

# Diversity and the early years

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## **Introduction**

Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector is characterised by diversity: diversity in settings and in the backgrounds of the children and teachers. Sociocultural theories have long held promise for pedagogy in culturally diverse contexts (see, for example, John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996), and the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), is underpinned by a sociocultural approach to learning (Carr & May, 1993). This chapter considers the changing landscape of ECEC, and, drawing on the sociocultural foundations of this book, considers some implications for working with children in the early years. We discuss the potential that the principles of *Te Whāriki* offer for embracing diversity, and while we celebrate the sense of growing cultural responsiveness in ECEC, we acknowledge some of the complexities involved.

## **The early childhood education and care landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand**

The ECEC sector in Aotearoa New Zealand comprises a wide range of services, including both teacher-led and parent-led, all-day or sessional, centre-based or home-based services (Ministry of Education, 2009). Although the majority of services are English medium, some centres foreground Māori tikanga and language (te kōhanga reo and ngā puna kōhungahunga), while others focus on Pacific Island languages and cultures (Ministry of Education, 2014). Participation rates in ECEC are generally high, with overall figures standing at 96% (for children starting school in the year ending December 2014). There is some variation by ethnicity, but all groups record at least 90% participation

(Education Counts, 2014a). Across all ethnicities the majority of children are enrolled in education and care settings or kindergartens. According to 2013 figures, only 20% of Māori children were enrolled in te kōhanga reo (Ministry of Education, 2015).

An overall picture of the changing landscape of the ethnicity of young children is evident in statistics gathered by schools. School rolls from 1996 showed 66% of children identifying as Pākehā and about 20% identifying as Māori, meaning only 14% drew from other ethnic groups. Since then there has been a steady increase in the diversity of the ECEC population. Recent figures (Education Counts, 2014b) indicate that just 50.4% of Year 1 students at school identified as Pākehā, with 25.7% identifying as Māori, 10.3% as Pasifika and 10.7% as Asian (and around 2.7% of children identifying as being from 'other' cultural groups).

The figures record only one (prioritised) ethnicity and so give a simplified picture, given that many children identify with more than one ethnicity. For example, the Growing up in New Zealand study noted that multiple ethnicities were recorded for 42% of the 6,327 children. Of these, 73% were described as having two ethnicities and the rest (27%) three or more ethnicities (Morton et al., 2014).

Ethnic diversity is only part of the complex picture. There is also a mix of socio-economic factors, such as the wide gap between rich and poor (Carter, Gunasekara, & Blakely, 2013) and the fact that 24% of dependent children aged 0–17 years were deemed to be living in relative poverty (2013 figures) (Simpson et al., 2014). Three out of five children living in poverty live that way for many years (Simpson et al., 2014).

The backgrounds of ECEC teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand collected from the 2013 Census are also diverse. Compared to teachers in the other education sectors, early childhood teachers are much younger and include more Māori, Pasifika and Asian teachers but fewer male teachers. The annual income of ECEC teachers tends to be lower than that of the general working population, especially compared with teachers in other education sectors. The proportion of ECEC teachers with a bachelor's degree or higher qualification is higher than in the general working population but lower than for teachers in the other education sectors (Statistics New Zealand, 2013).

### **Social and cultural processes in ECEC settings**

As a basic premise, *Te Whāriki* highlights the role of “socially and culturally mediated learning and of reciprocal and responsive relationships for children with people, places and things” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9). These

ideas were reiterated in two literature reviews exploring quality in ECEC, commissioned by the Ministry of Education (Dalli, White, Rockel, & Duhn, 2011; Mitchell, Wylie, & Carr, 2008), which showed the importance for children's outcomes of both teacher/educator interactions with children and the opportunities afforded by the environment. The findings of these reviews relate to Vygotsky's (1994) claim that the cultural context is central to development, and Wertsch and Tulviste's (1992) argument that mental functioning in the individual can only be understood by examining the social and cultural processes from which it derives.

A key feature of Vygotsky's theory is the child's interactions with others, and his claim that higher psychological functions emerge first in the "collective behaviour of the child", in cooperation with others, and only subsequently become internalised (Vygotsky, 1935, cited in van der Veer & Valsiner, 1993, p. 317). Sometimes these interactions involve intentional assistance, which Bruner and his colleagues termed "scaffolding" (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976, p. 90). This might involve engaging the learner's attention and interest, reducing the complexity of the task (in effect letting the learner do as much as he/she can manage and the tutor filling in the rest), keeping the learner on task, highlighting crucial features of the task, reducing the learner's frustration, and demonstrating or modelling behaviours until the tutee is "checked out to fly on his [sic] own" (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976, p. 96).

### **Attunement versus hijacking**

It is worth taking a closer look at the nature of the interactions described in the previous section. We would argue that to be effective, such interactions rely on intersubjectivity (Rogoff, 1990) or intersubjective attunement (Dalli, White, Rockel, & Duhn, 2011), which is not always easy to achieve. The practitioner researchers in Davis and Peters's (2011) Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) study found many dilemmas when seeking to understand and support children's thinking. Even when adults thought they were following the child's interests, when reviewing recorded conversations it was evident that adults may prioritise their own views and understanding and 'hijack' the direction of an interaction instead of really listening to and understanding the child (Peters & Davis, 2011). Knowledge of children's interests and experiences can help the adult tune in to what is being talked about. However, even then there can be a tendency to make assumptions. Practitioners in Davis and Peters's study found that slowing down and taking time to listen were crucial. Focusing on trying to engage with the child's meanings and ideas contributed

to 'seeing' the child and their learning differently. It also helped adults to see themselves differently (Davis & Peters, 2011).

Seeing both the child and oneself differently and trying to understand the learner and achieve intersubjectivity draws attention to the 'lens' we bring to the interaction. Ka'ai and Higgins (2009) discussed how we all carry "subconscious and culturally conditional filters for making sense of the world around us" (Knudtson & Suzuki, 1993, cited in Ka'ai & Higgins, 2009, p. 21). These authors claim that when we meet people who have a substantially different set of filters, it makes us confront the assumptions, predispositions and beliefs that we take for granted (Ka'ai & Higgins, 2009). We suggest that this will only occur if we are open to recognising the other's filters and our own. Otherwise it is easy to simply talk past or talk over each other. In ECEC, adults may have to be particularly careful that power differences between young children and adults do not militate against adults confronting their own assumptions. It seems relevant to also keep in mind van der Veer and Valsiner's (1994) caution that scaffolding is not always positive, and that those working with the child could promote ignorance or be potentially detrimental in other ways.

Connected with the idea of not hijacking the direction of the interaction, adults may also consider resisting the desire to move children's thinking towards something the adult feels more confident with (such as counting the legs on a spider) instead of supporting the child grappling with ideas in territory where the adult has less knowledge (for example, wondering why the web appears to glisten in the morning light). Peters and Davis (2011) reflect that much learning can occur when grappling with uncertainty at the edges of a child's understanding, and this opportunity can be lost when adults move the child's thinking too quickly to 'safe' and familiar ground. Hence, rather than scaffolding to the adults' known 'facts' (which may be contestable anyway), we might scaffold the child's exploration and curiosity beyond the surface topic to explore the deeper meanings and ideas, where adults might also find their thinking stretched. Perhaps this becomes even more important when working within a diverse cultural group. Rameka (see Peters & Rameka, 2010) has noted the value of uncertainty, hesitancy, apprehension and negotiation in Māori theories of progression in learning, which seem relevant for other cultures too.

The pedagogical task therefore seems to involve being alert to recognising and then capitalising on the learning that is offered by diversity. Thomson (2002), writing in Australia, commented that we can imagine the sorts of beliefs discussed above, along with other linguistic and cultural resources, as being in a "virtual school bag", brought to the educational setting. "Virtual

school bags are variously opened, mediated and ignored” (p. 9), with teachers tending to draw on the contents of those bags, “whose resources match those required in the game of education” (Thomson & Hall, 2008, p. 89). Those children for whom there isn’t a close match may only get the chance to utilise what is in their bags occasionally, or even be discouraged from doing so.

Teachers have found this metaphor helpful in exploring the resources that children bring to ECEC and school (e.g. Hartley, Rogers, Smith, Peters, & Carr, 2012; Peters, Hartley, Rogers, Smith, & Carr, 2009) and seeing the early childhood portfolios as a concrete way of sharing some of what is in the ‘virtual’ bag or backpack. However, Thomson (2002) has argued that it is necessary to do more than just connect to this knowledge. If diversity were to be fully embraced, then what counts as important knowledge requires careful consideration, and the dominant forms of knowledge should be decentred so that more inclusive models of knowing – and being – are recognised and taught to all. Ritchie and colleagues provided concrete examples of this in action, where “Te Ao Māori was repositioned to the centre, validated and visible, an interruptive force” to colonial discourses (Ritchie, Duhn, Rau, & Craw, 2010, p. 37).

Another extension to developing more inclusive models of knowing and being might be addressed by negotiating spaces. The idea behind negotiated spaces provides room to explore the interface between different worldviews and knowledge systems (Smith et al., 2008) and the relationship between different (and often conflicting) cultural understanding. As Smith et al. (2008) argue, the negotiated space is a place of entering, reconstructing and balancing ideas and values in complementary realignments. Responding to diversity may also require identifying and making explicit the assumptions implicit in the operating spaces of competing epistemologies.

At the heart of negotiating these spaces is being empowered to negotiate, resolve and better comprehend the cultural conflict between the different epistemological understandings. According to Mila-Schaaf and Hudson (2009), engaging in this negotiated space involves the

initial attempts at theorising a range of intercultural options. It is expected that outcomes, agreements or solutions sourced from within the ‘negotiated space’ will always be local, specific, situated, contingent and peculiar to their own time, space and context. (p. 116)

Ideally, outcomes ought to be applicable and responsive to complex and changing contemporary realities (Smith et al., 2008). In this way the learner

does not have to work within these spaces; instead, the spaces surround, embrace and nurture the learner.

As an example of building models of inclusiveness, we look at one example of responding to diverse complex realities through pedagogical practices. Prochnow and Macfarlane (2008; cited in Macfarlane, 2013, p. 4) presented adaptations of a series of questions taken from Cartledge and Kourea (2008) to uncover any biases that could influence a teacher's practice. Although these questions were originally aimed at teachers in relation to the impact of cultural responsiveness for Māori learners in schools, they are relevant for valuing diversity in the early years to guide educators to examine their own beliefs and perspectives. (Note that some of the language has changed to reflect the context of the early years.)

- Does the ethnicity of the child in my setting influence my perspectives/biases in terms of how I respond to and manage their learning? If so, how?
- What is the correlation (negative/positive) between my behavioural interactions with students and their ethnicity?
- How are my responses being perceived by the child?
- How are my responses being perceived by families?
- Has the child's learning been enhanced?
- How equitable and culturally appropriate are my teaching strategies? How do I know?
- How do I identify cultural influences on, and explanations for, various learning styles and behavioural nuances?
- How do I enhance the learning of children?
- What pedagogical position do I derive from, and how do I effectively use, my position to support diversity?

### **Keeping context in mind**

In this chapter we are focusing on the interactions between people, but these take place in a cultural context and, as noted earlier, *Te Whāriki* draws attention to children's reciprocal and responsive relationships with places and things as well as with people (Ministry of Education, 1996). Opportunities afforded by the environment are therefore also important considerations (see, for example, Dalli et al., 2011; Mitchell et al., 2008). More recently, Macfarlane and Macfarlane (2012) noted the increased realisation that context is important to the quality of teaching and learning. Therefore it is relevant to consider the extent to which the diversity of backgrounds is evident in the design of spaces and the resources available.

In a three-year TLRI project focused on children's learning journeys from ECEC to school (Peters & Paki, in press), te reo Māori me ōna tikanga (Māori language and customs) became the focus of a stocktake of resources in each setting. This cultural audit/stocktake of both ECEC and the school context was valuable when considering children's transitions between the two. For example, a teacher from a primary school spoke about how a Māori boy transitioning was able to settle in better when he had access to a book he was familiar with from his early childhood setting. The connection he had to a familiar object appeared to help him settle and feel he belonged in his new environment.

In this example we see that the child's interest in the book played a critical role in his transition and a bridge between the familiar and the new and/or strange. Noticing this incident and supporting the child's interest strengthened the relationship between the two contexts. The process of knowing the child then moved towards a closer look at the context, histories and things of 'value'. Teachers from both sectors partnered to develop a series of action research and explore culturally responsive pedagogies that had similar parallels to a body of research conducted in primary and secondary schools (e.g. Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy, 2007; Bishop, Berryman, & Richardson, 2001; Cowie, Otrrel-Cass, Glynn, & Kara, 2011; Macfarlane, 2004; May, Hill, & Tiakiwai, 2004).

### **Working with the principles of *Te Whāriki***

Carr and May (1993), the co-directors of the curriculum project that led to the Early Childhood Curriculum, wrote about the four "tall kauri" (Piaget, Erikson, Vygotsky and Bruner) whose theories provided important guides for the development of *Te Whāriki*; from these scholars, the sociocultural theories took prominence (Carr & May, 1993, p. 14). The approach to learning in *Te Whāriki* led to new frames of assessment with the publication of *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Carr, Lee, & Jones, 2004–2009), which provides exemplars to guide teachers in this work. One of the introductory booklets for this resource focused on sociocultural assessment (*Sociocultural Assessment, Book 2*, Carr, Lee, & Jones, 2007). The *Sociocultural Assessment* booklet provided details of the sociocultural approach to learning reflected in the interconnected principles of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). In this section we explore these four principles: whakamana (empowerment), ngā hononga (relationships), whānau tangata (family and community) and kotahitanga (holistic development) in depth to consider the potential that *Te Whāriki* offers for embracing diversity.

*Tē Whāriki* states that children should “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” (p. 9). However, what does this really mean and how does the curriculum advocate for diversity in the early years? Certainly this calls for a complex and broad exploration that requires a need for critical adaption and innovation. It also opens up the doors to multiple interdisciplinary perspectives, because the statement above expresses the ideology that learning is not limited to any particular domain, time or place.

Holding on to that thought about a curriculum brings to light the potential for embedding the four *Tē Whāriki* principles in order to deepen our understanding and create positive changes. Table 5.1 provides both English and Māori descriptions of the principles.

**Table 5.1: *Tē Whāriki* principles (English and Māori explanations)**

<p><b>Empowerment:</b> “the early childhood curriculum empowers the child to learn and grow” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 14).</p>	<p>Whakamana: ‘whaka’ is a prefix meaning to do something, and ‘mana’ can refer to prestige and power (Mead, 2003).</p>
<p><b>Holistic development:</b> “the early childhood curriculum reflects the holistic way children learn and grow” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 14).</p>	<p>Kotahitanga means to bring together as one, or unity. Durie’s (1994) introduction of an integrated ‘wholeness’ of the child reflects the equal importance of different domains for the total wellbeing of a child.</p>
<p><b>Family and community:</b> “the wider world of family and community is an integral part of the early childhood curriculum” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 14).</p>	<p>Whānau tangata: the concept of whānau (extended family) means to be born, family or offspring. ‘Tangata’ is human or person. Whānau tangata can be described as a “process of establishing whānau relationships by means of identifying, through culturally appropriate means, your bodily linkage, your engagement, your connectedness, and therefore (unspoken) commitment to other people” (Bishop, Berryman, &amp; Richardson, 2001, p. 41).</p>
<p><b>Relationships:</b> children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places, and things (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 14).</p>	<p>Ngā hononga: hono is the process of building or breaking a relationship rather than the relationship itself. The concept of ngā hononga focuses on the process of forming relationships where the concept of whānau (family) merged with whanaungatanga (relationships) acts as a compass whereby everyone participates and contributes to the wellbeing of each other, and in particular, the child (Pere, 1984; Reedy, 1995, 2003).</p>



In broader terms, diversity can include distinctive patterns of inclusion, acceptance, respect, empowerment and dimensions of race, ethnicity, national and regional origins, sexual orientation, gender identity and abilities, along with political, cultural and intellectual ideologies and practices. Diversity adds to the fabric of *Tē Whāriki*, where the term ‘curriculum’ is used to “describe the sum total of the experiences, activities, and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster children’s learning and development” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 10). In particular, the principles provide for opportunities to critically reflect on and explore one’s position and actions.

We want to suggest that the principles can act as a tool for developing self-awareness rather than awareness of others. People need to understand their own unique and common experiences so that they are better prepared to engage in an exploration of commonality and uniqueness of another. The principles initiate a re-examination or repositioning of the self by creating a curriculum that must reflect and respect others.

Diversity resonates within the aspirations of *Tē Whāriki*, according to which, as noted earlier, all children should have the opportunity to “grow up as confident and competent learners” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9). For example, if we were to take a closer look at whakamana (empowerment), the statement aims to provide opportunities for children to “take increasing responsibility for one’s own learning; to enhance their sense of self-worth; to contribute to one’s potential; and to learn in ways that are enhancing” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 40). The quality of learning has to be personalised, contextualised and meaningful, such that participation, engagement and collaboration with children, whānau, teachers and their communities are realised.

Royal Tangaere (2001) provides some reflections about the essence of the learner through the five strands within the *Tē Whāriki* curriculum. These strands are: mana atua, mana whenua, mana tangata, mana reo and mana aotūroa. Each dimension places the learner within interchangeable contexts that work together as a whole towards understanding the nature of learning and development from a Māori perspective. Royal Tangaere (2001) defines each context as follows:

- mana atua – the interaction with the esoteric world of the Māori, giving a sense of belonging
- mana whenua – the interaction with the land, giving a sense of belonging

- mana tangata – interaction with people, present and past
- mana reo – interaction with language; the development of communication
- mana aotūroa – interaction with the environment and the universe through exploration and discovery. (p. 21)

If mana provides a means of transformation for the child, then the principle of whakamana (empowerment) advocates that diversity must be located within other features reflected in the distinctive patterns of each early childhood setting; cultural perspectives, structural differences, philosophical emphases, environments, communities and the children themselves (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 11). The merging of these features and notions of diversity may, on the surface, seem challenging, but they offer a renewed perspective in our education system for engaging with diversity in the early years.

The ideas discussed here are relevant beyond ECEC. The *New Zealand Curriculum (NZC)* (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 42) shows the alignment of the strands of *Te Whāriki* with the key competencies in the *NZC*, and beyond to tertiary education, building “Confident, Connected, Actively involved, Lifelong learners”. In addition to these explicit alignments, the ECEC and school curricula are also connected through their principles and their aspiration/vision statements. For example, the principle of whakamana relates to the *NZC* vision of confident learners and to the principles that “put children at the centre of teaching and learning” and assert that they should experience a curriculum that “engages and challenges them”, that is “forward-looking and inclusive” (p. 9), and that recognises the significance of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Like *Te Whāriki*, the *NZC* recognises that learning is “shaped by interactions with people, places, ideas and things” (p. 12). This draws attention to the importance of children experiencing school contexts where their values, languages and cultural knowledge are an implicit part of teaching and learning practices (Fletcher, Parkhill, Fa’aoi, Taleni Tufulasi, & O’Regan, 2009; Macfarlane, 2007).

## Conclusion

In this chapter we have considered the diversity within ECEC in Aotearoa New Zealand and have discussed *Te Whāriki* as a framework for thinking about pedagogical approaches that go beyond inclusion to view power relationships and knowledge in ways that offer a transformative approach. A cultural pedagogy of relations, founded on respect, partnerships and collaboration, is central to the future of early-years education. There has been a growing

awareness of cultural responsiveness in ECEC, but pedagogical practice brings with it complexities and dilemmas, not least the question of whose perspective is prioritised and how shared understanding can be achieved.

Thomson (2002) has argued for more inclusive models of knowing. In an increasingly diverse ECEC landscape, this seems vital. The work of Taguchi in Sweden provides a lens for further disrupting the notion of insiders and outsiders (where 'inclusion' means including more people on the 'inside', perhaps requiring some aspects of self to be given up to achieve a place in the centre). Rather than strategies that add more to the 'inside', all parties need to negotiate and perhaps transform within a mutual, reciprocal exchange (Taguchi, 2008, 2009). Rather like some of Escher's pictures or a Klein bottle, the view of what is inside/outside becomes disrupted. The virtual backpacks (Thomson, 2002) are welcomed and opened, their contents "validated and visible" (Ritchie et al., 2010, p. 37), and the ECEC setting strives to ensure learning is personalised, contextualised and meaningful.

We have shown that such approaches are validated by the framework provided by *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). However, teachers' working conditions "must be such that they are able to find, use and value each child's particular configurations of knowledges, narratives and interests" (Thomson, 2002, p. 8). To transform pedagogical approaches in these ways, teachers need to be adequately resourced and assisted. The Minister for Education has recognised that the successful implementation of *Te Whāriki* relies on the skills and expertise of teachers, and that a high-quality teaching profession is critical (Parata, 2013). It seems key, therefore, that policy directions support high standards in teacher qualifications, professional development and employment conditions.

It is important to recognise that ECEC is an important part of a lifelong learning journey. In our research together we have worked extensively at negotiating the space between ECEC and school, and, as noted earlier, the ideas we have raised in this chapter also have relevance for schools. The next chapter picks up this theme and explores diversity and the primary school years.

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