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# COMMENT

It is with great pleasure that we write an introduction to this special issue of the *Early Childhood Folio* on key learning competencies across place and time. Publication of these working papers (adapted and edited for the *Early Childhood Folio*) from a Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) project means that they will now be widely available for teachers. These are articles by teachers for teachers.

This was a cross-sector project, including three schools (Rotorua Primary, Discovery 1 and Parkview Primary) and two early childhood centres (New Brighton Community Preschool and Nursery and Aratupu Preschool and Nursery). The project was developed during the days of the draft New Zealand school curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2006) and all of the teachers in these settings shared the same umbrella research subject: the draft key competencies. At the time we called them “learning competencies”, to include reference to the familiar early childhood outcomes of “learning dispositions” in the national early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), and to enable the project to make connections across the sectors.

By 2007 the final curriculum for schools was published, with a table (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 42) that aligned the five early childhood curriculum strands with the five school key competencies—and added an alignment with tertiary learning as well. This is a framework that describes a vision of learning pathways and journeys over a lifespan of education. It is a stunning example of cross-sector commitment in a national curriculum document. Since that curriculum was published, schools have explored the ways in which the key competencies can be

implemented and linked to their communities. New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) researchers, for instance, prepared a discussion kit based on their research with five “early adopter” schools (Roberts, Bolstad, & Hipkins, 2007), and the Ministry of Education funded two exploratory studies to document how schools have been going about implementing key competencies (Cowie et al., 2009; Hipkins, Cowie, Boyd, Keown, & McGee, 2011). This collection sets out further examples and ideas.

## Practitioner research and a cross-sector emphasis

All of the authors developed research projects that were of interest in their place. These situated projects contributed to the overarching research questions: (1) In a range of schools and early childhood settings that have already displayed initiative in teaching learning dispositions and key competencies, what do the children do in these diverse contexts when they are apparently managing self, relating, making meaning (the label for the key competency *using language, symbols and texts* when the research proposal was developed), thinking and participating in desirable ways? How do children interpret these actions? (2) How do teachers in a range of contexts enhance continuity and growth in five domains of learning competencies: managing self, relating, making meaning, thinking and participating? How do they interpret these actions? (3) How do teachers enhance continuity in learning competencies over time, within and across settings? How do they interpret that continuity?

Each article in this collection is connected to the others through these broader research questions, but each is written to stand on its

own. The complete research project is written up in the final TLRI report (Carr et al., 2008).

The teacher-researchers were supported by three research co-ordinators (Tina Williams, Keryn Davis and Sue Molloy) who already knew them well and had cultural or geographical affiliations with the settings. We (Margaret Carr and Sally Peters, from the University of Waikato) directed the project, met regularly with the teacher-researchers and research co-ordinators and acted as research support in a range of ways. This was an action research or practitioner inquiry project, where “the practitioner is the researcher, the professional context is the research site, and practice itself is the focus of study” (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006, p. 503). Reflection on practice is central to this work, and in this case both the collection of data and the reflection was shared across the entire research team—but the ownership remained with the teachers. Andrea, one of the teacher-researchers, interviewed at the end of the research, commented:

So I went in completely and utterly blind, having no idea what was going to be expected ... Never did I imagine we'd be at this point ... I always saw research as being (a) way too academic for me, but (b) a sort of separate project that went alongside ... that wouldn't have given us this much value to this place. So I didn't understand how much we would own it.

Keryn, one of the research co-ordinators, wrote some notes at the end of the project. They included the following comment:

While it [the project] was collaborative, they [the teachers] retained the majority share if you like. They talk about it as theirs, but also as ours. The 'our' being the wider research team. I do the same. It's theirs but at the same time it's ours. There's acknowledgement and respect for what each person has brought to the mix. I guess they have individual identities within identities within the whole. They have retained their identity and ideas throughout the project, while still being part of a bigger thing.

### Midlevel situated theories and the articles in this issue

So, although all of the settings chose their own, situated, questions to pursue, in individual settings and during group discussions the research team explored ideas together to

zoom out on cross-sector midlevel theoretical positions, in the spirit of the alignment on page 42 of *The New Zealand Curriculum* and the breadth of the title of the project—*Key Learning Competencies across Place and Time: Kimibia te ara tōtika, hei oranga mō tō ao*.<sup>1</sup> We all really liked James Gee's (1997) argument for the value of “midlevel situated meanings”:

(Midlevel) situated meanings are, I argue, crucial to learning—without them, learning is either too general or too specific and useless for any critical or deep purposes. Of course, in schooling, many learners are crippled because they either have some induction into a cultural model (theory) without any real feeling for the situated meanings connected to it (this is too general), or they have some feeling for the situated meanings and ability to work with and recognize them in situ, but do not really have much feeling for the larger cultural model that connects and explicates them (this is too specific). (p. 243)

In our view midlevel situated meanings can provide a platform for teachers beyond the research site to reflect on practice in their own community and to move their learning forward. Action research (a feature of the TLRI programme) is a rich source of these midlevel situated meanings, and “practitioners are among those who have the authority to construct Knowledge (with a capital K) about teaching and learning” (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006, p. 508).

These articles have been selected for their canvassing of midlevel situated meanings and their co-construction of Knowledge about the teaching and learning of key competencies and learning dispositions. All these articles shift their units of analysis from small-grain to middle-grain size. They have zoomed in on detailed episodes of learning or conversation and then zoomed out into discussions at a more theoretical level. A vivid metaphor of the relationship between kaiako and akonga in a Māori education context (Mary Simpson and Tina Williams), and an example of this “zooming in” and “zooming out”, leads the way. Another article (Paula Robinson and Claire Bartlett) explores relationship and pedagogical balances in the space between teacher intentions and learner intentions, arguing persuasively for the value of “real-life” contexts that capture both children's and teachers' interests and

providing some clear ideas about the notions of *teacher intentions* and *learner intentions*.

The teachers have borrowed from other sectors. In Yvonne Smith, Keryn Davis and Sue Molloy's article, Learning Stories (originally developed in the early childhood sector) provide the finely grained elements of practice that illustrate the opportunities in a school setting for the pedagogical integration of key competencies with learning areas. Yvonne's stories introduce us to her “split-screen” analysis of the students' learning. Andrea Wilson-Tukaki and Keryn Davis explore the school key competency of *relating to others* in an early childhood centre, arguing imaginatively for its foundation in three domains of knowing and describing the concept of a story that is “The Bomb!”. This article has a strong message about valued outcomes for children in early education. Nadine Bashford and Claire Bartlett critique the notion that dispositional actions and behaviours can be described as the same for different age groups. They found that the actions described (as a sequence) in the original Learning Story framework did not fit with their observations. Returning to the broader disposition “nouns”, to *Te Whāriki*, and to their observations of infants and toddlers whom they know well, they develop a useful new dispositional framework for infants and toddlers. They add much-needed clarity by differentiating between the *nouns* and *verbs* of disposition. And the taxing dilemma of how to describe learning journeys and progress when outcomes include key competencies and learning dispositions is thoughtfully canvassed as storylines (Robinson and Bartlett) and co-constructed pathways of learning (Nikki O'Connor and Susie Greenslade).

When Tina reflected back over the project with Mary, after one of their conference presentations, she commented that becoming “multilingual” had been important for the researchers—and the teachers—during the project:

One of the characteristics we talked about was that it was important to become multilingual when you're doing a project such as this. And we weren't referring to Māori and English, we were referring to those, plus the academic language, plus the classroom and curriculum language, and the language of the children as well, so you had to be quite skilled in what you are doing.

We agree. We were learners too, expanding our conceptual vocabulary and our languages as we listened to these thoughtful action researchers.

## Thank you

This issue owes a great debt to the funding and support from the TLRI programme and a special thanks to the NZCER Press production editor for the *Early Childhood Folio*, Joanna Morton. We especially thank the teacher-researchers and the research co-ordinators for their imagination, sustained interest, collaboration and competence. We hope that other teachers find some ideas here to think about in this special issue of the *Folio* as they pursue the opportunities that are afforded, invited and provoked by the official policies of interconnection between national curriculum outcomes across the sectors in Aotearoa New Zealand. We think there are messages here for education internationally as well.

Finally, the publication of this *Folio* collection has been delayed because of the tragic September 2010 and February 2011 earthquakes and the aftershocks; four of the five research sites were in Christchurch, and all of them were seriously

affected in different ways. The attention of the teachers and two of the research co-ordinators has for the last 15 months been on the wellbeing of their own families as well as the children, families and colleagues in the centres and schools, and we thank them for making the time to edit these articles for the *Folio*.

Margaret Carr and Sally Peters  
Guest editors

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## Note

- 1 Translated as “Seek the right path to benefit your world.”