impact of the national protests and fervour around racism galvanised our efforts.

I became part of this movement in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, as Playcentre parents attended discussions, hui and workshops about te Tiriti. Playcentre, as a regional and national organisation, was working to educate its members about te Tiriti and te ao Māori. By the end of the 1980s, I was co-leading workshops about te Tiriti and Tiriti-based practices. I learned that a more effective way forward could be found by working together with Māori to better understand their ways of being, thinking and doing.

While I was a Barnardos co-ordinator in early childhood home-based care and education, the draft national curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, was released for consultation (Ministry of Education, 1993). We were able to trial it and discover what it would mean for practice. Later that year, I moved into lecturing in ECE and was excited about the possibilities of teaching on a programme that incorporated te reo and te ao Māori.

Prior to *Te Whāriki*, practitioners had struggled with implementation of the Tiriti-based curriculum in terms of Māori language, concepts, and ways of being and doing, as Cubey (1992) notes. Since 1996, when the final version was released, despite support for teacher education, mainly in the form of workshops, practitioners continued to struggle with implementing the Tiriti-based curriculum (Ritchie, 2003; Ritchie & Rau, 2006; Jenkin, 2010). This was also the case for early childhood teacher education lecturers (Jenkin, 2016; Ritchie, 2002). As a lecturer guiding students on practicum, I noticed their struggle with implementing Tiriti-based aspects of *Te Whāriki*. They lacked the skills, confidence and knowledge to be effective, and this became the focus of my doctoral studies. I investigated what the 1996 *Te Whāriki* curriculum advocated for Tiriti-based practice in mainstream ECE centres.

It was more than two decades later that the Education Review Office (2017) noted challenges in implementation, and this led to the refreshed version of *Te Whāriki* being presented in 2017. In the brief to the refresh committee, the aspiration for children remained for them "to grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind,

body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9; 2017a, p. 5).

Other areas to remain unchanged were the document's overarching Principles: Whakamana/Empowerment, Kotahitanga/Holistic Development, Whānau Tangata/Family and Community, and Ngā Hononga/Relationships (Ministry of Education, 1996; 2017a). The original Strands of *Te Whāriki* were also to be retained: Mana Atua (Wellbeing), Mana Whenua (Belonging), Mana Tangata (Contribution), Mana Reo (Communication) and Mana Aotūroa (Exploration) (Ministry of Education, 1996; 2017a).

Since the refresh, the Ministry of Education has produced *Update of Te Whāriki: Summary of Engagement Findings* (2017b), informed by consultation with the sector. It has seven sections: Consultation and Document Development; Learning Outcomes; Inclusiveness; Educational Theory; Kaiako Guidance and Support; Implementation Support; and Layout and Design (Ministry of Education, 2017b). It is interesting to note that in the update there is no specific section on Tiriti-based curriculum or biculturalism, although it is mentioned in the Inclusiveness section. A significant change is the reduction in the number of learning outcomes from 118 to 20 (Cherrington, 2018), although many have been merged into other sections of *Te Whāriki*. This is a significant alteration, and I was interested to investigate the implications for a Tiriti-based curriculum.

As te reo Māori is the Indigenous language of Aotearoa (and thus the first language), it is appropriate to use Māori language first for titles and names, rather than privileging English terms. While there is consistent use of dual English and te reo Māori titles in the 2017 version – which is lacking in the 1996 version, where English alone is used in headings for the Strands (Ministry of Education, 1996) – English is still put first. As it is te Tiriti that underlies *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996; 2017a), it is important to reveal and consider that relationship.

The relationship between te Tiriti o Waitangi and *Te Whāriki*

The foundation of *Te Whāriki* is the Māori and Crown partnership commitment of te Tiriti, and the curriculum set out to guide the ECE sector on how to meet its obligations and responsibilities from the Ministry's perspective as Crown partner in the contract with Māori (Ministry of Education, 1996; 2017a). Therefore, it is important to consider the gains and losses in terms of how *Te Whāriki* embodies te Tiriti.

A major change to *Te Whāriki* in 2017 (Ministry of Education, 2017a) was the inclusion of an introduction to te Tiriti o Waitangi and its implications for education, "particularly in terms of achieving equitable outcomes for Māori and ensuring that te reo Māori not only survives but thrives" (p. 3). However, connections to te Tiriti are not woven through the Principles and Strands as they are in the 1996 version, which undermines its importance. Practical approaches were originally embedded in the Principles and Strands, so kaiako could easily refer to them when reflecting on their curriculum and planning their unique whāriki, or the weaving together of their practices.

As Skerrett and Ritchie (2018) note, direct reference to te Tiriti is largely ignored until the end of the 2017 document. Nevertheless, a key aspect is the retention of its original vision: "In early childhood education settings, all children should be given the opportunity to develop knowledge and understanding of the cultural heritages of both partners to te Tiriti o Waitangi. The curriculum reflects this partnership in text and structure" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9; 2017a, p. 69).

I was inspired to read the whakataukī beginning each section in the 2017 version, which promote understanding and application of tikanga. Skerrett and Ritchie studied *Te Whāriki* as a site of resistance, considering the "competing knowledge systems, critiquing ways in which Western curricula have devalued and invisibilised long-held Māori world views and knowledges" (2018, p. 59). Their article includes robust discussion on the relevance of the whakataukī and te Tiriti to the curriculum and working with children, as well as recognising that te Tiriti is foundational to *Te Whāriki* and "provides background to understanding differences between the 1996 and 2017 versions of *Te Whāriki*" (p. 56).

Skerrett and Ritchie focus their analysis of the two versions on the strength of connection between te Tiriti o Waitangi and *Te Whāriki*, noting that "The treaty is not mentioned again in *Te Whāriki* 2017 until a paragraph towards the end of the document making links to the school curriculum" (p. 58). Thus, reference is reduced to the beginning, end and footnotes, te Tiriti effectively bookending the 2017 version, rather than being woven through it.

However, the beginning of the 2017 version of *Te Whāriki* does feature discussion of te ao Māori, for example, it recognises that Māori, as tangata whenua, share responsibility with Pākehā "for protecting Māori language and culture, and ensures that Māori are able to enjoy educational successes as Māori" (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 2). Similarly, its discussion of whāriki as a concept includes some description of collaborative ways of weaving, its symbolic and spiritual meaning for Māori, the time and skill involved, and holding the finished product as taonga, "valued for its artistry and kaupapa" (p. 10).

In the section A Curriculum for All Children, the discussion of learning and identity calls for kaiako to understand the worldview of Māori children, and their whakapapa connections, and stipulates that "all children should be able to access te reo Māori in their ECE setting … in the everyday curriculum" (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 12). These nuggets of information enable kaiako who are not skilled or knowledgeable in te reo Māori and te ao Māori to gain further understanding. These are examples of what Skerrett and Ritchie call "gems of wisdom within this document which we can only hope will be recognised and transferred into te Tiriti o Waitangi-based practice" (2018, p. 59).

The Principles

The introduction to the Principles is a welcome addition to *Te Whāriki* in the 2017 version, and states that the Principles of *Te Whāriki* are "the foundations of curriculum decision making and a guide for every aspect of pedagogy and practice" (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 17); as such, they empower kaiako to take action in implementing the curriculum.

PRINCIPLE 1: WHAKAMANA/EMPOWERMENT

Changes in the Principle of Whakamana/Empowerment in the 2017 version seem less bold in directing teachers to discuss and understand bicultural issues, or to "actively seek Māori contribution to decision making and ensure that Māori children develop a strong sense of self-worth", as stated in the 1996 version (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 40). The specific reference to Māori has been diluted in the 2017 version, empowerment being more generally "culturally located hence kaiako need to seek the input of children and their parents and whānau when designing the local curriculum" (p. 18). This could be regarded more as cultural inclusion than bicultural – thus contributing to a multi-ethnic curriculum – however, it is a requirement of education practice in Aotearoa to be both Tiriti-based and multi-ethnic. This new terminology could set a precedent for the diminishment of the uniqueness of Māori as Indigenous – there

is a risk that tangata whenua could become regarded as just one of the ethnicities involved in ECE.

Te Tiriti is also reduced to a statement in a footnote in the 2017 Whakamana Principle section: "The empowerment principle is reflected in the high expectations, Treaty of Waitangi, inclusion and learning to learn principles found in *The 2007 New Zealand Curriculum*" (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 18). The phrase "recognising the significance of te Tiriti o Waitangi" in the earlier version (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 40) is far more courageous than 2017's mere noting of the Treaty of Waitangi. It is also important to highlight that generally referring to the Treaty of Waitangi points to and privileges the English version of the 1840 Treaty, a document that does not correspond in translation to te reo Māori version, referred to as te Tiriti o Waitangi, of the terms Māori chiefs agreed to.

In 1996 *Te Whāriki* included two reflective questions for early childhood teachers relating to te Tiriti: "In what ways does the environment and programme reflect the values embedded in te Tiriti o Waitangi and what impact does this have on adults and children?" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 56). This was replaced by: "What opportunities might kaiako offer children to connect to, respect and care for Papatūānuku?" (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 35), which misses the connection not only to programmes, but to the wider values of te Tiriti, further weakening the Tiriti-based curriculum.

Another example of the Māori worldview being included in the revised curriculum is in the description of learning dispositions: "Cultural beliefs influence which learning dispositions are valued and how. Te Whatu Pōkeka highlights rangatiratanga, whakatoi, manaakitanga and aroha as learning dispositions that are valued in te ao Māori. Others include hūmārie and whakahī" (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 23). These learning dispositions are not mentioned in the 1996 version. *Te Whatu Pōkeka* (Ministry of Education, 2009) is a document developed to support the original *Te Whāriki*, providing information about the way tamariki Māori learning is seen through a kaupapa Māori lens.

PRINCIPLE 2: KOTAHITANGA/HOLISTIC

Overall, the Kotahitanga/Holistic Principle is similar in the two versions of *Te Whāriki*, both stressing the fundamental importance of spirituality for Māori. My doctoral research showed spirituality to be the most challenging area of a Tiriti-based curriculum for participants to implement. As spirituality is fundamental in te ao Māori, I will return to the subject following discussion of the individual Principles and Strands.

PRINCIPLE 3: WHĀNAU TANGATA/FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

There has been a significant loss of acknowledgement of Māori in the Principle of Whānau Tangata/Family and Community in the 2017 document, despite the mention of hapū and iwi in the introduction, which seems to have a more multi-ethnic than bicultural focus. The original wording is far richer:

> New Zealand is the home of Māori language and culture: curriculum in early childhood settings should promote te reo and ngā tikanga Māori, making them visible and affirming their value for children from all cultural backgrounds. Adults working with children should demonstrate an understanding of the different iwi and the meaning of whānau and whanaungatanga. (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 42)

This acknowledgement of a place for Māori language and culture enabled it to thrive, grow and be accepted in Aotearoa, and it is a significant loss that this important goal has been deleted.

PRINCIPLE 4: NGĀ HONONGA/RELATIONSHIPS

Here I was gratified to see a counterpoint to the loss of points of connection to te Tiriti: "Connections to past, present and future are integral to a Māori perspective of relationships. This includes relationships to tīpuna who have passed on and connections through whakapapa to, for example, maunga, awa, moana, whenua and marae" (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 21). These crucial connections were not made in the original curriculum document, so their inclusion in the refreshed document supports the claim that it has a stronger focus on biculturalism (Ministry of Education, 2017b).

The Strands

The Strands, Goals and Learning Outcomes of the national curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, are where the action points for kaiako are located, but there are no Tiriti-based statements in the Goals and Learning Outcomes. Two of the Strands (1 and 4), however, do involve ideas for Tiriti-based curriculum delivery in their Evidence for Learning sections, which aim to guide kaiako practices and provide "examples of evidence of children's learning and development" (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 23).

Apart from the Mana Aotūroa/Exploration Strand, the footnotes for each Strand contain relevant Tiriti-based curriculum ideas. The examples given in the practice section for each have an introduction strongly linked to bicultural practice, which is, however, absent in the sections for each age group. It was disappointing that the sections on leadership, organisation and practice had little to enhance Tiriti-based practice, when leadership is one of the most effective ways to do this (Jenkin, 2010).

STRAND 1: MANA ATUA/WELLBEING

The first Strand is Mana Atua/Wellbeing, and statements from the 1996 version have migrated to different sections of *Te Whāriki* in 2017. For example, two of the relevant statements concerning health have been moved to Principle 2: Kotahitanga/Holistic, and a third relating to the spiritual dimensions of the past, present and future is now encompassed by Principle 4: Ngā Hononga/Relationships. Included in Strand 1 is the invitation for kaiako to look for evidence of a child learning with regard to how they respect tapu and tikanga, and their awareness of hauora.

STRAND 2: MANA WHENUA/BELONGING

In 1996 *Te Whāriki* contained five Tiriti-based learning outcomes in the Mana Whenua/Belonging Strand, whereas the new edition, in essence, has none. These have been replaced with an introduction to the Strand that covers concepts such as tangata whenua (whānau, hapū and iwi), and relationships Māori have to each other and to the land. It includes sharing "appropriate histories, kōrero and waiata with mokopuna to enhance their identity and sense of belonging … [and] to engage respectfully with and to have aroha for Papatūānuku … understanding of kaitiakitanga and the responsibilities of being a kaitiaki by, for example, caring for rivers, native forest and birds" (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 33).

Additionally, in the consideration of leadership in this Strand, it advises that "Kaiako support tikanga Māori and the use of te reo Māori" (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 35). However, the key area from the 1996 version that is missing in the 2017 version is this: "Māori … children will be more likely to feel at home if they regularly see Māori … adults in the early childhood education setting. Liaison with local tangata whenua … should be promoted"

(Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 54). Making connections and building relationships with local tangata whenua rightfully takes time to develop and is an area of challenge for kaiako. However, this is not a sufficient reason to leave it out.

STRAND 3: MANA TANGATA/CONTRIBUTION

In a predominantly Pākehā-oriented system of ECE, opportunities for Māori input can be limited, therefore it is important to provide for thoughtful interaction, and make appropriate space and "commitment to, and opportunities for, a Māori contribution to the programme" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 64). This point is diluted in the 2017 version, which provides only that "Kaiako are aware of the concepts of mana and whakapapa and the importance of these concepts in the development and maintenance of relationships" (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 36), which weakens it as a Tiriti-based curriculum.

STRAND 4: MANA REO/COMMUNICATION

In the 1996 version of Mana Reo/Communication there were statements that could be considered Tiriti-based. These were generally incorporated into the introduction in 2017, which says, for example, "It is important that te reo Māori is valued and used in all ECE settings. This may involve, for example, using correct pronunciation, retelling stories, and using Māori symbols, arts and crafts" (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 41). Interestingly, the only Strand to include examples of practice for the three separate age groups is Mana Reo/Communication, which states: "Te reo Māori is included as a natural part of the programme" (p. 44).

Some aspects of the Tiriti-based curriculum were retained from 1996 in the 2017 leadership section: "The use of te reo Māori in the programme is encouraged. Kaiako are supported to learn te reo Māori and to understand what it means for a child to be growing up bilingual" as well having "an appreciation of te reo as a living and vibrant language" (Ministry of Education, 2017a, pp. 45, 42). If there is to be a shift in knowledge and content around te reo Māori in the curriculum, with those in Aotearoa completing their education with a reasonable level of fluency, stronger directives and support from the Ministry of Education are required. Interestingly, research on the Mana Reo/Communication Strand by McLachlan (2019) did not mention te Tiriti-based curriculum or implementation in the discussion or the reported participant responses.

STRAND 5: MANA AOTŪROA/EXPLORATION

The changes in the refreshed *Te Whāriki* that live up to the vision of stronger bicultural framing are within the Mana Aotūroa/Exploration Strand. This can be seen in the introduction to each section and in the examples of practice in which children are supported to respect Papatūānuku, Ranginui and other atua Māori, and kaitiakitanga. It directs kaiako to be "aware of the history of Māori exploration and navigation" (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 48). These examples replace the former and rather vague direction to recognise Māori "ways of knowing and making sense of the world and of respecting and appreciating the natural environment" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 82). When a curriculum moves from vague to specific, kaiako have a clearer idea of what is expected of them and avenues for them to explore with tamariki to implement an effective Tiriti-based curriculum.

Importantly, two changes to the reflective questions in the refreshed version strengthen it as a Tiriti-based curriculum. The original *Te Whāriki* asked: "In what ways is Māori language included in the programme?" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 76). Now, the question for kaiako reflection is: "In what ways is te reo Māori used and encouraged in this setting as a living language?" (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 45); and later: "How might children be encouraged

to connect with and care for their worlds in ways that are responsive to Māori values?" (p. 50). The incorporation of acknowledgement of te reo Māori as a living language and connection to Māori values is a step forward on the Tiriti-based curriculum journey.

Engagement with the spiritual aspects of te Tiriti o Waitangi

The spiritual aspects of te Tiriti are referred to in the 1996 *Te Whāriki* but were reduced and watered down in 2017. Aspects of spirituality are positioned in several parts of the 2017 curriculum, such as Principle 4: Ngā Hononga. Furthermore, the introductory section of Strand 1: Mana Atua/Wellbeing refers to "Te Whare Tapa Whā [model and the] importance of te taha wairua to holistic wellbeing" (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 26), and one of the four dimensions of the Māori health model is indeed the spiritual. In addition, a footnote directs that children should understand "their own mana atuatanga – uniqueness and spiritual connectedness" (p. 26).

It is important to emphasise the place of spirituality in te ao Māori, as this is a challenging area for many ECE practitioners (Jenkin, 2010). The introduction to Mana Atua/Wellbeing has specific recommendations pertaining to practice: using Māori protocols for separation of soiled items from kitchen and laundry; the need for kaiako "to develop their own knowledge of te reo Māori, tikanga Māori and Māori world views" and "facilitate tuakana–teina relationships" (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 28). These aspects of the work all have spiritual elements and could be a starting point for relevant practice and learning.

In Strand 2: Mana Whenua/Belonging in the 2017 version, only one statement on spirituality is similar to the original, which stated that children develop "Knowledge about the features of the area of physical and/or spiritual significance to the local community" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 56); although in the later edition a more directive approach is replaced by "(this may include their spiritual significance)" (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 32). With the teaching of connections to spiritual significance now optional, practitioners are free to ignore this crucial aspect of the Tiriti-based curriculum.

In the Evidence for Learning and Development section of the Mana Whenua/Belonging Strand, there are three relevant statements regarding tapu, hauora and tikanga, which are useful for practitioners (Ministry of Education, 2017a). These are examples of incorporating spiritually informed ideas into practice, despite there being no attendant Tiriti-based statements in the Goals or Learning Outcomes sections, or as examples when working with infants, toddlers or young children.

The visual impact of the structure and design of the refreshed *Te Whāriki*

The appearance of the 2017 version is enhanced by colour and photographs, especially with the depiction of whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 11), and the clear messaging about the difference between the curriculum for mainstream and Māori-immersion ECE services. Acknowledgement of the weaving artist and graphic designer is a welcome addition, as is the explanation of the cover motif, the art of weaving and its meanings in te ao Māori.

The addition of photographs in the 2017 version of *Te Whāriki* makes it more inviting, enhances the readability of the document, and shows the diverse ethnicities of children attending ECE services. There are quite a few photos of this, although they are small and it is sometimes difficult to interpret them or to see their relevance. However, the depiction of the

Tiriti-based curriculum in action is diminished in the English version. The photos in *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* (the section of the 2017 version of *Te Whāriki* for Māori-immersion centres) are larger and support my understanding of Tiriti-based activities possible with children. For example, there are photos of toddlers playing with appropriate te ao Māori equipment (p. 9), children and their kaiako learning tī rākau (p. 10), children exploring outdoors (pp. 24, 26) and singing waiata with actions (p. 30).

The 2017 version of *Te Whāriki* describes the curriculum for Kōhanga Reo and other Māori-immersion settings in a separate, flipped document, rather than interspersed through the main text, as it is in the 1996 version; a separation that Skerrett and Ritchie (2018, p. 60) call "a perplexing dualism". While the two aspects of the earlier *Te Whāriki* – te reo Māori and English – are not direct translations of each other, I miss having te reo Māori in each section as a reminder of its importance. As a Pākehā, I am mindful that I have neither the mandate nor the knowledge and skills to discuss *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* (Ministry of Education, 2017a), as this is for kaiako utilising the document to critique.

Theory underpinning *Te Whāriki*

I was pleased to see the theoretical underpinnings of *Te Whāriki* included in the 2017 version, which explained its grounding in kaupapa Māori (although it is positioned last in this section, thus privileging Western notions), as well as socio-cultural approaches (Vygotsky and Bruner) and bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner). The initial draft of *Te Whāriki* had almost ten pages of detailed notes, including theories and extended references (Ministry of Education, 1993, pp. 147–56). These were absent in the final 1996 *Te Whāriki*, which from May's (2001) perspective meant "the redrafting was subject to various 'raids', with considerable relocation, [and] removal" (p. 247).

Use of the word kaiako was a welcome addition in the refresh, as it encompasses the many roles of adults in ECE services. The *Update of Te Whāriki* document (Ministry of Education, 2017b), however, details some disagreement regarding the meaning of the term, as well as challenges to the use of the word kaiako. In response, the Ministry (p. 6) explains that more information would be included in the final 2017 document: "Kaiako includes all teachers, educators and other adults, including parents in parent-led services, who have a responsibility for the care and education of children in an ECE setting" (p. 7).

One of the reasons for the refresh of *Te Whāriki* was to establish "stronger bicultural framing" (Ministry of Education, 2017b, p. 2). In support of this claim, Cherrington (2018) states that "the revised *Te Whāriki* has a stronger focus on kaiako … [who] are expected to incorporate te reo Māori (Māori language) within their interactions with children and to incorporate Māori cultural values and knowledge within the programme" (p. 3).

Conclusion

My initial concerns were that, when the 2017 version of *Te Whāriki* was released, the Tiriti-based curriculum would be 'dumbed down', as teachers still lacked the skills, knowledge and confidence to implement it, despite the expectation for the writing group to produce "stronger bicultural framing" (Ministry of Education, 2017b, p. 2). Although research on the refreshed 2017 version of *Te Whāriki* is currently slender, with Skerrett and Ritchie (2018) providing the

only Tiriti-based critique since, there is much to be said about the place of te Tiriti o Waitangi in *Te Whāriki*.

Many aspects of the original *Te Whāriki* from 1996 have been retained in the refreshed version, albeit in different places, and I have indicated where they contribute to stronger bicultural framing. However, despite these gains, there have been several important losses, especially in the way that kaiako are accorded the choice of whether to have strong links to te Tiriti o Waitangi and Indigenous spirituality in their curriculum. There are definite gaps in the new version pertaining to spirituality, primarily because there is no reference to it in the Goals or Learning Outcomes sections, or examples of practice for each age group. Including spirituality in these sections is important, because they are prime places for Tiriti-based curriculum in action to occur.

The most disturbing aspect of these losses is a feeling that ECE could be sliding into a multi-ethnic curriculum where te ao Māori, tikanga and te reo Māori become just one of the cultures represented in our services. This can be seen in the 2017 version of *Te Whāriki* most noticeably in the way that its stated goals, learning outcomes and reflective questions are not clearly Tiriti-based, and how this in turn could see the practice of a curriculum that emphasises the multicultural over the bicultural. In terms of future research, given that it is now eight years since the refreshed *Te Whāriki* was released, it is important to discover how ECE practitioners and more recent graduates – with only the experience of the refreshed *Te Whāriki* – believe it has made a difference to their implementation of the Tiriti-based curriculum.

For a strong programme of professional development for both kaiako and ECE teacher educators to exist, we must ensure that kaiako have the knowledge and skills to understand how te Tiriti o Waitangi underpins *Te Whāriki*, and how to incorporate knowledge of te ao Māori, tikanga and what constitutes taonga in Māori society into their practice. I believe teachers' skills with te reo Māori should be such that they can carry out conversations in te ao Māori with children and colleagues. Knowledge and skills could enable teachers to then implement the Tiriti-based curriculum, thus gaining confidence in their abilities. Once a teacher understands these benefits for themselves, to the children they teach and their whānau and the wider community, they can take this on as their personal commitment to te Tiriti o Waitangi. Collectively, this could enable the practice of early childhood teaching to meet our obligations and responsibilities not only to the education sector, but to society in Aotearoa as a whole.

My hope for the future is that young Māori whose educational experience has been solely or mostly in Māori-immersion education will rise through the ranks of leadership, and work with the media to influence mainstream education. This, alongside the growth of the speaking of te reo Māori and the understanding of te ao Māori amongst tangata Tiriti, could enable the next version of *Te Whāriki* to be truly a site of affirmation of tino rangatiratanga (Skerrett & Ritchie, 2018).

Glossary

aroha	love
atua Māori	Māori god
awa	river
hapū	kinship group
hauora	health
hui	meeting
hūmārie	geniality
iwi	tribe
kaiako	teacher, educator, other relevant adult
kaitiaki	guardian
kaitiakitanga	guardianship
kaupapa Māori	Māori approach, principles
kōrero	discussion, conversation
mana	prestige, authority
manaakitanga	support, care for others
marae	sacred, communal, enclosed complex of buildings and grounds around a wharenui and marae ātea
maunga	mountain
moana	ocean
mokopuna	children
rangatiratanga	self-determination
taha wairua	spiritual aspect
tamariki	children
tangata Tiriti	non-Māori people
tangata whenua	Indigenous people
taonga	treasure
tapu	something sacred or forbidden
te ao Māori	the Māori world
te reo Māori	the Māori language
te Tiriti o Waitangi	the Treaty of Waitangi
tikanga	customs, protocols
tino rangatiratanga	self-determination, sovereignty
tī rākau	stick game
tuakana–teina	older sibling–younger sibling, mentor–mentee
waiata	song
whakahī	pride
whakapapa	genealogy
whakataukī	proverb
whakatoi	mischievousness
whānau	family
whanaungatanga	kinship, relationship
whāriki	woven mats
whenua	land

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Author

Dr Chris Jenkin is a retired lecturer in early childhood teacher education, whose research mainly focused on the implementation of the bicultural curriculum in mainstream early childhood services.

Ko Ngā Kete Manaakitanga: He huarahi mā tātou, ā, he anga whakamua

Rangituohu Nathan and Siobhan Nathan

Korihi te manu. Tākiri mai i te ata. Ka ao, ka ao, ka awatea. Tihei mauri ora!

Translating as “The bird sings. The morning has dawned. The day has broken. Behold, there is life”, this utterance proposes that with every new day comes opportunities for self-reflection and motivation toward new experiences of learning.

Ko wai māua e kōrero ana?
Mai te maunga Otawa ki te maunga Rangiuru ko te Takapū o Tapuika, ā, ko Waiari te awa e kōpiko ana, ko Kaituna te awa e teretere ana.
Ko Makahae te marae.
Ko Ngāti Tūheke te hapū.
Ko Tapuika te iwi.
Ko Rangituohu rāua ko Siobhan Nathan māua.
He uri māua o Te Arawa waka.

Of our various iwi connections within te ao Māori, we have chosen to introduce ourselves through our Tapuika pepeha. We live in what is known as te Takapū o Tapuika and we felt it appropriate to acknowledge our tīpuna of the whenua whereon we reside here in Te Puke. Siobhan and I are daughter and mother, and we facilitated Ngā Kete Manaakitanga for the Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood Education) (BTEC) programme together at Te Whare Wānanga o Wairaka Unitec. It was a unique and beneficial situation, in which our respective knowledge bases were mutually acknowledged and respected.

I joined Unitec in 2015 as a lecturer with some mātauranga Māori background, and a passion for and knowledge of te Tiriti o Waitangi. I was employed to cover for the regular kaiako, who had been seconded to another programme. The position description mentioned Ngā Kete Manaakitanga as part of the required teaching responsibilities, and intrigued by this, I looked at the programme prospectus to find out more. There I read of whakaaro Māori that I found both exciting and motivating.

I fell in love with a kaupapa that would lead me into a glorious world. As I continue to traverse the terrain of Ngā Kete Manaakitanga, the wonder and excitement of engaging with ngā taonga tuku iho remains steadfast and constant. I was employed on a one-year fixed-term contract but have managed somehow to still be here nine years later.

Siobhan joined our BTEC whānau in 2022, and taught on the programme until late 2024. Bringing a new and breathtaking perspective to Ngā Kete Manaakitanga, she quietly but confidently embraced her mahi as a lecturer and Kaiārahi Mātauranga Māori. Her knowledge of and experience within te ao Māori has me in awe of her expertise and continued encouragement of mātauranga Māori within our BETC programme. Growing up in kaupapa Māori learning, Siobhan reflects the wawata of doting parents and whānau. I am reminded of the following whakataukī expressed in *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa Early Childhood Curriculum*: “Tū mai e moko. Te whakaata o ō mātua. Te moko o ō tīpuna. Stand strong, O moko. The reflection of your parents. The blueprint of your ancestors” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 17).

Tēnei te mihi arohanui ki a koe e te tamāhine.

Ko Ngā Kete Manaakitanga: He huarahi mā tātou, ā, he anga whakamua

Te whānau o Te Akoranga Kōhungahunga o te Whare Wānanga o Wairaka Unitec includes in our BTEC programme a series of kete that support the learning of our ākonga as they endeavour to meet their commitment to te Tiriti o Waitangi, by embracing te reo Māori me ngā tikanga Māori, as early childhood education (ECE) kaiako. The kete are Manaaki Tangata (year one), Manaaki Whenua (year two) and Manaaki Taonga (year three), and are placed within our programme as challenges as well as support systems for our ākonga. The same are also presented as such for the team who facilitate the programme. Here, we discuss our learning and experiences as Ngā Kete Manaakitanga unfold, are reviewed, and are embedded in our programme. He huarahi mā tātou, ā, he anga whakamua. A path for us, and a way forward.

Because of our shared responsibility for Ngā Kete Manaakitanga, Siobhan and I decided to write this reflection together, and share our thoughts about, experiences with and knowledge of these beautiful taonga.

Ngā Kete Manaakitanga: He aha ēnei taonga ātaahua?

Manaaki is a word that can be interpreted with varying perspectives. According to *Te Aka* (2024), manaaki means to "support, take care of, give hospitality to, protect, look out for – show respect, generosity and care for others." Heta-Lensen (2022) adds further depth to this statement as she articulates the rationale for the development of Ngā Kete Manaakitanga. She asserts that "A quintessential value within te ao Māori is manaakitanga" (p. 107). She further describes manaakitanga as being the act of caring for others and an integral consideration within te ao Māori. *Te Whatu Pōkeka* uses the word 'nurture' to explain the concept of manaaki when expressing the notion of the holistic nature and wellbeing of the mokopuna (Ministry of Education, 2009). These ideas illustrate that manaakitanga is the essence of te ao Māori with regards to the caring and wellbeing of humankind, the environment and all things precious within it. Considering the above whakaaro, how do Ngā Kete Manaakitanga address them?

Heta-Lensen (2022) explains that "to manaaki people – expressed as manaaki tangata, place – expressed as manaaki whenua, and those things that are held up as taonga – expressed as manaaki taonga" (p. 107) forms the main thrust of what we call Ngā Kete Manaakitanga. The three courses are intentionally placed within the degree to scaffold ākonga as they embrace, plan, engage with and embed into their mahi as ECE kaiako te reo Māori me ngā tikanga Māori. As purported in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) and *Our Code, Our Standards* (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017), as ECE kaiako we need to show our commitment to Tiriti-based practices by using te reo Māori, and observing and practising tikanga Māori as we manaaki our tamariki mokopuna and their whānau, the environment and those things that are held up as taonga.

As the lecturers of Ngā Kete Manaakitanga, Siobhan and I acknowledge the privilege it is to facilitate and impart our knowledge and understanding of te ao Māori. As mentioned earlier, my journey with these taonga reflects my continued exhilaration with being able to step into this kaupapa alongside our ākonga. Siobhan expresses her engagement with ngā kete by incorporating ideas that spring from her growing up in te ao Māori and complementing them with what her koroua Tā Apirana Ngata expressed as "ko tō ringa ki ngā rākau a te Pākehā hei ara mō te tinana" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 3) – modern technology. We think it has been an effective partnership, where I was willing to draw on her expertise and she on mine. However, as the opening utterance to this discourse suggests, constant self-reflection acts as

motivation toward improvement and accountability.

To manaaki people – expressed as manaaki tangata

The first of Ngā Kete Manaakitanga is Te Kete Manaaki Tangata. Ākonga are required to complete this kete in the first semester of study. We begin this part of our kōrero with the following whakatauākī:

> Hutia te rito o te harakeke, kei hea te kōmako e ko?
> Kii mai ki au, he aha te mea nui i te ao?
> Māku e kii atu,
> He tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata! (Ngaroto, quoted in White, 2017, p. 21)

This kōrero expresses the thought that, while everything is of value, the most valuable of all things are people. As the primary focus of Te Kete Manaaki Tangata, ākonga are introduced to concepts that support the care and wellbeing of people. These concepts are referred to as pou, or pillars – pou that support and manaaki tāngata. People include the ākonga, their whānau, their centre colleagues and most importantly the tamariki mokopuna. Whanaungatanga, hauora, tikanga marae, tapu and noa are specific pou that are examined closely and linked to the holistic wellbeing, care and nurture of people.

Whanaungatanga – he aha ai?

Whanaungatanga, as asserted by Rameka (2018), refers to family relationships. In her article 'A Māori Perspective of Being and Belonging', she describes being as whakapapa (genealogical connections) and belonging as whanaungatanga. *Te Aka* (2024) defines whanaungatanga as "a relationship through shared experiences and working together which provides people with a sense of belonging." A strong theme throughout *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), whanaungatanga is reflected in its principles and strands, and kaiako are encouraged to ensure that tamariki will feel a sense of belonging – whanaungatanga. Siobhan and I agree that this concept is an essential consideration for our ākonga to be aware of, and the idea that it is an expression of a person knowing they belong is an underlying rationale regarding the inclusion of whanaungatanga as a pou that is examined in Te Kete Manaaki Tangata.

As ākonga begin their journey with Ngā Kete Manaakitanga, relationships are built and grow, and often last well after graduation. Discussions and anecdotal evidence also suggest that whanaungatanga – the sense of belonging that ākonga feel – is an important aspect of Te Kete Manaaki Tangata. It is a contributing factor in successful programme completion. Added to this, and integral to the mahi of ECE kaiako, our ākonga need to know how they reflect whanaungatanga. As the very foundation of manaaki, consideration and developing understanding of why and how whanaungatanga is relevant for ECE kaiako is essential.

Hauora – he aha ai?

Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1985) and Te Wheke (Pere, 1997) are models of wellbeing that set out the holistic nature of humankind with regard to manaaki. These authors identify the

essential care systems, based on whakaaro Māori and supported with lifetimes of leadership, nurturing and love, that are important for the wellbeing of people, our tamariki mokopuna and their whānau. Therefore, the inclusion of this pou in Te Kete Manaaki Tangata is essential to our ākonga, as upholding wellbeing is crucial in their interactions and experiences with tamariki, their whānau and work colleagues.

Hauora is defined as "to be fit, well, healthy, vigorous, in good spirits" (*Te Aka*, 2024). Siobhan and I both see the importance of including a pou that centres on the health and wellbeing of people, and it is our intention that our ākonga understand its relevance for them as well. Hauora is an all-encompassing concept of health and wellbeing, and carries with it the momentum to provide tikanga around the hauora – manaaki that should be afforded to all. Hauora examined here in Te Kete Manaaki Tangata complements the Hauora course that ākonga complete in the second semester of their studies. We are confident that the manaaki tangata experiences and learning regarding hauora scaffold ākonga well into the Hauora course.

For example, ākonga are asked to consider Māori health models such as Te Whare Tapa Whā and to show their understanding of these models through digital or physical resource creations they can share with the children in their ECE centres. There have been some positive results with this being a strong foundation for when they complete the Hauora course.

Tikanga Marae – he aha ai?

As the previous course co-ordinator and main lecturer of Te Kete Manaaki Tangata, Siobhan clarifies tikanga marae by saying, "Think of *tikanga marae* as being *tikanga establishment*." She explains that including this pou is to emphasise that every institution has tikanga – a way of doing things, processes that are put in place to ensure the holistic wellbeing, caring and nurturing – that is the manaaki of people. Mead (2016) explains tikanga as:

- Rules, plan, method, code of conduct.
- Custom, habit.
- Reason, rationale, purpose.
- People following proper procedures, rules and regulations.
- Correctness or tika (as the word tikanga suggests).

If we consider these points, it is obvious why Siobhan suggests that tikanga marae is about ascertaining that there is tikanga everywhere, and with reference to marae, the very essential need for tika, or correctness, in the ways of being and doing in our most formal situations is made clear. Ākonga are given opportunities to express their understanding of tikanga during our kete manaakitanga class sessions. They are asked to facilitate the beginning of each class and do so by following the tikanga that guides this part of each session. We call this wā whānau: a time when as a class whānau we begin each session with karakia, mihimihi, pepeha, whakataukī/whakatauākī and waiata tautoko.

I recently attended a wānanga that focused on tikanga in relation to Siobhan's and my iwi and hapū. Discussion centred around the very points that Mead identifies, as we endeavoured to come to an understanding of the rationale and origins of some of our 'tikanga'. It was a most interesting experience. If we are to ensure the manaaki of people, having tikanga

in place to guide the way is of utmost importance. Hence our rationale for including it as a pou to be examined and applied in the mahi that our ākonga do in their ECE centres.

Tapu and Noa – he aha ai?

Though they are commonly misunderstood concepts, Siobhan and I are firm in our belief that tapu and noa reflect the safety guidelines needed as we manaaki people. When asked what they understand about tapu and noa, our ākonga will often reply: "Tapu is sacred or forbidden and noa is the opposite." However, clear guidelines as to how these concepts are relevant to them are integral to Te Kete Manaaki Tangata.

Te Aka (2024) describes tapu as "sacred, prohibited, restricted, set apart, forbidden, under atua protection", and goes on to explain in more depth the role tapu plays in te ao Māori. Noa is defined as "to be free from the extensions of tapu, ordinary, unrestricted, void." Williams et al. (2012) clarify tapu and noa as being sacred and non-sacred. One might wonder, then, how these concepts link to the BTEC, and why we convey the importance of our ākonga seeing the relevance of tapu and noa to their roles as kaiako.

The Environmental Protection Authority (2020, p. 15) states: "Tapu is seen as a human construct to regulate society. Rendering certain possessions or places tapu is a safety measure designed to bring a sense of caution, thereby restricting access." Based on such an understanding, as facilitators of Te Kete Manaaki Tangata, Siobhan and I see the relevance of tapu, and therefore noa, as important concepts when we consider the safety measures and policies needed in our ECE centres as we manaaki our tamariki mokopuna.

With constant review and ongoing research, we are confident that the pou play an important role in preparing our ākonga as they develop their knowledge base and apply this learning in their mahi as early childhood kaiako. Four other components complete the content included in Te Kete Manaaki Tangata. Integral to the effective application of learning and experience with Te Kete Manaaki Tangata are:

- Mihimihi.
- Wā whānau.
- Te rautaki mātauranga Māori.
- Te reo Māori me ōna tikanga.

A few years ago, as a new cohort, we embarked on the mihimihi journey: ākonga were asked to research their pepeha and present the information gathered to the class as a means of assessment. As we prepared for the presentations, an ākonga approached me with a story I will never forget. She began by explaining that, growing up Pākehā, she thought that her connections to Aotearoa were only through her English ancestors. She had a feeling there was something connecting her to a Māori heritage, because of kōrero rarely spoken of in her family. She wept as she explained that, during her research, she had found who her iwi and hapū were and had travelled to meet her extended whānau. Her words – "Whaea I now know my maunga, awa, marae, iwi, hapū and whānau … I have seen them, walked them … I'm proud of my Māori connections" – were heartfelt, and I quietly promised myself to never take my pepeha for granted.

Te Kete Manaaki Tangata affords our ākonga opportunities to discover who they are, apply concepts and the components that make up mihimihi, use te reo Māori, sing waiata

tautoko, practice tikanga and lead wā whānau – all aspects that contribute to the mihimihi and tikanga Māori experience.

Wā whānau is an initiative whereby ākonga are required to open each day of study with karakia, mihimihi, pepeha, whakataukī, whakatauākī and waiata tautoko. Regardless of which class is first in their day (it is not always one of the kete), ākonga supported by our team of lecturers carry out this mahi. Ākonga-led wā whānau is a beautiful way to begin our teaching day. It also affords our ākonga (and our team) opportunities to use te reo Māori and observe tikanga practices.

Another strategy that is introduced early in Te Kete Manaaki Tangata is Te Rautaki Mātauranga Māori. As ākonga complete Ngā Kete Manaakitanga, they are challenged to develop resources and implement plans to apply learning from Ngā Kete in their ECE centres. Te Rautaki Mātauranga Māori is implemented during work experience and practicum placements, and progress is monitored and reviewed through Ngā Kete Manaakitanga.

Te Kete Manaaki Tangata is our chance to showcase te ao Māori in such a way that ākonga new to this world of learning are not afraid to have a go. Sometimes there is resistance to unfamiliar mātauranga Māori experiences to begin with. Rokx (2015) suggests that there is reluctance on the part of ECE ākonga and kaiako to engage with te reo Māori in case they use it inappropriately, and they feel that they need added support with their efforts to kōrero. Many of our ākonga express similar concerns as they begin their journey with Ngā Kete.

Kōrero, karakia, waiata, hīmene, whakataukī and whakatauākī are essential components of this kete, and ākonga are guided along a path to engaging with te reo Māori and recognising tikanga opportunities. A learner of te reo Māori as a second language myself, I am empathetic towards what ākonga may be feeling as they embark on Te Kete Manaaki Tangata journey. Siobhan, who is a fluent speaker of te reo Māori, was very supportive of our efforts to kōrero whenever and wherever we can. Most ākonga respond to modelling they observe, and to positive and empathetic guidance.

To manaaki place – expressed as manaaki whenua

In their second year of studies, ākonga are required to complete Te Kete Manaaki Whenua, in which they engage with learning about protecting te whenua, the land, and te taiao, the environment, wherein we live as sojourners. The phrase “Whatungarongaro te tangata, toitū te whenua: As man disappears from sight, the land remains” (Dewes et al., 2011) reminds us of our responsibility to learn about and care for the land and our environment, so it remains intact once we are gone. One of my mokopuna participated in a pūkōrero competition and shared with the audience her hopes for an Aotearoa New Zealand where our whenua and taiao are cared for. This was her rationale for ensuring that her future living here on her whenua would be a safe one.

As the name of this kete suggests, and based on previous explanations of manaaki during their Te Kete Manaaki Whenua experience, ākonga are asked to consider how they can protect te taiao. As the former facilitator of this kete, Siobhan asserts that “ākonga learn how to protect the environment and use it as inspiration and motivation for work with children.” The main components of this kete are kaitiakitanga and kōrero whenua.

Kaitiakitanga

According to Rameka et al. (2022), tiaki means to "look after, nurse, care, protect, conserve or save" (p. 47). As kaitiaki, we become agents of tiaki, and the act of tiaki is kaitiakitanga – we are charged with protecting our environment. There are ample opportunities within the ECE community to share our knowledge and experiences of kaitiakitanga with tamariki. Through planned workshops and activities, Te Kete Manaaki Whenua affords our ākonga the opportunity to make a commitment to helping this happen as they share their learning in their centres and the community.

One such learning activity experienced by our ākonga is a workshop in our pā harakeke, Rangimarie, here at Unitec. A focus of our Unitec Kaitiaki Taiao Tanya White is the integration of health and wellbeing into people and the land. Tanya takes our ākonga into the pā, where they learn about tikanga pā harakeke and kaitiakitanga. From this experience, ākonga come away with a greater appreciation for te taiao, the ecosystems of the pā and the surrounding whenua and waterways. As a kaitiaki taiao and kairaranga, White says, "Tikanga pā harakeke provides a point of access for whānau to connect with te ao Māori" (2017, p. 11). White further describes kaitiakitanga as sustaining relationships with te taiao that affirm sustainability of our natural resources.

Another important aspect of this kete is learning about ngā atua Māori, the ultimate kaitiaki of our whenua and taiao. Harmsworth and Awatere (2013) discuss Te Timatanga, or Māori creationist theory, regarding Ranginui, Papatūānuku and their children. After the separation of their parents, each of the children took responsibility for the environment created; and as part of this ancestry, many responsibilities and obligations were conferred to humankind to sustain and maintain the wellbeing of people, communities and natural resources. Ākonga can gain an appreciation for the way kaitiakitanga is perpetuated from a te ao Māori perspective through theory and legend. It also motivates them to reflect this knowledge in their work as ECE practitioners.

As a means of assessment, ākonga are asked to create an activity for tamariki that will help them understand the importance of their environment and why they need to look after te whenua and te taiao. Positive feedback from ākonga makes it clear that as they participate in the pā harakeke activity, learn of kaitiaki taiao and prepare for this task, they, more than anyone, learn an appreciation for te whenua and te taiao, which motivates them even more to share what they have learned with our tamariki mokopuna.

Kōrero whenua

The other component of Te Kete Manaaki Whenua is the opportunity for ākonga to express themselves creatively. The kōrero whenua part of this kete scaffolds the ākonga into broadening their interaction with te reo Māori and tikanga Māori through the research and kōrero they are required to gather about the whenua in preparation for the second assessment of this course. The presentation of the kōrero whenua is through ngā toi ataata. Heta-Lensen and Wrightson (2019) assert that it is integral to engaging with te taiao to understand why it is relevant to ākonga and their work with children.

As ākonga engage with Te Kete Manaaki Whenua they are required to produce an art piece that reflects the research they have carried out regarding the whenua and the application of learning about te taiao. Through ngā toi ataata, te reo Māori and tikanga, they express who they are and how they connect to the land and environment. While this is

challenging for ākonga at first, there is ample evidence through the art pieces created that positive outcomes occur. In their discourse, Heta-Lensen and Wrightson (2019) showcase some of the beautiful work produced by past ākonga of the BTEC programme. Reflective explanations by ākonga also highlight positive engagement and thought-provoking responses to te kōrero whenua and Te Kete Manaaki Whenua.

Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) maintains "that kaiako are the key resource in any ECE service. Their primary responsibility is to facilitate children's learning and development through thoughtful and intentional pedagogy" (p. 59). It is important that our ākonga engage in activities such as kaitiaki learning opportunities and kōrero whenua to increase their proficiency in te reo Māori and tikanga Māori, as well as their capabilities with children's pedagogical development.

To manaaki those things that are held up as taonga – expressed as manaaki taonga

In 1840, when rangatira Māori were asked to consider signing a treaty with the British Crown, they were guaranteed full sovereignty over customary rights and social norms – "Te tino Rangatiratanga o rātou wenua o rātou kāinga me o rātou taonga katoa" (Wilson, 2016). This suggests that our tīpuna understood that they and their descendants would have sovereignty over everything they held as precious, and therefore the responsibilities as kaitiaki that went with it. The year three course, Te Kete Manaaki Taonga, reflects this notion and completes the journey our ākonga take during their studies.

A visit to Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland Museum is a course highlight, where ākonga can view taonga Māori and draw on the knowledge that comes with these taonga to further enhance their learning of te ao Māori. A kete of taonga, collection of resources, that has been created during the Kete Manaakitanga journey is assembled by ākonga to use in their centres with tamariki. These taonga complement the use of te reo Māori and application of tikanga Māori.

Te Kete Manaaki Taonga scaffolds ākonga into extended use of te reo Māori and tikanga knowledge. As a culmination of Te Kete Manaaki Tangata and Te Kete Manaaki Whenua, ākonga are encouraged to take a leadership role in sharing what they have learned while on their Kete Manaakitanga journey. All aspects of te ao Māori are demonstrated through opportunities to perform and lead where they feel the most comfortable. Ākonga are asked to plan and lead activities such as ngā mahi a rēhia (performing arts), pūkōrero, karetao atarau presentations, and facilitating a rā whakangahau where whānau and friends are welcomed and acknowledged. A pinnacle of shared experiences, the rā whakangahau serves to reassure ākonga that what they have achieved during their BTEC encounter with Ngā Kete Manaakitanga prepares them well to take a leadership role in implementing te ao Māori considerations in their praxis as qualified kaiako.

Kōrero whakamutunga – kia kaha Ngā Kete Manaakitanga

E kōrero ana māua te inoi o tō māua koroua: "Ko to ngākau ki ngā taonga a ō tīpuna Māori hei tikitiki mo to mahuna" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 3). My mokopuna used Apirana's encouraging words to support her pū kōrero topics. The taonga she referred to during her kōrero were te reo Māori and education. She referred to them as ngā taonga tuku iho – treasures handed down by our ancestors. Siobhan and I love the mahi we have done with

ākonga on the BTEC programme, and it is our assertion that through Ngā Kete Manaakitanga, ngā taonga tuku iho are validated as integral to the wellbeing and perpetuation of ngā tāngata, te whenua/taiao me ngā taonga katoa – all the treasures.

Once ākonga have started their Kete Manaakitanga journey, it is our intention to guide them towards a future filled with courageous endeavours to share learning from Ngā Kete, assume leadership mentoring roles to kōrero i roto i te reo Māori, or to speak in the Māori language, and apply tikanga knowledge to strengthen ECE centre policies and procedures. A daunting challenge to some, but an exciting endeavour for many. We challenge our ākonga to take on board our encouragement to whakarongo, titiro and kōrero at every opportunity.

Ngā Kete Manaakitanga, as integral components of the BTEC o Te Akoranga Kohungahunga o te Whare Wānanga o Wairaka, have been influenced by those charged with delivering each kete since its inception, and are strongly supported by the whānau who facilitate the BTEC programme. A dedicated teaching space, Te Whare Tapere, is used exclusively for facilitating Ngā Kete Manaakitanga along with mātauranga Māori perspectives that are included in other courses of study within the BTEC. Every semester during student orientation week, a whakatau into our programme and our teaching spaces is led by our Māori staff in Te Whare Tapere, and our new ākonga begin their journey with us by hearing te reo Māori and experiencing tikanga from the beginning. For our team, this is one of the most important aspects of, and an appropriate introduction to, our programme.

In *Our Code, Our Standards* (Teaching Council of New Zealand, 2017, p. 2), the values of whakamana, manaakitanga, pono and whanaungatanga remind us of the obligation we have to our tamariki, their whānau, our communities, centre whānau and ourselves to be the best we can as practitioners of integrity: “Kia heke iho rā i ngā tūpuna, kātahi ka tika. If handed down by the ancestors, it would be correct” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 60). As explained in *Te Whāriki*, a legacy of intergenerational expertise and correctness from those who came before us sets a sound foundation for what lies ahead. Although Siobhan is no longer with our programme, she remains a support person for me. Our earlier assertion that Ngā Kete Manaakitanga reflect the wawata a kui mā, koro mā – the aspirations of ancestors for their descendants – and the above whakataukī remain firm motivation for what we do. It is our honour and privilege.

When Siobhan and I decided to write this account of Ngā Kete Manaakitanga and considered what we would discuss, we were cognisant of the responsibility we had to clearly articulate the goals and aspirations we have as we facilitate these taonga. Ko Ngā Kete Manaakitanga: he huarahi mā tātou, he anga whakamua – a way forward for us all. We firmly uphold whakaaro that Ngā Kete Manaakitanga are not just te reo Māori courses, but a compilation of learning experiences that aspire to reflect te ao Māori.

Closing with our opening whakataukī – Korihi te manu. Tākiri mai i te ata. Ka ao, ka ao, ka awatea. Tihei mauri ora! – we must continually reflect and remind ourselves to take every opportunity afforded us, to ensure that we are always moving forward.

In closing, Siobhan and I would like to acknowledge those who have contributed to Ngā Kete Manaakitanga since their inception: Yo Heta-Lensen, Carol Smith, Nicole Job and Kiri Neho have each added their expertise and passion to the successful continuation of these beautiful taonga. Tēnei te mihi nui ki a koutou katoa!

Nō reira ka waiho ā māua kōrero ki konei. Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā rā tātou katoa.

Kuputaka – glossary of Māori words

ākonga	student
anga whakamua	moving forward, ahead
ātaahua	beautiful
atua Māori	Māori gods
awa	river
hapū	tribe or subtribe
harakeke	flax
hauora	health and wellbeing
hīmene	hymn
huarahi	in this context, pathway
iwi	extended kinship group, tribe, people
kaiako	teacher
kaiārahi	guide, leader, mentor
kairaranga	weaver
kaitiaki	custodian, guardian, protector
kaitiakitanga	guardianship, environmental stewardship
karakia	prayer, ritual chant, incantation
karetao atarau	shadow puppet
katoa	all, every
kaupapa	programme
kaupapa Māori	a Māori approach that assumes the normalcy of being Māori – language, customs, knowledge, principles, ideology
kete	basket, and in this context, courses
kōrero	conversation, chat, story, news, discussion
koroua	elder
kui mā, koro mā	ancestors who have passed the breath of life to the generations following
mahi	work
mahi a rēhia	performing arts, traditional pastimes encompassing performing arts, games and storytelling
manaaki	to show respect, generosity, hospitality and care for others
manaakitanga	the process of showing respect, generosity, hospitality and care for others; welcoming, respectful and caring
marae	building complex where people can gather with a specific kaupapa Māori focus
mātauranga Māori	Māori knowledge, wisdom, understanding
mihimihi	speech of greeting
mihi whakatau	speeches of welcome acknowledging those present at a gathering
mokopuna	grandchild
noa	ordinary or without restrictions
pā harakeke	flax plantation
pepeha	introduction through ancestral links
pono	integrity
pou	pillar
pūkōrero	speech
rangatira Māori	Māori chief

rautaki	strategy
rā whakangahau	celebration day
tamariki	children
tāngata	people
taonga	treasure
taonga tuku iho	heirloom, something handed down, cultural property, heritage
tapu	under restrictions
tātou	we, us, you and I
te ao Māori	the Māori world
te reo Māori	the Māori language
te taiao	nature, the environment
tika	correctness
tikanga Māori	Māori ways of doing, including practices, customs and rituals
tikanga marae	processes that guide how things are done on the marae
tipuna, tīpuna	ancestor, ancestors
titiro	look
toi ataata	visual arts
waiata	song
waiata tautoko	supporting song
wānanga	learning symposium
wawata	aspirations
wā whānau	in this context, it is the way we begin each kete session as a class whānau
whakaaro	thoughts and ideas
whakamana	empowerment
whakamutunga	conclusion
whakarongo	listen
whakatau	welcome
whakataukī	Māori proverb, author unknown
whakatauākī	Māori proverb, author known
whakapapa	genealogical connections
whānau	family, extended family, family group
whanaungatanga	sense of belonging, collaborative relationships
whenua	land

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Authors

Rangituohu Nathan is a Lecturer on the Bachelor of Teaching (ECE) degree at MIT and Unitec. A great-grandmother and marae/hapū kuia and kaikaranga, she is also considered the kuia of the Ngā Kete Manaakitanga programme.

Siobhan Nathan was until late 2024 a Lecturer and Kaiārahi Mātauranga Māori at Te Whare Wānanga o Wairaka Unitec, and is now Kaikōkiri Kaupapa Māori/Kaupapa Māori Programmes Specialist at Tauranga Libraries.

The Many Faces of Play: Play after the war zone

Galina Stebletsova and Barbara Scanlan

Introduction

Our discussion aims to portray how play can galvanise a child's journey to recovery from ongoing trauma and related challenges to wellbeing. Supported by *Te Whāriki* (the Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood curriculum) Strand 1, Mana Atua/Wellbeing, we highlight the need for developing the ability for tamariki to have a sense of personal worth and cultural identity, developing resilience, and revisiting and working through experiences (Ministry of Education, 2017). Children need to experience early childhood settings "that are safe and secure places where each child is treated with respect and diversity [is] valued" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 31).

A sense of belonging also contributes to children's wellness and creates an environment that allows for exploration and building new connections through play. Our discussion will also delve into play therapy as a beneficial and effective intervention for tamariki who may experience behavioural or emotional challenges. By inviting kōrero from the teaching community, authentic views can inform much-needed and timely conversation about play as a transformational mechanism towards peaceful childhoods and holistic wellbeing.

Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) also suggests that children need to feel they have a right to belong and that their personhood is acknowledged and celebrated as uniquely theirs. Furthermore, we view *Te Whāriki* as a curriculum that promotes peace, as seen in its focus on wellbeing, family and community, and relationships, with play and its healing potential at the core. We therefore view *Te Whāriki* as foundational in our work, and the stakes for whole communities are high: "Understanding possibilities for peace within fragile and conflict environments requires the participation of children as quintessential for building communities where children have the opportunity to thrive, learn and participate" (Abidi, 2021, p. 9).

Childhood trauma can be a distressing experience that may overwhelm a child's ability to cope and can have lasting effects on all aspects of development. Growing up in an environment torn by war, terrorism or family violence may have a profoundly damaging effect on children and families around the globe. Families and children living in war zones of any kind are exposed to violence, ongoing trauma, and, as a result, high levels of stress, psychological difficulties including depression and long-lasting effects on mental health. Growing numbers of children around the world today face "prolonged episodes of hostility, terrorism and missile attacks resulting in destruction, damage, fatalities and injuries among all parties, which inevitably leads to a variety of negative psychological consequences, particularly post-traumatic stress (PTS) symptoms, increased anxiety and depression" (Slone & Shoshani, 2017).

In addition, children and families who have migrant or refugee backgrounds might require similar support to those who have experienced war, as instability, unpredictability and hardship might have been part of their experiences, too (Wylie et al., 2018). As a result, globally, the growing disruptions to peaceful childhood have a strong correlation with holistic development being challenged. When children experience continuous conflict, fear and violence, their mental health is threatened. Long-lasting psycho-emotional stress is often associated with childhood trauma (Slone & Shoshani, 2017).

A note on children's rights to protection

The United Nations declaration of the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World, 2001–10, embraced principles based on peace and security for all children. However, more than 20 years after adopting the declaration, conflicts and wars are increasing and have unfortunately become part of a global reality. Our thinking, therefore, needs to be adapted to a world with conflicts, and we need to develop strategies to work with and alongside children who have experienced the trauma of war, displacement and migration (Early Childhood Peace Consortium, 2024). It is becoming increasingly evident that kaiako who support children in culturally diverse settings today will need to develop and employ strategies that address children's trauma and support them through a healing process. One of these strategies is play, which is already embedded in our curriculum and ethos of early childhood education (ECE) in Aotearoa.

The United Nations not only protects and promotes the rights of the child in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), but reminds us that these rights also apply to children facing the consequences of war and conflict. Abidi (2021) states that "forced displacement and migration are interwoven into the fabric of fragile and conflict environments" (p. 1). However, no matter what the external environment brings, children are wired to play from the moment they are born. Observing children in play highlights that play brings joy and comfort, as well as providing endless opportunities for exploration of all things human.

This description is reflected in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), where children's play is celebrated and acknowledged as important learning, as a way to be, and as a right. Therefore, the curriculum lends itself to supporting all children in their learning, wellbeing and development. At the very core of the curriculum lie the values of culture, language, identity and inclusivity, requiring kaiako to "actively respond to the strengths, interests, abilities and needs of each child" (p. 13), and to respond to children's "cultural ways of knowing and being" (p.12). By acting in such ways, early childhood environments can become respectful, inclusive and peaceful spaces for all tamariki, families and whānau.

A note from neuroscience

Nathan Wallis (2020), in his discussion on the first 1000 days of a child's life, asserts children's need for and right to play. He suggests that play is fundamental to the optimal development of a child's brain. Continuous exposure to stress often has secondary consequences, and stress, particularly in the early years of life, is adversely associated with impairments in cognitive performance and regulation of emotions (Wallis, 2020). Considering a brain that has been exposed to trauma, the need for play to overcome trauma is therefore highlighted. When play is child initiated, Wallis says, children can revisit and explore topics and situations that are significant to them. By having those many opportunities, and with the support of engaged adults, challenging and frightening situations can be explored within a safe environment, leading to healing (Wallis, 2024).

Violence in today's world can be considered a global pandemic, and as Abidi (2021, p. 2) asserts, "the intensity and pervasiveness of the violence experienced in conflict and fragile environments and particularly the violence experienced by children affected by armed conflict is devastating." According to neuroscience, traumatic events in early childhood result in a long-lasting trauma, which may mean "brain development is interrupted and trauma triggering

higher stress levels alerting the brain's executive functioning abilities" (Bullard, 2021, p. 52). And while it cannot be argued that living during Covid equates to children experiencing the trauma of war and terrorism, some similarities can be drawn in the sense that children experienced disruptions and restrictions to what had previously been their normal life experience (Abidi, 2021).

A note from *Te Whāriki*

In the Aotearoa context, the focus on children's wellbeing is foundational to our curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017). However, what has always been central to the curriculum is that play is a vehicle for supporting all aspects of holistic hauora for all tamariki. Play is not only essential to children's development but is also an innate, natural activity for all children. Through play, children can share their ideas, and communicate nonverbally and verbally, and through their actions. Play supports the development of "strategies to calm themselves, to distract themselves from negative thinking, to work through times of nervousness, anxiety or shyness and to prepare for potentially stressful events" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 36).

Te Whāriki also suggests that children need to feel they have a right to belong, and that their personhood is acknowledged and celebrated as uniquely theirs. Play is informed by children's interests, thoughts, experiences and ideas, and in turn empowers them to investigate what the cause of their feelings, ideas and interests might be, as well as how to take those ideas further. Children have the right to be in charge of where their play goes, what their storylines are and how they want to investigate their stories. Doing so enables children to develop their sense of self, their identity, as well as develop skills that support them in their social interaction with "people, places and things" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 12). For kaiako who observe play, this is an opportunity to find out what children have experienced and how those experiences affect them, and from there they can engage in relevant planning of how to support the children to work through trauma.

We view *Te Whāriki* as a curriculum that promotes peace in its focus on wellbeing, family and community, and has relationships with play and its healing potential at the core. We therefore view *Te Whāriki* as a foundation: our curriculum has relationships with the families and the community at its heart, as is evidenced in *Te Whāriki* Strands of Mana Atua/Wellbeing, Mana Whenua/Belonging, Mana Tangata/Contribution, Mana Reo/Communication and Mana Aotūroa/Exploration (Ministry of Education, 2017). Play experiences as discussed above are not possible unless kaiako build strong whanaungatanga with the families, to ensure kaiako understand the context, origins and depth of the play of children. Kaiako need to make the time and the effort to get to know families, understand them as unique family units, their culture, the experiences they bring to the setting, as well as trauma they may carry – both conscious and unconscious.

The importance of including families and whānau in the life of an early childhood setting is evident in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 20), as the "wellbeing of each child is interdependent with the wellbeing of their kaiako, parents and whānau." Therefore, working in partnership with the families is an essential first step for kaiako, who will also need to acknowledge their cultures, beliefs and traditions, to ensure no undue pressure and disruptions are placed on children who might be new to Aotearoa. Supporting families and whānau to establish a sense of belonging in the centre is not only a goal of the curriculum, but is also discussed by Bürgin et al. (2022, p. 848) as an "essential step in a child's recovery, as

they depict that the community can offer safety, love and belonging … for both basic needs and multilevel intervention … for mental health."

By weaving the additional strands of basic service and security, community and family supports, focused, nonspecialised supports and specialised services (Bürgin et al., 2022) into the very fabric of *Te Whāriki*, kaiako can support tamariki, even though they might lack specialist education and skills. Founded on the following aspirations for children – that they "grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 2) – *Te Whāriki* does not prescribe what kaiako must teach and children must learn, but offers and facilitates opportunities for all learners to be supported by their kaiako, in the community that knows them and cares for them as individuals.

The echo of trauma

Armed conflict destroys much more than physical spaces; it also has a devastating effect on the psyche of individuals, as well as that of entire nations and societies. Additionally, while not all children experience war, they might be immigrants or refugees with stressful and traumatic experiences in the past. Wylie et al. (2018) stress the lack of transcultural knowledge, skills and practices as an added factor in children's and families' trauma. Children's experiences are shaped by a wide range of influences. As the experiences and impacts on children in conflict zones have many levels, the response needs to be equally varied. Bürgin et al. (2022) add that the focus of any intervention needs to be holistic, taking the physical, mental and emotional safety of children into account, then working towards resilience and ways to work through the trauma with the goal of finding ways to overcome the effects of war and conflict.

Trauma deprives children of effective care – unless, however, ECE centres can support the specific needs of children living in the aftermath of or during adverse life experiences and destabilisation resulting from armed conflict, natural disasters, migration and family violence. These children in particular require predictability and a sense of safety in order to recover – values that are promoted by *He Māpuna te Tamaiti* (Ministry of Education, 2019), which highlights the need for whanaungatanga, manaakitanga and ngākau nui for tamariki. While we do not suggest that all kaiako are health or cultural specialists, nor that they can replace specialist support, we do believe that kaiako can play an important role in children's journeys towards holistic hauora.

Kaiako might be able to support and guide families and children towards expert help and access to interpreters, and relevant community support (Wylie et al., 2018). Establishing a safe and positive environment for children to be in is foundational, and might require kaiako to establish what makes children feel safe, or what they might fear. For children, a range of noises, smells or scenarios might act as triggers and transport them right back into the conflict zone and traumatic memories. Making time to share observations with whānau and seeking their input and support are essential for creating a safe environment for tamariki (Ministry of Education, 2019). This notion is further supported by Bürgin et al. (2022), who assert the importance of opportunities for social interactions and education, as well as offering support to the parents. Over time, kaiako and families can develop goals and expectations for tamariki to achieve, and then implement strategies, including role modelling of expected behaviours in a range of situations, that can apply to both home and the early childhood education setting.

A note to kaiako

Kaiako are individual people, and therefore bring their own experiences, challenges, histories, cultures, values and beliefs to the centre. The Ministry of Education (2019) acknowledges this diversity of kaiako by encouraging them to be reflective and address often-unconscious biases and cultural assumptions. Our own beliefs and ways of doing and being reflect our thinking, actions and attitudes. Kaiako are expected to "appreciate and acknowledge differences without assuming that difference means deficit" (Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 18). Withholding judgment on parenting practices, and seeking to understand and, where appropriate, offering support to parents and whānau are steps kaiako can take to demonstrate their commitment to strengthening partnership with families. According to the Ministry of Education (2017), "parents and whānau trust that their ECE service will provide an environment where respectful relationships, encouragement, warmth and acceptance are the norm" (p. 21).

For a kaiako, it is important to understand the concept of āhurutanga and the importance of safe spaces for children and families who have experienced trauma. Learners who experience difficulties connecting to their new environment, social insecurities and anxiety need to have a designated learning space that calms, provides opportunities for one-on-one support and, importantly, acknowledges and values children's identity and who they are as individuals (Kingi, 2010). The kaiako role, therefore, extends to providing trauma-informed responses, and creating stable and safe learning spaces conducive to an ongoing recovery. Continuous professional development on understanding trauma and supporting building resilience plays a critical role in creating the best opportunities for affected children and families.

A note from the early childhood education sector

As professional ECE kaiako, we have developed strong relationships within a mainly Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland-based ECE community over the years, and have been able to draw on voices of kaiako from both public and privately owned services, who are involved in supporting children and families with refugee backgrounds. We have also had the opportunity for informal conversations with some families, whose voices are captured in this kōrero. We invited kaiako to share their experiences and understanding of how play can facilitate addressing and working through traumatic experiences of tamariki in their country of origin. All kaiako contributing to this kōrero work in culturally diverse ECE settings across both islands of Aotearoa.

Kaiako A shared that, after conducting a self-review on how the setting accommodates children with refugee backgrounds:

> *We have discovered a gap, like … none of our team really knew how to approach these children and their parents when they first come [into the setting]. We just weren't confident and were worried that we could say the wrong thing or upset them even more. It was really scary, the responsibility of it all. As a team we decided to do some research and also find some PD and with Sal [the manager] we developed guidelines. We called it 'Takaro for Everyone'. It was really good, because we also got the parents involved. We were lucky, because one of our kaiako speaks Kurdish, so that helped a lot when developing relationships with parents. They really were our greatest resource! It was so good to talk with them and ask what they thought their children needed most from us and from the centre. It worked*

really well for those two children and their whānau and we learned a lot, as a team, you know. Play really is a great way to involve children with trauma in the setting and get the parents on board as well.

Kaiako B reflected on play as a way to support the hauora of children with refugee backgrounds:

We felt that the parents were reluctant to come … and talk to us. We were really challenged by the language barrier and also by feeling that the parents were maybe too scared to talk to us. It was really sad that we couldn't find a way to connect, and you could see that when they dropped off their wee boy in the morning, it took a long time to get through to him and make him feel safe and welcomed at the centre. Mornings were our most challenging time! He took a long time before he felt confident to approach other kids, and started building friendships. It was interesting to watch, because it was through play that he got to open up to other children. Not with words at all! But he watched them and then joined in – a little bit at a time. We did have chats with other children and explained that they have to be patient and not scare him away, and that they need to be kind because he has been through so much already.

Kaiako C works in a small, monocultural team and found that:

We really lack cultural knowledge and practice in our team, so when these two families arrived in our centre, we felt a bit lost. The three children stick together and play by themselves – they are not really looking to make friends outside of their own bubble. We quickly realised that, as a team, we had to learn more about their culture and maybe games that they play at home. In the end we made use of loose parts, because they are so open ended, and we figured that would be a good first step to give them some freedom to choose what they want to do. I think it was quite a comfort for them, because they could explore and create without being overwhelmed by the new environment and slowly integrate. The loose parts are a favourite of our children, so it was a good way to give them a platform to give a start to their first friendships. We have reflected a lot and decided to enrol in PD to help us grow our cultural knowledge, so we can be better prepared and support the children and families better.

Kaiako D, who is also in a small rural monocultural ECE centre, shared her concerns.

We've tried many, many strategies to accommodate D into our centre. He is almost four, but his English is just emerging, and he gets really frustrated when things don't go the way he wants them to be, to the point that he may become aggressive towards other kids, especially outside, where we often have mixed age groups. We didn't quite succeed in our relationships with parents yet, as there is a language barrier and they prefer just dropping him off and picking him up, no communication, despite our efforts to connect with them. We have been doing our best at assigning one kaiako just for D when he is outside, mostly to ensure safety for all and to try and engage him in a positive way. What is meant to be play time is now a heavily supervised time for all children. It has been quite difficult for our team, we feel this is an isolated effort when you'd hope family would engage. Well, we keep trying.

Kaiako E had positive experiences with play as a vehicle for working through trauma.

> *Yeah, it really worked for us. The children seemed to find their way into our centre community by observing play and what the others did, and then slowly started to play alongside other kids. They didn't speak English when they first came, but play was their language and the other children seemed to just understand them.*

Kaiako F emphasised the importance and value of solitary play, stating:

> *Children who have trauma show social withdrawal, and that was so clear to see the magic that play and resources can create for those kids. She would always choose something quietly, and then go and sit in her favourite spot by the window and play by herself. You could see she was really into playing, but she wasn't really interested in the other kids. She probably feels safer by herself for now and just wants to play and explore. I'm sure that she will become more interested in everyone around her, but it takes time, after all the things she has seen and been through.*

Parent A is appreciative of play-based learning for their child, who just transitioned into a large multicultural ECE setting:

> *We are so happy to see [our child] play outside. We have been so scared for so long and were always inside. But now to see him play and climb in the trees is so special. We never wanted to leave him alone. It was just never safe! From the first week here, he loved being outside. We took him to a playground, and I cried because I could see he was so happy climbing and jumping and just running and the wind and the sun ... and we took him to the riverside. Now, at kindy, he can do all of that without us having to be scared for him. He has learned such a lot just from being able to go outside and he is asking always so many questions.*

Parent B was surprised by how much interest the teachers took in the home life and experiences before coming and upon arriving in Aotearoa:

> *The teachers are so kind – they asked us everything about our food, and traditions and culture, and how we do things at home. My husband doesn't speak English and the children are learning, but the teachers are so welcoming, and we didn't need much English when we first came and shared some cooking with everyone. The teachers, they asked us for some words so they can learn our language. I was so surprised!*

On the contrary, Parent C was concerned about the lack of cultural knowledge the teachers had, despite it being a culturally diverse setting:

> *When we came, they asked us many questions to start with, but now no one talks to us. We just drop off [our child] and then we leave. We know she is safe, but we don't know anything else she does there. The teachers, they are always so busy and don't come and talk to us.*

It can be concluded that there is a variety of views, and as kaiako we need to take on board the need to develop our understanding of the power of play as language, foundation for social connections and being. Play is multifaceted and should be at the centre of children's daily life and experience. Kaiako need to identify and break down barriers to children's play and use the

power of play to counteract children's trauma. Even solitary play, often underestimated, should be viewed as a stepping stone to more interactive and social play. It can offer children comfort and a safe place to observe from, as well as become a coping mechanism to unconsciously address trauma.

Play-based therapy as a way to healing

Children use play as a vehicle to learn about their current world, explore their identity and that of others, and find ways to connect to their social environment. *Te Whāriki* asserts that this learning happens by "doing, asking questions, interacting with others, devising theories about how things work and then trying them out" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 46). Historically, learning through play, not by formally teaching children in structured educational environments but by providing a blank canvas and unstructured time for exploration, has been recognised by a range of theorists, including Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner. Play takes the leading role in children's holistic development and is a "key context where they learn many significant occupational life skills" (Brown & Lynch, 2023, p. 250).

Depending on the severity of their emotional symptoms, children who have experienced trauma in their early years may express varying capacity to play, and may initially be unable to play symbolically due to not yet developing the ability to differentiate ideas and feelings from concrete reality (Halfon, 2017). The cumulative effect of childhood adversity and its relationship with the trauma itself influences the type of play the affected children may engage in. Creating safe, creative, well-resourced and challenging environments for these children that promote creativity and expressiveness and, importantly, support freedom of choice, is a paramount first step in supporting these children towards improved social connectedness, healing and recovery. One way to make these environments thrive and to uncover and deal with emotional and mental trauma in children is play therapy.

Childhood trauma due to deprivation and adverse experiences in the early years, whether due to growing up in a war zone, or a threatening and socially hostile environment, negatively affects interpersonal relationships and all aspects of development. The effects of trauma are "widespread and may impact the cognitive, affective, behavioural, or physical realities of the exposed individual" (Crenshaw et al., 2021, p. 301). While it may be widely assumed that all children have the ability to play, the reality is that some children exhibit limited play skills. In particular, children who have grown up in deprivation and experienced severe emotional, mental health and behavioural challenges may have their ability to play negatively affected and their play skills significantly underdeveloped. Some of these children have never had the opportunity to learn to play, due to limited social and emotional skills and overall skills to function socially (Murray, 2021).

Children need a safe environment to play and also to engage in the opportunities that play and play-based therapy has to offer (Cohen & Gadassi, 2018). *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) highlights the power of play and thus child-led learning. This stance is complementary to Rogers' (1951) flexible and individualised conception of therapy, describing it as person-centred and non-directive therapy, which lends itself to use with children, as play can be equally child-led. Research on the positive outcomes of play therapy for these children confirms that through providing a safe, accepting and free-to-explore environment, children are able to build their self-concept, and develop trust, self-acceptance and coping awareness and skills (Halfon, 2017; Murray, 2021; Ray et al., 2021).

The importance of play is not new to the early childhood sector, and while kaiako are not specialised play therapists, they use a variety of approaches to play. Similarly, play therapy is customised and, depending on the individual characteristics of children involved, various techniques will be used. As mentioned earlier, social connectedness for children who have experienced early-years trauma is of paramount importance in making sense of their social environment and linking themselves to the world. The therapeutic exploration of self in play and expressive therapy settings is a way to initiate interactions with and response to the social environment. It is important to note that the expressive therapy settings are not limited to early childhood premises, where different forms of therapy such as music, dance, drama and art are accessible, but may include local community centres and health clinics.

Interaction with others "begins with the formulation of how we begin to develop a self-concept" (Yasenik & Gardner, 2021, p. 341). While the initial understanding of who we are typically develops by communication through early relational experiences, the sense of self might be fluid and shifting, depending on the environment we are in. Family and the wider social environment play a pivotal role in the development of a positive self-concept, mental and emotional wellbeing, and a positive sense of belonging. Those concepts can be explored in the safety of play and play-based activity with a certain amount of detachment, as children can slip into the role or character of a person, and variations and repetitions of scenarios, behaviours and ideas are not only allowed but welcomed.

There are multiple models of play therapy that can be applied to ECE settings to support children and families affected by trauma. One of these models is the Play Therapy Dimensions Model developed by Yasenik and Gardner (2021). While this model would typically be used by play therapists, it may also be valuable to kaiako who work with children affected by trauma. The model comprises two primary dimensions: consciousness and directiveness. The model can be adapted by an early childhood teaching team as both a decision-making and planning tool. It prompts kaiako to reflect on their strategies to support children affected by trauma and the readiness of children for these strategies to be applied. The consciousness dimension represents a child's play activities and verbalisations. Importantly, there is a need for emotional distance from the trauma the child is trying to overcome.

Yasenik and Gardner (2021, p. 343) refer to "a weaving process", in which the movement across consciousness can be expected to shift up, down and sideways, accompanied by verbalisations, while the child is working with certain levels of conscious awareness. At other times, a more symbolic play can be encouraged, to allow the child to distance themselves from negative memories, thoughts and feelings. Symbols used in play assist the child in assimilating the new possibilities into a past representation, thus helping the positive change (Yasenik & Gardner, 2021). The directiveness dimension indicates the level of intervention from the teacher's side, tracking the play through observation, actively elaborating and extending the play, and assisting with verbalisations.

This model is one of the multiple examples of ways to support children affected by early-years trauma; it allows for a tailored approach to suit the individual characteristics of the child involved in play and it provides guidance for teachers to track the important milestones of positive changes. Play therapy is not just limited to the Play Therapy Dimensions Model – there are multiple models that can be used, ranging from directive to non-directive approaches, with the therapist guiding the play while also encouraging child-centred learning. Psychodynamic play therapy, for instance, explores the child's unconscious thoughts and feelings through play, and cognitive behavioural play therapy integrates cognitive and behavioural techniques into play, supporting children to identify and change negative thought patterns and behaviour (Koukourikos et al., 2021).

Conclusion

Aotearoa is in a privileged position with regard to supporting tamariki who have experienced trauma, as it already has an ECE curriculum that promotes holistic, inclusive and culturally appropriate care and education for all tamariki. *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) supports working in partnership with families and whānau, as well as the wider community, which enables kaiako to offer individualised support to tamariki, taking their specific experiences, needs and backgrounds into account. Kaiako can draw on the expertise of families and carers when considering appropriate cultural practices that can be woven into play opportunities. By creating play opportunities that encourage and support tamariki to work through their trauma, they can also make connections to their worlds, including not only areas that they might find scary, but also those that might offer solace and a way forward. Therefore, knowing the children well and working in partnership with their families and whānau is essential, as the parents' insights, alongside their aspirations, can further inform the individualised support that kaiako can offer.

It is worth noting that kaiako cannot be expected to be experts in supporting tamariki with and through trauma and, therefore, working with the early childhood community, exploring what they require to better serve tamariki and whānau, needs to be a priority. Play therapy can be implemented in early childhood services to support tamariki, but this may at times require the support of specialists, professional development for kaiako, and working in partnership with the communities the children live in. Appreciating that a family is not an isolated unit but an integral part of our social system, and developing cultural awareness that is informed by the families, can support a hands-on, practice-based support for children and families who have experienced trauma. Investigations into ways to problem solve with whānau and tamariki, as well as the early childhood sector, could inform a suitable approach that enables kaiako to respond quickly, meaningfully and holistically.

Glossary

āhurutanga	comfort
hauora	wellbeing
kaiako	teacher
kōrero	conversation
manaakitanga	care for each other
ngākau nui	great respect
tamariki	children
whānau	extended family
whanaungatanga	connection

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Authors

Galina Stebletsova is a Senior Lecturer at MIT and Unitec with keen interest in children's wellbeing and how curriculum supports it, aspects of play in relation to cultural diversity, children's mental health, and the role a holistic curriculum plays in supporting children and families today.

Barbara Scanlan has worked as an ECE teacher in Austria, Scotland and Aotearoa, and believes that play has the power to educate, to heal and to bring joy even in challenging situations.

A Conversation on Mentoring

Lee-Anne Turton and Katie Farrimond, with Sue Emerson

Mentoring and leadership are fundamental themes in the dominant discourse of early childhood education (ECE). Mentoring is perceived as a dynamic, two-way relationship that nurtures professional development. In this partnership, mentors guide mentees in building their knowledge and skills, while also opening opportunities to enhance teacher wellbeing (Dreer-Goethe, 2023). However, this guidance is not a one-directional transfer, but a mutual exchange, embodying the socio-cultural perspective that learning is a socially mediated, collaborative process through both formal and informal exchanges.

Recognising the widely acknowledged role of strong teacher leaders in ECE, we explore potential professional learning opportunities that may strengthen teaching practices through supportive and meaningful mentor partnerships. This conversation on mentoring is structured through the interplay of theoretical framing and interview-based narrative produced in discussion with Sue Emerson, an experienced educational leader and teacher mentor. It explores mentor partnerships in ECE, drawing on current literature, research and practice. Barriers within mentoring relationships are also discussed, alongside practical strategies for navigating these challenges.

Sue Emerson brings over four decades of experience in education, contributing to leadership development across a range of settings and curricula, including ECE and initial teacher education. She has authored five youth leadership programmes delivered nationally and continues to shape mentoring practice through her work in academia and teacher development. Her values-based approach to mentoring reflects a commitment to ongoing learning, adaptability and relational leadership, offering valuable insights into the evolving landscape of mentoring in ECE. The authors have worked alongside Sue for several years, benefiting from her mentoring and leadership in their own career development.

What is your mentoring philosophy?

MENTORING AND LEADERSHIP

Sue Emerson: One core philosophy sits at the centre of the approach I take to leadership, in relationships, and the mentoring of others: He tangata, he tangata, he tangata. It is people, it is people, it is people. People-first leaders will prioritise people above any task, which allows them to walk with their people and know their intent, their drivers and their goals. John Maxwell (2017) suggests that experience by itself teaches some lessons; however, using reflection and communication ensures learning occurs in this experience. Mentoring plays its part in accelerating individuals to the next step through collaborative evaluation. I believe it is too easy to just leave the learning to experience, rather than capture it in formal professional-development mentoring or informally as it occurs in real time. I challenge us to do both as mentor.

Covey and Merrill (2006) speak of leadership as a way of living rather than a role or position. This forms the platform of Sue's philosophy towards leadership and the mentoring of others. She believes that you cannot be a mentor if you do not live true to your words.

What is the value of mentoring in education?

REALISING POTENTIAL THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

SE: Education, and in particular teaching, is a complex profession that has many facets and influences, including codes of practice and government regulations, as well as being grounded in relationships with others. The role of leaders and mentors within education is in simplifying those complexities, 'flattening the bumps in the road' so to speak. Education is about growing human potential and mentoring is an inherent part of this process; through seeking and sharing wisdom, knowledge and experience we all grow in our practice. The value lies in the collective. When you take on a leadership or mentoring role you take on the privilege of influencing others as part of the leadership mantle; however, with this comes the responsibility of respect for others and the acceptance that it is no longer solely about you, there is a wider responsibility and opportunity as a leader to listen to where others are coming from and to help them grow on their terms. This is mentoring.

John Maxwell (2017) believes that for many people their innate sense of motivation has been squashed out of them by stress, lack of support, busyness, poor attitudes, feeling unappreciated, having no resources, lack of training or poor communication. For our teachers, many of these feelings are salient and very familiar. Maxwell says that you need to re-excite people about their potential and the possibilities for them through mentoring. Often it includes overcoming their old blocks or barriers that have held them back. To do this you need to have a match with a mentoring relationship; you can't force people together, it needs to be reciprocal in wanting to enter the mentoring relationship.

When you mentor others, never forget that you are escorting them on a path to success rather than sending them off; stick by them until they are prepared to take off, and let them leave when they are prepared.

Mentoring in ECE is not only about guiding practice, but also about reigniting a teacher's passion, curiosity and belief in their own capabilities. All educators have the capacity to actively contribute to mentoring and leadership within the ECE culture of mahi kotahitanga and ngākau māhaki. At its core, leadership is both the ability and the opportunity to influence the thinking and actions of others. As Maxwell (2017) suggests, our everyday interactions carry the power to inspire, support and guide, making influence a shared responsibility across the profession. However, this cannot be left to chance; leaders must make opportunities for formal mentoring arrangements to develop.

In ECE, leadership is about facilitating others' development, rather than exerting authority. Mentors scaffold learning experiences, challenge assumptions, and stimulate reflective thinking by creating a safe environment for mentees to learn from risks and mistakes. This mentoring approach aligns with ECE's core values, emphasising respect for individual learning paths, the importance of social interactions in learning, and the belief in collective knowledge building. It recognises the socio-cultural underpinnings in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), and the ways this informs mentoring and leadership as integral to ECE's ethos.

Mentoring is understood as offering guidance and support for professional growth and self-assurance. Mentors assist mentees in navigating their path through action and reflection, challenging preconceived assumptions, practices and beliefs about teaching. Learning and development are promoted through a reciprocal learning process. This not only ensures the growth of the individual, but also benefits the broader collective (Education Council New Zealand, 2017; Klages et al., 2020).

There are numerous advantages to serving as a mentor. Dreer-Goethe (2023) corroborates this, highlighting that research supports the positive impacts for mentors, including enhanced pedagogical knowledge and communication skills. Mentoring serves to fortify and cultivate a positive teacher identity and, when successful, enhances teacher wellbeing for both mentor and mentee. This research also emphasises the importance of pairing mentors and mentees effectively for successful outcomes. It suggests that the skills and mindsets of both individuals play a significant role in establishing these relationships (Dreer-Goethe, 2023).

Klages et al. (2020) identify a potential power imbalance in mentoring relationships where the mentor also holds a leadership role over the mentee. This dual positioning can constrain the development of a trusting and open relationship, as mentees may self-censor or withhold concerns due to perceived risks. Understandings of power are widely contested, ranging from views of power as domination to more enabling or relational forms. Despite these differences, theorists generally agree that power is socially and relationally constituted and that it resides in the social context (Avelino, 2021). As social contexts shift, power relations inevitably change, making empowerment a vital strategy for fostering transformative change. In mentoring, empowerment supports mentees to take greater responsibility for their own development within a less directive structure (Hobson, 2020). This approach redistributes authority and fosters reciprocal engagement that affirms each teacher's voice, agency and professional identity.

AKO – TO BOTH TEACH AND LEARN

SE: I also don't see that a mentor has more knowledge than the mentee necessarily or always in every situation, and neither does a mentee necessarily have less; the relationship should be based on mutual trust and respect so trusted conversations can take place. I am inspired by much of the work of Simon Sinek et al. (2017) about leadership and mentoring. One idea from their work that resounds with me when referring to mentoring is that both parties turn up to teach, and both parties turn up to learn. This reciprocity reminds me of the tuakana–teina model and ako concepts within te ao Māori. In the case of this model, younger, less experienced people are guided by older or more experienced people; however, it is often entirely reciprocal.

As ECE centres become more diverse and multicultural, effective leadership and mentoring must be anchored in robust, mutual relationships within a professional community. Such connections foster a space where a multitude of perspectives are acknowledged and diversity is applauded (Aitken, 2013; Turton & Wrightson, 2017; Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2016). Within these relationships, it is important to consider the mentor–mentee relationship as a partnership rather than an experienced expert collaborating with a novice or learner (Langdon & Ward, 2015).

This notion resonates with the kaupapa Māori principle of whanaungatanga, which advocates for co-operative leadership (Mane et al., 2015). Implicit within whanaungatanga are the concepts of ako and tuakana–teina. The tuakana–teina leadership model represents a dynamic and reciprocal relationship between the leader and the follower. The mutual exchanges between the two are reflective of Māori leadership principles, values and customs (Ruru, 2016). Additionally, ako acknowledges the insights that both mentors and mentees contribute to learning exchanges. It recognises how shared learning experiences can foster the development of new knowledge and comprehension (Keown et al., 2005). Within a mentoring partnership, this reciprocity encourages mutual respect. The *Educational Leadership Capability Framework* (Wylie et al., 2018) highlights the responsibility of leaders to ensure te

Tiriti o Waitangi forms the foundation for culturally responsive pedagogy. Mentors must ensure they grow their own and others' capability to uphold this commitment.

What do you consider to be the most important qualities or skills for a mentor working with mentees, and why?

RESPONSIVE RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIPS

SE: Humility is a key quality that I believe a mentor needs to have when fostering a positive mentoring relationship. Part of this involves the mentor removing ego from the dynamic, as well as recognising the potential power imbalance that can exist. A mentor who shows respect and trust early on will create a strong foundation for the relationship to build and grow. These are very important qualities that a mentor should have.

Within the *Educational Leadership Capability Framework* (Wylie et al., 2018), building and sustaining high-trust relationships features as the first of nine capabilities. Constructing and maintaining relationships of high trust is the essence of effective leadership. When leaders demonstrate humility, it ensures that relationships are built in their education experience while treating others with openness and respect.

Such relationships are formed when leaders respectfully interact with others, demonstrating empathy and modesty, and promoting transparency in conversations. These leaders possess a high degree of emotional intelligence and self-awareness. They enhance health, safety and wellbeing, and strengthen relationships (Wylie et al., 2018).

People skills and the ability to connect positively and constructively are essential to any potential mentoring. Emotional intelligence includes being able to manage your feelings and emotions while maintaining empathy for others and being responsive. This view of relationships informs mentoring decisions while maintaining the integrity of the partnership (Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018). Emotionally intelligent leaders can adapt and connect with others in ways appropriate for the context; this means being understanding and reflective.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

SE: Effective communication is key in a mentoring relationship, so that everyone has a voice; this ensures that mentees feel safe and respected. When we strive for a shared understanding through effective communication, it means we are all heading towards the same goal. As the relationship grows, the roles can shift in a mentoring relationship; this is where being vulnerable and sharing our own imperfections through effective communication can enhance the learning.

Much has been written about effective communication within the field of mentoring and leadership (Aitken, 2013; Dreer-Goethe, 2023; Rodd, 2020; Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018; Turton & Wrightson, 2017). Effective communication is a cornerstone of successful mentoring and leadership. It fosters a clear understanding, builds trust and promotes a positive mentoring environment. Leaders who communicate effectively can articulate their vision, align mentees with their goals, and help them develop and grow. In mentoring, open and honest communication allows for constructive feedback and learning, paving the way for the mentee's personal and professional development. Therefore, communication plays a vital role in the dynamics of mentoring and leadership (Dreer-Goethe, 2023; Rodd, 2020; Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018).

ACTIVE LISTENING

SE: Listening is an essential skill for mentors to be able to understand the perspective of their mentee and enable them to bridge the connection between the practices and new ways of thinking. Part of active listening is holding back on your own story to invite the mentee's ideas and perspectives; doing this allows you to understand the challenges and aspirations of those you are working with. If mentees feel heard and valued, then new ideas are more likely to develop. Mentoring involves guiding and supporting mentees in their personal and professional development, so, ultimately, this is influence, nothing more, nothing less.

Active listening is a familiar strategy within the ECE profession and is crucial for successful communication within leadership and mentoring (Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018). This complex process involves expressing empathy, posing relevant questions, rephrasing and summarising to confirm understanding. The objective of active listening is to not only fully comprehend the speaker's message, but also to consider any potential feelings that underlie the message. As the process of active listening is nuanced, it thus requires a broader range of emotional and cognitive activity (Rost & Wilson, 2013).

What methods do you use to help mentees set professional-development goals and track their progress?

COLLABORATIVE GOAL SETTING

SE: In the beginning, the mentor needs to ensure that they have set up the purpose and intention of the mentoring relationship. This is an important skill for a mentor, as it creates a foundation with professional boundaries considered and the code of conduct in the given profession. This is like an agreement or contract between the mentor and mentee. It helps to create a professional partnership, and it can keep being referred to if help is needed to get back on track. Once this purpose has been defined, you can start by establishing a foundation of trust. This involves being consistently available and maintaining confidentiality with the information shared. Through these steps, the mentee will begin to feel that there is genuine care and become comfortable to open up. It can be a challenge for mentors and mentees when there are differing expectations of each other or the purpose of the partnership. This can lead to frustration from both sides and impact on the success of the mentorship. This misalignment can be overcome with a clear direction and vision outlined at the start of the mentoring partnership, including the roles and responsibilities for each person within this. Simon Sinek suggests we work out why we are doing what we are doing first and foremost, to understand ourselves and to initiate change. I use this strategy when working with my team. It helps to work out the individual's 'why'; particularly when working towards individual changes in behaviours, approaches or work habits.

Mentoring relationships are based on a reciprocal process where learning and growth develop through reflective communication. Mentors have an important role in this relationship, where they support mentees to set goals and empower them to work towards these with support and guidance (Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018). An important element of successful mentoring is having goals that are mutually defined, and working collaboratively to consider new ways of thinking and learning (Rodd, 2020; Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018). Formulating realistic goals is the first step in the mentoring relationship, and then supporting these goals with meaningful feedback that relates to practical experiences and learning (Dreer-Goethe, 2023). When this partnership is developed within the context of professional learning and is based on respect and support, both mentor and mentee are motivated to be active

participants, therefore striving for excellence (Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018). By setting collaborative goals, mentors move beyond the ease of leaving learning to experience and instead cultivate deliberate, reflective practice.

DEVELOPING AND GUIDING

SE: Specific goal-orientated approaches, such as formal professional-development systems within an organisation, work best, as there is a timeline with clear objectives and a shared understanding of the outcomes. This would have specific, achievable goals to be met, and often works well around a start-to-end project when you don't know the mentee well. An example of this may be a student teacher on a practicum placement. Another valid strategy for mentoring is the informal day-to-day mentoring that occurs more organically within teaching and learning environments. This is about touching base with people, regular catch-ups and check-ins to 'take the temperature' of the relationships; this way you can feel if people are disconnected.

Once goals are established, it is important to ensure that there are regular meetings to create a safe space for questions, dialogue and sharing challenges. These meetings create opportunities to review the goals that were set, discuss progress and give meaningful feedforward. Strategies for supporting teachers' practice during these goal-orientated time-frames could include working alongside them to co-design learning experiences, observing practice and giving feedback, and writing reflections to review progress and discuss challenges (Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018).

Informal day-to-day mentoring focuses on the principles of distributed leadership, which champions individual contributions and emphasises their unique leading practices, rather than relying solely on positional leadership (Rodd, 2020; Turton & Wrightson, 2017). Leading practices recognise the leadership capability of every teacher within the learning environment. This can be demonstrated informally when teachers check in on colleagues within the culture of mahi kotahitanga and ngākau māhaki. Acknowledging and empowering individuals to share their leading practices fosters a sense of collaboration, where leadership is a shared endeavour (Turton & Wrightson, 2017).

Within all mentoring relationships, mentors will need to be adaptable and flexible to tailor their support to the unique challenges and contexts. Being adaptable allows the mentor to address diverse learning styles and preferences, as well as respond to emerging trends within the learning environment. As the mentoring relationship develops, the role of the mentor evolves and moves from more direct guidance to empowering mentees to make more of their own informed decisions. Mentors should be prepared to make space for mentees to step up and take ownership of their professional development (Rodd, 2020; Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018).

When working through these goals, teachers will need to reflect on their practice and make intentional choices about ways to improve outcomes for learners. Mentors can support mentees to implement intentional changes and then assess these through observation, reflection and feedback. Once mentees can see the impact on learners, they can make further changes to continue developing their teaching practice. The informal day-to-day mentoring can benefit this ongoing process, as discussions and feedback can be fluid as the learning develops and changes (Rodd, 2020; Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018).

Providing constructive feedback and evaluating progress in a mentoring relationship can be delicate tasks. Balancing the need for honest feedback with maintaining a supportive and non-threatening environment is crucial. Additionally, mentors must ensure that feedback is specific, actionable, and focused on growth rather than criticism (Rodd, 2020; Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018).

What strategies would you use to guide teachers in reflecting on their practice and/or to support teachers in addressing challenges they face in the classroom?

CRITICAL REFLECTION

SE: Reflection transforms our experience into a profound understanding. When we pause, reflect, and reframe our encounters, we extract deeper meaning. Conversations with others – be it mentors, peers, or even our inner dialogue – expand our mental horizons. They challenge assumptions and refine our understanding.

Reflection on practice is a familiar activity for early childhood teachers who have studied in Aotearoa New Zealand (Afrin & Bishop, 2023). Socio-cultural learning theory recognises the learning process as active engagement between learners and teachers. The Aotearoa ECE curriculum *Te Whāriki* states that it is the responsibility of all kaiako (teachers) to be "thoughtful and reflective about what they do, using evidence, critical inquiry and problem-solving to shape their practice" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 59). In a mentoring partnership, both the mentor and the mentee actively participate in discussions, problem solving, and knowledge-sharing activities. The mentor facilitates opportunities for the mentee to explore ideas, ask questions and contribute to the learning process. Stamopoulos & Barblett (2018) espouse an essential leadership capability to create safe spaces for individual reflection and developing self-awareness.

All teachers benefit from ongoing critical reflection on philosophical thinking and pedagogy. Taking time to stop, think and change can help us respond less reactively, balance our energy and manage stress. This balance can be achieved by ensuring our actions align with our beliefs (Rumjahn, 2022; Klages et al., 2019). As Aotearoa continues to move towards a culturally diverse community, teachers are working and teaching alongside kaiako, tamariki and whānau from all corners of the globe (Chan, 2011; Stebletsova & Scanlan, 2023). Therefore, we must continue to challenge taken-for-granted beliefs that we hold from our own identity, and to consider the values and beliefs of others in the learning community. Reflective practice facilitates the reconstruction of knowledge and the evolution of understanding (Brock, 2015). This is a transformative process that involves making implicit thoughts and biases explicit, challenging them and changing them. It is a continuous journey of self-improvement and growth (Afrin & Bishop, 2023).

Mentoring is not solely about providing support; it is also a space for critical dialogue that challenges assumptions and fosters professional growth. Conversations that prompt mentors and mentees to question their beliefs and practices can be profoundly transformative, especially when they occur within collaborative environments such as professional learning communities (Arnsby et al., 2023). These interactions encourage reflection, disrupt accepted norms and contribute to the development of more thoughtful, responsive educators. Such dialogue also plays a role in challenging positional authority and promoting leadership through collaboration, reinforcing the idea that mentoring can be a site of shared learning and mutual empowerment (Turton & Wrightson, 2017).

PROBLEM SOLVING

SE: I am careful to hold back my own story to invite the mentees' ideas and perspectives. A strategy I often use to guide someone to unpack issues or problems is asking 'why?'. I start by respectfully listening to the concern and begin using 'the five whys' to dig down and identify the heart of the problem. This invites the mentee to reflect at a deeper level rather than have me offer an early solution. This requires active listening so I can prompt with the 'why is that?' questions.

The diverse cultures, values, beliefs and philosophies we find in ECE create a vibrant mosaic; however, differences can arise that require leaders to support solutions. Problem solving requires collaboration and respectful communication so that the underlying cause of the problem can be uncovered. During this process, it is important to hear different points of view to ensure everyone feels heard. Stamopoulos and Barblett (2018) suggest first understanding a problem and considering the priorities within it before deciding on the best course of action.

Another powerful strategy is when a mentor engages in a series of reflective 'why?' questions with the mentee, rather than providing direct solutions. This powerful problem-solving approach aims to uncover the root cause of an issue or unexpected situation. By asking 'why?' five times, the true nature of the problem and its solution become evident. After an unexpected event, the 'five whys process' involves tracing the issue back to its root cause. The purpose is not to assign blame, but rather to understand why something occurred (Miller & Maellaro, 2016). Active listening is crucial for a mentor, allowing them to delve deeper into the situation while eliciting the mentee's responses through progressively deeper 'why?' questions. Once the root cause is identified, strategies can be used to address the issue.

In your experience, what are the main challenges within a successful mentoring relationship?

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

SE: I have a belief that a challenge is never more important than the relationships that are within it, so any decision starts with head and heart. Rather than focusing on the problem, we strategise and 'solutionise' from the cause of the issue. Asking 'why is this?' or 'why is that?' takes us to the root cause and then we 'solutionise' from there.

Mentors can experience rewarding outcomes and relationships that impact positively on their wellbeing, as well as contribute to the educational community (Dreer-Goethe, 2023). However, mentoring also presents unique challenges, which can have an impact on the outcomes. Addressing these challenges requires effective communication, flexibility, empathy, and a willingness to adapt strategies to meet the unique needs of each mentee. As discussed, building a strong foundation of trust and mutual respect is also key to navigating these challenges and fostering a positive and productive mentoring relationship. Just as successful mentoring relationships can impact positively on teacher wellbeing, the opposite can be said for unsuccessful mentoring. Dreer-Goethe (2023) highlights the stress that excessive or unsuccessful mentoring can have on a teacher, and how this can impact their overall wellbeing.

Below are some challenges commonly experienced by teachers in a mentoring partnership in ECE. We discuss the implications of these along with insights from Sue and some possible strategies to overcome them. The challenges include time, communication, change and mentor experience.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

SE: If you can focus on respect and grace in times of conflict, and prioritise relationships and connections, then it changes the way you deal with conflict. One thing I have never been good at is stepping away from the fire, potentially I care too much, and this results in me staying too close to the fire.

Knowing when to step towards the fire and when to step back is important; at times you want to fix things, but you also need to recognise when you are not always the right person to support or fix the situation. Part of mentoring is emotional intelligence and reading the situation and the people within it. An additional important skill for a mentor is the ability in challenging situations to ensure that there are professional boundaries in place, to keep both people in the partnership safe.

Navigating a constantly changing political, cultural and social landscape within ECE often leads to conflicts (Rodd, 2020). Conflict is inevitable in a group setting, as diverse perspectives and interests naturally lead to differing opinions and potential disagreements (Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018). However, this presents opportunities for teams to learn and grow through conflict. The heart of conflict resolution is respectful relationships and effective communication (Rodd, 2020; Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018).

Priddy (2024) presents the FBI model, representing feelings, behaviour and impact, as a tool to guide effective confrontation. This guides the mentor to prepare a specific statement highlighting the behaviour, how it makes the mentor feel and the impact this has on the team. Once the mentor shares the statement, they remain silent while the mentee processes their response. This approach will guide the conversation until an acceptable outcome has been reached. By adhering to this method, conversations become more empathetic and respectful, steering towards resolution rather than conflict. The FBI model thus promotes positive exchanges and effective communication and maintains individual morale.

TIME

SE: Time is one of the roadblocks that often arise within a mentoring relationship. Often, within a work-based environment, finding time away from the work can be difficult. However, within my available time I work on emphasising people over the tasks on my desk, and having the regular touch-base check-ins helps me to identify when people may need additional support or time.

Time is one of the most pressing challenges that teachers face with successful mentoring relationships. Often both participants are busy, so making time for consistent and regular meetings can be difficult, and often the hours allocated to these are insufficient to be effective (Morrissey & Nolan, 2015). Mentees can benefit from more time and the increased opportunity to work alongside mentors, and this can help the power imbalance and support the development of authentic relationships (Polley, 2022). Often mentors are inexperienced and still developing their skills in mentoring, therefore finding the time to both support mentees and develop their mentoring skills can be difficult (Arnsby et al., 2023).

Making use of technology can be a good strategy to overcome the challenge of finding time when both mentor and mentee are available through tools such as shared calendars, shared documents, and online meetings when barriers occur in regular meeting times (Morrissey & Nolan, 2015). Having multiple ways to communicate means that everyone can access the information at a time and through a medium that is suitable for them (Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018).

The Education Council's *Educational Leadership Capability Framework* (Wylie at al., 2018) highlights the importance of constructing and maintaining shared leadership and a professional community. Optimal learning is achieved when the educators involved collaborate to disseminate their knowledge and scrutinise their methods. Mentoring focuses on creating the necessary conditions and practices for collaboration and fostering a vibrant, proactive and successful community committed to continuous learning, innovation and enhancement for the benefit of all stakeholders.

Developing a professional community of practice is a way to support ongoing learning and can be developed within one organisation, or across organisations (Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018). Creating access through an online collective learning space for teachers and mentors to access together is a way to share ideas, and this opens space for diverse ideas and perspectives while overcoming the need to be in the same place at the same time. This has been seen as a major benefit in research undertaken, where it was identified that online options meant that teachers had "an early childhood network to belong to, without the need to travel for meetings" (Morrissey & Nolan, 2015, p. 43).

RESPONDING TO CHANGE

SE: Change can be challenging for many people, teachers included. Overcoming these challenges requires a relationship based on mutual trust and patience. I use positive reinforcement as one way of mentoring people through the tough stuff. While saying that, I am acutely aware of the balance between being overly positive and using authentic leadership to help move others to a new space with different outcomes.

While change can be positive and important to a growth mindset, there are many reasons why teachers resist it. These can be related to fear of the unknown, insufficient knowledge of the change, and lack of trust in those making changes (Rodd, 2020; Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018). Change requires open, honest communication within a culture of trust. Ineffective communication will become a barrier to change, and will impact progress when there is a lack of clarity. Communication is often affected by factors such as language barriers, differences in communication styles or even generational gaps, as well as other challenges that can lead to misunderstanding (Rodd, 2020; Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018).

Navigating change requires a delicate balance between honouring teachers' expertise and providing clear information. When changes are proposed within a culture of trust, teachers are more likely to embrace them as a pathway to growth and improved outcomes (Rodd, 2020; Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018).

LACK OF MENTORING EXPERIENCE

SE: People need to find their tribe! I have found three personal mentors who are a regular 'go-to' for me when I have a difficult decision to make, a difficult conversation to have or a challenging situation to address. We have all been mentors for each other or been mentees with each other for over 30 years. Sometimes each person in any one conversation has an opportunity to be the mentor, then they swap to be the mentee. Choose at least one mentor who thinks very differently to you so they will challenge you and stretch your thinking.

Despite the critical role mentoring plays in teachers' career development, it is often performed without any formal learning or professional development (Arnsby et al., 2023; Langdon & Ward, 2015). Participating in mentorship training programmes or workshops can provide theoretical knowledge and practical skills necessary for effective mentoring. These programmes often cover essential topics such as communication skills, setting goals, providing feedback and understanding the needs of the mentee (Langdon & Ward, 2015).

Langdon and Ward (2015) advocate for a shift from a focus on the transmission of knowledge toward flexible, educative mentoring. This can be achieved through prolonged and serious engagement with evidence about mentoring practices. Their research observed teacher practice moving from a focus on imparting knowledge for practice to an exploration of knowledge of practice. This goes beyond superficial support, emphasising a vision of 'good teaching', treating teachers as learners, and viewing the classroom as a site of inquiry.

Mentorship is a continuous journey of learning and growth, not just for the mentee, but also for the mentor. One common misconception is that once someone becomes a mentor, they have reached the pinnacle of their learning journey. We must realise that this is only the beginning of new learning. Surrounding teachers with role models and mentors can provide new perspectives, insights and knowledge that can enhance their mentoring skills. Networking often means access to a wider group of professionals, which can lead to more learning opportunities. This not only benefits the mentors themselves but also enhances the quality of support they can provide to their mentees (Langdon & Ward, 2015).

Conclusion

Mentoring partnerships have the potential to grow individual capability and contribute to the collective good of ECE in Aotearoa. Through the familiar lens of socio-cultural learning theory, knowledge and understanding are constructed through social interactions and experiences. The key to all successful mentoring partnerships is strong, responsive and reciprocal relationships built on mutual trust and respect (Rodd, 2020; Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018). Mentoring partnerships need to go beyond a focus on imparting knowledge for practice, to an exploration of knowledge of practice. Utilising strategies that enhance mentoring relationships, outlined here, as well as overcoming challenges and conflicts in professional and constructive ways, can lead to transformation within ECE. The sector must take responsibility for investing in the development of theoretical knowledge and practical skills necessary for effective mentoring before teachers find themselves in these roles. Mentoring in ECE is not only about guiding practice, but also about re-exciting a teacher's potential. Ensuring that mentoring remains a transformative supports both individual growth and the collective flourishing of early childhood education in Aotearoa.

Glossary

ako	teaching and learning
kaiako	teacher
kaupapa Māori	Māori approach
mahi kotahitanga	working together
ngākau māhaki	working with heart
tamariki	children
tuakana–teina	elder sibling–younger sibling, mentor–mentee
whānau	extended family
whanaungatanga	relationship

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Authors

Lee-Anne Turton is a Senior Lecturer and the Academic Programme Manager of the Bachelor of Teaching (ECE) at MIT and Unitec, with interests in educational leadership and initial teacher education programme development.

Katie Farrimond is the Professional Experience Co-ordinator on the Bachelor of Teaching (ECE) at MIT and Unitec, with interests in mentoring and fostering professional relationships.

Sue Emerson is currently the Head of School of Bridgepoint and Community Studies and the School of Sport at MIT and Unitec.

Navigating Teaching and Learning During Covid-19: Implications for future practice

Lata Rana, Yvonne Culbreath and Michelle Johnson

Introduction

To provide a retrospective view of teaching and learning during the Covid-19 lockdown in the Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood Education) initial teacher programme at Unitec, we gathered perspectives and reflections of both lecturers and students enrolled in this period. We describe the impact of shifting from in-person to virtual classroom settings, including the effect on teaching pedagogies. Amongst the challenges posed by the pandemic, we discuss the delicate task of maintaining and nurturing relationships while supporting student wellbeing. We address the challenges stemming from the effects of lost opportunities for practicum placement and discuss how some of these challenges were mitigated.

Research literature from national and international studies is examined to support this exploration. We discuss significant learnings drawn from the impact of Covid-19 online learning and the implications for the continued iteration of flexible learner-centred pedagogies. Although several studies have been conducted that focus on experiences of teaching and learning remotely during Covid-19, this study focuses specifically on a field-based early childhood education (ECE) programme, with an emphasis on future learning.

On Monday 23 March 2020, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced that Aotearoa New Zealand was at Alert Level 3, rising to Alert Level 4 two days later. At that time the nationwide lockdown was expected to last for at least four weeks. Commentators later said that the immediate and strict response limited the spread of the virus in Aotearoa and ultimately saved lives. By the end of November 2021, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland had spent 181 days in either Alert Level 4 or 3 since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, which ranked as one of the world's longest Covid-19 lockdowns.

The impact of Covid-19

When asked to recall an event in the year 2020, most people experience a moment of dawning recognition that that was the year the Covid-19 pandemic reshaped our lives. The pandemic produced a crisis in all spheres of life. In education, the closure of schools and face-to-face teaching activities impacted educational institutes internationally. During the pandemic, e-learning and mobile technologies became a necessity to continue the educational process of teaching and learning. Students and teachers had to adapt to teaching and learning online in a very short time (Bose & Hicks, 2020; Bilecen, 2020; Gurukkal, 2020; La Velle et al., 2020). The pandemic led to a rapid change in the mode of teaching and learning. It led to a change and growth for education by integrating technology and offering different platforms for teaching and learning online.

Some teachers reported a sense of innovation as they developed their technological skills and reconfigured previous practices for the online environment (Kidd & Murray, 2022). Digital tools such as breakout rooms provided a platform for student discussions and collaboration. Tools such as Google Docs, Canvas and Padlet were also widely used to support teaching and learning in the virtual classroom. However, despite the availability of digital tools for collaboration, and students' proficiency in the digital domain, both communication and engagement were identified as major challenges.

Cockburn and Chami (2022) share the experiences of teachers and learners at the University of the West Indies. They highlight how the Covid-19 pandemic has raised awareness of the need for innovation in technology to enhance teaching and learning. The authors discuss various challenges faced by students due to the pandemic. Access to computers and other technologies, and poor internet connection were challenging and this affected their motivation to learn. Long periods of self-isolation and distancing also affected the wellbeing of students and staff. The inequality in accessing tools such as laptops and other devices forced many students to use their mobile phones, which was not ideal for learning online.

In light of these challenges, Cockburn and Chami (2022) argue that academic institutes and government need to develop strategies and policies that encourage a more resilient and equitable research environment. Various strategies were put into place to support the challenges faced by students and staff. Old, refurbished computers were made available to those who needed them, and devices were provided to students on loan. Some staff were also provided with virtual private network (VPN) access. Education managers developed work-from-home policy documents to support and regulate work environments. To some extent, technology helped to offset negative effects of the pandemic. Innovations in digital tools supported educational institutes to better understand their own needs and those of their students. This has led to a step forward in using technology in education (Cockburn & Chami, 2022).

Access and inequities

Commenting on the impact of the pandemic and educational resilience, Zamfir (2020) points out how schools and educational institutes were able to continue with teaching and learning activities after the school closures. There was a major shift towards online education and homeschooling. Online teaching and learning brought about innovation in the educational sphere. However, the author cautions us as to how digital gaps could widen inequities in education. Zamfir (2020) rightly highlights the influence of living conditions at home and how some parents can support educational achievement. However, this is dependent on the educational attainments of parents.

Similarly, Hood (2020) discusses how the pandemic brought to light the disparities and inequities within the education system of Aotearoa. It also highlighted inequities in terms of having access to a device or internet connection at home to support online learning. For some students, the quality of the internet connection was governed by the affordability of internet packages, resulting in poor-quality video conferencing (Wenmoth, 2021). Another challenge for online teaching and learning was that distance learning was not conducive to creative teaching in terms of group projects, discussions or interactive activities. This also affected the development of students' "soft skills " (Cockburn & Chami 2022, p. 135). In other words, this compromised students' ability to practise and develop their interpersonal skills.

Challenges for students

Schultz and Gavoni (2020) share the experiences of school students using Google Classroom to learn virtually. The authors conducted a study that explored the experiences of high-school students in Australia. In the initial surveys, students reported that the teachers gave too much work to students to complete online. Students reported they did not like being online for too

long, with the majority preferring face-to-face learning over remote learning. They missed face-to-face check-ins by teachers in the classroom.

The relational aspect of teaching and learning was captured in a storytelling study by Clare and Clark (2022). The findings of their study emphasise the importance of the relationships between students and teachers. This was the key to the success of students. Their findings also suggest that "learning is socially situated and knowledge is created through interactions with others" (Clare & Clark, 2022, p. 680). The discourses and storytelling highlighted the importance of dialogue, and how this encourages critical thinking. Educators thus recognise themselves as being human. The pandemic allowed academics to break away from formal education, shifting the emphasis from the content of the course to focusing on showing an appreciation and consideration of the learner's context.

Teacher identity and pedagogy of care: Teaching through lockdown

The issue of teacher identity and self-efficacy came to the fore during these uncertain times. During lockdown, the traditional notion of the classroom space as a context for engagement and interaction between students and teachers drastically altered. Kidd and Murray (2022) examined the online teaching experience from the perspective of teachers within the initial teacher education sector. Their findings revealed feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability by all teachers, for their students, for themselves and their families. Feelings of vulnerability and intrusion were exacerbated by the necessity to teach from the dining table while other domestic activities were taking place in the background. Conducting online lectures in front of a lot of blank screens meant that teachers experienced self-doubt and were uncertain about the quality of their teaching skills.

As the lockdown continued, teachers adapted to the 'new normal' way of teaching their 'virtual' students. They emphasised the importance of having established relationships with students prior to lockdown, noting that these relationships facilitated their online interactions (Kidd & Murray, 2022). Relationships between teachers and students went beyond the transmission of information in the traditional classroom setting. Mutch (2021) conducted a qualitative study in Aotearoa, and their study highlights how teachers were more than just facilitators of learning. Findings also highlight how teachers undertook a pedagogy of care during the pandemic – they went beyond just focusing on teaching and learning. The teachers showed care for their students and families by making sure the students received the basic supplies, and prepared resources and activities according to students' needs and interests. The teachers also made themselves available after hours, and all this took a toll on teachers, both professionally and personally (Mutch, 2021).

Similarly, Kim and Asbury (2020) share how teachers were concerned about pupils living in families who did not have basic essentials like food. The pandemic brought to the fore inequities and social issues, and how these affect the learning and wellbeing of the pupils. Hood's (2020) study explored the opportunities and challenges of Covid-19 and the lessons schools can learn for the future. In addition to lack of resources and inequities regarding access to devices and internet connection, Hood (2020) identified other inequities in terms of physical space for learning. Hood's research findings reveal how difficult it was for some students to access a quiet workspace, and some students did not have the support of parents in their learning. Some students struggled, as they were not competent to engage in learning independently. Another significant concern was the lack of preparedness of teachers and schools to support the diverse needs of students, especially neurodiverse students or those

with English as a second language, and this greatly affected the learning and wellbeing of students (Hood, 2020).

Initial teacher education: The practicum experience

The practicum experience is regarded as the cornerstone of teacher education within the teaching profession. It lays the foundation for students to begin to develop their teacher identities under the guidance of an experienced mentor teacher (Moyo, 2020; Altinsoy, 2022; Gebhard, 2009). Teacher identity construction is experiential and fluid, and continually evolving, shaped by ongoing interactions and conversations, and influenced by contextual factors (Miller, 2009; Trent, 2010). Developing an authentic teacher identity involves being completely comfortable with oneself as a whole person (Gibbs, 2014).

Altinsoy (2022) explored the effects of the online practicum due to Covid-19 on teacher identity formation using the theoretical framework of positioning theory. Adopting this framework, the study aimed to discover whether the online practicum experience posed constraints or challenges for identity construction for preservice English-language teachers during lockdown. The author's use of positioning theory relates to identity construction and focuses on how students position themselves within social contexts and how they position mentors or university lecturers. The researcher sought to discover the positions that student teachers assigned to themselves during their online practicum experience as well as those attributed to their mentor teachers and university lecturers. Throughout a typical practicum experience, preservice teachers undergo a process of identity construction, facilitated by the guidance of mentor teachers and university lecturers within the classroom context (Altinsoy, 2022).

Findings from this study indicated that preservice teachers believed that the remote practicum was detrimental to their confidence levels and felt disconnected from the real classroom environment. Other findings revealed that participants positioned their online supervisors as critics and masters, and unconsciously positioned themselves as powerless. Despite the growing prevalence of digitalised practice teaching, Altinsoy (2022) suggests that online practicum teaching did not enhance teacher identity and confidence for the preservice teachers involved in this study.

Impact of lost practicum experience

In their study, Silva-Pena et al. (2023) examined the impact of the online practicum from the perspective of early childhood student teachers. One student described the loss of the in-person practicum as "losing an essential part of her university experience" (p. 25), and the absence of face-to-face interaction with children. Learning about pedagogical practice from a hypothetical perspective in the virtual classroom was likened to carrying empty baggage, and can never replace the sensory experiences of being present in an early childhood setting: the noise, sights and smells cannot be replicated in the virtual environment, therefore presence becomes necessary (Silva-Pena et al., 2023).

Another study conducted in Portugal also focused on the online practicum experience and how it posed a significant challenge for educators and student teachers (Flores & Gago, 2020). According to the findings, the negative effects of decreased time spent engaging with children significantly impacted preservice teachers' professional development (Flores &

Gago, 2020). Conversely, it also presented opportunities. The transition to remote teaching necessitated a departure from traditional roles and practices, prompting close collaboration with teachers and supervisors (Flores & Gago, 2020; Lai & Pratt, 2020). These accounts of virtual practicum experiences suggest that, for some student teachers, the online practicum could not successfully replicate or replace the in-person practicum.

Relationships and interactions with students

The sudden move from in-person to online teaching proved challenging for lecturers and students in the absence of specific recommendations for teacher education programmes. Flores and Gago (2020) discuss the importance of maintaining interactions and relationships with students. However, for lecturers in the Master of Teaching degree there was a need for constantly 'being in touch' and responding to student teachers' doubts and questions via online tools. In addition, there was a need to provide feedback in written form almost immediately. This need for feedback and availability involved long hours of work during lockdown, albeit in a more flexible and diverse manner (Flores & Gago, 2020).

In 2023 Carrillo and Flores conducted a literature review that offered a broad perspective on teaching and learning practices within higher-education institutes, encompassing both the pandemic and post-pandemic periods. Themes from the literature included accessibility, authenticity, collaboration, democratisation and personalisation. The issue of democratisation within the online teaching and learning context became a focus. For example, the need for a more democratic approach became evident. This involved providing regular opportunities to receive feedback from students after the lessons (Cutri et al., 2020; Quezada et al., 2020; Turchi et al., 2020). At times, roles between educators and students were reversed, as students' digital expertise exceeded that of educators (Cutri et al., 2020). The impact of social isolation generated feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability among some students, leading to a greater focus on addressing their social and emotional needs. This became a natural component of teaching during that time.

Our musings: The challenges and triumphs

As we began to collate our discussions, we talked about some of the language synonymous with the government's approach to placing the country in lockdown – kupu such as 'bubble', as in 'staying in your own household bubble', which later became the 'trans-Tasman bubble'. The traffic-light system was designed to protect the health system from undue pressure due to the growing number of cases. The main priority for tertiary institutes in Aotearoa involved translating and following public-health advice while offering care and guidance to staff and students. The following section presents our retrospective view of teaching and learning during lockdown within the Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood Education) programme at Unitec, Aotearoa.

Navigating between professional and private contexts

Lata Rana: One of the challenges I faced was to encourage students to engage in the virtual classroom, as students initially preferred to keep their cameras turned off. As a result of this,

I found it difficult to gauge student understanding, as I could not see the students' body language or any other behavioural cues. Another concern was that both teachers and students found it difficult to open their homes to the teaching and learning community. I found it initially difficult to teach virtually online, as I was sharing study space with other family members who needed to be online for study or work too. It was difficult in the beginning to shift from private to professional space, or even share the two spaces. This was because, up until now, my professional space was my workplace, not my home. This change in the place of work, which was now at home, meant that I needed to share space with family members. One was studying for his NCEA at the time, and my husband was also working from home.

Yvonne Culbreath: The sharing of these spaces with other family members and their daily schedules meant resilience, kindness and understanding, plus negotiation, of different areas of the home space. Prioritising internet use for Zoom classes and meetings meant significant planning ahead for specific times, for the frequency, duration and access for the family schedules regarding internet use and my own schedule. Keeping to the time negotiated with my family members could sometimes be challenging, as some sessions would go into a break time, and letting the rest of the family know ahead of time required spontaneous changes to the agreed scheduled learning. This would depend on the goodwill of family members who, for example, required the space to prepare snacks and beverages, as its initial intended use. As the home environment became a significant learning space, students chose areas conducive to their learning. The multiple purposes of kitchen tables, dining rooms and bedrooms meant these adjustments were an important consideration in their learning.

Challenges for teachers and students

YC: As the use of the home internet increased, sometimes this would be problematic as students and I found the internet not as reliable as first expected. This was often beyond my control and without any warning. The upgrading of various network systems throughout Tāmaki Makaurau was a very real factor and an important consideration in the learning of the students and me in the virtual space.

One of the positives, from my experience, was that some students who were not confident to share their views, ideas and questions in the face-to-face classroom found the courage to express themselves on the online platform. This gave them a sense of purpose and confidence, as their home environment was familiar, known and safe. On the other hand, some students, not comfortable with the online learning space, decided to leave the paper at this time. A variety of reasons, including their learning style and the time required to be online, meant my respectful consideration of their decision. This was an interesting development, as students decided to attend or not attend the Zoom sessions for various reasons.

Michelle Johnson: As a new lecturer, I was teaching the practicum experience course for our first-year students. Zoom quickly became our main platform, as it enabled us to plan and book designated class times, and facilitate essential interactions with and between students. In theory, the virtual classroom aimed to replicate many of the benefits of in-person learning, offering immediate feedback and collaborative opportunities through breakout rooms, providing a platform for the continuation of many of the activities that typically occur in an in-person classroom. While the theory-based courses transitioned smoothly, I found the practicum component of the early childhood programme was particularly challenging.

Lockdown of early childhood centres

MJ: As in many other national and international initial teacher education (ITE) institutes, the lockdown meant that student practicum placements could not proceed. For ITEs in Aotearoa, a temporary Covid-19 programme change was negotiated with the Teaching Council. This meant that when restrictions eased, and our students regained access to their centres, they would fulfil their practicum hours within their home centres rather than at an external practicum placement. Despite the uncertainty of not knowing when the students would gain access to their centres, we pressed forward with readying students, even in the absence of a starting date. However, we were faced with the additional hurdle of preparing first-year student teachers who had had limited experience in early childhood settings before the lockdown. For those transitioning from secondary school to tertiary education, the limited opportunity to establish relationships with both the children and the teaching community before the lockdown heightened their anxiety surrounding the practicum experience.

Loss of practical experience

MJ: In September 2022 I spoke with six second-year student teachers who had recently returned to campus. I wanted to hear about their experiences of learning in the virtual environment during the pandemic. The conversation also focused on their reflections regarding the substitution of the typical four-week placement experience with a home-centre practicum. My objective was to determine whether the students encountered any difficulties or changes that could be directly attributed to the loss of the practicum placement. One student expressed feeling a lack of self-confidence and self-efficacy, specifically attributed to the loss of practical experience. In terms of her confidence in talking to parents and engaging with teaching teams, she said that she felt more like a first-year student despite entering her final year of study.

The impact on confidence and self-efficacy was echoed by the other students participating in the conversation. Another student voiced feelings of helplessness and isolation during lockdown, which resonated with two others in the group. All three students for whom English is an additional language struggled to review the Zoom recordings and transcripts, due to inaccuracies in the transcriptions. As I reflected on learning through lockdown, these firsthand accounts from my conversations with students, and the international literature, underscored the profound impact of social isolation on students' educational journeys.

Learning new skills and teaching pedagogies

LR: We developed several pedagogical innovations during the pandemic. I was teaching the research course to year three students in the programme during the pandemic. As a part of the course, students were supposed to conduct research about their practice in the early childhood centre where they completed their professional practice hours. However, as all centres were closed during Covid, students collected a set of data during online classes. Adapting this course involved students inviting lecturers and other students to participate in interviews and/or questionnaires about their practice. This required the students to reflect on their home-centre environment and then design the questionnaires. The data collected was then analysed online in the breakout rooms.

We soon realised that it was important to maintain connections with students and to be more conscious of student needs. We became more flexible in assessment requirements, deadlines and assessment methods. One of the strategies I used was to design interesting activities as icebreakers at the beginning of the class, as it was important to create an interest in the subject. During my sessions, I used several tools while teaching on Zoom; for example, using the whiteboard or breakout rooms. I had to adapt my teaching sessions and update them to be suitable for a virtual classroom. We found that the content needed to be very focused so that students did not spend too much time on the screen.

YC: Another supportive tool was the transcription of each teaching session, although sometimes the transcripts were unreliable in terms of their English translation and correct meaning. Discussions with my colleagues about the benefits and challenges encountered by students and myself with the transcripts remained an ongoing topic. The purposeful preparation for the online audience meant the delivery of content would be adjusted for the students' online learning. Therefore, selection of content (according to the prescribed learning outcomes for the paper) meant that I needed to be deliberate, purposeful and intentional in selecting the videos and the language in the PowerPoints themselves.

Another aspect was the intensity of concentrating, in preparation for each session. I was mindful of the importance of the online sharing of the screen, as – in the face-to-face environment – presence and opportunities for discussion, critique and questions were part of the usual flow of learning and teaching in the classroom space. However, significant adjustments to my pedagogy online enabled creative learning in the virtual space. Shared power dynamics became a key factor in effective learning and teaching, as the interchange of student and then teacher often took place organically.

MJ: Prior to the lockdown, one of my teaching workshops involved student teachers engaging in hands-on sensory play experiences, which typically involve materials such as gloop, clay, ice and finger painting. When faced with the challenge of adapting this workshop to an online format, I called on the expertise of one of our academic advisors who specialise in educational technology. Together, we brainstormed ideas to adapt the experiential workshop into an engaging online format.

The session we curated involved organising small groups of students to collaborate on creating a Pinterest board. With the use of breakout rooms, students researched and collaborated ideas for sensory play onto a group board. At the conclusion of their time in the breakout rooms, each group presented their Pinterest board, to explain how their chosen sensory play activity could foster learning and exploration in early childhood. While acknowledging the limitations in replicating the tactile learning experience, this pedagogical approach provided an interesting alternative within the virtual learning environment.

Drawing on the expertise of others: Tuakana–teina

MJ: To address student anxieties during lockdown, and the loss of the mentorship that usually occurs during the practical experience, I invited a guest speaker, Julie Anderson, to join my online teaching session. As a senior kindergarten teacher, Julie has mentored students and beginning teachers for many years. Leading up to the session, I set up an online forum for students to post questions and challenging scenarios for Julie to consider. Two students volunteered to collate the questions into themes.

On the day of the Zoom interview, the students led the process, posing the questions on behalf of the class. Julie listened to each concern and scenario and shared her wealth of

teaching experience. In retrospect, the combination of digital technology, lockdown measures and flexible working hours created an unprecedented opportunity for my students. This allowed an opportunity to engage in an extended pedagogical discussion with a senior teacher, a challenge that is often difficult to achieve in the busy kindergarten environment.

YC: The personal and professional accounts of adapting face-to-face teaching in the online space have presented common experiences, plus differing views as well. For me, however, with the support of teaching team members who were more confident in information technology, my anxiety subsided, enabling me to become more confident with this new learning. At times I could see the videos on my screen, but students could not connect or see them on their devices. This was another opportunity to continue refining my IT skills. Often students would remind me if I had missed a step in the process of doing this. Therefore, the students became the experts in this aspect. Tuakana–teina refers to a traditional Māori teaching concept of a tuakana (elder) providing support to a less experienced teina. This became an important consideration in online learning for my cohort of students.

Another significant tool was the management of the 'chat space', as this could be challenging for me to manage alongside delivery of content. In the initial days of teaching online, I supported my colleague during her sessions, so that while one of us was welcoming students, the other interacted with students in the chat space. Over time, the role was taken on by one of the students, enabling the chat space to be monitored so that questions and comments could be shared in the virtual classroom. As a community of learners, aspects of a distributed leadership approach empowered my students to share their strengths and have a voice. This was crucial to our teaching ethic, which is founded on the Treaty of Waitangi, where participation in the learning space, protection of student wellbeing, and partnership between student and lecturer are fundamental to a pedagogy of hope and transformation (Rana & Culbreath, 2019).

MJ: Early childhood teaching is influenced by socio-cultural and constructivist theories. We understand that learning is a socially mediated process. Just as learning is shaped by interactions with families, societies and social norms for children, adult learners are influenced by social contexts and experiences. Reflecting on my experiences of teaching through lockdown, and those of my students and teaching colleagues, I have a sense that we came through it together. Despite the challenges, we worked collegially to adapt and create engaging teaching sessions for our students within the digital environment.

Whakawhanaungatanga: The pedagogy of care

YC: In terms of the virtual classroom, there was no need to approach me in the physical sense, where other students may be in the close vicinity, so the online platform gave some students an immediate opportunity to speak with me privately. This seemed less confrontational, with a degree of privacy and confidentiality, and the Zoom face-to-face option became a preferred space over the classroom. Therefore, deleting part of the recording was crucial to the identity and sensitivity of some information shared, especially for the privacy and confidentiality of the student voice. This was a valuable skill that involved Unitec IT Zoom experts being called upon to support with the best way to delete personal conversations. An example in my experience was one student who began to cry as multiple home and study requirements started to take their toll. Therefore, my role as a lecturer became even more multifaceted as I began to see an increase in personal stories being shared. As a result, I felt it was important to strengthen the emotional resilience of our students as they managed their personal and professional selves during lockdown.

The ongoing wellbeing, integrity and confidentiality of students was a priority for me throughout the Zoom teaching. Feedback from one of my students commented on their preference for not using the breakout rooms. Therefore, I reflected on the purpose of the breakout room and realised that students needed more time to familiarise themselves with the online learning space. In response to a request by students, I decided to offer extra Zoom sessions, especially when assignment preparation was scheduled. The management of familial commitments took priority, then the additional Zoom sessions in the evening were scheduled in consultation with students. These Zoom opportunities were voluntary, as students could attend within the time frame given. The sessions were often an hour or ninety minutes. This was at the discretion of the student, as there was no pressure to be online at the start of the session. A relaxed, informal atmosphere invited further unpacking and consolidation of understanding and meaning in the virtual space. As a consequence, I believe the strengthening of respectful relationships with my students was optimised.

LR: One of the main concerns that arose for me was making connection with the students in a virtual classroom. Some of the other concerns were sharing workspace with other family members and working long hours. As an educator, I appreciated the collegiality of the other teachers. I was able to have regular contact with other teachers on the programme. This supported my confidence and wellbeing during these uncertain times. It was great to see each other every day, even if it was on Zoom. Positive collegial relationships supported my wellbeing. It was great to be able to stay connected with each other through Zoom or other social media.

Discussion and analysis

As we collated our own recollections of teaching through the Covid-19 lockdown, we realised that our experiences were not unique. Many of our challenges and triumphs parallel the international literature. Throughout this period, the relationship dynamic took on a more intense, and perhaps more intimate, form of engagement, as the pastoral care role of teaching required prolonged interactions and meaningful communication between teachers and students.

For a period, the internship, as it were, of Zoom and online teaching became a place where relationships were strengthened and reversed as IT novices demonstrated what they knew in support of the lecturer and fellow classmates. Sometimes it was a negotiation of trial and error, as everyone in the Zoom session contributed to the sharing of collective ideas to scaffold new skills and knowledge with IT. These interactions offered opportunities to build confidence, familiarity and expertise in the online learning space between lecturers and students. Teaching is a relational and caring profession. Therefore, creating and maintaining authentic caring relationships with students requires intentionality. *Te Whāriki*, the Aotearoa early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2017), reiterates the importance of people, places and things. Therefore, our relationships with our students, our relationships with the learning place, and our relationships with technology and its many tools underpin these aspects.

From the initial uncertainty of how to adapt and deliver the course content, while supporting student wellbeing, teachers were also tasked with the additional consideration of how to manage their private selves with their professional lives. The move to teaching from home meant that the distinctions between the two contexts became blurred. An interesting analogy to describe the act of teaching is that of teaching as dramatic performance, as proposed by Goffman (1959), where the classroom serves as the stage. During the

performance, the teacher assumes the role of a character and presents a polished 'front-stage self' to the audience. However, once they retreat backstage, they can relax and step out of character. The shift to remote teaching relaxed the boundaries between work and personal life, as teachers navigated the challenges of teaching from home while managing household responsibilities and personal wellbeing. This blending of professional and personal domains underscored the complexity of the teaching role during those unprecedented times (Kidd & Murray, 2022).

Summary

The experience of teaching during the Covid-19 lockdown offers valuable insights for future learning across the education sector. One key insight is that the sudden shift to online teaching and learning spurred innovation and fostered collaboration among teachers across all spheres of education. At the same time, it highlighted existing inequities in access to digital learning resources, as well as disparities in the ability to engage with digital learning. While teachers sought to alleviate the issues in the short term, moving forward, education systems and governments must prioritise digital learning and support for educators (OECD, 2021). By addressing these underlying issues, new and more equitable practices can be developed within educational institutes in the future. The pandemic has provided opportunities for deeper dialogue about how educational institutions can develop the capabilities needed to create a sustainable knowledge-based society.

We are concluding with Yvonne's poem, a creative expression that captures our journey of walking alongside our students through the Covid-19 lockdown to the joy of the graduation ceremony.

We stepped back in time – Yeah
Remembering our dues
To teach with compassion
It's what we should do
This online gig happened
Determined to do
The best way of learning
When lockdown ensued

Our team came together
We tried, then reviewed
This craft we call teaching
Was something brand new
As online we learnt all
The things we should do
The students they taught us
IT was not new

Remember the 'chat space'
I'll call it for you
This new way of learning
What can it do
Give us the option

To try things anew
With courage and laughter
I do this
For you!

The zoom space was opened
We gathered as one
In spaces where learning
Content could be fun
Recordings and transcripts
Were in-ter-resting... fun

To those who were learning
In the online space
We appreciate your presence
Respect and grace
As we navigated the learning
At this time
Determined that all
Should flourish and shine

The pandemic has a place
In our history
Aotearoa New Zealand
Will forever be
Remembered for its stand
And space to save
Our people, our nation, our face

The consequences
We'll see
In our future ahead
As generations remember
Those who dared
To teach online
What a feat
What a victory
As our students
Have now graduated
With their
Bachelor of Teaching
Early Childhood degree
From a place called
Unitec o Wairaka see

Glossary

kupu	word
tuakana–teina	older sibling–younger sibling, mentor–mentee
whakawhanaungatanga	process of establishing relationships

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Authors

Lata Rana is a Senior Lecturer in ECE at MIT and Unitec and has research interests in globalisation and education, cultural diversity, critical multiculturalism, and gender in early childhood education research.

Yvonne Culbreath is a Lecturer at MIT and Unitec and has contributed her ECE expertise in Pacific nation communities in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland through a particular interest in critical pedagogies that draw on ancestral concepts.

Michelle Johnson currently works at MIT and Unitec, where her experience as an early childhood teacher, initial teacher educator and researcher informs her passion for using music, drama and the visual arts to support inclusive pedagogies in ECE.

Voices of Reflection

Pauline Bishop and Tahera Afrin, with Asinate Waqavou, Rae Yuan, Wenya Li and Luseane Cains

Reflection begins with a baby reflecting the expression on the face of their mother and other regular engagers. A visual understanding of reflection can also occur while playing with mirrors, or by looking into a puddle outdoors. Stomping over our own reflection and seeing it forming back together might be another relatable experience. As time goes by, individuals may use reflection as a tool to improve their life and career choices. Individuals who choose to be teachers begin the journey by reflecting on their professional effort. Reflection supports a teacher to know their values, beliefs and assumptions, thereby enabling them to interrogate themselves. In Aotearoa New Zealand Professional Learning is one of the standards for all kaiako, including those in early childhood education (ECE) (Education Council New Zealand Matatū Aotearoa, 2017). Kaiako have a professional responsibility to be reflective and to inquire into their own practice in an iterative way (Education Council New Zealand Matatū Aotearoa, 2017).

Beyond meeting competency standards, reflection is important because it allows kaiako an opportunity to thoughtfully consider an event, issue or idea, drawing on beliefs supported in the profession from colleagues, the Ministry of Education and research about praxis to enhance outcomes for tamariki and whānau, and kaiako (Rouse, 2021). Considering the context of the place and space where the teaching occurs is also relevant. Teaching "is a continuous cycle of responding, reflecting and trying again. Teachers' skills are constantly evolving and growing over time" (Searcy, 2023, p. 238).

With this in mind, we wanted to gather and share some ideas on how this responsibility is being carried out in early childhood centres at this time. During a professional development workshop, we asked early childhood kaiako questions about how they engaged in reflection:

(a) What motivates you to reflect on your practice?

(b) What do you reflect on?

(c) When do you reflect?

(d) How are these reflections documented, stored and shared?

(e) What actions and thoughts are changed?

(f) Does working with tamariki who have special needs require additional reflections?

These questions were put forward in a workshop about kaiako perceptions of reflective practice by the authors (Pauline Bishop and Tahera Afrin) in an event organised by the Associate Teachers Network in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland in 2022. The last question was prompted by Tahera's own teaching experience and curiosity about pedagogy, thinking and reflection. We summarised the answers we were given in the following way.

Why reflect?

Why do we reflect? Reflection is part of the teaching profession that starts from the early experiences of being student kaiako, where reflection is a compulsory part of education and assessment. As new kaiako, reflection may be suggested by colleagues or for quality assurance practices. But truly meaningful reflection comes from being challenged, curious, emotional, frustrated and helpless, and often arises in moments that are emotionally charged,

when we are deeply challenged or stirred by experiences that push us beyond our comfort zone. Reflection is an integral part of developing teacher identity by fostering self-care and pedagogy. This can be related to Fook's model of critical reflection, which suggests engaging in a pedagogy of discomfort (Robinson, 2021). Boler's pedagogy of discomfort (1999, cited in Robinson, 2021) embraces ambiguity at both cognitive and emotional levels to allow different perspectives to be considered and assumptions to be seen.

What to reflect on

During the workshop, associate kaiako drew on their own experiences with reflection. They suggested that a range of topics was usually covered when reflecting. The opportunity to share in a group discussion resulted in the following: reflecting on day-to-day practices, challenges, policies, interactions with tamariki or ākonga and whānau, tamariki learning, peer relationships, professional ethics and leadership dynamics. In addition, partnership with whānau is emphasised for the kaiako working with tamariki in the early years (Brock, 2015). This includes reflecting on promoting home languages for tamariki who have English as an additional language (Brock, 2015). Tamariki with special physical needs or neurodiversity must be considered, especially when discussing rights, equity and fairness referred to in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989).

When to reflect

Kaiako in ECE often reflect when working with tamariki. Some of these reflections evolve from professional kōrero with colleagues, often informally. Although writing can itself be a powerful transformative act, because it slows thinking down, externalises thought to support processing, and can be revisited, more formal reflection pieces are developed and written for quality-assurance purposes. Here is an example of how early childhood kaiako can reflect at any time. One day when Pauline was teaching, kaiako noticed that some tamariki would miss out on a turn when playing games like Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed. This prompted reflection on how the game could be more inclusive. They suggested that all tamariki who wanted a turn as a monkey could stand up in a group. When the game began, it became about how many tamariki were involved, for example: "20 tamariki, jumping on the bed, five fell off and bumped their heads, Mama phoned the doctor, and the doctor said no more monkeys jumping on the bed." This decision meant all tamariki were included, which was what Pauline wanted to achieve.

When we reflect and when we share reflections can be an invitation for collective professional growth, offering opportunities to learn from each other's praxis. However, this does not usually happen, as suggested by the participants in the Associate Teacher Network workshop run by the authors in 2022. Often, the documentation goes to the 'quality' folder and then is not revisited.

Our suggestion to encourage the revisiting of reflective ideas is to link them to the Professional Growth Cycle, Performance Review, staff hui, Professional Development plans and curriculum planning. The goal is to enact those ideas.

Additional needs, additional reflection

Kaiako keep their reflective hat on with each tamaiti they interact with. Tamariki with additional needs often challenge the routine, the curriculum and the thinking of the kaiako. The Education Review Office published a report called *A Great Start?* in 2020. This report shows that some tamariki with disabilities are excluded from early childhood settings, and when they are included kaiako are less confident in how to support them (Education Review Office, 2022). This emphasises the importance of being self-aware and identifying and confronting bias and assumptions. Not only with the tamariki, but with their whānau, who might also need additional care, support and hugs.

When we reflect on play, we may recognise our expectations of tamariki. However, tamariki with disabilities may not fit in with what we expect. Reflection allows kaiako to adapt their teaching practice or develop alternate ways of teaching and learning, which is one of the key responsibilities discussed in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017). This additional reflection becomes a part of kaiako practice.

There are a lot of resources available to assist kaiako to work with diverse learners and their needs. For example, McAnelly et al. (2025) list a number of evidence-based practices and resources to support children with autism. However, the engagement with these resources will require reflection on the uniqueness of the tamariki.

Voices from the sector

Here, reflective statements from four early childhood kaiako in practice are examined to understand the complexity of the reflective process and the power of the outcomes. Asinate Waqavou is a Pacific kaiako who is an Associate Teacher of Unitec students. Rae Yuan is an experienced centre manager who replied to the workshop questions in an email. Wenya Li is a Unitec graduate who was asked to contribute, and Luseane Cains is a senior Unitec scholar now working with tamariki with special needs.

A voice of courage: Asinate's reflection

Shifting from a culture of silence and shyness to becoming a confident leader in the preschool room has been a truly transformative experience for me. Growing up in a Fijian community, I was taught to respect authority and maintain harmony, which often translated into keeping quiet and avoiding attention. While these values have their merits, they also hindered my ability to step into leadership roles.

When I was given the opportunity to lead the preschool room, I felt a mixture of excitement and apprehension. I knew that it was time to break free from the constraints of my cultural conditioning and embrace a new version of myself. It was a deeply personal journey of self-reflection and growth.

At first it felt uncomfortable to assert myself and speak up in front of the children, parents and my colleagues. But I realised that in order to effectively lead, I needed to overcome my shyness and find my voice. I started by acknowledging my strengths and unique qualities. I reminded myself that I had a genuine passion for early childhood education and a natural ability to connect with children. These realisations became the foundation upon which I built my confidence.

Taking small steps outside my comfort zone, slowly emerging, I actively sought opportunities to lead activities, engage in discussions and make decisions. It was scary at times, but each small success propelled me forward. I celebrated every milestone, no matter how seemingly insignificant, because I understood that they were all stepping stones towards becoming the confident leader I aspired to be.

Throughout this transformation, I was fortunate to have the support of my supervisor, manager and colleagues who believed in me. They provided guidance, shared their own experiences, and encouraged me to embrace my Fijian heritage rather than see it as a hindrance. They reminded me that my cultural background brought unique perspectives and strengths to my leadership style, and that I could create an inclusive environment where everyone felt valued.

There were moments of doubt and setbacks along the way, but I learned to be patient and kind to myself. I realised that confidence is not a destination, but a lifelong journey. It's about continuously learning, growing and adapting. Through perseverance and a commitment to personal growth, I have emerged as a confident leader in the preschool room.

Today, I am proud of the positive impact I have on the children, parents and my colleagues. I have witnessed the joy and growth in the children's eyes, knowing that I played a part in nurturing their development. I am grateful for the transformation I've undergone, as it has not only changed my professional life but also empowered me to embrace new opportunities and challenges with confidence in all aspects of my teaching and learning.

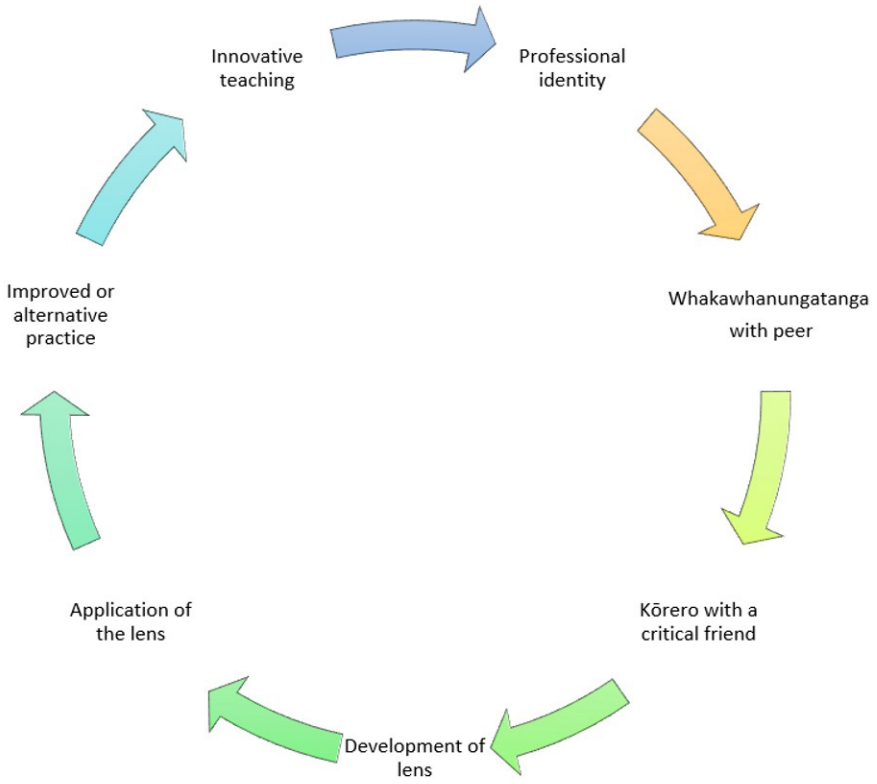
In conclusion, my personal experience of working in a culturally diverse environment at Little Pearls has been nothing short of extraordinary. It has enabled me to find my voice, appreciate the richness of diversity, and be appreciated in ways that have touched my soul. I am forever grateful for the profound impact it has had on my personal and professional journey.

Asinate's reflective piece, to us, leads to two areas of thought: who you are is what you reflect, and reflection is a socio-emotional process.

Who you are is what you reflect

Parker Palmer (1998), an educator well known for his work in teaching and reflective practice, once wrote, "You teach who you are" (p. 1). Teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the kaiako. Knowing oneself is critical to being able to connect with the learner. As reflection is part of teaching, this also provides an opportunity to bring our inner selves into our teaching thought processes. Our cultural identity is often a big part of our professional identity, and reflection allows us to see this connection. This is seen in Asinate's reflection in which she considers her cultural background values and strengths foundations she can return to when uncertain about what to do in her work as an early childhood kaiako.

It may also be beneficial to draw on other perspectives for the development of one's professional self. We would like to suggest an alternative way to look at reflective practice that can allow kaiako to become more self-aware. Supplementary to individual reflection, this dynamic mentorship is part of a professional relationship. The professional relationship may start from whakawhanaungatanga with peers (see Figure 1). Once you have developed trust with your peer to be your critical friend, intentional kōrero on teaching and learning leads to refining the reflective lens (Hargraves, 2020). Applying that lens, the kaiako then can be challenged to improve practice or try alternate ways. This leads to innovative and dynamic teaching and learning, and supports the individual to grow in their own professional identity. The value of this collective critical dialogue may be profound.



Reflection is a socio-emotional process

The process of reflection is embedded in the journey of becoming a kaiako. The development of theoretical underpinning for reflection starts in the very first courses students take to understand teaching in their context (O'Connor & Diggins, 2002). Discovering themselves again and again, as Asinate suggests, takes place every time they write a reflection piece on their own practice as kaiako. Through reflection, they not only discover their own capabilities, strengths and wish-lists in terms of teaching, but also develop an ability to come to know themselves. This self-awareness is vital for teachers to avoid unconscious actions.

Coming to understand ourselves over time as a practising kaiako cannot happen without acknowledging our journey along with it. The process, therefore, involves a range of emotions. Curiosity, anger, happiness, jealousy, insecurity, satisfaction and pride can easily be part of reflections that allow us to see changes in ourselves and respond to those changes. Therefore, the process of reflection or critical reflection is a felt process with emotions, rather than being purely a cognitive process (Robinson, 2021).

A voice of inner call: Rae's voice

Rae, the manager of an ECE centre, suggested that, for her, reflection occurs spontaneously, or after she has dealt with a situation. She asks herself, "How could I have dealt with this better?" She believes there is a need to establish a shared understanding in the team. She also reflects

on “inner conflicting voices”. As she explained, “Some reflections are my own thought process; some are written down and some are kept for the Professional Growth Cycle.”

A Professional Growth Cycle is a Teaching Council requirement and focuses on how teachers use and meet *Our Code, Our Standards* in their everyday practice (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2021). Rae suggests that through reflection she becomes conscious of what she is doing and how she is going to do things differently. “Often, we assess and judge based on our general assumptions. But for special needs children, we have to think out of the box.”

Shared understanding

Rae’s valuing of shared understandings across the team points to a key purpose of reflection. Teaching teams in early childhood centres work closely together with tamariki and whānau (Mitchell et al., 2006). This closeness leads to a need for co-operation and synchronous ways of engaging to create consistent, warm, reliable emotional environments (Hargraves, 2020). Regulations and policies lead to a need for this shared understanding, where the policies are written in language that makes sense to kaiako and whānau (Mitchell et al., 2006).

The Professional Growth Cycle

The Professional Growth Cycle was developed by the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand (2021). It consists of knowledge, action and outcomes that are closely connected to the reflective cycle. The evidence of the growth cycle needs to be naturally occurring as part of the teaching and learning environment. The growth cycle relies on critical collegial conversations about shared understanding, collecting evidence and evaluating it, in which kaiako share their perspectives of what they have observed or been involved in. Therefore, teaching and learning in early childhood centres are dependent on the shared understanding and the co-operation of kaiako.

Centres need a common understanding of the standards, so they can plan an annual cycle to foster collaborative learning involving conversations about teaching and learning. Giving and receiving feedback leads to individual and collective annual statements as a team, which results in a reflective, highly trusted profession to benefit learners (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2021).

Thinking outside the box

When interacting with tamariki with special needs, for example, who may be neurodiverse and think differently from others, kaiako need to ‘think outside the box’, be aware of personal assumptions and respond to individuals (O’Connor & Diggins, 2002). This takes thoughtful intentional teaching (Hargraves, 2019; McLaughlin et al., 2016). Kaiako should not be afraid to do things differently, change routines or adapt practices to support the experience of the tamaiti, and to reflect on the effectiveness of these new practices (McLaughlin et al., 2016).

However, some whānau experience tells us that sometimes kaiako are inflexible and unwilling to adapt or change (Afrin & Bishop, 2023). Reflective practice is seen as a tool to support intentional teaching and encourage kaiako to think of the perspectives of others and

adapt their teaching accordingly in a responsive way (McLaughlin et al., 2016; O'Connor & Diggins, 2002; Rowe, 2015).

A voice of bravery: Luseane's voice

I have been working in a sensory kindy where I am part of a team of kaiako that support tamariki from the ages 2–6 who have been diagnosed with autism (they are all on different levels of the spectrum) and/or with other diagnoses. Walking into this space with no experience or any understanding about autism spectrum disorder (ASD) made me nervous, but deep down I've always been curious and eager to learn more about additional needs and supporting these precious tamariki.

It was very challenging for me to build a connection with parents. As a new staff member, I could see that parents were wary, and unsure around me. I had to work hard to earn their trust. Every day I would pick a specific learning experience a child had, and I would discuss it with their parent at pick-up. Slowly, parents began to feel more comfortable around me. That is when I noticed that parents (and staff too) often face challenges around daily routines, such as eating habits, sleep, toileting, transitions, sensorial sensitivity, social cues and environmental awareness (and many more). I thought to support with the eating habits of our children, as many parents would talk to me about this.

Challenging meal-time behaviour, described as picky eating, can be a combination of messy eating, excessive time-consumption, having limited food items and avoidance of any new food exposure (Adams et al., 2021; Ausderau et al., 2019). I noticed certain tamariki can or cannot tolerate certain food items, based on the smell, texture (whether it is crunchy while eating and soft after it has dissolved, or soft and then very gooey after chewing it) and the sound foods make as they eat. Also, the presentation can be quite overwhelming. After many observations of tamariki, I thought a great approach was to use a provocation that the tamariki love the most and are familiar with, and adding food to it. That led me to think of interweaving waterplay and food exploration together.

However, as a Pasifika woman, brought up with the opportunity of experiencing tikanga Māori, implementing this idea at first was confronting, as it opposes tikanga Māori of not wasting food or not playing with food. I took the courage to have conversations with the teaching team. As a team, we asked ourselves, "Could there be any leeway for our children in terms of food being used to explore and to play, even though it may go against tikanga Māori and other cultural values and beliefs?" To further involve the community, our team approached forums on social media, where we could reach out to Māori and Pasifika communities and ask their kaumātua about the appropriateness. Many of these forums came back with answers that were positive, and reassuring. Food is noa, free from any restrictions, and if these ideas have been established as beneficial for the tamariki and their hauora, then they are considered to have leeway.

With this consent, I filled a trough full of water and sliced fruit into it. When it was woven into the daily routine, when waterplay took place outside, tamariki were able to familiarise themselves with having the fruit in the water. As kaiako, I played and interacted with and alongside tamariki, encouraging imitation, scaffolding tamariki to see and take notice of the food. Over time, they picked up the food and tasted it.

To ensure that tamariki get the help and support they need, and to expand on the limited food-item intake, we (the kaiako and I) will continue to provide meaningful and relevant provocation, involving imitation and role modelling that will help tamariki gain confidence to try

new things without feeling uncertain. I proudly observed how this was good for their hauora and their whare tapa whā (their whole self).

This reflection evokes two ideas: reflection being a leader in the space of education, and reflection offering opportunities for changed thoughts and actions.

Reflective practice to support leadership

The reflective kaiako can lead change in the setting, even at the beginning of their career. Luseane's reflective narrative shows how kaiako can demonstrate curiosity, awareness of their own cultural assumptions, and a willingness to seek out information. This thoughtful, self-questioning, internal evaluation and professional learning builds knowledge in reflective practice (Ministry of Education, 2019). Her reflection shows how upholding the mana of the tamaiti is paramount, even at the risk of controversy and debate. It is the responsibility of the kaiako to uphold the mana every tamaiti is born with (Ministry of Education, 2009; 2017; 2019). The leadership qualities of a kaiako can thus become evident through the process of reflection. The early childhood settings may have identified leadership roles within the structure of the organisation, but leadership through reflection can be a powerful catalyst to everyone, even the very beginning kaiako.

Reflection offers opportunities for changed thoughts and actions

Changed thoughts can influence actions and add to the identity of a kaiako, which allows them to step back and view their perspective, bias and assumptions (Brookfield, 1995). Luseane was able to identify how she was influenced by her bias and assumptions. This allowed her to untangle pedagogic problems, and to see things from different viewpoints (Brookfield, 1995), and she was able to understand her own position (Ministry of Education, 2017) better. Brookfield points out that all teachers have their own "positionalities … hence the notion of autonomy can be appreciated through reflection" (2005, p. 133).

The student kaiako journey starts with being self-aware: "Giving voice, discovering voice, encouraging voice, and finding voice are phrases frequently used to describe practices designed to develop a learner's confidence to name the world in ways that feel accurate to them and that match their experiences" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 134). The beginning kaiako has the opportunity to step back from themselves and review values and experiences that influence how they act. Reflective practice allows time and space for this self-assessment. Also, reflective practice supports critique of the status quo, looking beyond superficial appearances and developing new strategies and techniques (Brookfield, 2005; O'Connor & Diggins, 2002; Rowe, 2015).

Reflective practice can be seen as meaning making, and the site of action taking place to support early childhood kaiako in their "professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions" (Isik-Ercan & Perkins, 2017, p. 351). This allows the development of a shared understanding, acknowledgement of different cultural lenses, multiple ideas, deeper self-assessment and more meaningful change. For example, in Aotearoa a growing awareness of the importance of considering how tamariki Māori are seen is emerging. Paki (2007, p. 1) suggests the need to reposition "the view of the Māori child to one of being nurtured within a philosophical construct underpinned and immersed in tikanga such as whakapapa, ira tangata, whanaungatanga, mana and tapu and ako, providing a strongly Māori theoretical base."

Following on from this idea, the practice of tau utuutu, in which different speakers can offer a new perspective to these conversations, provides a new theoretical lens for the practice of reflection (Werry et al., 2021). As a theoretical lens based on the context of Aotearoa, tau utuutu emerged from Werry et al.'s (2021) research, which describes a multi-perspective approach to reflective practice. Considering perspectives from tamariki, whānau, kaiako and the place the centre is positioned in introduces another dimension to reflective practice. This is an Indigenous whaikōrero (following the threads of the previous speaker's kōrero) tikanga, allowing tamariki and whānau voices to be included (Werry et al., 2021). Beyond immediate whānau, extended whānau may offer perspectives not yet shared, perspectives from whakapapa and whenua. Such inclusion enables deeper critical reflection on tamariki learning and can result in a profound shift in pedagogy (Werry et al., 2021).

Professional dialogue between colleagues within the early childhood environment can follow the same process, as acknowledged in Wenya's work. This allows the development of a shared understanding, acknowledgement of multiple ideas, deeper self-assessment and more meaningful change. We offer, as an example, an observation that arose from a reflective conversation between the two authors as colleagues that took place in 2023:

A kaiako who asserted the 'no toys from home' policy without considering the emotional circumstances of the tamaiti created a problem for the tamaiti. The whānau challenged the rule and explained the importance of their tamaiti having a particular toy from home. Applying the tau utuutu process, the kaiako reflected on her personal position and acknowledged the whānau position and that the circumstances required a more responsive and flexible policy. The policy was duly updated to allow the tamaiti to bring emotionally important objects from home. Using traditional reflection methods might not have achieved this inclusive response. (Afrin & Bishop, 2023, p.22)

Kaiako and tamariki together engage in reflection and wairua, or spiritual inquiry, through engagement with place in Aotearoa (Wrightson et al., 2025). Connection on a wairua level, or an understanding of what this might be, can influence kaiako decision making. Reflective practice can include consideration of "how local traditions and values are honoured and continued" (Kroll & Meier, 2015, p. 1). For early childhood kaiako in Aotearoa, reflection and inquiry informed by place and whānau often feature in their work. In addition, the spiritual connection that tangata whenua have to the land in Aotearoa is well known in education (Summers, 2023) and being conscious of this mauri (land has a life force) can influence kaiako decision making.

Teaching is complex work where complex decisions need to be made daily. Uncertainty, juggling, flexibility, and relationship-orientated intersection between Indigenous and dominant cultures are part of that complexity. It has been suggested that "our bodies, … are inseparable from the land we inhabit and all that has occupied that space over time" (Pohio et al., as quoted in Kroll & Meier, 2015, p. 138). This wairua connection influences the lens kaiako in Aotearoa use when they reflect on their practice and the tamariki and their whānau that they work alongside. In Aotearoa Māori are tangata whenua, the people of the land (Summers, 2023). Te ao Māori offers an alternate perspective to the dominant Western worldview (Summers, 2023). There is an interplay between space and place (Duhn, 2010; Wrightson et al., 2025).

Voice of the context: Wenya

REFLECTING ON MY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CYCLE

In my professional learning cycle, I posed the inquiry question: How can I build positive relationships with children and whānau to strike a balance between attachment and developing independence while effectively supporting children's social competence?

During my time in the toddler room (under three years old), I encountered challenges in establishing relationships with A, a child displaying challenging behaviours including hitting, scratching, biting and screaming. These behaviours typically surfaced when A was upset or unable to fulfil his desires. Notably, A tended to target T, his close friend during playtime, resulting in numerous accidents. Concerns raised by T's parents prompted us to address the situation urgently. Additionally, A displayed aggression towards teachers who intervened to prevent him from harming others.

I also observed that, aside from his challenging behaviours, A had formed strong bonds with one of the toddler teachers, leaving minimal room for me to foster a positive relationship with him. Providing care for A became exceptionally challenging, as he exhibited resistance, preferring his favourite teacher for tasks like changing his nappy or putting him to bed. As a kaiako responsible for T's safety, I felt immense pressure to closely monitor A, particularly during interactions with T:

- *A is in a family situation with different parenting styles from his separated parents. The inconsistency between his mum's structured approach and his dad's relaxed style may have led to a lack of routine and predictability in A's life.*
- *At nearly three years old, A is still developing socially and emotionally, requiring significant support and guidance from adults around him.*
- *Negative feedback from teachers when he makes social errors triggers his feelings of anger, prompting him to resort to aggressive behaviour.*
- *His parents have noted that A often plays with older siblings and cousins, leading him to resort to physical confrontation when conflicts arise. This has become his way of defending himself and asserting his desires.*

Following discussions with the teaching team and our centre manager, we convened a team hui to make a plan to support A effectively:

- *Positive guidance: All kaiako will be committed to using positive reinforcement to encourage A's positive social behaviours.*
- *Calming techniques: We will employ various calming techniques such as outdoor walks and reading A's favourite book,* Where the Wild Things Are*, to help him manage his emotions.*
- *Supporting others: A will be encouraged to assist in caring for other children he has harmed. This will support A to foster a sense of empathy and responsibility towards his peers.*
- *Individualised learning: We ensure responsiveness to A's unique learning needs, setting specific goals for his social and emotional development. This will be linked to A's individual learning plan and shared with A's parents to encourage their involvement.*

- *Parental involvement: We have shared our support plan with A's parents, fostering open communication to ensure consistency in supporting A's routine.*

To enhance my support for A, I have also implemented more intentional strategies:

- *Building trust: By observing A's interactions with his favourite teacher, I identified the elements that strengthened their bond. Spending quality time with A, and reading his favourite books, allowed me to establish a connection with him. This teaching approach aligns with the principles of* Te Whāriki*, which emphasise the importance for early childhood kaiako to establish responsive and reciprocal relationships with tamariki through active engagement with them based on their interests and preferences (Ministry of Education, 2017).*
- *Choice and autonomy: I offer A choices whenever possible, to empower him and encourage his engagement during activities like nappy changes and nap times.*
- *Self-regulation support: I have provided personalised self-regulation strategies to help A calm down during challenging moments.*
- *Professional development: I have pursued professional-development opportunities to enhance my skills in supporting A's social and emotional development, such as Strategies for Supporting Development of Self-Discipline in Children, Supporting Children's Social Competence about He Mapuna te Tamaiti, and Taking Personal Responsibility. Through attending PD, I have demonstrated my commitment to ongoing professional development and implementing reflective teaching practice as a professional ECE kaiako (Education Council New Zealand Matatū Aotearoa, 2017).*

After A had transitioned to the preschool room for a few months, I returned to work there. In this new setting, A continued to rely on me as his primary caregiver. He sought me out whenever he felt upset, hurt, or needed assistance, trusting that I would address his needs. A often resisted other teachers' attempts to help him, insisting that only I assist him, potentially limiting his opportunities for independence and autonomy in the classroom. Through collaboration with my mentor, we devised an approach to encourage A's independence while fostering open communication with him and his parents.

Moving forward, I aim to gradually encourage A to accept support from various kaiako and caregivers, providing opportunities for independence and fostering inclusivity within the preschool learning community. This collaborative approach ensures A's holistic development while respecting his unique needs and fostering a sense of belonging.

Drawing on collaborative work with colleagues, questioning policy, considering multiple perspectives, literature, professional development and professional dialogue enhance Wenya's developing pedagogy. We consider that there is a thread of thought prominent in this reflection.

Reflection is a powerful tool in the Professional Growth Cycle

It is important for a kaiako to consider factors from the wider environment in a situation where they reflect on behaviour of tamariki or their own teaching strategies – the environment and the stories that follow the land.

Wenya's work demonstrates the importance of collaboration and mentoring, and the place of professional development and reflection in the growth of teaching practice. Wenya's example demonstrates how thoughtful she is. She also reveals the important value of being non-judgemental and seeking to understand by the gathering of perspectives to inform her practice. As Tobin suggests, reflection works best when it is a "systematic collegial practice" (as quoted in Kroll & Meier, 2015, p. 12) that supports the Professional Growth Cycle.

The Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand (2021) developed the Professional Growth Cycle as a framework for ongoing learning and reflection. It is driven by teachers and leaders, and offers practical guidance to shape a Professional Growth Cycle that works for the centre.

Conclusion

Contextualising the knowledge and growth of kaiako is important, as they can influence the way tamariki are supported in their learning. While tracking learning and progress is a common practice of early childhood kaiako in Aotearoa, the use of a contextualised lens in models of reflection is not so common. To this end, we have raised the possibility of using culturally informed lenses such as tau utuutu for reflection, to include the voices of extended whānau, whakapapa and whenua (Werry et al., 2021; Wrightson et al., 2025). We have also offered a new reflective model (see Figure 1) that illustrates how peer-supported reflection can support professional growth.

From our perspective, it is certain that reflective practice in Aotearoa can and should attend to political, social, cultural, spiritual, place and relational dynamics – including the use of Māori concepts and tools – to shape reflection in ways that are contextually meaningful.

We aim to develop reflective practice by offering a contemporary, contextualised landscape of reflection through voices from the ECE sector. Asinate, Rae, Luseane and Wenya's honest discussion of how their cultures have influenced their thinking is evidence of the power of reflective practice. We started out with why, what, when questions relating to reflection, and considered what is needed to support tamariki with additional needs. It became clear that thinking outside the box of our own lives and experiences leads kaiako to ask "Why not?" questions about policies that do not work for tamariki. Thinking outside our own discrete lines of thought requires bravery and ultimately leads to changed thoughts and actions. From here we can engage in responsive and reciprocal relationships "with people, places and things" (Ministry of Education, 2017). Aotearoa has a unique cultural ecology in this place that influences all who live here – a powerful context worthy of reflection.

We strongly recommend that the Ministry of Education funds time for teachers to reflect, change and develop early childhood education in Aotearoa.

Glossary

ako	teaching, learning
ākonga	student
hauora	health and wellbeing
hui	meeting
ira tangata	divine spark
kaiako	teacher
kaumātua	elder
kōrero	talk
mana	status
mauri	life force
noa	free from any restrictions
tamaiti	child
tamariki	children
tangata whenua	Indigenous people of the land
tapu	sacred, prohibited
tau utuutu	procedure in which local and visiting speakers alternate
te ao Māori	the Māori world
tikanga	custom, correct procedure
wairua	spiritual inquiry
whaikōrero	formal speech
whakapapa	genealogy
whanaungatanga	relationship, kinship
whānau	family
whare tapa whā	the whole self; four-sided house
whenua	land

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Authors

Pauline Bishop is a Senior Lecturer at MIT and Unitec. Her research interests are agency, diversity and hauora.

Tahera Afrin is a Senior Lecturer at MIT and Unitec. Her research interests are neurodiversity, social justice and teacher education.

Working Effectively in Teaching Teams in Early Childhood Education

Veronica Griffiths, Erin Hall, Fleur Hohaia-Rollinson, Jenny Malcolm, Kerry Purdue, Jackie Solomon and Donna Williamson-Garner

Introduction

Kaiako employed in early childhood education (ECE) in Aotearoa New Zealand work in teams. These teams, whether small or large, are diverse, comprising individuals with different life experiences, backgrounds, skills and qualifications, personalities and philosophies. While some kaiako teams develop and progress smoothly, others take time to establish and function well. Effective teams rely on the development of open, inclusive, respectful relationships that support kaiako wellbeing, uniqueness and strengths (The Education Hub, n.d.). When relationships among kaiako are strong and communication is clear, everyone carries out their respective roles and responsibilities to the best of their capabilities, leading to quality learning environments for tamariki and their whānau (Ministry of Education, 2017). Stable teams and good working relationships are thus integral to good-quality practice.

Kaiako working within a positive culture of trust and respect draw on one another's strengths and diverse experiences to create a cohesive team with a shared sense of purpose (Education Review Office, 2020). This type of supportive team culture also increases team members' self-esteem, overall morale and job satisfaction. Furthermore, the establishment of rights-based, socially just leadership within teams facilitates an inclusive environment that values the differences that give each kaiako their unique identities. These differences include, but are not limited to, disability, ability, sexual orientation, gender, mental and physical health, ethnicity and cultural background, religious or spiritual beliefs, socio-economic status, marital status, age and body type. Diversity is about recognising and embracing difference, and using this as a facilitator of good practice and strong workplace relationships (Cumming et al., 2021a, 2021b; Griffiths et al., 2023a).

While kaiako may be fully committed to their professional obligation to contribute to an inclusive and well-functioning team in theory, this outcome is not always the reality due to some members intentionally or unintentionally discriminating against other team members because of some aspect of their diversity (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020). In this chapter we discuss diversity awareness among ECE teams and consider some of the key features that support the functioning of effective teams. We draw on literature and research that examine the importance that inclusive team cultures and environments have for instilling a sense of belonging and wellbeing among the kaiako in those teams, and how both they and ECE leaders can work cohesively to achieve this.

The importance of team diversity

Kaiako diversity is important and necessary for ECE programme teams because it provides a richness of languages, cultures, identities and backgrounds for the tamariki and whānau they work with (Griffiths et al., 2023a). Teamwork that is underpinned by a strengths-based, empowering approach that embraces and celebrates diversity benefits not only kaiako, but also tamariki, their whānau and the wider community (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020). Haslip and Donaldson (2021) suggest that when kaiako role-model such characteristics as teamwork, kindness, forgiveness and social intelligence, tamariki are enabled to effectively learn about and practise these important characteristics in their interactions with one another.

The intricacies and complexities of teamwork are central to discourse on quality teaching. Authentic collaborative relationships among diverse kaiako are easier to establish and maintain when guided by the principles of inclusion and equity (Griffiths et al., 2023a). Working effectively in teams means acknowledging and respecting each person's uniqueness, identity and contributions, making accommodations to enhance kaiako wellbeing and belonging, and listening to the perspectives of others (Griffiths et al., 2023a; Griffiths et al., 2023b, 2025).

The importance of inclusive policies and procedures

Inclusive policies and procedures help support this ongoing journey of instilling in workplaces the values and attitudes that bring a sense of belonging and equity to everyone within them (Ministry of Education, 2019). Within the ECE context in Aotearoa, teaching practice is informed by various key guiding documents that aim to promote and facilitate collaborative teamwork, and equity and inclusion of all, and is underpinned by our commitment to te Tiriti o Waitangi. These documents include the *National Education Learning Priorities* (Ministry of Education, 2019), which require leaders and teams to "ensure [their] places of learning are safe, inclusive and free from racism, discrimination and bullying" for tamariki, whānau and kaiako (Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 2). The Human Rights Act 1993, section 21, makes it illegal to discriminate against people on the basis of "sex, marital status, religious belief, ethical belief, colour, race, ethnic or national origins, disability, age, political opinion, employment status, family status, and sexual orientation."

The Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations 2008 (New Zealand Parliament, 2008) emphasise the need for managers, leaders and kaiako to work collaboratively together to ensure the provision of quality care and education, while the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) highlights the importance of teamwork resulting in good learning outcomes for tamariki. The curriculum document states that kaiako should serve as "role models for practices that support their own health and wellbeing and that of others" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 59).

The Code and Standards (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, n.d.) centres on the formation of professional relationships among teaching teams, and stresses that every kaiako is responsible for promoting an inclusive, supportive, respectful workplace culture that upholds both code and standards. The code also highlights values relevant to this responsibility – whakamana, manaakitanga, pono and whanaungatanga. Whakamana is about kaiako acknowledging strengths and enhancing mana through high-quality teaching and leadership. Manaakitanga involves a willingness to value and support each member of the team. It is also about caring for and holding kind and respectful attitudes to others, with an emphasis on responsibility and reciprocity. Pono calls on kaiako to act with integrity and honesty. Whanaungatanga is about forming connections and strengthening respectful relationships to enhance a sense of belonging and togetherness.

The values of manaakitanga and whanaungatanga are included as competencies in *Tātaiako: Cultural Competencies for Teachers of Māori Learners* (Education Council New Zealand Matatū Aotearoa, 2011). *Tātaiako* encourages kaiako to align their practice not only with these competencies, but also with the competencies of ako, tangata whenuatanga and wānanga when working in teams. *Tapasā: Pacific Cultural Competencies Framework for Teachers of Pacific Learners* (Ministry of Education, 2018) likewise promotes collaborative, respectful relationships and professional behaviour among kaiako in ECE settings.

The common thread between these and other policies and resources relevant to ECE (see the New Zealand Government Legislation website, https://www.legislation.govt.nz/ for the Education and Training Act 2020, Employment Relations Act 2000 and Health and Safety at Work Act 2015) is that they all call on kaiako to work together to develop and maintain safe working relationships that value kaiako diversity and challenge societal discourses of stigma and discrimination (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020; Griffiths et al., 2023b, 2025).

Working as part of a diverse team in early childhood education

Kaiako who work as part of a diverse team in early childhood settings need to be confident and comfortable if they are to contribute effectively to a working environment that is collaborative and inclusive. The benefits of such teamwork lead to better outcomes for all, including kaiako happy in their work, more stable staffing, and the provision of high-quality education and care for all tamariki. The Education Review Office (2020) confirms that collegial teams appreciative of diversity are well able to deliver a highly responsive curriculum with a focus on equity and excellence for every learner.

Arndt et al. (2020) discuss the importance of collaborative work for building effective relationships in teaching teams made up of individuals with diverse values, beliefs, views and perspectives, singling out trust as fundamental to such collegiality. Trust relies on being open to learning and creating spaces where people feel safe to openly contribute their views, as we do not all think the same; nor can we assume that everyone will gain the same understandings from discussions. Consequently, when we value, appreciate and celebrate the uniqueness and strengths of one another, and view each other from a positive inquiry stance, we can build trust, and when people trust one another, there is respect, with more likelihood of open-minded discussions occurring.

ECE policies and research identify a number of factors associated with inclusive, effective teamwork. These include workplace culture, leadership, effective communication, and understanding and acceptance. While each factor is discussed here individually, they are closely interconnected and collectively shape the conditions for successful teamwork.

WORKPLACE CULTURE

Because organisational culture has a strong impact on the effectiveness and quality of ECE workplace environments, managers and leaders within those settings need to ensure kaiako are carefully supported to foster their collegiality and professionalism (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, n.d.). Working in inclusive ways within diverse teams is an equitable process that respects and values the uniqueness of every team member and so allows equitable participation of all team members.

According to Arndt et al. (2020), those of us working in ECE teams and committed to fostering an inclusive workplace culture must first understand ourselves – our individual values and beliefs, our biases, assumptions and attitudes. We need to question these and be prepared to disrupt our own assumptions and those of others. Arndt et al. (2020) talk of the capacity to ‘sit’ with uncertainty, because “uncertainty opens up spaces for diverse actions and perspectives to come through and prevents us from working on assumption. Making space for uncertainty and discomfort also means taking very small, uncertain steps” (para. 10). Arndt et al. (2020) state that we also need to allow others the opportunity and space to articulate how their workplace relationships work best for them. Engaging in critical reflection within teaching teams is especially vital when team members offer alternative thoughts about

the world that challenge us to question the status quo and dominant discourses. Thinking about and discussing whose knowledge is privileged is just one example of a topic ripe for critical reflection.

Leaders and kaiako who foster and promote inclusive teams help create working and learning cultures that are free from bias, discrimination and bullying, and therefore safe (Ministry of Education, 2019). According to Kearns (2017), "an inclusive workplace recognises and promotes individual differences, and understands that each member brings their own personality, talents and skills to the team" (p. 257). However, diversity is not always accepted in practice, due to varying perspectives and perceptions such as 'isms' (e.g., ableism, ageism, racism, sexism), each of which is the product of certain beliefs about incapability and/or phobias that manifest in stigmatising behaviours towards others. These mindsets restrict and limit effective working relationships within diverse teams. For further reading on this, see, for example, Azarmandi et al. (2023), Bhana et al. (2022) and Purdue et al. (2024).

LEADERSHIP

Haslip and Donaldson (2021) identify leadership as one of the character strengths of effective teamwork; they also single out bravery and kindness as characteristics of such leadership. The Education Review Office (ERO) (2020) also confirms leadership as one of the main variables influencing workplace culture. According to the ERO (2020), effective leadership focuses on ensuring equity and excellence not only for tamariki, but for every kaiako. Leaders therefore need to ensure that kaiako are sufficiently confident and comfortable working together to effectively contribute to a diverse working environment that is also collaborative and inclusive.

Leadership styles and approaches that align well with the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) are important for leading diverse ECE teams. *Te Whāriki* encourages both leader and team member alike to see difference and diversity in positive ways and as a rich resource. Leadership that includes kaupapa Māori principles is especially important in the early childhood context of Aotearoa. Such principles support and value diversity, and the contributions of all team members (Hawkins, 2017). These principles underpin distributed and strengths-based leadership, which draws on the strengths of team members.

Distributed and strengths-based leadership facilitates respectful, collaborative relationships based on mutual trust and respect for the teacher strengths that build and sustain capacity (Thornton, 2019). These leaders create the conditions essential for supporting social-justice goals and developing inclusive teams that respond positively to diversity. Such leaders have a realistic view of their own strengths and weaknesses, and what they can reasonably achieve themselves. They accordingly recognise and utilise the strengths of others. Knowing that all kaiako have a valuable contribution to make, they ensure this happens by exercising strong guidance and establishing mentoring mechanisms. Their focus is on identifying and growing strengths, and is considerably less interested in identifying and ameliorating weaknesses.

The values of kotahitanga and whanaungatanga are embedded in strong, shared leadership. Effective pedagogical leaders build and develop leadership capacity and lead the learning of all kaiako (Ministry of Education, n.d.b). Effective leaders of learning collaborate with all team members, encourage trusting and respectful relationships, consider the language, culture and identity of their team members, engage in open-to-learning conversations, are non-judgemental and open minded, act with honesty, trust and respect, have a high level of self-awareness, and are comfortable with complexity and ambiguity (Ministry of Education, n.d.b).

Teams operating according to distributed, strengths-based principles tend to be more energetic and more motivated to do their job well. Socially just leadership is closely aligned to distributed, strengths-based leadership. This occurs when leaders are aware of their responsibilities to others, make decisions grounded in strong principles, values and theories, and are willing to have courageous conversations while engaging with others in ways that are honest, trusting and respectful (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Authentic leadership (Leaupepe, 2017) has links to positivity and to an ethical foundation based upon honest and genuine relationships. According to Leaupepe, authentic leaders accept multiple perspectives and replace right/wrong dichotomies with a third space that allows for a holistic approach to issues and new possibilities. Such leaders are self-aware and so can recognise their strengths and limitations, and the impact they have on others. They have a strong moral compass that guides moral decision making and behaviours. They are also open to new perspectives and experiences, and have the courage to make unpopular decisions. Their ability to make fair, well-informed, considered decisions builds on an important facility that Leaupepe (2017) calls emotional transparency – the ability to share values and thoughts.

When positive leadership styles are absent, poor leadership can create toxic work environments marked by unhappy teams, high kaiako turnover and job dissatisfaction. Bad leadership, which can include silencing, bias and inequity, can significantly harm diverse teams, leaving kaiako feeling undervalued, afraid to share their unique perspectives and with low morale (Brooker & Cumming, 2019). Ineffective leadership practices can drive kaiako to leave the profession, which results in more homogeneous teaching teams, and ultimately reinforces dominant negative stereotypes and discourses about early childhood teachers and teaching (Garrett & Gibbs, 2025; Turton & Wrightson, 2017).

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Ongoing effective communication across all members of a team is a key ingredient of sound teamwork, kaiako wellbeing and quality service delivery (Ranta et al., 2022). Effective communication within diverse teams includes active listening, respect, sensitivity to nonverbal cues, encouraging feedback, asking questions, showing empathy and adapting one's communication style. Understanding what respectful communication can look like for different cultures is especially important. For example, knowledge of vā (the relational space that connects us) and the importance of teu le vā (caring for the relationship) and talanoa (encompassing principles such as reciprocity, balance, respect and mutual trust) is essential when communicating and forming stronger relationships with Pacific people (Ministry of Education, n.d.a). Arndt et al. (2020) note that a common assumption in teams is that silence means agreement, whereas it can often reflect a person's uncertainty about how to voice a difference of opinion, belief or perspective, or a lack of comfort in doing so.

UNDERSTANDING AND ACCEPTANCE

Understanding is a first step towards acceptance of diversity. Arndt et al. (2020, para. 2) note the importance of "seeking opinions instead of stating opinions" in this regard. Appreciation of what the teaching competencies in key educational documents such as *Tātaiako* (Education Council New Zealand Matatū Aotearoa, 2011) and *Tapasā* (Ministry of Education, 2018) mean in terms of teaching practice is vital for understanding Māori and Pacific team members. For example, Pacific people are not homogeneous. Each Pacific nation has its own traditions, languages, customs and identity. Values such as respect, service, family, relationships, leadership and belonging also vary across nations. Consequently, knowing how these play

out not only within ECE settings but in other contexts (e.g., home, church) enables kaiako to respond to Pacific team members in culturally responsive ways (Ministry of Education, n.d.a).

Kearns (2017) points out that kaiako need to be aware of, understand and recognise how their own personal values and beliefs influence their ability to foster a culture of inclusion in their workplace and work effectively with others. She also highlights the importance of kaiako critically reflecting on their attitudes and practices as an effective way of exploring biases and phobias in more depth, and how these might be influencing their relationships and work. She notes that kaiako are often unaware of any biases they may have until a matter arises that challenges their belief system.

Strategies for creating and maintaining successful diverse teams

Because the intricacies of teamwork are central to discourse on quality teaching, we now outline some pivotal ways of building and supporting team functioning that is inclusive of diversity.

UNDERSTANDING TEAM DYNAMICS

Derman-Sparks et al. (2020) point out the importance of understanding that working in teams is complex and not without its challenges, but that openly acknowledging and appropriately addressing instances of bias, discrimination and bullying offer opportunities to grow together as a team, where difference is recognised and embraced and strong trusting relationships are formed. As Kearns (2017, p. 260) says, "Before we can promote diversity and create an inclusive environment, we must be prepared to challenge our own preconceived values, attitudes and beliefs."

Understanding team dynamics is thus an essential aspect of knowing how to build trust, develop a sense of unity, and work collaboratively within teams of individuals with diverse personalities, strengths, skills and ways of being. As each person in the team learns more about the personalities and perspectives of their colleagues, they will develop greater self-awareness of their own personal proclivities and perspectives. This sense of collegiality makes kaiako better able to challenge bias and discrimination, and look more deeply at their practice.

A positive inquiry approach within teams is a particularly useful way of facilitating collegiality because it equips kaiako with an appreciation for the qualities team members bring to the group and embeds a sense of belonging into the team. Such learning and understanding builds stronger relationships, forges trust and enhances the efficacy of teamwork (Arndt et al., 2020). Effective teamwork enables better problem-solving and innovation, empowers kaiako and provides opportunity for personal growth.

Leaders and kaiako can work together to build inclusive team cultures and environments by engaging in strategies that promote and foster collaborative anti-bias relationships (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020). These include observing how people in the team interact with one another and treat one another; reflecting on whether the contributions of team members are acknowledged and valued; having regular catch-ups both with individuals and as a team, to share, discuss and reflect on what is working well; and securing clear guidance on how to address any identified issues of bias.

KNOWING ONE'S RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

ECE teams need to engage together with educational policy documents that outline kaiako rights, as well as their responsibilities towards colleagues, so that they gain a shared

understanding of how to use the guidance in those documents to be more inclusive (Griffiths et al., 2023a; Griffiths et al., 2023b). Discussion of values of importance, especially those identified in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) and the Code and Standards (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, n.d.), provides a fruitful starting point.

The strong equity focus woven throughout documents such as these and the legislation mentioned earlier in this chapter again requires us to actively acknowledge our responsibility for ensuring our teams are free of discrimination and bullying. For example, if a member of a teaching team has a disability, other kaiako may need to understand that reasonable accommodations have to be made to the work environment to ensure this person can equitably participate in it and contribute their skills. Other kaiako may request flexible employment practices, the implementation and application of universal design, or opportunity to upskill (Griffiths et al., 2023b, 2025).

Equity is appreciating that fairness is not sameness and is an important facet of developing effective inclusive teams, the members of which actively support one another. Early learning services also need to have clearly outlined processes in place whereby kaiako can safely convey concerns or make complaints about any discriminatory behaviours, including racism or bullying, they experience or witness (Griffiths et al., 2023a).

CREATING A POSITIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT

As Cumming et al. (2021a; 2021b) remind us, all of us who work in ECE teams have a responsibility to ensure our workplaces are happy, healthy and positive for all. According to Haslip and Donaldson (2021), genuine collaborative relationships among diverse kaiako teams are easier to establish and maintain when guided by a character- and strengths-based philosophy. Such a philosophy is underpinned by the strong belief that everyone's character has positives and strengths that allow them to make a valued contribution to the team environment. Working in inclusive, diverse teams involves acknowledging and respecting each person's uniqueness and contributions, listening to the perspectives of others, communicating well, and making a concerted effort to promote the wellbeing and belonging of all kaiako (Cumming et al., 2021a; Cumming et al., 2021b).

FACILITATING A CULTURE OF INCLUSIVITY AND EQUITY

Facilitating a culture of inclusivity and equity in ECE settings requires all members of early childhood teams to have the knowledge and skills to effectively engage in collaborative learning relationships and to work through issues and challenges by engaging in critical dialogue and reflection, creativity and risk taking, co-operative and collaborative problem-solving, and partnership and shared responsibility (Hohaia-Rollinson et al., 2021). Because successful teamwork relies on this culture of unity and positive attitudes towards diversity, we can all promote such a culture by continually reflecting on our views, values and understandings of diversity and difference. We all need to be actively aware of how we can positively or negatively affect team relationships through the attitudes we hold (Griffiths et al., 2021). Questionable jokes and comments present just one example of behaviours that kaiako can find offensive. Having appropriate service and/or organisational policies and processes in place that convey people's rights and can be discussed at staff meetings strengthens team unity and prevents discrimination (Griffiths et al., 2023a).

PROMOTING CULTURAL COMPETENCE

All kaiako should expect their workplaces to be culturally safe and inclusive (Ministry of Education, 2019). Early childhood settings in Aotearoa are becoming more ethnically diverse,

which means forming authentic relationships that are respectful and appreciative of cultural and linguistic diversity has become a much-needed attribute and skill for kaiako (Gide et al., 2022; Gould et al., 2023). In particular, kaiako teams need to have sufficient time and ongoing professional development opportunities to learn how to give appropriate effect within their work practice to the articles of te Tiriti o Waitangi and to know their obligations as a Tiriti partner. Tiriti partnership includes valuing and respecting Māori kaiako by affording them mana as tangata whenua – the Indigenous people of Aotearoa.

All kaiako need to take responsibility for implementing te reo me ngā tikanga Māori in early learning services. This responsibility includes identifying how their own cultural identities, values and beliefs can affect their relationships and interactions with their colleagues, both positively and negatively (Griffiths et al., 2023a). Finding ways for kaiako from different cultural backgrounds to share their funds of knowledge about their respective languages, cultures and communities contributes not only to safe workplaces, but also to effective teaching and learning environments for tamariki and whānau from culturally diverse backgrounds. A commitment among leaders and their teams to growing and promoting cultural competence is therefore a vital component of a high-quality early childhood service (Gide et al., 2022; Gould et al., 2023).

Facilitating diversity training and professional development

Even though we aim to work collegially alongside our colleagues, we can all benefit from intentional diversity training and professional development to ensure the voices of all ECE kaiako are heard, in the interest of promoting effective team relationships (Ministry of Education, 2019). Kaiako are particularly well placed to identify any changes and improvements they know are necessary in this respect, because they are typically among the first to recognise and respond to the barriers to workplace inclusion (Griffiths et al., 2021; Griffiths et al., 2022, 2023a; Griffiths et al., 2023b). ECE leaders need to prioritise ongoing professional learning and development (PLD) opportunities so that kaiako can collaboratively share ideas about diversity and inclusiveness, challenge discriminatory attitudes and practices, and generally work towards ensuring their ECE environment supports diversity (Griffiths et al., 2021).

This emphasis on PLD also supports continuous team improvement, and ensures kaiako have access to the information, including research literature, they need to support their growing understanding of cultural and diversity capability. Access to knowledge of this kind is just as important as being open to different ways of considering and viewing differences, because these facilitate opportunities for challenging unacceptable workplace cultures. When we have the opportunity to think differently about difference, we are better able to challenge our own viewpoints and positionings on diversity. Various organisations, such as Te Uru Tāngata Centre for Workplace Inclusion (https://diversityworksnz.org.nz/), have developed online resources to help workplaces (including early learning services) facilitate inclusivity in diverse teams and address discriminatory attitudes and behaviours. These can be a starting point for self-initiated learning and/or team professional development.

Griffiths et al. (2021, p. 29) and other literature (see, for example, Derman-Sparks et al., 2020) offer reflective questions that encourage dialogue on building teams free of bias in ECE settings, such as:

- What do I/we need to do to uphold te Tiriti o Waitangi partnerships and the value, respect and mana shown to Māori kaiako as tangata whenua?
- Do my/our beliefs, values and attitudes towards diversity positively or negatively influence the way I/we work as a team?
- Who is advantaged/disadvantaged by how I/we respond to diversity within our early learning team?
- What inclusion- and equity-related discussions would I/we like to have in our teaching team, and why?
- Am I/we a positive role model for inclusive practice for tamariki and whānau?
- What advocacy actions can I take to support the wellbeing and rights of kaiako in my/our team when racism, discrimination or bullying is present?

While these strategies offer a good starting point for fostering effective and inclusive diverse teaching teams, it is important to acknowledge each comes with inherent complexities and potential challenges. Factors such as policy constraints, interpersonal dynamics, power imbalances and resistance to change can all affect their implementation and success. Engaging in inquiry and internal evaluation – grounded in reflection, open dialogue and a willingness to question assumptions – can support diverse teaching teams to address these complexities and challenges and move forward together (Education Review Office, 2021; Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, n.d.).

Concluding comments

In this chapter, we have highlighted the importance of diversity awareness in creating an inclusive team culture in ECE settings. When kaiako share in the responsibility of building strong, inclusive ECE teams, they instil in their workplaces a sense of whanaungatanga, an important bicultural value that means belonging for all. Commitment among ECE team members and their leaders to working collegially to provide high-quality ECE contributes to positive learning outcomes for tamariki and whānau. When everyone in an ECE team feels valued and acknowledged for who they are and for the important work they do, discrimination and team discord are far less likely. Kaiako well supported in policy and practice are even better able to contribute to making early learning settings inclusive, equitable and safe for all. Because equity-and-diversity-based legislation and policies play such an important role in promoting inclusive ECE workplaces, kaiako also need to understand how these apply to working legally and ethically within ECE teams.

Effective inclusive practice is also about ensuring kaiako can look after and advocate for their own wellbeing so they can be effective in their educational roles and responsibilities. Kaiako who work together in inclusive, equitable and safe diverse teams are well placed to develop and hone their teaching practice. Working within such teams enhances cross-cultural skills, increases self-awareness, and improves communication, negotiation and problem-solving skills. Strong leadership is vital to the development of an ECE team culture guided by the principles of inclusion and equity. When leaders take the time to truly engage in dialogue with team members about the benefits of diversity and inclusion, and proactively challenge attitudes and behaviours that are discriminatory or reflect bias, they help mould teaching teams and work environments that are inclusive and safe for all.

Glossary

ako	practice in the classroom and beyond
kaiako	teacher
kaupapa Māori	Māori approach, customary practice
kotahitanga	unity
mana	status
manaakitanga	values – integrity, trust, sincerity, equity
pono	truth, honesty
tamariki	children
tangata whenua	the Indigenous people of Aotearoa
tangata whenuatanga	place-based, socio-cultural awareness and knowledge
te reo me ngā tikanga	Māori language and protocols
wānanga	communication, problem solving, innovation
whakamana	to legitimise, give authority to
whānau	family
whanaungatanga	relationships with high expectations

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Authors

Veronica Griffiths is a regional academic staff member in the early childhood education programmes at the Open Polytechnic Kuratini Tuwhera, with interests in teacher inclusion, diversity, leadership and mentoring.

Erin Hall is a Senior Lecturer in the Bachelor of Teaching (ECE) programme at the Universal College of Learning, with research interests in inclusion and diversity, professional practice experiences and mentoring.

Fleur Hohaia-Rollinson is a Senior Lecturer Pūkenga Matua at Te Rito Maioha Early Childhood New Zealand and an advocate for socially just, culturally responsive practice, who serves as Co-President (Tangata Whenua) of OMEP Aotearoa.

Jenny Malcolm is a regional academic staff member at the Open Polytechnic Kuratini Tuwhera, with interests in rights, inclusion, diversity and autonomy.

Kerry Purdue is an early childhood regional academic staff member at the Open Polytechnic Kuratini Tuwhera, with interests in developing inclusive, responsive and equity-focused early learning environments.

Jackie Solomon is a senior academic staff member at the Open Polytechnic Kuratini Tuwhera, with interests in equity, diversity and inclusion in early childhood education.

Dr Donna Williamson-Garner is a senior academic staff member in ECE at the Open Polytechnic Kuratini Tuwhera, with interests in inclusive practice, working with children and families experiencing adversity, and infant and toddler pedagogy.

Soso‘o le Fau ma le Fau / Connect the Fibre with Another Fibre: Supporting transition to school for Pacific children

Ruta McKenzie, Glenda Albon and Sarah Te One

Our research team would like to acknowledge Sautonu Toailoa, who passed away in January 2025. Sautonu made a significant contribution to this research project and was one of the teacher researchers from Lalaga Preschool. Fa‘afetai tele Sautonu, mo lau tautua.

Motivated by a desire to stimulate systemic change and redress educational inequity, we present the findings of Soso‘o le Fau ma le Fau, a community-led action research project.[1] The research focused on Pacific āiga, fānau and tamaiti experiences of transitioning to school. Our purpose was to amplify the marginalised and silent voices of Pacific tamaiti, āiga and fānau, and to strengthen faia‘oga pedagogy using Pacific approaches in which respectful, reciprocal relationships are crucial for learning and engagement. Pacific methodologies were a key feature of the research design. The combination of Pacific metaphors and models made the transition experiences culturally relevant and meaningful for āiga, fānau, tamaiti and faia‘oga.

This report is about transitions to school for Pacific children, and explores a two-year community-led, participatory action research project undertaken in four early learning services (ELSs) and four schools across Ōtautahi Christchurch.[2] These ELSs and schools were either Pacific-language immersion services, were set in Pacific communities, or had large numbers of Pacific children on their rolls. The majority of participating āiga and fānau were Samoan.

The research was motivated by the aspirations of Pacific fānau for our children to succeed in education. We know that children’s first experiences at school can have a lasting impact on their learning and, for our Pacific communities, the stakes are higher than average if those impacts are negative. Working alongside faia‘oga from the participating schools and ELSs, we sought to understand:

- What do successful transitions look like, sound like and feel like from the perspectives of Pacific āiga?
- From a Pacific world view, what is the fau and what does this look like for children transitioning from A‘oga Amata (Pacific ELSs) to English-medium schools?
- From a Pacific worldview, what is the fau and what does this look like for Pacific children transitioning from English-medium ELSs to English-medium schools?
- How can the fau be strengthened to ensure children’s transitions are successful?
- What can ELS and primary teachers do to ensure the fau is strong for all Pacific children and their āiga?

Each of the four partnerships between ELSs and schools decided on their research focus.

1. This chapter is based on a two-year research project, Soso‘o le Fau ma le Fau, which focused on transitions to school for Pacific tamaiti. Funded by the Rātā Foundation, it was co-designed by Tātai Aho Rau CORE Education researchers and leaders in the Pacific Community in Ōtautahi Christchurch who produced a report (Taleni et al., 2023) and resources for schools and early learning services. The report can be accessed via the Tātai Aho Rau CORE Education and Rātā Foundation websites.

2. Early learning service (ELS) was the Ministry of Education-preferred term at the time of this study (cf. the early childhood education [ECE] terminology employed elsewhere in this publication).

The inquiries surfaced very powerful messages from the heart of the community and āiga. We were conscious of the fact that many voices are silenced when it comes to hearing Pacific experiences. Guided by the overarching questions, ELSs and schools worked in tandem with communities on action research projects that investigated an issue confronting them. Conversations were informed by the principles of talanoa – alofa, mālie, māfana, faka'apa'apa, fa'aaloalo – the use of home languages, and genuine engagement with the āiga.

Bringing the voices of children, āiga and fānau to the fore created new opportunities for faia'oga in ELSs and schools to develop Pacific-informed pedagogy. These strategies strengthened relationships between āiga, fānau and schools. Not only did children reveal a strong sense of identity, but the ripple effect of Pacific values influenced the organisational structures of the schools.

O moemitiga a mātua ma āiga ina ia manuia fānau / We want our children to succeed

Statistically, Pacific children lag behind their peers, and this is now shamefully accepted as a truism. This is wrong. This is unfair. And this needn't be the pathway for Pacific learners. Speaking at a Rātā Advisory Group Hui (17 February 2021), Ruta McKenzie had this to say: "We want our children to know who they are, where they are from and how they belong. We aspire for our children to thrive as citizens who actively contribute to our increasingly diverse society. If we can strengthen children's identity, languages and cultures in early learning services and schools, our hopes and dreams will have a chance of succeeding." The proverb "O au o matua fānau" refers to how precious children are to the fānau and āiga.



Figure 1. From the original report, *Soso'o le Fau ma le Fau – Connect the Fibre with Another Fibre: Supporting the successful transition of Pacific tamaiti from early childhood education to school*, Taleni et al., 2023, p. 20. All photos and figures reproduced here are used with permission. The artwork was produced by Tātai Aho Rau CORE Education.

The issue is that schools do not have a clear pathway for tamaiti transitioning from Pacific-immersion ELSs to schools. Unlike Māori-medium Kōhanga Reo, children attending an A'oga Amata move directly into mainstream schools around the age of five. In many cases, the school may not be the same one that the child's early childhood peers attend. Once Pacific children enter school, their opportunities to connect with their language and participate in cultural celebrations become limited to experiences outside school. Within school, their identities as Pacific people can become fragile. The shift from Pacific-language immersion to English-medium schooling poses barriers to the child's identity as a learner who belongs. This undermines both their contributions and those of their āiga, and at the same time has the disturbing effect of silencing their thoughts, ideas, voices and anxieties.

Ko e tu'unga 'etau 'ilo / What we know

> The ongoing unanswered question is: Are Pasifika students failing the system or is the New Zealand education system failing Pasifika students? When are 'we', as a 'community of learners' going to get this right? (Taleni, 2017, p. vi)

The longstanding, negative effects of failure in an education system that privileges certain sections of society over others has significant implications for Aotearoa New Zealand's future (Henare et al., 2011; Macfarlane et al., 2007; Peters, 2010). Social cohesion is undermined when certain groups are unable to contribute meaningfully, or their contributions seem to disappear, in faceless bureaucratic systems. Educationally, Pacific students are continually relegated to the 'long tail' of underachievement and arrive at schools with labels such as 'disengaged', 'priority learners' and 'kids at risk'.

First and foremost, our research team's aspirations were underpinned by a desire to see Pacific peoples' cultural and spiritual values recognised as foundational to the identities of the āiga, fānau and tamaiti. Pacific peoples view children as treasures and beacons of hope for the future. All members of the āiga are responsible for their care (Ministry of Education, 2017). These hopes, aspirations and dreams include educational success, so the notion of collective responsibility in the āiga extends to include faia'oga. Engaging Pacific learners, their āiga and communities in the education system ensures every Pacific learner experiences a transition from ELS to school that supports their identities, languages and cultures.

Three key ideas motivated us to undertake this research:

(a) That "Pasifika students have, for too long, been trapped in an environment of underachievement, and little has changed since the 1960s and 70s" (Taleni, 2017, vi).

(b) That a positive transition from ELS to school influences Pacific children's identities and perceptions of themselves as learners and, at the same time, supports parental engagement as partners in educational endeavours.

(c) That Pacific approaches to research design develop a shared understanding of cultural metaphors and spiritual values in everyday contexts such as ELSs and classrooms.

While there is a great deal of international research on transitions to school in general (Margetts & Kienig, 2013; Perry et al., 2014), there is very limited research on transition to

school involving tamaiti and āiga from Pacific and mainstream ELSs to school. Transitioning into a new education environment is a time of change and adaptation for not only tamaiti, but also for āiga (May, 2011; Wright, 2011).

A successful transition to school takes time and is directly affected, either positively or negatively, by the actions of the teacher (Hartley et al., 2012; Peters, 2010). As well as learning to adapt to the new environment of a school, children from Pacific ELSs also have to manage differences in language and cultural experiences (Tagoilelagi-Leota, 2017). Podmore et al. (2001) revealed the following issues and dilemmas facing children transitioning from an A'oga Amata to a mainstream school:

- Children voiced that cultural activities were important to them in early childhood. Continuity of cultural activities for children is not assured when they begin school.
- Children preferred to have a familiar person stay with them at school. However, 45% of teachers preferred not to have parents stay in their classroom when children first started school.

During the transition phase, teachers in both sectors should recognise that the child's language and culture are crucial. We were influenced by Bernstein (1970) who recognised that the culture of the child cannot enter the classroom until it has first entered the consciousness of the teacher. Shared pedagogical approaches across settings support transitions for all involved (McNaughton, 1998; Davis & McKenzie, 2016).

The ELS sector in Aotearoa provides a diverse range of services for children from birth to six years old, including a growing number of Pacific-immersion ELS settings – A'oga Amata. The majority of these settings are closely aligned with a community, āiga and church, and some are privately owned. The philosophical rationale of A'oga Amata is to retain identity, language and culture (Matapo et al., 2023).

Initiatives such as the *Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020–2030* (Ministry of Education, 2020) and *Tapasā: Cultural Competencies Framework for Teachers of Pacific Learners* (Ministry of Education, 2018) indicate a willingness on the part of the education sector to engage with Pacific communities and redress the statistical imbalance.

There are synergies between research into Pacific education, and into transitions to school. Both research fields aspire to transform learner experiences at a community level by empowering tamaiti, āiga and faia'oga to use their skills and knowledge as tools for change. Both bodies of research reveal positive impacts of successful parent engagement and student achievement when cultural ways of being, doing and knowing are embedded in pedagogy.

Pacific in design and action

> When the language dies, a culture dies, when culture dies, our stories die, when our stories die, our connections die, when our connections die, our identities die, when our identities die, we will truly be lost people. (New Zealand Parliament, 2018)

Storytelling is a significant aspect of Pacific cultural ways of knowing, being and doing. At the heart of this process are trusting, respectful relationships based on Pacific values. The stories for this research were located in four partnerships between Pacific ELSs and primary schools. While we do not share the details here, the titles of the co-constructed stories appear in Figure 2.

Early Learning Services and School partnerships	Inquiry focus	Inquiry questions
Barnardos Hornby Pasifika Early Learning Centre and Te Māhuri Mānuka Hornby Primary School	Talanoa over the fence	How can we honour and reflect the cultures and values of families in their new learning environments as they transition?
Lalaga Preschool and Te Kōmanawa Rowley School	Lalaga Talanoa: Weaving conversations	How can we strengthen the fau of identity, language, culture and spirituality during transitions?
Tafesilafa'i Early Learning Centre and Waltham School	Pulupululima faifaipea : Working together to grow	What are the important elements of partnerships between home, ELS and school to support successful transitions?
Kidsfirst Kindergarten Hoon Hay and Te Kōmanawa Rowley School	Lalagaina o leo: Weaving voices	How can we create learning environments that reflect and strengthen tamaiti identity, language and culture during transition to school?

Figure 2. Summary of the partner inquiry stories (Taleni et al., 2023, p. 40).[3]

Pacific research approaches typically use metaphors and models. These provide an authentic means of connecting the familiar with the unfamiliar (Ministry of Education, 2017). The combined effect of qualitative, Western methodologies (Dalli et al., 2017; Te One, 2007; Alexakos, 2015) with Pacific cultural and spiritual values allowed us to capture the diverse perspectives and stories from tamaiti, āiga and fānau. These informed, influenced and shaped the pedagogies of teachers from ELSs and schools.

Soso'o le fau ma le fau

The Samoan mūāgagana 'Soso'o le fau ma le fau' ('Connect the fibre with another fibre') provided a cultural metaphor for making sense of the issues associated with transitions to school for Pacific tamaiti, their āiga and fānau.

Pacific children's confidence in their identities, languages and cultures can be understood as a metaphorical fau, and the transition from ELS to school is the process of connecting the fibres from one environment to another – physically, culturally, linguistically and spiritually. Strong connections are supported when the new environment affirms Pacific children's identities, languages and cultures, and those of their āiga. This leads to successful transitions and continuity in learning. Including children's experiences alongside those of their āiga makes them visible to the fānau and wider educational community. This is widely recognised (Te One et al., 2020; Gully & Hohepa, 2021) as a strengths-based solution to support understanding across different cultural contexts.

3. For demographic information about the ELSs and schools, please visit https://ero.govt.nz/review-reports; for in-depth accounts of the stories, visit https://core-prod-assets.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/public/Rata-Pacific-report-3Jul-Flattened-for-web_compressed.pdf.



Figure 3. Ruta McKenzie using fau to explain the mūāgagana 'Soso'o le fau ma le fau' (Taleni et al., 2023, p. 8).

Teu le vā

The notions of vā and teu le vā are central to understanding the importance of relationships between people, places and things. The vā is regarded as a sacred relational space and is protected, nurtured and cared for accordingly (teu le vā). This space is not empty, but serves to connect thought and feeling (Reynolds, 2022). Teu le vā infused the relational elements of our research at all levels. Given our purpose – to amplify the marginalised and silent voices of Pacific tamaiti, āiga and fānau, and to strengthen faia'oga pedagogy – we ensured the people, spaces and places we worked with were cared for respectfully and with love.

Talanoa

> Fofola e fala kae talanoa e kāinga / Invite family members to come together on the mat and talanoa (Tongan)
> Fofola le fala se'i ta talanoa / Spread the mat so we can talk (Samoan)

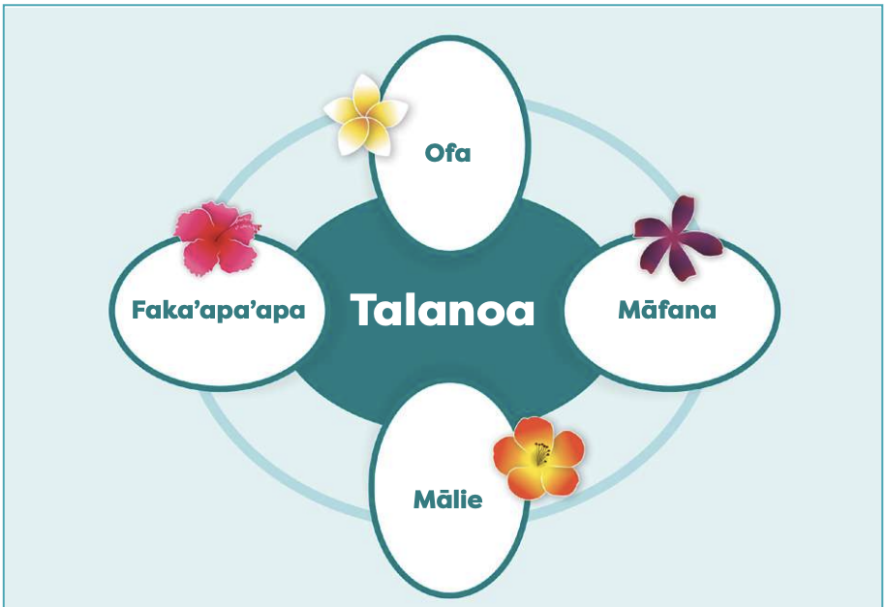
Talanoa is a traditional concept used across several Pacific Island cultures to reflect a process of inclusive, participatory and transparent dialogue. It allows people to engage in social conversation which may lead to critical discussions or knowledge creation that allows rich contextual and interrelated information to surface as co-constructed stories (Vaioleti, 2006).

Talanoa provides opportunities to discuss authentic knowledge grounded in Pacific values of respect, reciprocity, love, humour and service. In the context of this research, spreading the mat so we can talk is also about inquiry – teachers inquiring into their transition practice to find out about what successful transitions for Pacific āiga and fānau look, feel and sound like.

Talanoa was employed at every level of engagement throughout our research. From working with āiga and fānau, with faia'oga, with our Steering Group, and with experts from

within Tātai Aho Rau CORE Education and externally, the talanoa process established our project as Pacific in its conception and its enactment. One of our researchers reflected that "As a Pālagi researcher, this multi-layered and collaborative process has brought the concept of talanoa to life for me" (Glenda, Tātai Aho Rau CORE Education researcher).

Talanoa is infused with the spirituality and emotion of vibrant, real discussions about matters of common concern. The outcomes of talanoa are not static and continue to respond to context, which enhances their relevance and robustness. Talanoa participants are immersed in co-constructed definitions of an issue and become active co-creators and co-designers of solutions.



Talanoa are founded on the following values:

Ofa | Love: Stories, talanoa with Pacific parents families and communities, Parents conversations and fono.

Māfana | Warmth: Warm and non threatening talanoa, builds rapport, trust for āiga and the Pacific community to engage.

Mālie | Humour: Highlight humour throughout talanoa/conversations to strengthen authenticity of the relationships.

Faka'apa'apa | Respect: Mutual respect is built and developed throughout the inquiry process. Collective decisions for 'Next steps' are significant for the outcomes.

Figure 4. The values of talanoa (Taleni et al., 2023, p. 9).

Kakala

Talanoa was how we came together to share our findings. When it came to analysing our data, we used the analogy of the Tongan kakala, an Indigenous framework of knowledge and wisdom, as a way to make sense of what we had observed (Thaman, 1988; 2007). There are four main phases in forming a kakala: teu, toli, tui and luva.

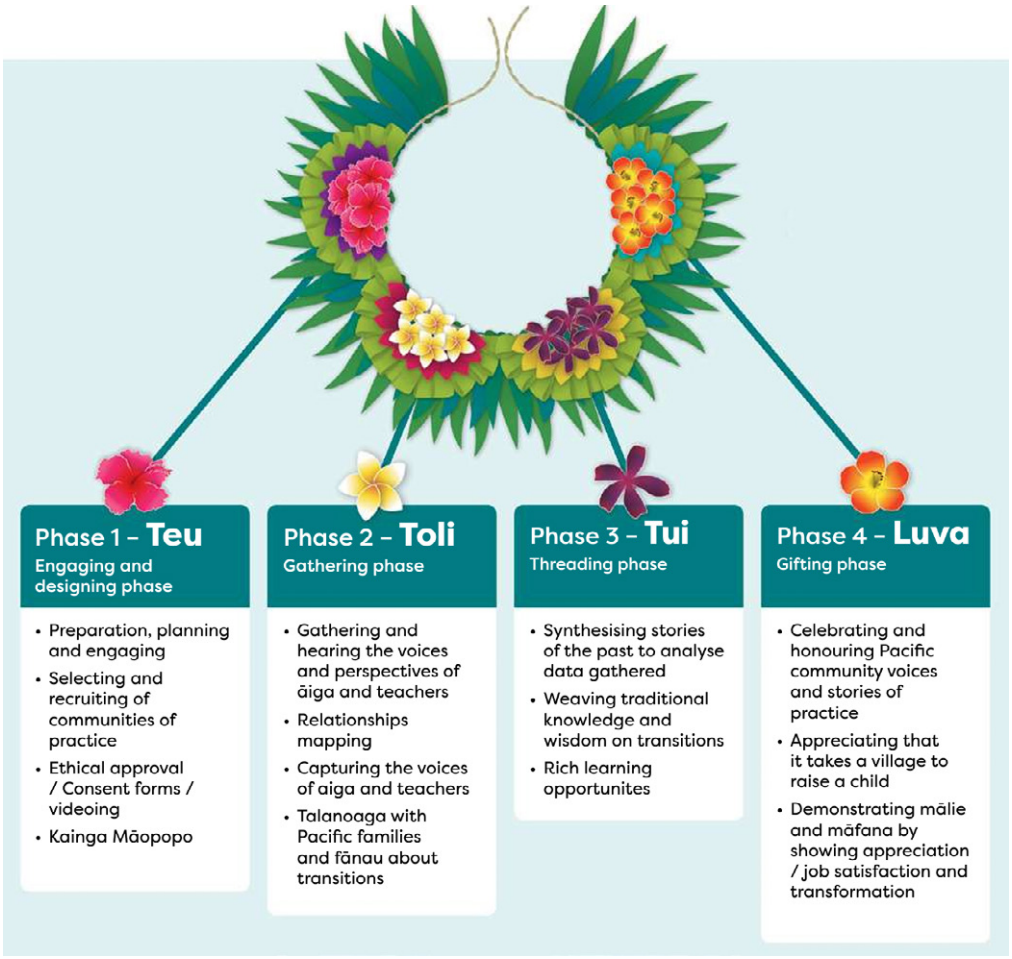


Figure 5. Phases of the kakala model (Taleni et al., 2023, p. 10).

Fono

The design of the project involved talanoa and fono with āiga, tamaiti, community leaders, school leaders and early childhood teachers. A mix of participants attended the āiga fono – grandparents, parents, young families, school and ELS leaders, teachers and children. The focus of these fono was to share the purpose of the project and to build relationships between and amongst the research team and āiga from the ELSs, alongside the teachers from the schools and ELSs involved in this research project. A strength of our particular project is how we utilised the kakala and elements of action research. We found synergies between the two approaches, but the kakala was the predominant guiding process.

Pitofilo e afua ai / Theoretical influences

During a research team hui (20 March 2020), Ruta McKenzie and Glenda Albon said, "Our theoretical framework is best represented by the hibiscus flower." This model summarises our theoretical framework and is consistent with our use of Pacific metaphors. As our data emerged, we attributed the petals to the strands of the fau. For ease, we worked to make sense of data using the fau, but we were always conscious of the need to bring this back to the whole – the hibiscus petals and flowers formed both the tui and luva phases of our research kakala. As well as revealing the fau in our data, we added a layer of robustness by questioning their presence, their influence and any gaps. The hibiscus reminded us that data does not exist in isolation but is part of a wider story.

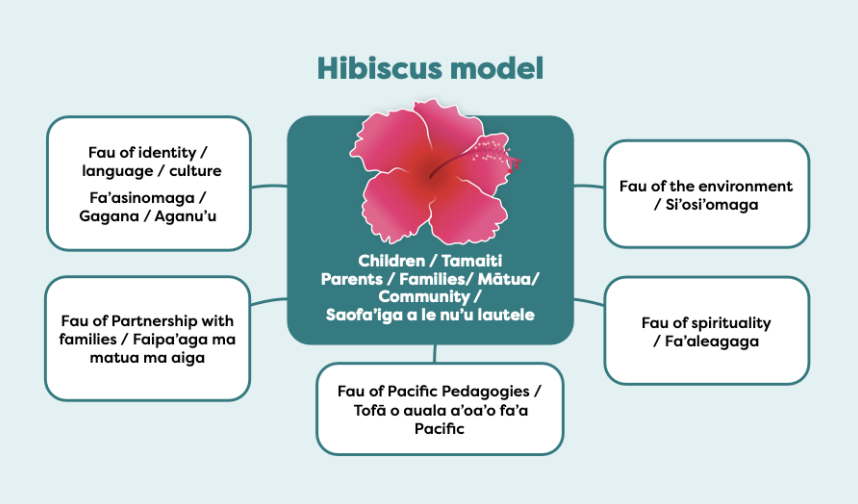


Figure 6. The hibiscus model (Taleni et al., 2023, p. 11).

Our themes and findings

The challenge of how to create equitable opportunities for marginalised communities to share their perspectives is significant. More important than merely listening to what tamaiti, āiga and fānau share is the obligation to act. Our Pacific mentors and leaders remind us all about the role of cultural protocols. As Vaioleti (2006) says: "Potentiality is a cultural aspect of Talanoa. It allows people to engage in social conversation which may lead to critical discussions or knowledge creation that allows rich contextual and interrelated information to surface as co-constructed stories" (p. 24).

We recognised the potentiality of the talanoa to not merely reveal stories but to also inform systems-level thinking that has fundamentally changed the ways teachers teach. Faia'oga have realised that their classroom practices are enhanced, not threatened, by including the Pacific tamaiti and āiga perspectives. Themes were organised according to the fau revealed across the four school inquiry stories. They demonstrated how effective Pacific approaches were in everyday classroom contexts. These themes later emerged as findings and influenced our concluding remarks.

Auala a'oa'o e fa'atino i le alofa / The pedagogy of love

> Tautua i le alofa mo se lumana'i manuia / Serve in love to thrive.

An overwhelming impression we all gleaned from the data was the importance of love – alofa that comes from within your heart. Across all the relationships we saw how alofa connected tamaiti, āiga, faia'oga and fānau. More than that, though, we saw how teaching with love underpinned decision making. It also interweaves with the value of service as a love to serve from the heart. The pedagogy of love connects heart with head. One of the Pālagi researchers observed that using talanoa not only deepened meaningful interactions with tamaiti, it deepened emotional connections between all participants, children and adults. Even a tamaititi recognised the importance of a loving pedagogy, reflected in practice:

> Parent: What did you like best about your first day at school?
> Tamaititi: That Whaea Lisa gave me a big hug.

The pedagogy of love can challenge notions of professionalism, but love is implicit in interactions between teachers and children (Grimmer, 2021). Each school inquiry generated its own insights, and these have been distilled down into four conclusions:

- O tatou uma / All of us
- Auala a'oa'o ma fa'atinoga fa'a Pasefika / Pacific pedagogies in practice
- Lagonaina o leo / Hearing the silent voices
- Galulue fa'atasi ina ia manuia / Working together to grow

O tatou uma / All of us

'O tatou uma' means 'all of us'. Fragmented approaches to transitions have not served Pacific communities well. The disconnect between cultures and pedagogical traditions has resulted in the well-documented story of underachievement and disengagement. This finding emphasises the strength of a united approach, embedded in Pacific methodologies, and informed by a rich tradition of metaphor. Strengthening partnerships between ELSs and schools and āiga has given rise to more collaborative ways of engagement – o tatou uma. Prior to the research, many Pacific āiga were reluctant to engage with schools and just dropped their children off. Now, as a result of participating in the research, with its emphasis on transitions as a shared experience, Pacific āiga and tamaiti see themselves as belonging in their school environments and faia'oga see that their role is to establish a space where knowledge is respectfully shared.

Auala a'oa'o ma fa'atinoga fa'a Pasefika / Pacific pedagogies in practice

> I played 'Le Aute' and [child's name] said, "I know this song, I'm Samoan." (Whaea Lisa, teacher-researcher, Waltham Primary School)

'Pedagogy' is a term used to cover teaching and learning, and is usually associated with

teacher practices. These practices are unconsciously culturally embedded to represent mainstream education. This was a concern, because of the ongoing evidence that Pacific children are not well served by the education system. Initially, some members of the research team were unaware that Pacific pedagogies existed. Embracing culturally responsive practice is a pedagogical theory that emphasises the use of Pacific metaphors as tools and resources. This can also mean tamaiti can act as faia'oga; they have the expertise. Learners can be teachers and teachers can be learners.

Increased awareness on the part of the faia'oga led to Lisa incorporating talanoa as a teaching strategy:

> Throughout the research, we became increasingly conscious of how, as faia'oga, we interacted with tamaiti, āiga and one another to bring [Pacific pedagogies] to life in our everyday practices. I give a bit of talanoa time after songs for the children to talk about where they have heard the songs and who they know who sings them. The talanoa often includes stories about when [the child] saw friends from our class at church. (Whaea Lisa, teacher-researcher, Waltham Primary School)

The implications of implementing Pacific pedagogies require Pālagi faia'oga, in particular, to challenge their assumptions and examine their biases when it comes to educational expectations for Pacific children.

Lagonaina o leo / Hearing the silent voices – see me, hear me, know me

Unlocking the culture of silence is a long-standing issue for Pacific āiga. Past experiences reveal that faia'oga assumed that if Pacific āiga (and tamaiti) did not respond, they did not understand. In fact, the value at work here is respect; respect for the words of the faia'oga, taking time to listen and process. The other process in place is the notion of teu le vā. Silence does not equate to not understanding. Silence is actually a form of response, and the cultural practice of talanoa, creating a safe space, eventually results in rich dialogue. The culture of silence has been misunderstood and has resulted in damaging assumptions being made about children and āiga.

All voices need to be heard in order to understand and find answers to our research questions and individual inquiries. Our strongest messages have come from the often silent and unheard voices. Where faia'oga and researchers have listened to and acted upon these messages in warm, respectful and loving ways, a deeper sense of belonging and trust, and authentic partnerships, have been achieved. In one instance, amplifying this voice acted to make a child with disabilities visible:

> As [child's name] is non-verbal (he communicates in other ways) I am his advocate for his Pasifika neurodiverse voice and want his voice to be heard amongst the talanoa sessions so he and other Pasifika autistic children and their Pasifika neurodiverse kin don't get lost or forgotten in the ongoing discussions of the future learning and wellbeing of our Pasifika children. The biggest advice I can give to parents and educators is to keep the communication lines open and flowing so everyone is on board and on the same page of how best to support the child, especially a child with extra needs. (Parent)

Once again, our Pacific methodologies provided solutions to what was perceived in English-medium education as a problem. Listening from the heart, respecting the space, the place and the person – young or old – and allowing time for responses was fundamental to our approach. A significant impact of this community-led research resulted in the parent establishing a regional group for Pacific parents of neurodiverse learners. This group now meets regularly and has a close working relationship with the Ministry of Education and Tātai Aho Rau.

'O tākanga 'etau fohé 'o tau tupu, tupu ai pe / Working together to grow

Working together to grow focuses on the effect of o tatou uma – all of us. In this research an important finding was the ways in which āiga and faia'oga in ELSs and schools collaborated together on transitions. For example, āiga are now more willing to participate in group visits to schools. During these visits, they help tamaiti take part in the classroom activities. In other words, they have broken the cultural silence. This confidence affects other āiga, and we have found a snowball effect – more āiga are involved and more āiga want to be involved. Āiga are now validated as belonging to this space and having a role.

Through the spread of talanoa, and the increasingly fragrant flowers in the kakala, not only have our fau been strengthened, but they have been made visible beyond the confines of the research. Being accessible makes it possible for the fau to grow. As well as nurturing faia'oga, āiga and community growth, over the two years of the research project we saw significant shifts in practice to respect and honour the voices of Pacific tamaiti. Hearing these voices made us aware of the fact that our Pacific tamaiti have developed sophisticated strategies to find a sense of belonging in multiple spaces – at home, school, church, sports centres and in community cultural events. These strategies enable them to feel a sense of pride in their culture and a sense of connectedness to all Pacific nations.

Understanding parents' aspirations, valuing the individual cultures of tamaiti, and making them visible in the curriculum and the wider school culture, enables tamaiti and their āiga to participate openly. This degree of engagement is exciting and infectious for faia'oga and āiga alike: "I can now see that the teachers in the school and preschool are working together. Whereas before they were quite separate. It feels so different now" (Parent).

Working together to grow has revealed expertise in unexpected places. We can only involve our communities if we know them and we can only know our communities if we listen. Through talanoa, with a focus on transitions, we found new resources to support language learning and potential resources to support Pacific learners.

Fa'aauau le fa'aāogaina o suiga fou / Sustainable, transformational change

> O le upega e fili i le po ae talatala i le ao / The net that became entangled in the night will be disentangled in the morning.

We began this research with some very clear challenges. Our questions were ambitious and required the faia'oga and āiga involved to be honest and courageous. The net metaphor above conceptualises the notion of the community coming together to collaborate and dialogue ways to disentangle issues that impact on Pacific students' learning.

For the findings of this research to effect transformational change, we need to first and foremost acknowledge that Pacific values both add strength and strengthen us as researchers, as faia'oga and as āiga engaged in education. Throughout this research we saw, again and again, how love, respect, service, warmth and humour imbued our work on every level. We never stopped wondering at the powerful influences these values have had on us.

To scale the results that we describe in our project requires locally based, locally led Pacific communities with a clear focus on deep, robust systemic change. Co-designed research projects that start with an intention to 'deep scale' are known for their impact on cultural roots (Riddell & Moore, 2015). Among the strengths of a community-led approach are the insights that have meaning for all involved. For example, when a faia'oga asked "Is this classroom mine or ours?", everyone knew what she meant. That shared understanding was transformational, because now āiga, including pepe, are part of the conversations about children transitioning to school.

As part of this research, we produced three outputs designed for faia'oga to use: an infographic highlighting the five themes to emerge from the research, a set of talanoa cards linked to Tapasā, and a series of four short videos featuring faia'oga and parents talking about the impacts of the research findings.



Figure 7. The resources designed to support faia'oga (Taleni et al., 2023, p. 70).

The combination of fau findings and conclusions establishes a strong sense of cohesion when it comes to redressing the issues of systemic failure and disengagement of Pacific learners. We have all heard distressing anecdotes about learners wanting to hide their identity as Pacific. We are confident our process allowed the voices of aīga, teacher-researchers and tamaiti to emerge. We learned what a successful transition looks like, sounds like and feels like from āiga; we created a shared understanding of the fau and we also strengthened their visibility in ELSs and schools. We created pathways for faia'oga to explore how these fau support Pacific tamaiti so that their journey into schools is enjoyable and builds a platform for successful future learning – learning that is culturally relevant and responsive.

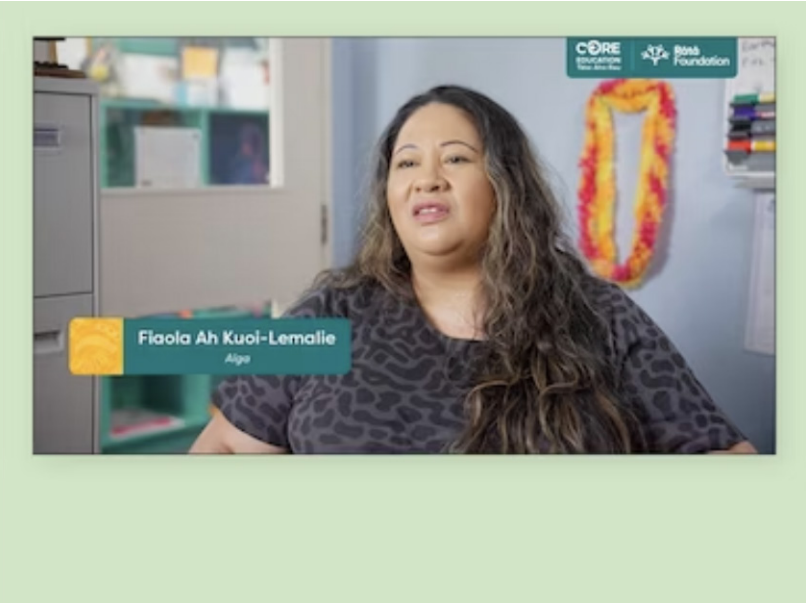


Figure 8. Still from a video of an āiga member advocating for her tamaiti.

In classrooms, teacher pedagogy was enhanced by strategies infused with Pacific values. At the organisational management level, the positive impacts gently influenced educational leadership in the participating schools and led to systemic changes. Principals and board members started talking with Pacific leaders. Ever present were tamaiti experiences and those of their āiga. We concluded that embedding Pacific cultural and spiritual values strengthens pathways to educational success. We found them to be the foundation for successful transitions to school. The heft of these cultural protocols supported a sense of belonging and engagement, the first steps to learning success.

For us, these findings were made possible by the process of spreading the mat. The combination of talanoa, kakala and fau has not only created a guide for our future but offers localised solutions to a national problem. We believe that local solutions can be mobilised to effect sustainable, transformative shifts in expectations and outcomes.

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To download a copy of the full report and the resources visit: https://core-prod-assets.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/public/Rata-Pacific-report-3Jul-Flattened-for-web_compressed.pdf

Fa'amatalaga / Glossary

āiga	family
alofa	love
fa'aaloalo	respect
faia'oga	teacher/s
faka'apa'apa	respect
fānau	children, extended family
fau	fibre, name of a tree, hibiscus
fono	meeting
kakala	Tongan necklace
māfana	warmth
mālie	humour
mūāgagana	saying
ofa	love
o tatou uma	all of us
Pālagi	person of European descent
pepe	baby
talanoa, talanoaga	talk, share stories
tamaiti	children
tamaititi	child
tautua	service
teu le vā	caring for the sacred relational space
vā	the sacred relational space

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Authors

Ruta McKenzie (MNZM) is an independent contractor and serves as a Senior Advisor Pacific on several boards. She is a leader in the Pacific community in Ōtautahi Christchurch.

Glenda Albon is an independent contractor, specialising in early childhood education.

Dr Sarah Te One is an independent researcher, active in the children's rights sector.