

# CELEBRATING THE CO-CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

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I have a rich appreciation for the co-construction of learning which is inspired by Te Whāriki, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, where the importance of responsive, reciprocal relationships are acknowledged as being essential and the co-construction of teaching and learning is recognized as a thoroughly social process. The curriculum is designed to include the weaving together of the various values and perspectives of all people involved in teaching and learning for young children so as to provide a mat, or Whāriki, for all to stand and build on the strengths of each person. This practice brings people together in an inclusive approach and values each person's prior knowledge and contribution towards a collaborative learning environment. This respect and value for each person's strengths is recognized in the Te Whāriki holistic approach to education which acknowledges the importance of social, cultural and emotional development, as well as cognitive growth, in educational settings. Through this perspective it is important to support all aspects of the person in a holistic way in order for them to develop to their full potential. I hold the same vision for my students as Te Whāriki has for young children, aspirations for becoming teachers are equivalent to the Te Whāriki intention for children to grow, 'as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society.' (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1996, p. 9)



## MY JOURNEY

This collaborative approach to teaching and learning began when I started my professional career working in an early childhood centre in inner city Cardiff, the capital city of Wales, UK. During my time in Cardiff I became very close to the families and children that I engaged with on a daily basis. It became clear to me that working with children involved more than working just with the children, as it was equally as important to engage with families in order to communicate about the children's learning during their day (Mitchell, Haggerty, Hampton & Pairman, 2006). Also of equal importance, was to work collaboratively with other teachers during the centres to ensure that children and families received the best care possible (Mitchell et al., 2006). This time in my life taught me about the importance of forming and maintaining relationships with those involved in the care of young children. This is an aspect of early childhood teaching that I talk to my students about so that they can appreciate how important they will be to the children and families they meet during their teaching lives. I reiterate to the students that their role will be an important link between the children and their families in communicating everyday events; although these may seem mundane at times they hold huge significance for parents and caregivers who do not have access to their children during the day.

After working in Cardiff for a number of years I relocated to the Welsh countryside. My family and I lived in a rural setting where I attended the local Welsh medium Ti a Fi (mother and toddler group) with my children. As they grew older my children made their natural progression to the Cylch (independent nursery attendance). During this time I thoroughly enjoyed assisting in the running of the Ti a Fi and Cylch and loved the challenge of teaching through the medium of my limited Welsh! The time I spent working in these Welsh language settings revealed to me the importance of language in social interaction and its importance for establishing relationships between children, teachers and staff. I also began to realize the significance of language as culture and how speaking the Mother Tongue was closely linked to a sense of belonging for the children and families within the setting. Through respecting and using the first language of a child and their family, early childhood teachers can support their identity and demonstrate that their culture and knowledge is valued (Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000). I believe that promoting and respecting the home language is as important in New Zealand as it is in Wales due to the similar bicultural communities and both being bilingual countries where the home



language is the minority spoken. Therefore, I hold the language aspect of being an early childhood teacher as imperative, and enjoy discussing issues of language and culture with my students on the papers I teach.

My holistic approach to teaching began to unfold during these happy years where I learnt that children do not grow fully when there are problems with 'cognitive, social, cultural, physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions' (MoE, 1996, p. 41). Working with children and families in various

settings over a sustained period of time taught me that respecting the cultural, social and emotional dimensions of children, families and teachers is imperative in the process of cognitive development. I now carry this knowledge with me in my teaching and give the same holistic support to my students during their learning journey.

## CO-CONSTRUCTING LEARNING

A reciprocal relationship of mutual respect with the students is an important aspect in students' learning process because this affords a culture where it is safe to ask questions and discuss issues together without the students feeling the pressure of being 'wrong'. Unpacking theories in a 'safe environment' is essential for students to be able to open up about their ideas and opinions and they need the opportunity to feel confident to explore their ideas in every lecture. Class discussions provide a great opportunity to see if students are finding a topic difficult or are in need of further support; ensuring that the concepts are accessible to all is of the upmost importance to ensure that learning is inclusive. Students deserve to be taught in a supportive and stimulating environment where they are valued as a member of their learning community. This is in line with the Graduating Teaching Standards for New Zealand early childhood teachers where professional values and relationships are an expected outcome for students where they are required to:

*'develop positive relationships with learners and the members of learning communities (and) have the knowledge and dispositions to work effectively with colleagues, parents/caregivers, families/whānau and communities' (Standard 6b, Graduating Teaching Standards, 2007).*

Through developing a safe learning environment with the students, evidence of their co-construction of knowledge becomes clear during the class discussions as they present their opinions and feel confident to approach each other or myself if there is any aspect of course content of which they are unsure.

In order to inform my own teaching practice and co-construction of knowledge I am currently engaged in a partnership research project with three early childhood teachers (Bateman, 2012a). My participation in this project has been very enjoyable and informative in relation to my professional development where I am learning about the everyday interactions between teachers and children which are pivotal to teaching and learning. This project not only informs my own teaching practice where I can see where teaching and learning actually 'happens' throughout the flow of an interaction, but it also provides me with rich footage of real life interactions within the early childhood sector which can be shown to students in tutorials. As part of the research I have meetings with the partnership teachers and share my analysis of the footage with them, providing a detailed account of what occurred during significant teaching and learning moments in order to inform future practice. I have also shared my findings from this study with other teacher

educators and researchers from the early childhood sector at an international level (Bateman 2012b; 2012c). The same presentations of the emerging findings have been shown to my students in order to keep them current on issues surrounding early childhood pedagogy.

I am also involved in a second study where I am project leader in an investigation into the impact of the Christchurch earthquakes on young children and teachers in an affected area. This research has provided me with valuable connections to the early childhood community within Christchurch where the teachers involved wanted the research to focus on their experiences in a positive way rather than presenting them as victims as is often the case. I work with an international team of academics on this project and we intend to continue with this research indefinitely. This project has afforded me the valuable opportunity to co-construct knowledge with academic peers and teachers. I discuss my experiences of this earthquake research with my students and show them footage from the study to demonstrate how teaching and learning can be achieved during difficult times when people work together and support each other.

## CONCLUSION

The vast majority of my professional development has emanated from being in the company of students, either online or face-to-face. My students regularly give me the opportunity to engage in self-reflective professional development regarding my teaching through my teaching appraisals, both mid-semester and at the end of each semester. From my experience, being a successful and effective lecturer is a practical learning experience and one which can only be strengthened the more I interact with my students. I learn about better ways to engage students with research and theory in practical ways through each lecture and am very open to learning everyday as an ongoing process. I am not afraid to show my students that I am a long way from perfect and do not know all the answers to every question I receive, and that humility is a valued attribute in the teaching profession.

During my time teaching here at Waikato University I have learnt a considerable amount from my more experienced peers. Through helping to run the Friday colloquium where staff members from the Faculty of Education are invited to present their educational research sessions, I have become increasingly aware of the prestigious work that my peers here at The University of Waikato are involved in. I have found these events to be thoroughly illuminating as the presenters have informed my developing understanding of the various research projects of my peers, which directly relate to teaching practice. I appreciate the valuable advice of my peers and respect their collegial approach to teaching and learning. I feel that I have developed professionally and learnt an immense amount through discussions with my peers and interactions with my students. They have all provided me with invaluable experiences which have proven to be the bedrock of my practice during these early years of my professional teaching practice.

In conclusion, I hope that my passion for the co-construction of knowledge through a collaborative work environment offers a holistic support for my students throughout their learning journey and that it will encourage them to reciprocate this approach in their future teaching practice where they will be part of a holistic, inclusive support network for the children and families they will be working with. My passion and respect for the New Zealand early childhood curriculum has led me on a holistic learning journey where I am continually developing culturally, socially and educationally through my engagement with peers, literature and students. Each academic year brings with it new students and challenges, but through a collaborative approach to teaching and learning I learn more every year.

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