

12 Partnership with families in early childhood education

New Zealand's policy and professional context

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Introduction

Effective, authentic and meaningful relationships between early childhood teachers, parents, caregivers and extended family members is positioned as a central tenet of the Aotearoa/New Zealand early childhood curriculum framework, *Te Whāriki*. The introduction to *Te Whāriki* declares the critical importance of such relationships. “Each child is on a unique journey. They come into the world eager to learn and into family, whānau or ‘aiga¹ that have high hopes for them. Teachers, educators and kaiako² in ECE settings work together in partnership with the family to realise these hopes” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 6).

This chapter explores the way in which partnership with parents/*whānau* is embedded as a core aspiration for early childhood education (ECE) in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and how partnership with parents/*whānau* is enacted in ways that are individually, contextually and culturally appropriate. It further explores how shifts in funding and policy have influenced both initial teacher education (ITE) for student teachers and continued provision of professional learning and development (PLD) opportunities for teachers, recognising that ITE and PLD are key drivers in teachers’ development of beliefs and practices in relation to engagement and partnership with parents/*whānau*. In presenting the current policy and practice landscape in the Aotearoa/New Zealand context, implications, challenges and possibilities for future practice are highlighted.

Why parent/*whānau* partnerships matter in ECE

Bronfenbrenner (2005, p. 260) states, “[c]hildren need the consistent and reliable care of their parents and other adults, but to provide that care parents need the support of employers, schools, and society as a whole.” The New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, which embraces Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model of human development, promotes the notion of interrelatedness between children, families and early childhood services. In the New Zealand context, involvement of the family is expressed through the Māori word *whānau*.

This term refers to family, extended family or family groups, and may also extend to friends and close connections who function in similar support roles to family members. This includes parents, caregivers, siblings and extended family such as grandparents, aunts, uncles and close friends (Duncan, Bowden & Smith, 2004; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). In order to reflect the culture, valued learning and key aspirations of each ECE setting, *Te Whāriki* prioritises the development of a rich and responsive local curriculum which is negotiated in collaboration between teachers, children, families and communities. This approach is captured in the use of the term *whāriki*, which means woven mat in Māori – a metaphor to represent that the curriculum for each setting will be woven from the principles, strands and goals of the curriculum framework, along with the structures and philosophies of the different early childhood services, and the negotiated values and beliefs of the key stakeholders (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017). The curriculum has four broad principles:

1. *Empowerment* – the early childhood curriculum empowers the child to learn and to grow.
2. *Holistic development* – the early childhood curriculum reflects the holistic way children learn and grow.
3. *Family and community* – the wider world of family and community is an integral part of the early childhood curriculum.
4. *Relationships* – children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things.

The principle of *Family and Community* grounds children’s learning in the interconnectedness between home and early childhood setting and encourages teachers to form meaningful relationships with families, such that children’s and families’ culture and community are affirmed, they experience culturally appropriate communications and they are encouraged to participate in and to contribute to the curriculum.

Early childhood education policy over the past several decades has consistently established notions of partnership and the meaningful involvement of families and *whānau* in the curriculum as a legislated requirement of early childhood services in New Zealand, including the obligation to “respect and acknowledge the aspirations of parents, family, and whānau” (Ministry of Education, 2008). Each centre is reviewed on a three-to-five-year cycle by the Education Review Office (ERO) – the evaluation arm of the national education system – using a set of evaluation indicators designed for ECE (ERO, 2013). As part of these reviews the ERO seeks evidence as to how early childhood services actively work in partnership with families to support positive learning outcomes for children, including taking an active role in curriculum development, implementation, assessment and evaluation (ERO, 2013). The resulting reviews are public documents, which parents can access as they make decisions about enrolling in an early childhood service. There is evidence in New Zealand that although most services meet the minimum licensing standards (Ministry of Education, 2008),

there is quite wide variability in how well services implement *Te Whāriki* and meet their other obligations to children and their families, including working collaboratively in partnership with families (ERO, 2013a, b) and Māori *whānau* (ERO, 2012).

New Zealand's focus on developing strong family–teacher collaboration in early childhood is supported by research that highlights both immediate and long-term benefits of a *whānau*-based approach. Sheridan, Clarke, Marti, Burt and Rohlk (2005) found that effective family–teacher partnerships increase children's educational success, including heightened social skills, positive attitudes towards school and higher student achievement, as well as overall wellbeing. Moreover, research shows that the family is the most powerful influence for learning and that this finding holds across all social and cultural groups (Anderson & Morrison, 2011; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Cairney (2003) argues that the family's influence on children's learning does not stop at five years when children start school; family background has been found to be a significant predictor of school achievement and there is a strong relationship between parents' knowledge, beliefs and interaction styles and children's school achievement. To support child and family outcomes, partnerships with families as a feature of children's early childhood experience is widely recognised as a key component of effective education. When families partner with teachers in children's early childhood experience, there is increased wellbeing not only for children but also for families and teachers, enhanced continuity and consistency between the different environments of a child's life, greater social support and sense of belonging, increased engagement in learning and an associated improvement in learning outcomes for children. Close partnerships with families guide teaching approaches that respond to the unique characteristics of a child, and support the teacher to be more attuned and responsive.

In 2013, Dr Russell Wills, the New Zealand children's commissioner, released a working paper titled “Parents’, Families’ and Whānau Contributions to Educational Success”. The report described parenting behaviours and attitudes that impact children's development and educational outcomes and argued that, regardless of socioeconomic circumstance, key parenting behaviours can mitigate some of the effects of poverty and disadvantage on education success. This report also emphasised that access to quality ECE can also support education success and recommended that “improving both the home learning environments and rates of participation in quality ECE by disadvantaged children is likely to improve their outcomes more than focussing on either area on its own” (p. 5). Furthermore, the commissioner asserted that to maximise positive outcomes for children and families a good approach is to start early in a child's life, to be strengths-based and to recognise the expertise of parents and *whānau*.

Trust, respect and shared expectations of teachers and families can have a significant influence on the partnership and connections developed. When a child attends an ECE centre, the parent/caregiver places great trust in the teachers to provide quality education and care, especially as this can be for up to 10 hours a day. However, Hornby (2011) found that attitudinal barriers between home

and early childhood services may interfere with healthy relationships. Hornby states that such barriers need to be systematically broken down in order to create the best possible learning environment for children. This is of particular importance in a country such as New Zealand, as it is one of the most linguistically and culturally diverse countries in the world (Statistics NZ, 2013). To ensure positive outcomes from ECE, Mitchell, Wylie and Carr (2008) emphasised the importance of family–teacher partnerships where families’ social/cultural capital and interests from home are respected and integrated into the development of the local centre’s curriculum.

Despite the grounding principle of family and community in the curriculum and the evidence to support the importance of the home–centre partnership, ERO evaluations of the implementation of *Te Whāriki* (ERO, 2013a, b) show that a number of ECE services struggle to implement the curriculum and to engage fully with both the bicultural nature of the curriculum (ERO, 2010) and the legislated requirement to engage with families and *whānau* (ERO, 2012). As part of ongoing national topical evaluations, the ERO (2013b) examined ECE services’ priorities for children’s learning, how these priorities were decided and the ways in which they influenced all aspects of what teachers do; findings identified considerable variability in how well services identified and responded to priorities for children’s learning. The report also emphasised the importance of understanding the aspirations of parents, as well as the strengths and interests of children, in order to provide a relevant and responsive curriculum. A particular area of concern was the lack of responsiveness to Māori and Pasifika children in many ECE services. The report concluded that better assessment and self-review practices would enable services to be more responsive to all children. With more effective assessment and self-review strategies in place, the ERO proposed that services’ ability to listen, respect and respond to what parents and *whānau* expect of ECE services would be strengthened.

Partnership with *whānau*: a bicultural approach

The importance of working in partnership with parents and *whānau* cannot be overemphasised in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Partnership is the foundation of the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, and also is an obligation established by the Treaty of Waitangi, as the founding document that established the relationship between the Crown and the Māori, as the indigenous people of the nation (State Services Commission, 2005). The Treaty sets a mandate for the Crown and the Māori to work in partnership, to ensure protection of all “*toanga*” (treasures), and to foster equal participation and power-sharing between Māori and non-Māori. Building on these obligations, *Te Whāriki* embraces a bicultural, treaty-based focus (Jenkins, 2017) and requires teachers to engage in consultation and meaningful collaboration with *whānau* to ensure children experience success as Māori.

The Māori concept of *whanaungatanga* is central to understanding approaches to partnership in the New Zealand educational context. *Whanaungatanga*

focuses on the commitment to build and strengthen relationships (Durie, 1997; Ritchie, 2003) based on a shared commitment among kin (or community) to form a stable social support system (Ritchie & Rau, 2006). *Whakawhānaungatanga* expresses the process of establishing such relationships and working together through shared experiences, which provides people with a sense of belonging. Ritchie and Rau (2006) explored the potential of *whakawhānaungatanga* approaches to increase Māori participation in ECE and to support teachers' confidence and competence in providing responsive and bicultural services that meet the expectations of *Te Whāriki*. Their work identified several key strategies for supporting *whānau* involvement:

- Establishing the importance of welcoming families and *whānau* and extending an ongoing welcome.
- Demonstrating a sustained commitment to obligations within the Treaty of Waitangi.
- Leadership within the team as well as a shared philosophy and commitment from the team.

They also identified several key strategies to support teachers' implementation of responsive and bicultural services:

- Awareness of current programme delivery and seeking support to deepen knowledge and abilities.
- Seeking and understanding Māori aspirations for children and learning.
- Everyday and integrated use of Māori values (*Te Ao Māori*), language (*te reo Māori*), and practices (*ngā tikanga Māori*).

Notably, *whakawhānaungatanga* approaches centralise the importance of *whānau*, including *whakapapa* (genealogy, kinship, connectedness to people and place) and everyday relationships as core aspects. Ritchie and Rau (2006) suggest that teachers who are open to different cultural perspectives, respect families' cultural capital and embrace appropriate cultural practices are better positioned to foster meaningful and authentic connections with *whānau*.

Given the primary importance of developing partnership with families, the ECE sector requires the commitment and dedication of early childhood teachers who are both skilful and informed in regard to supporting effective partnerships and breaking down the barriers that can limit teachers and families working together in meaningful and authentic ways to support children's learning. In particular, if the relationship between teachers and parents/*whānau* is to foster children's learning and wellbeing, the focus of communication and involvement needs to be on pedagogy and the experience of teaching and learning for the child (Mitchell et al., 2006). Therefore, the importance of ensuring teachers are well equipped with pedagogical knowledge, skills and attitudes to support children's learning and to develop strong family partnerships is paramount in both pre-service training and ongoing professional learning development.

Initial teacher education in New Zealand

Initial teacher education (ITE) is the pathway by which prospective teachers enter the teaching profession. While factors related to the duration, location and content of such ITE programmes are contested in the national and international literature, there is general agreement that high-quality ITE is correlated to the quality of teaching, and thereby, subsequent positive outcomes for children. In New Zealand, it is required that a minimum of 50% of all teachers in a licensed early childhood service hold a recognised early childhood ITE qualification, with additional funding for up to 80% of staff to be qualified. Current requirements mandate that a recognised teaching ECE qualification will comprise a three-year bachelor- or diploma-level qualification, or alternatively a one-year graduate diploma for those who already hold a bachelor degree qualification. There are several pathways to attain such qualifications, including offerings from the colleges and faculties of education within the university sector, and polytechnics or private training establishments (PTEs), as well as different programme types, including field-based, face-to-face and distance learning.

In 2015, the New Zealand government established the Advisory Group for Early Learning to consider the role of ITE as part of a larger review of ECE. This report highlighted concerns as to the effectiveness of current ITE provision in preparing teachers to implement *Te Whāriki* competently. The report commented, “We also looked at the effectiveness of current ITE, and were struck by lack of evidence for a positive relationship between it and curriculum implementation in early childhood education” (Advisory Group for Early Learning, 2015, p. 12). Looking ahead, questions remain as to the role of early childhood ITE, the nature of provision and the continued parity of qualification with teachers in the primary and secondary sectors.

Within New Zealand, ITE has been a contested and shifting field in recent decades as a result of deregulation of the tertiary education sector and growing marketisation of teacher training options, as evidenced in the multiple pathway options noted. The provision of early childhood ITE has been the most variable of all education sectors due to changing perspectives related to the status of early childhood teachers in comparison to their counterparts in the compulsory school sector. For example, it was not until 1988 that the six colleges of education were granted funding to teach a three-year ECE teacher education qualification (birth to five years) when such programmes were already the established norm for those teaching in the primary sector (Kane, 2005).

A further significant change occurred between 1990 and 2006 as the sector experienced the amalgamation of six formerly stand-alone ITE teachers’ colleges with nearby universities (Gunn, Berg  igh & Hill, 2016). These changes marked a significant shift in focus from practice-based programmes to research-based practice, and practically, changes from diplomas to degrees. More recent indications suggest that ITE may move to postgraduate qualifications – with trials of masters-level qualifications currently being piloted – although this outcome will depend on future political decisions following a recent general election.

The diversity of early childhood ITE qualifications adds to the complexity of the sector and to challenges in determining the content and focus of different programmes. Due to growing demand for a qualified workforce, in the early 1990s, the government also enabled polytechnics and private training establishments to offer early childhood ITE qualifications, which in turn raised concern about quality assurance across programmes (Kane, 2005) and about varying emphases on theory and practice between different providers.

To ensure the quality of ITE provision, all programmes must be approved and accredited by the Education Council Aotearoa New Zealand and either the New Zealand Qualification Authority or the Committee on University Academic Programmes, and are subject to ongoing monitoring and review. The Education Council serves a role in establishing the criteria for graduates exiting ITE programmes, currently identified as the *Graduating Teacher Standards*. These standards specify the skills, knowledge and attributes of those entering the profession of teaching, and therefore guide the content and focus of ITE programmes. In relation to parent–teacher partnership, the standards state that graduates must “have the knowledge and dispositions to work effectively with colleagues, parents/caregivers, families/whānau and communities” (Education Council, 2015). However, at this time little is known about the way in which ITE programmes prepare graduates for the task of working in partnerships with families as there is little published description as to how, whether or which standards are used to guide the knowledge base and exit standards of programmes of ITE (Cameron & Baker, 2004).

While it is likely that the knowledge, skills and attitudes to foster positive partnerships with families is a core aspect of ITE, given the wider focus on the early childhood curriculum, the lack of information on programme content and outcomes makes it difficult to evaluate how prepared teachers are for teaching in a diverse sector. To support the transition into the teaching profession new graduates enter into a period of provisional certification in which they must engage in an advice and guidance programme as part of ongoing professional learning and development (PLD). In addition, sector-wide PLD for all teachers is highly valued. The importance of PLD is especially noted for both qualified and unqualified ECE staff members.

Professional learning and development in New Zealand

Three government agencies influence New Zealand early childhood teachers’ engagement in ongoing PLD. These are the Ministry of Education, the ERO and the Education Council Aotearoa New Zealand. The Ministry of Education’s regulations for licensed early childhood services require that management provide staff members with “adequate professional support, professional development opportunities, and resources” (Ministry of Education, 2008) whilst the ERO’s framework for EC reviews, *He Pou Tātaki*, references professional learning opportunities and activities as elements supporting quality practices (ERO, 2015).

In 2017, the Education Council Aotearoa/New Zealand released an updated Code of Professional Responsibility and Standards for the Profession, outlining

professional practice expectations for all qualified teachers. Central to this code is the expectation that teachers engage in ongoing PLD in order to continually strengthen teaching practice. Furthermore, one of the four foundational values of the code is a *commitment to families and whānau*, which requires that teachers “respect the vital role that learners’ family and whānau play in supporting children’s learning (Education Council, 2017, p. 12). This foundational value, alongside the emphasis on family and community within *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), highlights the importance of partnerships with parents and *whānau* as integral to quality ECE practice in New Zealand. However, as we outline in the next section, the changing landscape of ECE PLD policy and practice has reduced opportunities for teachers to engage in PLD that strengthens their practice in this area.

The introduction of the first iteration of *Te Whāriki* in 1996 saw extensive PLD support enabling early childhood services to access free, regular, in-depth PLD through contracts funded by the Ministry of Education and delivered by a range of providers such as the colleges of education/universities, national organisations (such as the Playcentre Federation and the Kōhanga Reo National Trust) and private providers. From 1996 to 2010, these contracts addressed areas of practice prioritised by the Ministry, particularly strengthening the implementation of *Te Whāriki*. Another Ministry initiative – the Centres of Innovation (COI) programme which ran from 2002 to 2010 – also provided opportunities for PLD. The COI were required, as a condition of funding, to present their findings to other teachers through a range of events which proved very popular with the sector. Alongside these Ministry-funded programmes, many ECE umbrella organisations provided additional PLD to their staff members and a limited range of one-off events were offered by teacher education organisations and commercial providers, with a cost to participants (Cherrington & Wansbrough, 2010).

In 2009, major policy changes by a new centre-right government saw the abolition of the COI programme, reduced funding and a more targeted approach for Ministry-funded PLD programmes. This resulted in significant cuts to the funding received across the ECE sector and saw the increased marketisation of ECE PLD, both of which impacted teachers’ engagement in PLD. The targeted approach to Ministry-funded PLD prioritised strengthening teachers’ capacity to engage more effectively with children and families, in particular from Māori, Pasifika and low-income communities, and working with services identified as of concern as reported through the ERO review process (Ministry of Education, n.d.). In addition, small nationally available programmes focussed on particular aspects of PLD such as infants and toddlers, mathematics, early literacy, leadership and *te reo Māori* (Māori language), and engaging with families and children was funded. Services unable to access these Ministry programmes are required to fund their own PLD. This is proving increasingly difficult in light of reduced government funding to services. In a recent survey of ECE services, “76% of respondents said staff professional development and learning had been affected” (NZEI Te Riu Roa, 2016, p. 5) by the reduction in government funding since 2010. Beyond Ministry-funded programmes, most PLD provided by outside

organisations now consist of short, one-off workshops rather than longer, situated programmes that are likely to be of greater benefit to teachers (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Further shifts in approaches to ECE teacher PLD are under way at the time of writing. A major initiative to introduce Communities of Learning (CoL) | Kāhui Ako (Ministry of Education, 2016a) as an integrated approach to PLD in the compulsory school sector was recently extended to allow ECE services to participate in their local CoL.

Despite the importance of developing partnerships with parents and *whānau*, little is known about the extent to which New Zealand EC teachers *currently* engage in PLD to strengthen their practice. Whilst early Ministry-funded contracts did not explicitly require a focus on developing family–teacher partnerships, a national survey of ECE services in 2005 found that 68% of teachers reported that strengthening partnerships with parents and *whānau* had been an objective in their recent PLD to a large or moderate extent, and 76% reported their PLD had been effective in supporting them to develop effective partnerships with parents, *whānau* and their community. When asked whether their PLD had resulted in the centre/service engaging parents and *whānau* in aspects of assessment, planning and learning, 81% indicated that this had occurred to a high or some degree (Cherrington & Wansbrough, 2010).

Since the adoption of an increasingly targeted approach to PLD in 2010, shifts in the degree to which Ministry-funded PLD programmes explicitly support teachers to strengthen their practice with regard to developing partnerships are evident. For example, Ministry-funded PLD programmes offered from 2010 to 2013 included a new core focus on ECE services being responsive to children’s identity, language and culture, with attention to developing partnerships and engaging parents in their children’s learning more implicitly embedded within this theme (Ministry of Education, 2012). In 2013, the establishment of Strengthening Early Learning Opportunities (SELO) programmes expanded the emphasis on language, culture and identity beyond working just with children to focus on “strengthening practitioners’ capacity to engage more effectively with children *and families* [added emphasis] within specific communities” (Ministry of Education, 2015). More recently, however, the SELO programmes’ emphasis has shifted to focus on “early childhood education providers and *kōhanga reo* that have low participation rates or need support in providing quality early learning” (Ministry of Education, n.d.) with priority given to improving “participation in quality ECE among: Māori children, Pasifika children [and] children from low socio-economic families” (Ministry of Education, n.d.), thus rendering the notion of partnerships less visible.

The effectiveness of these PLD programmes, particularly in relation to strengthening partnerships, is unknown with the last publicly available evaluation noting variability in the degree to which PLD programmes strengthened services’ responsiveness to children’s identity, language and culture, midway through the contract period (Cherrington & Thornton, 2013). In addition to this gap in understanding the effectiveness of PLD in this area, the current targeted approach to Ministry-funded PLD has meant that decisions about both the focus

of and approach to PLD have been devolved entirely to ECE management and teachers. Thus, whilst both *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) and the Education Council's (2017) Code of Professional Responsibility and Standards for the Profession provide explicit expectations regarding partnerships between ECE services and parents/*whānau*, the extent to which services have access to and engage in PLD in this area remains uncertain.

Implications for initial teacher education and professional learning and development

Initial teacher education

The need for improvement in relation to ITE was identified as a core recommendation of the Advisory Group for Early Learning (AGEL, 2015). Several areas exist for guiding and informing improvement in ITE in order to address the concerns outlined earlier in this chapter. This includes a need to establish a stronger knowledge base for how ITE programmes support and prepare graduates for the task of building partnerships with families. It has been noted that ITEs have difficulty documenting the relationship between *Te Whāriki* implementation and child outcomes (AGEL, 2015; ERO, 2013b, 2013c). This finding has pedagogical implications for student teachers and graduates especially in terms of developing skills for effective implementation and recording curriculum goals and learning outcomes. Clear and accurate documentation of curriculum implementation and outcomes appears very worthy of any future ITE investment and may require further targeted reviews and evaluations of programme efficacy.

Debate related to the form, content and delivery of ITE programmes offers continuing challenges. However, an area of potential opportunity is to ensure future ITE developments move beyond a dichotomous view of practical teaching skills versus research and theory-informed training to ensure attention to both provisions so that student teachers are aware of the research and theory which informs their practice and are also competent and confident to deliver a curriculum which meets both child and family/*whānau* needs.

In addition to a more balanced ITE approach, there is a need to establish minimum qualifications for early childhood teachers. At present the range of qualifications, paired with the percentage of the workforce that is unqualified and has not experienced ITE presents a significant challenge to the sector. The Advisory Group on Early Learning (AGEL, 2015) identified this as a risk, with the implication that teachers without training may not have the conceptual skills to take full advantage of PLD.

Professional learning and development

In addition to improvements in ITE, ongoing PLD for ECE teachers was identified as a core recommendation of the Advisory Group for Early Learning (AGEL,

2015). As outlined earlier in this chapter, evolving policy decisions have resulted in limited professional learning and development opportunities, lack of PLD funding or very limited resourcing and exclusively targeted PLD funding for services to low socioeconomic areas with high Māori and Pasifika populations or for services targeted as poor quality. Recent shifts to Communities of Learning | Kāhui Ako provide a potential opportunity for teacher PLD; however, there are challenges for involving ECE services in this initiative. These include the high number yet small scale of individual ECE services compared to only one or two schools in their area and the fact that children attending ECE services transition to a number of schools in their vicinity, thus often making it difficult to determine which ECE service should join specific CoL | Kāhui Ako (Ministry of Education Early Childhood Advisory Committee, 2016b).

To better support appropriate PLD in ECE, the Advisory Group for Early Learning (AGEL, 2015) recommended a significant investment in professional development initiatives with a focus on leadership for learning and engagement with families/*whānau*. Given New Zealand's unique cultural context and the need to incorporate Māori principles and values when considering what works with Māori parents and *whānau* (Jenkins, 2017), there needs to be careful consideration for developing and implementing programmes that are culturally responsive and effective. Moreover, the quality of implementation also has a significant impact on programme outcomes and requires appropriate resourcing and robust evaluations.

Māori models of leadership offer opportunities for *whānau* to take increasing responsibility and active participation in children's learning and early education. Parent–teacher partnerships need to be adaptive in order to suit different family cultural perspectives (Chan & Ritchie, 2016; Guo, 2005). Implications for professional preparation and practice include the need for teachers to be equipped with skills that are culturally responsive and reflective, especially in Māori principles and values, so that the likelihood that parent–teacher partnerships meet the needs and perspectives of Māori families and children is increased.

Shuker and Cherrington (2016) highlight the need for ITE and continuing teacher PLD to include strategies to develop parent–teacher partnerships that are culturally appropriate and suggest that not only do teachers need skills in order to embrace diversity but they also require “the possession of dispositions and attitudes that enable educators to truly welcome, acknowledge and embrace diversity” (p. 183). Billman, Geddes and Hedges (2005) suggest that the parent–teacher partnership can be deepened with shared understandings, as parents and teachers may not have the same expectations or aspirations for their children's early childhood education experience. They further suggest that teachers need to develop skills in being adaptable to suit the needs of families and to explore ways to understand the perspectives and beliefs of the families they work with. When parents are supported to engage with their children in the early childhood curriculum, they become more confident and knowledgeable advocates for their children within the wider education system, which can further enhance the transition to school and the continuity between home and education settings.

Future directions

To support critical shifts in quality curriculum implementation, enactment of strong teacher–family partnerships and culturally responsive approaches to teaching and learning, we believe the future directions for ITE and teacher PLD should involve:

- 1) Legislation and funding to support a fully qualified teaching workforce in ECE.
- 2) A balanced approach to ITE with a focus on effective pedagogical approaches and research and theory informed practice.
- 3) A more targeted and nuanced approach to the reporting and evaluation of ITE programmes and outcomes.
- 4) Appropriate government resourcing and funding for all teachers to access relevant and effective PLD which is targeted to teacher/centre learning goals/needs and child and family outcomes.
- 5) Enhanced PLD in relation to the implementation of *Te Whāriki*, in particular related to cultural responsiveness and partnerships with families/*whānau*, and which supports clear and accurate documentation of curriculum implementation and its outcomes to children and their families/*whānau*.
- 6) Support for teachers to develop strong local curricula in consultation with families and communities.
- 7) ITE programmes and funded teacher PLD opportunities that focus on explicit expectations regarding partnerships between ECE services and parents/*whānau*.

Conclusion

Meaningful partnership with parents/*whānau* has been long established as a critical tool in providing positive outcomes for children in early childhood and for later life trajectories. When partnerships are functioning in ways that support mutual sharing of knowledge and skill, and when there is rich and detailed communication between home and centre that focusses on teaching and learning, then children can experience the full promise of the early childhood curriculum. Given the national evaluation reports suggesting that existing teaching ECE practices and partnerships with families are variable across settings, with notable concerns in key areas, there is a clear need for both initial teacher education and ongoing professional learning and development opportunities to target parent–teacher partnership as a core focus. If teachers are to develop the rich, individualised curriculum as proposed in *Te Whāriki*, then greater levels of collaboration, shared decision-making and parent/*whānau* involvement in curriculum implementation and recording are essential. This can only be achieved with increased, well-funded and high-quality PLD opportunities for all teachers and services.

Notes

- 1 *Whānau* and *aiga* are terms Māori and Pasifika peoples use to express the concept of family, both immediate and extended.
- 2 *Kaiako* is the Māori word for teacher and in *Te Whāriki* is used to include “all teachers, educators and other adults, including parents ... because it conveys the reciprocal nature of teaching and learning which is valued in this curriculum” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 7).

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