Aotearoa/ New Zealand early childhood education: Moving forward with intention.

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The Aotearoa/New Zealand early childhood (EC) curriculum, *Te Whāriki,* first introduced in 1996 has been heralded as a huge success (Smith, 2015) and received international acclaim (Li, Park & Chen, 2016). The structural features of the curriculum are represented as a *whāriki* or weaving metaphor, enabling the creation of a holistic, child-centred, inclusive curriculum that recognised New Zealand's bicultural heritage (Carr & May, 1993). In April 2017, a revised version of *Te Whāriki* was released. While the structural features of the principles, strands and goals remain the same, guidance to teachers reflects changes in society, research and practice in the last 20 years (McLachlan, 2017). Volume 1 of this series presented changes across the successive curriculum versions.

Guided by the principles, strands and goals underpinning *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996; 2017), teachers and practitioners are expected to weave a curriculum that reflects the values, goals, and beliefs of teachers, children, families, whānau (extended family) and community. Thus, children's daily curriculum experiences and interactions are determined at a local community level. This presents both opportunities and challenges in ensuring that children experience a curriculum that is broad and deep but also responsive to individual interests, culture and context (Dalli, 2011; Smith, 2015).

Historically, strengths and opportunities identified in the curriculum include the positioning of children as competent and confident learners (Nuttall, 2013); the view that learning occurs through *all* experiences and interactions and the importance of relationships (Nuttall, 2003); the focus on children's interests in a child-centred, play-based approach (White, Ellis, O'Malley, Rockel, Stover, & Toso, 2008) and the openness of the curriculum to allow for maximum teacher-decision making (Brostrom, 2003).

Challenges and concerns about the implementation of *Te Whāriki* have also been raised, including several reports from the national Education Review Office (ERO, 2013, 2016, 2017) which identified varying levels of quality across the sector. Further critique has noted that the non-prescriptive nature of *Te Whāriki* relies heavily on teacher content and pedagogical knowledge (Hedges & Cullen, 2005); the potential for the openness of the curriculum to be used to justify poor or traditional practices (ERO, 2013); and the absence of guidance on pedagogy, teaching and the role of the teacher (ERO, 2013; McLaughlin, Aspden, & Snyder, 2016; Meade, 2000).

While many of the challenges outlined above remain, McLachlan (2017) has noted that the 2017 version of the curriculum "is not business as usual with a new cover" (p. 8), highlighting a new guidance on pedagogy, learning outcomes, assessment and particularly, teachers as intentional practitioners. This increased emphasis on intentional teaching reflects international trends highlighting intentionality and the importance of teacher-child interactions (Epstein, 2014; Kennedy & Stonehouse, 2012; Siraj-Batchford, 2009) along with recognition within New Zealand that teachers need a more active role in children's learning if the promise of the socio-cultural curriculum is to be realised (Cherrington, 2016; Cullen, 1996; Hedges, 2000; Meade, 2000). Thus, meaningful engagement with the revised curriculum will require a process of re-envisioning deeply-embedded perspectives of child-centredness that have traditionally positioned teachers roles as non-directive and facilitative (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). To aid teachers in this process, McLaughlin and Cherrington (in press) have highlighted useful models to help teachers explore notions of intentional teaching within play-based practice.

McLachlan, Fleer and Edwards (2018) argue that *Te Whāriki* is a *competence*-based curriculum in which learners have some control over the selection, pacing and sequencing of

curriculum. This type of curriculum also requires teacher judgements of *when* and *how* to introduce new learning to children. Despite the increased emphasis on intentional teaching within the updated curriculum, there remain a number of teaching practices that are *hidden* and teacher's *perceptions* of their implementation of teaching strategies may not reflect what occurs in practice. In the following sections we examine research into teachers' experiences of, and challenges in implementing *Te Whāriki* in relation to (i) promoting children's social and emotional competence, (ii) providing quality infant and toddler education and care, (iii) developing children's literacy, and (iv) understanding the impact digital technology has on the engagement of children and families within the Aotearoa/New Zealand context.

Promoting children's social-emotional competence

Aotearoa/New Zealand EC teachers are generally aware of the pivotal role they play in supporting the social-emotional development of young children and key aspects of promoting social-emotional competence are embedded throughout the curriculum strands (Koh, 2017). Yet, a growing body of literature (ERO, 2011a, 2013, 2017; Koh, 2017; McLaughin et al., 2016; Phillips & Tyler-Merrick, 2015; Tyler-Merrick, Hunter, van Dyk, & Soper, 2017) suggests that working with children who lack social-emotional competence skills is one of the most stressful issues teachers face. The Education Review Office (ERO) in 2017 reported that teachers said they received inadequate training to teach social-emotional competence skills during their initial teacher education (ITE) programme. This finding was also supported by professional leaders in EC services who reported that ITE programmes did not always equip teachers with the necessary skills to teach or respond to children's needs, including those children with social-emotional competence difficulties (ERO, 2017). This need for additional knowledge and skills was previously highlighted by ERO in 2011(a), when they found in 45% of the services they reviewed, teachers' practices were only '*somewhat effective*' or '*not effective'* in supporting children's social-emotional competence. Issues such

as poor policy implementation, lack of consistency and poor quality teacher-child interactions were identified as the most problematic.

Despite the inclusion of social-emotional competence in the curriculum, Koh (2017) found that teachers do not refer to *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) to inform their practice but they did identify similarities in their own philosophical beliefs and practices with the principles and strands of *Te Whāriki*, especially in relation to developing children's well-being and sense of belonging. Similarly, McLaughlin et al. (2015) found that teachers stressed the importance of building warm and trusting relationships with children and their family/whānau as the foundation for promoting children's learning and social-emotional competence. Koh (2017) also found teachers were less specific about naming the teaching strategies they used to support children's social-emotional competence and that the ways they taught social-emotional competence varied. In contrast, McLaughlin et al. (2017) reported that specific social-emotional teaching practices were derived from teachers' descriptions of their interaction with children rather than specific naming of practices. Once named, however, teachers were able to indicate their level of use of different specific teaching practices (e.g., naming different emotion words, modelling how to enter peer play or take turn).

Collectively, these studies indicate that teachers have a general understanding about how to support the development of social-emotional competence in young children, suggesting that more specific, nuanced approaches and strategies to building competence and addressing concerns with children's social behaviours may be relatively 'hidden' (or unnamed) practices within the Aotearoa/New Zealand EC context. Research into recent professional learning programmes to support teacher practice in this area is now discussed.

Professional leaders play a pivotal role in providing guidance to teachers in their EC services by sharing and modelling appropriate strategies to support the development of social-emotional competence skills (ERO, 2016). In Aotearoa/New Zealand, research in this field is still in its infancy but professional learning opportunities on *how* to use intentional teaching practices to teach social-emotional competence skills in the daily EC programme is developing with promising results. With the use of two professional learning workshops, Tyler-Merrick et al. (2017) found increased teacher positive attention to children resulted in increased positive child behaviour and decreased challenging behaviour. The teachers anecdotally reported they were more motivated to continue to use the identified strategies as they could see positive outcomes for all children.

A more widely available professional learning programme to support New Zealand teachers' to teach social-emotional competence skills is the *Incredible Years* programme (Ministry of Education, 2018). Positive results from the National Evaluation of the programme (Wylie & Felgate, 2016) have been reported by ECE teachers, with their confidence levels in managing children's behaviour increasing from 46% at the beginning of the programme to 88% by the end of the programme.

These studies suggest that developing EC teachers' skills in supporting young children's social-emotional development can be achieved when hidden practices are made explicit and teachers are supported to learn about, and use, specific practices in line with *Te Whāriki's* principles and values.

Providing quality infant and toddler education and care

In outlining the nature of curriculum in New Zealand EC services, *Te Whāriki* differentiates between the characteristics, strengths and needs of infants, toddlers and young children. Recognising individual pathways of development, *Te Whāriki* identifies these three groups of

children within overlapping bands: infants (birth to 18 months), toddlers (one to three years) and young children (two and a half years to school entry). Both global and national trends indicate growing numbers of infants and toddlers are attending EC services for at least part of their week and, at times, for long periods of time (Dalli, White, Rockel & Duhn, 2011).

Alongside growth in participation, there is increasing research evidence that intentional and specialised teaching practices are required in order to provide quality education and care for our youngest children (ERO, 2015). Such practices for infants' and toddlers' are necessary given infants' and toddlers' higher needs for physical and emotional support in line with attachment theory and current neurological research on early brain development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2009). *Te Whāriki* affirms the need for specialized teaching practices by making distinctions in the examples of practice for infants, toddlers, and young children.

In order for infants and toddlers to thrive, the EC environment must be built upon the foundation of rich, sensitive, responsive and individualized relationships between adults and children (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). *Te Whāriki* prioritizes such relationships and argues that, in order to thrive and learn, an infant or toddler must establish an intimate, responsive, and trusting relationship with at least one adult within the setting. New Zealand research suggests that these relationships function best in the context of an attachment-based approach (such as a primary caregiving, or key teacher model), in which the organizational culture of the setting allows teachers to engage with children in individualized, responsive and flexible ways that best meet the needs of each infant or toddler (Bary, 2010; Rockel, 2010). Such models also emphasise the critical importance of close partnerships between teachers and family members, collaborative approaches and flexible routines and rituals (Dalli, Kibble, Cairns-Cowan, Corrigan & McBride, 2009).

However, the extent to which attachment-based approaches are adopted in EC settings is varied (Carroll-Lind & Angus, 2011), compounded by systemic issues related to the lack of specialized training for infant/toddler teachers, the need for a fully qualified EC teaching workforce and limited access to targeted professional development related to infant/toddler pedagogy (Dalli, White, Rockel, & Duhn, 2011). Implementation of specialized practices can be problematic if teachers do not understand important characteristics for each age group and the need for a more intensive relational pedagogy for very young children. Without specialized practices, professional development, or appropriate qualifications teachers may implement a de facto, watered down version of curriculum for 3-5-year old children that will not meet the needs of infants and toddlers and has the potential to be detrimental to their learning and well-being. Under estimating the importance of specialized teaching practices and, as a result, minimising the role of the infant/toddler teacher serves neither children nor teachers, and has potential to render such practices less visible within broader EC pedagogy.

There is also clear evidence for the need for teachers to be intentional in their interactions with infants and toddlers and provide a responsive curriculum across all areas of learning (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2009). This requires having specialized practice knowledge about effective approaches for the unique characteristics of these age groups and comprehensive knowledge of development and curriculum. A recent ERO report (2015) identified that, consistent with a strong emphasis on relationships, EC services gave priority to the wellbeing and belonging stands of the curriculum with infants and toddlers yet placed less emphasis on the communication and exploration strands of the curriculum. Intentional teaching approaches are thereby critical in ensuring that within the context of sensitive and responsive interactions, teachers also attend to cognitive and language development, positioning infant and toddlers as capable and confident learners, communicators and explorers. Thus, taken together, attachment-based caregiving, specialized

pedagogical knowledge and intentional teaching practices provide an important pathway to improving quality infant/toddler pedagogy across curricular and developmental domains.

Developing children's literacy in *Te Whāriki*

Internationally, research has focussed on the role of the EC teacher in supporting children's literacy prior to school entry (National Early Literacy Panel, 2009; Shanahan & Lonigan, 2013). Literacy was included in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), but how teachers should promote literacy was open to interpretation (McLachlan & Arrow, 2011). For teachers with strong understandings of literacy, *Te Whāriki* offered maximum flexibility and scope, but for teachers with poor understandings, it was a recipe for few or poor literacy practices. ERO's (2011b) national evaluation of literacy in EC services suggests many teachers lacked knowledge and effective pedagogies to promote literacy in EC, with wide variation in the literacy experiences provided for children in 353 EC settings. Around 25% of centres provided inappropriate literacy activities for young children, such as phonics packages with two year olds, extended mat sessions and meaningless literacy worksheet activities.

New Zealand research suggests that teachers have had difficulty in understanding their role using *Te Whāriki*, particularly in relation to literacy, given its guidance on broad rather than specific practices (Hedges, 2003; Foote, Smith & Ellis, 2004; McLachlan & Arrow, 2013). Westerveld, Gillon, van Bysterveldt and Boyd's (2015) study of emergent literacy skills in 92 four-year-olds in kindergartens showed that although girls did better than boys, all children scored relatively poorly on letter name knowledge and phonological awareness - literacy abilities which are predictive of later reading achievement (Tunmer, Chapman & Prochnow, 2006). McLachlan et al. (2013; 2014) similarly found low levels of letter name knowledge, phonological awareness and vocabulary in children in low SES childcare centres and kindergartens. However, children's literacy abilities were improved after professional

learning with teachers, which led to an enhanced literacy environment and intentional teaching of literacy within free play environments. Westerveld et al. (2015) and McLachlan et al.'s (2013, 2014) studies suggest teachers need to be more aware of the importance of children's literacy development and have the requisite pedagogies to be able to teach in EC.

One of the problematic issues for EC teachers is the literacy policy framework within which they teach (McLachlan & Arrow, 2011). New Zealand's current literacy strategy is a conglomeration of approaches developed by the Ministry of Education (2003) to counter the literacy gap highlighted in international studies of literacy and reading (e.g., PIRLS and PISA) and includes literacy-related professional development for primary teachers and resources for teaching (Ministry of Education, 2003, 2006). These resources do not explicitly address the role that EC teachers play in supporting children's literacy (e.g. Ministry of Education, 2006), which may contribute to EC teachers' lack of confidence and certainty about their role as teachers of literacy (McLachlan & Arrow, 2013; ERO, 2011b). Whether deliberately, or an oversight, successive documents have overlooked how literacy should be promoted in EC settings, instead focusing on dispositions for literacy. This has resulted in the knowledge and skills and associated practices being hidden from teachers or more difficult to access (Nuttall, 2013). Although dispositions for literacy are obviously important, so too are the experiences of literacy that children need in order to meet the school entry expectations of the Literacy Learning Progressions (Ministry of Education, 2012) and which are part of the literate cultural capital that predicts reading achievement (Tunmer et al., 2006).

The greater focus on outcomes in children's learning recommended by the Advisory Group on Early Learning (2015) was influential in the 2017 revision of *Te Whāriki*. Twenty learning outcomes are highlighted including three targeted at oral language and literacy acquisition. Alongside these, the revised curriculum offers stronger guidance on the role of teachers in

promoting oral language and literacy acquisition and clearer expectations of what literacy learning and development will look like, so teachers can more readily assess children's literacy outcomes. Such changes have potential to build EC teachers' confidence and make their literacy teaching practices more visible.

Digital technologies, literacy and *Te Whāriki*

Research on the use of digital technologies in EC is relatively recent, although in the compulsory school sector it is long-standing (McLean, 2016). Burnett and Marchant (2013) argue that children are increasingly "technologized", as they encounter toys with digital components from birth and this technologisation increases through childhood. Whilst there is growing research on digital literacy practices in home, school and digital communities, including the online spaces utilised by young children (Hooker, 2015; Wohlwend, 2013), EC teacher practices in relation to supporting children learning through digital literacies are an emerging pedagogy.

In her Australian study, Hill (2010) found that children had greater "multiliteracies" knowledge than anticipated through their engagement with digital technologies at home. When teachers built on the multiliteracies knowledge from the home in the EC setting, there was greater literacy engagement and strengthened literacy outcomes for children. McLean (2016) argues that teachers need to be aware of new literacy practices and how children engage in what Burnett and Merchant (2013) refer to as "meaning-making in technologically–enriched contexts" (p. 577). Both Burnett and Merchant (2013) and McLean (2016) have noted the importance of teachers becoming confident with digital technologies in order that they are able to use these as part of their literacy practices, rather than separate from them. Although *Te Whāriki* 2017 refers to supporting children's engagement with digital technologies, there is still limited guidance on teachers' roles. Building on the

emerging research in this area within New Zealand, including teacher-led inquiries, is necessary to strengthen our knowledge base and make more explicit effective pedagogical practices in order to promote teachers' capacities and confidence in this area.

Notably, one specific technology has received a lot of attention and uptake across the sector: digital or e-portfolios. Digital or e-portfolios enable online representations of children's assessment documentation for the purpose of making learning visible and sharing with children and families. Recent New Zealand studies (Goodman & Cherrington, 2015; Hooker, 2015) found greater engagement by families with their children and their assessment data when centres moved to using digital or e-portfolios, whilst Higgins and Cherrington (2017) found teacher-parent communication was enhanced. Children's engagement with their e-portfolios is somewhat more problematic. Goodman and Cherrington (2017) found that EC services adopted idiosyncratic approaches to their introduction of e-portfolios, ranging from using e-portfolios as their sole approach to documenting children's learning, through to maintaining a full or abbreviated traditional, hard-copy portfolio for children alongside e-portfolios which they used primarily for communicating children's learning to parents. In many instances, children were given little or no access to their online portfolio, raising the question that "if documentation of children's learning is only available online, how do teachers ensure that young children are able to re-visit, reflect on and self-assess their learning?" (Goodman & Cherrington, 2017, p. 36). Their findings highlight the importance of teachers carefully thinking through the adoption of new technologies, particularly in relation to the principles, goals and learning outcomes of *Te Whāriki.* To achieve such outcomes requires the provision of appropriate professional learning to support teachers' confidence and use of intentional practices when using digital technologies, including e-portfolios, while also including children in their own learning.

Future Directions

We argue that it is time to move to "actionable behaviours" (McLaughlin et al., 2015, p. 32) to enact the philosophical and aspirational foundations of *Te Whāriki*. Across the curriculum, including the areas we have highlighted in this chapter, EC teachers in Aoteaora/New Zealand appear to struggle relating theory to practice (Alvestad, Duncan & Berge, 2009; Koh, 2017). Moving to ensure children's learning is more visible and that teachers engage in intentional teaching practices in which the goals they have for children's learning and the strategies they use to meet those goals are made explicit may help address this issue.

The provision of more professional learning opportunities for teachers, both at the pre-service and in-service level, is required to support greater intentionality within their practice together with using adaptive and responsive approaches that are appropriate for teaching and learning in EC settings. Such professional development should draw upon the characteristics of effective professional learning and development as identified by Mitchell and Cubey's (2003) best evidence synthesis of quality professional development, in particular that "theoretical and content knowledge and information about alternative practices" is included and that it "helps…change educational practice, beliefs, understanding, and/or attitudes" (p. 81).

Alongside such professional learning programmes, we advocate for ongoing research to help inform, identify, and enact specific teaching practices that work in Aotearoa/New Zealand EC settings. Finally, we look forward to the evaluation of the implementation of *Te Whāriki 2017* planned by the Education Review Office over the 2018-2020 period, in particular the extent to which teachers are better able to implement the curriculum and assess "what matters here" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 65) for all children.

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