Māori Engagement with Early Childhood Education in a Low-Socioeconomic Area

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Ngahuia, Niwa, Siobhan, Keanu and Jah-rall.

ABSTRACT

The early childhood education (ECE) options available to parents in New Zealand are many and varied. As a country New Zealand values ECE and has a high rate of engagement. However, despite a number of government initiatives targeting Māori and those from lower socio-economic areas Māori engagement remains low. This is widely acknowledged and the challenge is to not only find the reasons why but to also be responsive to the causes for low engagement.

Early learning services in New Zealand follow a curriculum that considers an holistic approach with the child at the centre of the learning. That curriculum is Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa. The curriculum recognises the potential of children and the importance of belonging in developing the whole child.

ECE in New Zealand is important for children who are aged zero to five. It is during these early years that children will begin to develop an understanding of the world around them. The environment that children live in is important to their development and it is generally considered that those from low socio-economic areas are less likely to succeed than those from higher socio-economic areas.

This thesis investigated Māori engagement in ECE from one low socio-economic area in New Zealand using an overarching Kaupapa Māori methodology. Semi-structured interviews were held with five participants from the low socio-economic area using a case study research design. My analysis found that there were many reasons behind the parents' decisions to send their children to ECE or not. It can be concluded that Māori engagement with ECE is dependent upon parents' early life experiences and their cultural values.

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CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

Introduction

He taonga te mokopuna, kia whāngaia, kia tipu, kia rea. A child is a treasure, to be nurtured, to grow, to flourish. This whakataukī (proverb) is used in Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa Early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996) and speaks to the potential of children. In Te Whāriki's (Ministry of Education, 2017) introduction the then Minister of Education Hekia Parata highlights the standard of early learning in New Zealand, rating it amongst the highest in the world. This thesis explores Māori engagement in early childhood education (ECE) from the perspective of those in a low socio-economic area. It looks into what influences parents' choice when deciding whether or not to send their tamariki to an early childhood education centre (ECEC). It specifically looks at one particular community.

Children learn through their early life experiences in which their senses play a vital role (Mukherji & Dryden, 2014). Children may learn through what they see, do, hear, feel, smell and taste. The first eight years of a child's life are when they are most susceptible to learning; however, what children learn from their experiences can change overtime (Asamen et al., 2008; Tayler, 2015) therefore they can learn from both implicit and explicit instruction.

The first five years are considered to be crucial for developing foundational life skills (Coelho et al., 2024; Gambaro et al., 2015; McCoy et al., 2017) such as but not limited to; thinking, behaving, linguistics, fine motor skills and executive functioning (Neha et al., 2020). These can all be taught through child rearing practices that model such things as interpersonal skills.

The history of education in general for Māori since colonisation, has not been a particularly positive one, hence the more recent desire of Māori to resist a system that did not favour them but rather attempted to assimilate them (Bishop, 2008; Walker, 2016). According to Latimer et al. (2021) institutional racism has influenced negative interactions with education systems. Māori resistance to such social injustice led to the formation of the Kōhanga Reo Movement and the establishment of kōhanga reo language nests (O'Toole, 2020) which aimed to revitalise the

Māori language (Benton, 1989). However, Latimer et al. (2021) found that Māori whānau abilities to choose services for young people are inhibited by a lack of trust. This lack of trust remains and Māori appear to still be reluctant, it seems, to enrol their tamariki into an early childhood education centre (ECEC).

Research Background

ECE in New Zealand is for children aged zero to five and provides a place for children to learn. This learning can be done through teacher-led, whānau (family)-led or parent-led centres or services. Teacher-led services include kindergartens, home-based education and care programs meaning that the learning will be at the educator's house. Whānau-led services include te kōhanga reo whilst parent-led services are playcentres, playgroups and ngā puna kōhungahunga (Māori language playgroup). All of these learning centres as a collective are referred to as early learning services (ELS) (Ministry of Education, 2022).

In New Zealand, statistics show that 71% of children were enrolled in early learning and care services in 2021. This rate decreased by 7% in 2022 (Education Counts, 2024). Education Counts (2024) report however, that kōhanga reo centres have maintained a steady enrolment of 4% of the total 71%.

Since the inception of early learning services (ELS) in New Zealand, the Ministry of Education has developed Te Whāriki – a framework built on understanding that children have a strong sense of mauri ora (the quality or essence of life) with a holistic approach to learning. The first edition of Te Whāriki was in 1996 and later revised in 2017. This framework is currently used across all ELSs in New Zealand (Neha et al., 2020).

Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) is the New Zealand ECE curriculum which is centred around the child (Ritchie, 2012) and identifies the value of the relationship between parents and the ELS teachers (Chan & Ritchie, 2017). It emphasises the importance of family engagement (Cruse, 2017) and is a framework that all ELSs in New Zealand follow (Neha et al., 2020).

For the purpose of this research ECEC refers to mainstream teacher-led services such as Montessori and kindergartens whilst ELS refers to all teacher-led, whānau-led and parent-led services in New Zealand.

There are many ELS options available to whānau in New Zealand. This is important to note in this research as the research looks at possible reasons for parents to either engage with ELSs or not engage.

Interest in the Topic

As a Māori student whose experiences within the formal education system did not begin until I was five, I have spent much of my educational life hearing about how Māori are less likely to achieve academically in comparison to our peers (Bishop et al., 2009; Hook, 2006). Having missed those early years attending an ECEC I do not feel as though I was disadvantaged. I was fortunate enough to be surrounded by teachers my entire childhood. Whilst there were a number of trained teachers within my extended whānau much of the learning I did was from those who were not part of the teaching profession. These included my koro who was a kaumātua (respected Māori elder) and my grandfather who was a labourer but also a lover of learning.

Reading literature based on the importance of ECE, I began to reflect on my personal experiences within the education system. A large portion of literature argues that ECE will increase the likelihood of a child academically succeeding yet there are many examples of both Māori and non-Māori who succeeded academically without attending a formal ELS.

As a teacher aide working alongside primary-aged children the effects of attending an ELS are equally as positive as my personal experience of not attending one. This is apparent in the behaviours and interactions of some children. Not only do these children have basic motor skills, recognise letters, shapes and colours but they are also able to play suitable games and demonstrate developing social skills. Although some children who did not attend an ELS may be trailing behind their peers academically they tend to excel in other practical areas of life such as knowing about tikanga, taiao (environment) and kawa (etiquette). Many of these children are

Māori (Hemara, 2000). Unfortunately, though they come equipped with this cultural toolkit (Bruner, 1996) this is not used as a measure of success in school.

As the daughter of someone involved with community organisations, I was in the privileged position of entering into discussions with members of a community centre interested in why Māori parents in their low socio-economic community did or did not choose to send their children to ELSs. So, my personal experiences coupled with the desire of the community centre to explore the ELSs choices of their community were the drivers behind this research.

The Research Questions

The overarching research question that guides this study is:

"*What is Māori engagement with early childhood education centres like within a lower socio-economic community?"*

To help understand why engagement is the way it is in one low socio-economic area further research questions were used to help guide the research:

1. What experiences do children have who don't attend an early childhood education centre?
2. What experiences did Māori parents in lower socio-economic areas have with ELSs?

For the purpose of this research the term 'lower socio-economic area' was referred to as an area that was rated 10 on the New Zealand Index of Deprivation (NZID). The NZID takes into account social circumstances such as resources (housing, low income), mobility transport costs and access to health care facilities in each area in New Zealand (Colbert & Exeter, 2021). The ordinal scale used to rate deprivation in each area ranges from 1-10. A rating of one represents areas that are not deprived whereas 10 represents the most deprived (Atkinson et al., 2014).

Why This Research is Important

Much of the research on ECEs indicates that ECE experiences are important in child development and the future academic success of children (Aos et al., 2004; Morris, 2018; Shaughnessy & Kleyn, 2012; Steed, 2018). Early childhood education is promoted across the literature as being the right thing to do for children under five (Gambaro et al., 2015; Shafiq et al., 2018; Willard et al., 2022) almost as if being in these centres is better for them than being at home but one cannot and should not forget the power of parents and the older generations as successful first teachers (Hemara, 2000). When looking through the lens of Māori, there are many successful Māori who did not formally begin their educational journey until they were of school age. Many Māori believe that children begin their learning in the womb (Buckley, 2003; Martens, 2013). Many Māori children learn through waiata (song) and karakia (prayer) when they are young (Tangaere, 1997) before beginning their formal education in primary school or kura kaupapa (Rona et al., 2018). Strengths in Māori children were noted by their elders and these strengths were nurtured (Hemara, 2000). Traditionally, prior to the written word arriving in New Zealand (Derby, 2023b) grandparents, elders or experts within a tribe would share knowledge and teach skills to children. These knowledgeable people would have used traditional Māori teaching methods such as oral storytelling (Amopiu, 2019).

This research is important in that it helps gain more insight into the reasoning behind why Māori parents choose to send their tamariki to ELS or why they do not. It will also help to better understand engagement across all ELSs in New Zealand.

This research project adheres to the principles set forth by the University of Waikato Ethical Conduct in Human Research and Related Activities Regulations (The University of Waikato, 2008). Ethics approval for this research project was granted by the Division of Education Research Ethics Committee at the University of Waikato in November 2023 (FEDU040/23).

Thesis Structure

Chapter one of this research project outlines the background, justification and purpose as well as my own interest in the topic as the researcher. Chapter two addresses the importance of child

development, executive functions and learning through play. It will look into theories relating to child development and experiences of those who live in low socio-economic areas before discussing the role family plays in child development. Chapter three outlines the methodology used for this project. It explains the overarching methodology, data collection methods, data analysis and ethical considerations. Chapter four brings to light the research findings from the participants and chapter five discusses the findings and their relevance to the literature. Chapter six concludes the thesis with the answering of the research questions, limitations, future recommendations of the study and a summary of the findings as well as concluding thoughts about the research.

Summary

Early childhood education in New Zealand is covered widely by the many ELSs available. These ELSs have a curriculum, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017), which has the child as the central focus. Whilst it places great emphasis on parent and whānau engagement, there are still many Māori whānau that do not engage with ELSs.

This thesis sets out to explore what Māori engagement with ECE is like within a low socio-economic area in New Zealand. The research came about due to personal noticings and experiences as well as a desire of the focus community centre to provide support to community members based on data. It will give insight into potential reasons why enrolment rates for Māori across ELSs in New Zealand are as they are. The next chapter will focus on reviewing the literature.

CHAPTER TWO - LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The education of tamariki Māori at all levels is a priority for the New Zealand education sector (Ministry of Education, 2022). A number of policies and curriculum initiatives, such as the New Zealand Curriculum Refresh, Te Mātaiaho (Ministry of Education, 2015) and Ka Hikitia (Ministry of Education, 2024a) attest to this. The government, through its Ministry of Education, has acknowledged that early childhood education has a large part to play in developing the foundational skills of learning. This is highlighted not only through its 2007 policy to provide 20 free ELS hours but also through other policies including He Taonga te Tamaiti - Every Child a Treasure, Early Learning Action Plan 2019-2029 (Ministry of Education, 2019) and the iterations of Ka Hikitia. Māori parents are perhaps still divided on the issue of the benefits of formal ECE under the guidance of a western framework versus the benefits of a learning environment that values extended whānau as first teachers and the most important teachers (Education Review Office, 2014; Hemara, 2000). Only 54% of tamariki Maori attended ELSs in 2021 with the majority of these being in mainstream ECECs (Education counts, 2022).

This literature review examines what Māori engagement with ECE is like in New Zealand. It examines traditional Māori society and some traditional Māori methods of learning. It further explores overall Māori engagement in the current education system with a focus on what influences Māori parents' decisions on their choices to attend an ELS or not.

Also, this literature review will investigate the importance of child development by exploring the theories from developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) and psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1997). It will continue with the effect that both executive functions and learning through play have on child development before exploring the experiences of those who live in lower socio-economic areas. The final section of the literature review will look at the role families and ECECs play in early learning and how their engagement in those early years impacts child development. The chapter will be concluded with a summary of the literature reviewed.

Traditional Māori Society

The principles and values on which Māori society was founded were those which were handed down through the generations from their ancestors (Rameka, 2015). Māori called such principles and values taonga tuku iho (treasures handed down from ancestors). These taonga tuku iho were handed down through whakataukī and the arts of carving, waiata and oral storytelling (Amopiu, 2019; Jenkins & Harte, 2011). For Māori there continues to be a strong emphasis on oral transmission to impart intergenerational cultural knowledge (Neha et al., 2020).

Traditional Māori Methods of Learning

Hemara (2000) posits that traditionally, learning began in the womb. He suggests that this is evidenced through metaphorical references. The unborn child was taught whakapapa and other new knowledge through waiata and talk. Prior to the written word being introduced into New Zealand in the 1800s (Derby, 2023b) the methods of learning for Māori people were oral, practical and included their art forms. Learning styles were appropriate to their needs (Amopiu, 2019; Jenkins & Harte, 2011; Metge, 2015; Petrie, 2016). The oral methods included pūrakau (stories), whaikōrero (speechmaking), waiata, haka (war dance), whakataukī, karanga (calling) and mōteatea (traditional chant) (Amopiu, 2019; Derby, 2023b; Mikahere-Hall, 2017) whilst the art methods included toi whakairo (carving), architecture, kōauau (musical instruments), toki (traditional tool) and waka (canoe) building (Mikahere-Hall, 2017). A key learning objective for Māori was not only to understand but also to be able to recall whakapapa (genealogy) (Adds et al., 2011).

Pūrākau are important to Māori people as they have enabled knowledge to be passed down through generations (Amopiu, 2019; Jenkins & Harte, 2011; Mikahere-Hall, 2017). This intergenerational knowledge formed the basis of Mātauranga Māori (Māori world knowledge). Metge (2015) notes that many pūrākau these days begin with kōrero o neherā (stories of ancient times) with elders adding their personal experiences through the generations (Mikahere-Hall, 2017). Adding to this, Mikahere-Hall (2017) states that in traditional times original pūrākau were passed down from tohunga (specialists) who learnt all about one particular object, term or theory.

Pūrākau are important because they help not only children but also adults learn and validate their understandings of where they have come from and the world around them (Amopiu, 2019).

Traditionally oral learning occurred everywhere for Māori – at home, through wānanga, in the garden, with extended family and on the marae (Adds et al., 2011; Metge, 2015). For many years, the marae has been a centre point for Māori people and has played a crucial role in teaching individuals (Adds et al., 2011; Tauroa & Tauroa, 2009). In traditional oral learning, elders within the family would spend time with children reciting traditional chants (Adds et al., 2011; Derby, 2023b; Mikahere-Hall, 2017) and sharing pūrākau. In these times, it was important that children were able to memorise these learnings so they could teach the next generation (Adds et al., 2011).

Whilst oral transmission of knowledge was important to Māori teaching and learning, so too was the natural world as Māori are deeply connected to the environment (Skerrett & Ritchie, 2020). Māori understood the importance of the environment to their survival and so the transmission of skills and knowledge of not only how to use the environment but also how to protect it were important. The sky and the earth were not simply the sky and earth as some object either near or far but rather personified as Ranginui the Sky Father and Papatūānuku the Earth Mother, giving what Orbell (1996) referred to as an intellectual and emotional connectedness between the natural environment and the people. Through these shared beliefs and connectedness the context for learning was to benefit the collective rather than the individual. Experts and Māori elders therefore imparted both cultural and practical knowledge to tamariki (Metge, 2015).

In contemporary times outside of the home, the marae has become a place of learning about Māori principles and values through cultural celebrations and practices. The marae is comprised of many different buildings such as the wharenui (meeting house), wharekai (dining room) and wharepaku (ablution blocks) (Bennett, 2007; Rapoport, 1976). The wharenui on the marae serves many educational purposes (Rapoport, 1976) as it contains carvings which are important to the whakapapa of an individual (Bennett, 2007). Carvings or patterns such as the raperape or kowhaiwhai are used in many wharenui to portray visual pūrākau (Adds et al., 2011; Mikahere-Hall, 2017). This is an important aspect of learning as it enables future generations to be gifted

with the knowledge of their people. Equally important as a place of learning is the marae ātea (open space in front of the wharenui). It is in this space that one hears the language of the orators of both the haukāinga (hosts) and the manuhiri (guests). This is the place where traditionally haukāinga were able to ascertain whether their visitors were friend or foe. As traditionally marae were a place of learning (Adds et al., 2011; Metge, 2015) it is not uncommon for them to now have a kōhanga reo incorporated into them (Bennett, 2007). This provides an opportunity for young children to be immersed in their language and culture whilst being in an ELS. This is important to the study as it is a potential option for parents when considering their priorities for ELSs. Being immersed in their culture and language could create a sense of belonging and familiarity, both of which are important as the child develops and finds their place in the world.

Māori Engagement in the Current Education System

Māori experience with formal education has not always been positive (Smith, 2002) with some Māori disengaging from mainstream education (Webber & Macfarlane, 2020). The numbers of Māori school leavers who attain the New Zealand National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) Level 1 have continued to decline since 2018 (Education Counts, 2024). Although many Māori students may not engage in mainstream education, Rameka (2011) writes that the education and learning which come from educational institutions is beneficial as it can help enhance an individual's mana. Mana is a powerful social-psychological construct for Māori people which can influence student behaviours and thoughts (Webber & Macfarlane, 2020). The Ministry of Education suggests that since the COVID-19 pandemic disengagement has worsened across all schools in New Zealand (Education Counts, 2024) in turn it has become a priority for the Ministry of Education. Regular Māori attendance (those who attended school for 90% of the term) in schools in 2023 was sitting at 33.1% (Figure NZ 2024). The Ministry of Education has an $88 million package of drivers aimed to create system shifts for better engagement (Ministry of Education, 2023b).

Both mainstream secondary and tertiary institutions in New Zealand report large disparities in academic success between Māori and non-Māori students (Highfield & Webber, 2021; Webber & Macfarlane, 2019), which can lead to the notion that mainstream education does not benefit all

Māori (Hook, 2006). Bishop and Berryman (2013) agree with this notion, reporting that when interviewing Māori students from different mainstream schools in New Zealand, the majority of the students in the study reported having negative personal and academic experiences. This led to them disengaging in their learning while being at school. Bishop et al. (2014) would argue that these negative experiences begin in primary schools. The challenge here is for the root of this not to begin in ELSs.

Mainstream education systems have previously dismissed traditional Māori practices for teaching young children. These systems have minimalised the value placed on extended whānau as teachers and the importance of orally transmitting knowledge versus written language (Pihama et al., 2002; Ritchie, 2012; Smith, 2002). However, historically this did not stop Māori from sending their children to mainstream schools in order for them to learn from the Pākehā about their weapons and ways of building large ships among many other things (Walker, 2016). More recently though Ritchie (2003) suggests that surveys have indicated that Māori parents now expect that opportunities will be provided in all mainstream educational settings for children to learn about their language and culture.

In New Zealand a large emphasis is placed on parent-teacher partnerships (Chan & Ritchie, 2016) which enable home and school to work together to enhance a child's learning. This is a step towards the more traditional practices for Māori, of extended whānau as teachers of tamariki. Creating equitable environments in schools (including ELSs) is a common goal across New Zealand (Webber & Macfarlane, 2020) in an attempt to close the educational achievement gap of disparity between Māori and non-Māori (Webber & Macfarlane, 2019) throughout the education system. It has been suggested by Willard et al. (2022) that if children attend an ELS they will have a higher chance of academically succeeding. Yet this must surely depend on the quality of delivery in an ELS. There are a number of factors to take into consideration when determining what a high quality centre includes. Some factors are; teacher qualifications and training, funding and access to resources, program quality, child to teacher ratio and relationships between the home and the centre (Biersteker et al., 2016; Karoly et al., 2013; Ministry of Education, 2011; Peters, 2010; Smith, 2015). In a New Zealand context, Willard's theory could potentially lead to narrowing the educational achievement gap between Māori and non-Māori but

it could be argued, not without quality delivery. Ritchie (2014a) would also argue that Māori are more likely to attend if the centre is culturally responsive.

Māori Engagement with Early Childhood Education

Engagement in ECE is considered important as it enables children to expand their knowledge and formally prepare them for school (Blakey et al., 2016; Centre of the Developing Child, 2024; Shaughnessy & Kleyn, 2012) through being nurtured by qualified ECE teachers (Wakeman, 2019). Fortunately in New Zealand, Māori families, as do non-Māori families, have the option to send their children to mainstream ECECs or kōhanga reo ELSs which operate under different systems (Ministry of Education, 2024c). This ability to choose is particularly important for Māori families as kōhanga reo foster a more traditional Māori learning style (Walker, 2016) through narrative teaching (van Oers, 2019) and being immersed in the Māori language and culture (Bennett, 2007). Kohanga reo follow the curriculum Te Whāriki o Te Kohanga Reo whilst mainstream ECECs across New Zealand all follow the culturally responsive Te Whāriki framework (O'Loughlin, 2013) which is taught mainly in the English language.

When the Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) framework was first implemented in New Zealand in 1996, it was a cutting-edge document (Te Ōne, 2013). At the time it was the first New Zealand bicultural and bilingual education curriculum document (Ritchie, 2005). It was also a document that many mainstream centres were reluctant to use as it drew significantly upon te ao Māori, which was unfamiliar territory for many ECE teachers (Ritchie, 2014b). Two decades after Te Whāriki was introduced, it was reported in 2018 that 51% of the centres in New Zealand were still not prepared to implement the framework (Education Counts, 2022b). It is this framework which emphasises that family engagement in ELSs is important for their children (Cruse, 2017).

The Ministry of Education (2022) found that Māori parents were more likely to engage in and enrol their children into ELSs if the services were culturally responsive or run by Māori. Between 2010 and 2014 a number of recruitment initiatives were introduced. The Promoting Early Childhood Education Participation Programme (Ministry of Education, 2016), which later

became Engaging Priority Families (EPF), was to allow families access to equitable high quality early learning by reducing barriers to engagement. The programme found that Māori preferred ELSs where the environment was conducive to providing for their cultural needs including tikanga and te reo Māori. According to the then Minister of Education, Hekia Parata, EPF was to support the hardest to reach families to enrol in early childhood learning. Approximately 800 children, largely Māori and Pasifika enrolled through this initiative (New Zealand Parliament, 2016). Also, during this period was the ECE Demand Stimulation Fund which funded projects that engaged communities in ECE and identified non-participating children. Supported Playgroups was another initiative which targeted Māori and Pasifika families. This initiative was designed to be responsive to community needs and address barriers to participation in low socio-economic areas.

Further to these initiatives was the Identity, Language, Culture and Community Engagement support package (Ministry of Education, 2016) which was designed for professional learning in the areas of language and culture for clusters of ELSs that were not responsive to their communities. Of these initiatives, the most successful for reaching the set targets in the first year were Supported Playgroups and Language, Culture and Community Engagement which both exceeded target. The Engaging Priority Families fell well short of its first year target (Ministry of Education, 2024b) possibly because the recruitment process took longer.

For Māori who wish to engage in mainstream ECEC it is important for them to know that relationships between the family and the centre are of utmost importance (O'Loughlin, 2013). This is because the relationship built between a child's family and the child's ECEC can expand a child's learning (Cruse, 2017) as the centre can be made aware of cultural (Webber & Macfarlane, 2019) and familial priorities. It also enables the centre to communicate early with families about their professional observations regarding the child's learning abilities (Vincent & George, 2020). These noticings can lead to early referrals if the child exhibits needs (Shaughnessy & Kleyn, 2012) resulting in fewer Māori children requiring special education placements (McCoy et al., 2017) later in their school journey. The importance of relationships to everyone was noted in each of the initiatives mentioned above.

One of the outcomes for ECE is to improve the long term educational success rates of students (Aos et al., 2004) including Māori, which can be achieved by allowing children to explore and interact within a formal environment (Dzainudin et al., 2019). An ELS provides children with a controlled environment to do this. Allowing children to explore, interact and play in their immediate environment provides an opportunity for children to learn in a spontaneous way (Dzainudin et al., 2019) at their own pace (Krishnan, 2010), similar to that of traditional Māori learning (Adds et al., 2011). Shaughnessy and Kleyn (2012) argue that engagement within ECE is important as ELS have educational tools that children may not get in their homes such as playgrounds, teachers and many peers which can help the child develop (Hook, 2006; Miller & Lang, 2022).

The Importance of Child Development

Child development is important in all cultures with much of the literature supporting the notion that early childhood is the most crucial time for brain development (Masten & Shaffer, 2016; Sameroff et al., 2014; Shafiq et al., 2018; Wildová & Kropáčková, 2015). During the early years of childhood, children begin to foster what Coelho et al. (2024) describe as neural networks. These networks are important for children as it helps them attain important skills such as being able to process information (Coelho et al., 2024), expand their cognitive (Sameroff et al., 2014) and social (Vincent & George, 2020) skills and form emotional relationships with others (Amopiu, 2019).

During the early childhood years children will begin to develop their prefrontal cortex (Funahashi, 2022; Logue & Gould, 2014) which is important for brain development (Parker et al., 2022). The prefrontal cortex is important for complex cognitive skills (Hodel, 2018) such as executive functions (Morris, 2018). If the prefrontal cortex is damaged or does not fully develop for various reasons children will have great difficulty in reasoning (Diamond, 2013), decision making and making judgements about situations (Funahashi, 2022). The prefrontal cortex can be developed through play (Parker et al., 2022).

The environment in which a child grows up can alter the way in which they develop (Elder, 2016; Mariëtte et al., 2018; Scarr & McCartney, 2016). For Māori children if they attend an ELS or school that is culturally responsive they are more likely to engage in more meaningful learning experiences (Rameka, 2022). During the early years of life a child's environment is dependent primarily upon their parents (Scarr & McCartney, 2016); if the environment is negative then children will not develop their social skills at the same rate as their peers (Centre of the Developing Child, 2024). Any positive environment can help stimulate a child's mind (Davies & Webb, 2011) with new environments allowing children to explore and interact with different objects (Morris, 2018). This can help to develop children's cognitive flexibility (Blakey et al., 2016).

Children think and express themselves differently to adults (Davies & Webb, 2011). Quality social interactions can benefit child development as it provides children with exposure to dialogue (Meade, 2013) and social skills (Morris, 2018). This is why it is important for adults to enter into play with children when they are young (Ferholt & Lecusay, 2010). Children have very minimal interest in reflecting on their early life experiences and can act out when they are irritated, exhibiting behaviours that adults try to stop (Davies & Webb, 2011). As adults can reflect on experiences more so than children (Davies & Webb, 2011) it allows them to facilitate children's development through modelling social behaviour and forming reliable relationships with them (Centre of the Developing Child, 2024). This modelling of social behaviour and the forming of reliable relationships is important in the development of executive functions which have their biggest developmental growth in early childhood. Whilst parents may not be able to label the executive function skills as such, identifying the skills might be of importance to parents as they select an ELS that meets their aspirations.

Theories of Child Development

Children are born with the potential to grow and develop. According to the Centre on The Developing Child (2011), regardless of genetic make-up, genes are impacted by the environments in which children grow up and experience life. Psychologists Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Vygotsky (1997) all added valuable theories to child development. Although neither

of these psychologists are New Zealand-based their theories on child development are universal. Their theories are important to this study because the socio-cultural values of Māori have an impact on the choices they make for their children. Bronfenbrenner's model in particular speaks to the environment in which children are raised and its influence on child development.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory takes into consideration factors from both an individual and the many contexts in which they interact (Crawford et al., 2020; Peters, 2003; Siraj & Huang, 2020). His model suggests that there is an interconnectedness of layers between the social worlds of children and their environment. He was of the opinion that if children from less fortunate backgrounds were to be successful they needed to change their environments (Eamon, 2001) therefore moving from a deficit based relationship to a strengths based one.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) seminal notion of the ecological model consisted of four systems; micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-level's (Crawford et al., 2020; Krishnan, 2010; Siraj & Huang, 2020) however, in his bio-ecological development of this theory (1995) he later added four key components (Krebs, 2009). These four key components being; the process, person, context and time (PPCT) (Crawford et al., 2020; Krebs, 2009; Krishnan, 2010; Siraj & Huang, 2020). In adding these four key components Bronfenbrenner renamed the model to the "bioecological theory of human development" (Navarro et al., 2022).

The four seminal systems (mirco-, meso-, exo- and macro-levels) have the child at the centre and each have either an indirect or direct influence on child development (Krishnan, 2010). Brofenbrenners theory addresses the complex layers of the environment in which children grow up within the context of relationships. It ranges from those people who will have a direct influence on a child's development (Gonzales, 2021) such as a child's family (for tamariki Māori this may also include the bigger collective group of the extended whānau as some whānau live in situations which are intergenerational), friends or ELS to the extensive socio-cultural world of the child.

Brofenbrenner's (1979) model suggests that at the microsystem level, children are more likely to experience problematic issues if they are from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Changes or conflict to any of the levels within Brofenbrenners model will have an impact on the other levels. An example of this might be a situation where a parent needs to return to the workforce due to financial strain. This would mean decisions directly impacting the members of the household would need to be made. One such impact might be the decision to enrol their child into an ELS rather than keeping the child home as the parent may have preferred. In such a case it is important that the relationship between the family and the ELS professionals is a positive and trusting one. The Ministry of Education (2024) supports Bronfenbrenner's idea of connectedness in the social worlds of tamariki and their families suggesting that such intimate connections and relationships between whānau and early childhood settings and other places in childrens' lives enhances learning. This is a collective and holistic approach similar to that of Māori. It is also an approach which sits well with the curriculum document Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) which lists as its four principles; empowerment - whakamana, holistic development - kotahitanga, family and whānau - whānau tangata, and relationships - ngā hononga. Te Whāriki is further related to Bronfenbrenner's model as the macro system relates to any social and cultural values and beliefs a child's family may have which can influence a child's environment during the early years.

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model

The bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) expanded on the ecological model (1979) by adding four key components. The process component which has been described by Krishnan (2010) as any interaction between a child and their immediate surroundings that help expand a child's competence or influences the child's wellbeing. Crawford et al. (2020) strengthens this description by stating that the influences of proximal processes are influential in a child's development. Siraj and Huang (2020) agree that proximal processes are influential as they can produce two different developmental outcomes, one being that disadvantages in the environment can lead to dysfunction while the second outcome is advantages such as a stable environment can lead to competence in the child. Both Crawford (2020) and Siraj and Huang (2020) write that proximal processes are at the heart of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model

(Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Proximal processes are any life experiences in which an individual actively participates in, such as changes in the environment over time (Krebs, 2009).

The person component regards any individual who can influence a child's development (Krishnan, 2010; Siraj & Huang, 2020) directly or indirectly (Araujo & Davids, 2009). Araujo and Davids (2009) claim that there are three types of characteristics that influence child development during this component. The first being the dispositions an individual holds, the second barriers and facilitators that influence children, whilst the third speaks to the demand characteristics an individual holds (Araujo & Davids, 2009). The personal component includes social interaction (Krishnan, 2010; Siraj & Huang, 2020) therefore, children can experience this whilst at an ELS. For example, children who have any disability may begin to experience negative social interactions when they are younger due to the differences in comparison with their peers (Krishnan, 2010) however, this is not the only reason they may experience negative social interactions.

The third component to Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (1995) is context. According to Krishnan (2010) the context component is the most important in child development. It is composed of different levels of the microsystem (Siraj & Huang, 2020) and includes the personal make-up of people living within a household such as two parents, a single-parent or a step-parent (Navarro et al., 2022). Krishnan (2010) elaborates saying that any interaction a child has that is constant can influence development whether it is physical, social or economic. The context component also includes how socioeconomic status can influence the development of children (Navarro et al., 2022).

The last component is time and in this component Bronfenbrenner stresses the importance of three types of time – the micro-, meso- and macro time (Crawford et al., 2020; Navarro et al., 2022). Crawford et al. (2020) explain microtime as an occurrence that happens during one event whilst meso time is explained as a recurring response that children have to a stimulus over a large time interval however, Navarro et al. (2022) adds to this by saying it regards the amount of times a child engages in a proximal process. Both of these times have been argued by Navarro et al. (2022) to be essential for an interaction to be considered a proximal process.

In traditional Māori society, because the success of the collective was dependent on the contributions of the individual, learning required considerable and consistent interaction between adults, children and the environment. Whilst some learning was explicit and practical based, other learning took place through play. An example of this is the use of Tītī Tōrea (stick games) where sticks are thrown to another person usually to the rhythm of a song. The objective of the game is not to drop the tītī (stick). Whilst this might just seem like a game, it was a way to develop hand eye coordination necessary for fast movements in the use of weaponry. It was also about rhythm, timing and movement and to an extent the emotional state of resilience. This was part of a process of development.

Macro time is the third time in this component and reflects the changes across not only an individual's lifespan but also across generations (Navarro et al., 2022) and significant historical and life events (Crawford et al., 2020).

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

It was Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky who believed that the knowledge children hold is socially constructed (Vygotsky, 1978) therefore it was children's interactions with other members of society (Peters, 2003) that was influential in his seminal notion of the 'Zone of Proximal Development.'This notion emphasised the relationship between learning and development (Eun, 2019; Fani & Ghaemi, 2011; Peters, 2003) in both a formal and informal setting (Eun, 2019). Due to the zone of proximal development being a social construct it can only exist within social situations (Fani & Ghaemi, 2011; Nicholas et al., 2021; Peters, 2003) that provide an opportunity for children to develop. Krishnan (2010) writes that this notion purposefully includes complex tasks that cannot be mastered independently by a child however, they can be accomplished with the guidance of a more able person (Fani & Ghaemi, 2011; Ferholt & Lecusay, 2010; Kuusisaari, 2014).

The zone of proximal development has been argued across the literature to be the distance between what a child can do alone and what the child can achieve with the guidance of a more

capable adult or peer (Eun, 2019; Krishnan, 2010; Nicholas et al., 2021; Vygotsky, 1978). Fani and Ghaemi (2011) write that the knowledge a more capable adult or peer shares along with the skills the child develops from this shared knowledge exceeds what the child could have done alone. It allows adults to help set the child up for success in the immediate future (Vygotsky, 1978).

Peters (2003) writes that a prime example being used in New Zealand is the Māori notion of tuakana teina which is when an older sibling (tuakana) helps the younger sibling (teina) (Metge, 2015). The zone of proximal development is about scaffolding children with the necessary life skills children need to be able to complete a certain task on their own (Centre of the Developing Child, 2024) which is what the tuakana teina notion does. Children are provided with this metaphorical scaffolding in many places such as when they play with their parents (Centre of the Developing Child, 2024), around the house (Metge, 2015) and in nature (Adds et al., 2011). However Fani and Ghaemi (2011) state that in order for children to fully develop through the zones, they must fully socially interact with those helping them. In traditional Māori society learning was practical and context based.

Whilst the idea of scaffolding through peer learning might take place in ELSs, the authentic concept of tuakana teina is gender specific. If Māori parents are looking to enrol their tamariki in a centre that is culturally appropriate to them the idea of the zone of proximal development with a Māori lens will be important.

Executive Functions

Executive functions are essential to child development (Diamond, 2013; Mariëtte et al., 2018; Moriguchi et al., 2016; Morris, 2018; Schneider et al., 2005). Both Moriguchi et al. (2016) and Mariette et al. (2018) write that the term executive functions refers to goal-oriented regulation of an individual's behaviour, thought and emotion. This involves using higher-order cognitive functioning in order to achieve the goal directed behaviour (Thorell et al., 2009). Executive functions are important as they help with mental processes that enable an individual to purposefully engage with and complete tasks (Centre of the Developing Child, 2024; Morris,

2018). Morris (2018) notes that whilst developing executive functions in early childhood is important, they remain important throughout the lifespan. According to the Centre on The Developing Child (2011) at Harvard University, the greatest growth in these skills occurs during the ages of 3-5 years. This is an important consideration for ELS because children will be attending an ELS at a time of their lives where the greatest growth in executive function skills occurs.

Executive functions have been argued by Diamond (2013) to be made up of three components: inhibition, working memory and cognitive flexibility. Inhibition is important for child development as it enables children to control their own behaviours and thoughts (Diamond, 2013). It is based on an individual being able to control their impulses whilst avoiding distractions (Morris, 2018) which is essential to development so an individual is not always acting on impulse (Diamond, 2013). This can be hard for young children, however inhibitory control is something that a child will start to learn in their early years of life (Thorell et al., 2009).

Working memory is critical for making sense of events that happen over time (Centre of the Developing Child, 2024; Diamond, 2013; Schneider et al., 2005). The capacity of working memory has been described by Andersson (2008) to be the number of activities an individual can achieve concurrently. Working memory is one of the most fundamental components of executive functions (Centre of the Developing Child, 2024; Thorell et al., 2009) and can come in two different forms – verbal (words, numbers, letters) and nonverbal (memories, pictures) (Diamond, 2013). This particular component is present in early childhood and develops rapidly during the early years of life (Thorell et al., 2009). Both working memory and inhibition reportedly correlate with academic achievements and neurodevelopmental disorders (Diamond, 2013; Thorell et al., 2009).

Cognitive flexibility helps an individual to respond and adapt appropriately to certain situations (Centre of the Developing Child, 2024; Blakey et al., 2016), concentrate on a particular task (Diamond, 2013), and helps with the development of working memory and inhibitory control (Blakey et al., 2016). The genetic makeup of an individual has been argued by Logue and Gould

(2014) to be associated with higher levels of cognitive flexibility. Blakey et al. (2016) claims that improving cognitive flexibility in preschool years is important as it leads to improvement across all three components of executive functions. Applying more than one rule to a stimulus is important in developing a child's cognitive flexibility (Blakey et al., 2016; Centre of the Developing Child, 2024). This is because it requires children to make a choice between two alternatives and resolve what Blakey et al. (2016) calls a within stimulus conflict.

Executive functions are controlled within the prefrontal cortex of our brains (Funahashi, 2022; Logue & Gould, 2014; Morris, 2018; Parker et al., 2022; Schneider et al., 2005) and rapidly develop during the early years of a child's life (Legare et al., 2018). The prefrontal cortex is responsible for producing and growing different neurons and synapses (Parker et al., 2022) therefore it is crucial to the development of executive functions. Executive functions are important in child development if children are to become productive citizens of the communities in which they live. Executive functions that are not fully developed are said to play a part in some psychiatric and learning disorders later in life (Logue & Gould, 2014; Thorell et al., 2009).

Executive function development requires interaction and engagement whether through a formal learning centre such as ELSs or through whānau connections and communications. The more experiences in early childhood the greater the opportunity for executive functions to develop (Centre of the Developing Child, 2024). Quality interactions and experiences with children are important in the development of executive functions. Children whose parents choose for them not to attend an ELS may benefit more from the smaller group interactions and experiences than those who attend ELSs.

Learning Through Play

Play has been argued across the literature to be essential for child development (Ginsburg et al., 2007; Parker et al., 2022; Steed, 2018). Hymes (1962) puts forth the notion that whilst early childhood centres prepare children for primary school, the use of textbooks, fussing over phonics and teaching children the way of primary school is actually not beneficial to the child. This notion is strengthened by Wylie and Thompson (2003) who claim that the beneficial learning

done in early childhood centres is done through informal learning and play. It is through play that children are able to develop and expand their imagination in creative ways (Ginsburg et al., 2007) whilst also gaining an understanding of the world around them (Shaughnessy & Kleyn, 2012). The United Nations High Commission for Human Rights (UNHCHR) regards play as being important, noting in Article 31 that children have the right to play (Ginsburg et al., 2007; Tobin, 2019).

Steed (2018) suggests that learning through play enables children to learn more about themselves and their environment. Parker et al. (2022) also adds that children who are still developing their socio-emotional skills will benefit from play as it helps children develop holistic wellbeing skills. Supervised undirected play can have a positive effect on children who are still developing their socio-emotional skills as it enables children to not only work in groups but also share, negotiate and resolve conflicts that may arise throughout their games (Ginsburg et al., 2007). This helps the children to learn how to be resilient.

Allowing child-led play can help children discover their interests and make decisions whilst moving at their own pace (Ginsburg et al., 2007). It also enables both the adult and the child to co-construct their play environment (Ferholt & Lecusay, 2010). This will benefit them later in life as scaffolding through play can help to develop executive functions particularly in the areas of planning and self regulation (Diamond, 2013; Neha et al., 2020). Play can also help children develop their speech, self-awareness and inhibitory control (Parker et al., 2022).

Ginsburg et al. (2007) puts forward the notion that play is essential to all areas of child development. There are two types of play which a child can enter that benefit their development; play that has meaning to it, such as allowing children to engage in imaginative play, or play which adheres to social norms and rules (Ferholt & Lecusay, 2010). Imaginative play supports healthy brain development (Ginsburg et al., 2007) while play which adheres to social norms and rules helps with social interactions. Learning through play is beneficial not only to those in ELSs but also to school aged children up until they are eight-years-old (Parker et al., 2022).

Engagement in Low Socio-Economic Areas

Living in low socio-economic areas can have negative effects on both the wellbeing and development of children (Letourneau et al., 2013). This is because lower socio-economic areas tend to have people living there who may be single-parent households (Paquette, 2004) or young parents (Kershaw et al., 2014), people who have low income (Rameka, 2022), poverty, disease and sickness (Cowan, 2023; Walker et al., 2011; Postlewaight, 2016) and people who have gained minimal or no educational achievements (Friesen et al., 2008). All of these factor into the early life experiences of children and can impact schooling and educational outcomes for children (Maloney, 2004).

Single-parent households and young parents have been shown to be at risk of social deprivation (Kershaw et al., 2014; Mills et al., 2012), reoccurring medical problems (Friesen et al., 2008) and poverty (Postlewaight, 2016). Due to these factors it has been noted by Walker et al. (2011) that those who experience social deprivation are more likely to experience ill health. Parents living in low socio-economic areas have also been associated with having mental health challenges (Friesen et al., 2008; Letourneau et al., 2013; Mills et al., 2012) which Letourneau et al. (2013) adds can lead to unsupportive parenting styles and non-engagement with children's early learning.

Cowan (2023) claims that in comparison to other developed countries New Zealand has a much higher proportion of children living in poverty. For children, this means they have fewer social interactions with educated people and their development may be hindered (Letourneau et al., 2013). It also increases the likelihood of children contracting diseases such as pneumonia and rheumatic fever (Cowan, 2023) which can lead to children experiencing developmental vulnerability (Walker et al., 2011). Developmental vulnerability has been described by Walker et al. (2011) as when children are significantly underperforming in comparison to their peers in all areas of child development such as speech, literacy and social and cognitive functioning (Neha et al., 2020; Thorell et al., 2009). In the event that children do attend ECEC in these areas, their health and wellbeing can limit them from regularly attending (Gillian, 2016). This can in turn mean not developing at the same rate as their peers (Neha et al., 2020). In New Zealand reports

show that in 2023 only 53.6% of students met the desired criteria for regular attendance across the entire country (Ministry of Education, 2023).

Those who live in low socio-economic areas have been reported to have a lower household income (Gillian, 2016; Rameka, 2022) which can impact on educational success for children throughout their lifespan (Gillian, 2016). In a study conducted by Maloney (2004) it was found that children who were raised in low income households for their early childhood were much less likely to gain a tertiary education qualification when they were older (Hook, 2006; Maloney, 2004). It has also been reported that those who live in low socio-economic areas are less likely to have access to high quality educational resources (Else, 1997; Gambaro et al., 2015; Willard et al., 2022). Engagement with any ELS can benefit children as it helps a child to develop social and language skills with trained professionals outside of their household (Willard et al., 2022). This is true for all children across all levels of socio-economic status. In New Zealand it is not uncommon for Māori to be amongst those living in low socio-economic areas (Cram, 1993; Neha et al., 2020; Ritchie, 2014a) therefore, of those engaging with fewer resources they are more likely to be Māori (Else, 1997). This can lead to low success rates for Māori children throughout their education journey (Hook, 2006) however it is important to note that it is not only Māori children who have low academic success rates in New Zealand (Else, 1997).

Low socio-economic areas tend to contain many families whose children share similar early life experiences (Letourneau et al., 2013). This can lead to behavioural problems and educational underachievement (Friesen et al., 2008) as children receive lower quality care (Willard et al., 2022). Adding to this Else (1997) and Gambaro et al. (2015) write that children in lower socio-economic areas that attend ELS in the area they live in are more likely to develop slower than children in higher socio-economic areas. Research has shown that for Māori students in particular, if their early childhood experiences with the education system are negative as they grow older, they start to resist (Else, 1997) and disengage (Hook, 2006) with the education system. This trend has historically occurred in New Zealand (Bishop, 2008) and can be seen in contemporary times through the high dropout rates (Bishop et al., 2009) leading to high rates of unemployment (Cram, 1993) and high levels of incarceration (Rameka, 2022). Māori constitute 52% of people in prison despite only being 15% of New Zealand's population (Ministry of

Justice, 2023). Māori children living in lower socio-economic areas are prone to exhibit behaviour problems (Friesen et al., 2008; Letourneau et al., 2013). Friesen et al. (2008) reveals that in boys these behaviours will be externalised such as showing aggression towards people, whilst Paquette (2004) notes for girls the behaviour will be internalised. Internalised behaviours can lead to being socially withdrawn which can increase the chances of one having mental health problems (Letourneau et al., 2013).

The Role of Family in Child Development

Family plays a vital role in the development of children (Fitzgerald et al., 2020; Lamb, 2010; Masten & Shaffer, 2016; Neha et al., 2020; Worrall, 2009) and has been consistently reported on when research was conducted on child development (Masten & Shaffer, 2016). According to Fitzgerald et al. (2020) much of the available literature has focused on the importance of the mother's bond with a child whilst little has been written about the importance of the fathers bond.

The role a father plays in child development has changed slightly over the last five decades (Lamb, 2010; Paquette, 2004) with the contemporary role of the fathers reportedly specialising in play (Amodia-Bidakowska et al., 2020; Lamb, 2010). Lamb (2010) states that historically fathers had the responsibility of ensuring their children grew up with the correct values and were viewed as being the protectors of the family. However, Paquette (2004) states that historically fathers were seen as authoritative figures. Authority alongside the discipline fathers historically showed (Paquette, 2004) impacted how children developed. Fathers are more likely to interact with their children in boisterous and highly stimulating ways in comparison to their mothers (Lamb, 2010; Paquette, 2004) and teach their children practical skills (Metge, 2015). This can help develop children's oral skills (Neha et al., 2020), cognitive skills (Sameroff et al., 2014) and their socio-emotional skills (Parker et al., 2022).

Mother-infant relationships and the effects this relationship has on child development has been widely researched (Fitzgerald et al., 2020; Lamb, 2010; Miller et al., 2011; Neha et al., 2020; Paquette, 2004). Mothers have always provided care and tenderness (Paquette, 2004) towards

their children fostering their child's emotions. Neha et al. (2020) writes that mother's are more likely to engage in book reading and storytelling with their children. Book reading and storytelling are important in child development as it can help to expand children's oral language skills and comprehension (Amopiu, 2019; Neha et al., 2020).

Regardless of what parental figure has had more research around the impact they have on child development both parents play crucial roles (Fitzgerald et al., 2020; Lamb, 2010; Masten & Shaffer, 2016; Metge, 2015; Miller et al., 2011; Neha et al., 2020; Worrall, 2009). According to Lamb (2010) each parent might engage with their children in different ways, with fathers engaging more so in play in comparison to the mothers. Neha et al. (2020) states that when parents talk to their children about past events or teach children how to read and write it helps their child develop. This is because it can help grow their children's oral language and literacy skills (Derby, 2023b). Parent behaviour has been argued by Masten & Shaffer (2016) to impact child development as children who grow up in single parent homes are more likely to display behavioural problems (Paquette, 2004). This can be for a variety of reasons, one which Paquette (2004) explains is parental absence. Parental absence means during childhood a child does not get to experience both disciplinary rules which are enforced by father figures (Lamb, 2010; Paquette, 2004) or they do not get the care and tenderness mothers provide (Paquette, 2004).

Siblings can also impact the way in which a child develops (Metge, 2015). Davidoff (2018) claims that siblings can act as surrogate parents and informal teachers with Amopiu (2019) adding that older siblings are more likely to take on leadership roles within a family structure when parents are not there. Sibling relationships are important for children's socio-cognitive development (Boer & Dunn, 1992) because children can learn from watching their siblings and mimicking their behaviours. Relationships between siblings have a strong impact on child development as it is one of the earliest emotional relationships a child will have with someone other than their parents (Kiselica & Morrill-Richards, 2007).

Grandparents can also impact child development. Grandparents can educate their grandchildren through storytelling and through passing down familial and cultural knowledge as they are

fortunate enough to be able to speak from personal life experiences (Metge, 2015). In New Zealand it is becoming increasingly common for grandparents to raise their grandchildren (Statistics New Zealand, 2017; Worrall, 2009). Statistics New Zealand (2017) found that in New Zealand one in four children were being raised by at least one of their grandparents. There are many reasons why grandparents will take their grandchildren into care (Metge, 2015; Williams, 2011) however all of the reasons are to keep the child in a stable environment. Metge (2015) writes that grandparents play an integral part in child development as they provide affection, love and care whilst also being able to educate their grandchildren. Hemara (2000) posits that traditionally while Māori parents were busy providing for the necessities of life, older members of the whānau helped with the responsibility of raising the young. He suggests that it is still common practice for Māori grandparents to support in the upbringing of children and their education.

The involvement of parents in their child's learning at their child's ECEC has been widely discussed across the literature (Chan & Ritchie, 2016; Derby, 2023b; Miller et al., 2011; O'Loughlin, 2013; Ritchie, 2003, 2012). These relationships are an integral component to a child's learning (Cruse, 2017) as they can help create a supportive learning environment for the child (Amopiu, 2019). The environment in which a child learns is important for the development of the child (Dzainudin et al., 2019). A supportive learning environment can help foster strong partnerships between home and the ELS (Derby, 2023b). Former Minister of Education Chris Hipkins highlighted that aside from effective governance, leadership and teaching, the success of ELSs is also dependent on whānau engagement and the opportunities afforded to parents for choice in meaningful learning pathways (Ministry of Education, 2019).

How Early Childhood Education Centres Can Support Child Development

There are many benefits to enrolling a child into either mainstream ECEC or into an ELSs (Centre of the Developing Child, 2024; Coelho et al., 2024; Shaughnessy & Kleyn, 2012). These include; early interventions for children with learning disabilities (Shaughnessy & Kleyn, 2012) and improving future academic success (Aos et al., 2004) in high quality ECEC (Education counts, 2022b) by helping improve children's literacy (Vincent & George, 2020) and oral skills

(Neha et al., 2020). ELS provides environments for children to grow and learn both on their own and with the help of adults and peers (Centre of the Developing Child, 2024). Coelho et al. (2024) write that ECE is important as it is the first step of a child's academic trajectory.

Early intervention of any intellectual or learning disability has been shown to improve a range of outcomes for these children (Kasilingam et al., 2021). Untreated or undiagnosed disabilities can lead to children being discriminated against by their peers later in their schooling journey (Bartlett & Mickelson, 2019). ECEC have trained teachers who are able to listen for any speech and language defects and observe for any other disabilities that may arise within a child (Shaughnessy & Kleyn, 2012). In doing this, qualified ECE teachers undergo training (Gambaro et al., 2015) to ensure a high quality of care is given to children attending the centre. In New Zealand, whilst there are no statistics on individual learning disabilities, the findings from the 2013 disability report were interesting to note. Six percent of children had a learning disability but were not diagnosed with any other physical or mental disability, whilst 52% of those who were already diagnosed with a disability were found to also have a learning disability (Statistics New Zealand, 2014).

The quality of an ECEC has been argued across the literature to improve the chances of children academically succeeding in their future (Alcott et al., 2020; Biersteker et al., 2016; Smith, 2015). This is because higher quality ECECs have more qualified teachers (Smith, 2015) and increased resources available for children (Crawford et al., 2020). In New Zealand all mainstream public ECEC are said to be of high quality due to these factors (Ministry of Education, 2011). Cognitive skills and social-emotional skills are two indicators of success (Sameroff et al., 2014) which are fostered in ELSs (Moriguchi et al., 2016). ELSs help to set children up for success in the future in their academic lives and also in their personal, social and emotional lives (Coelho et al., 2024) while also instilling routines into children and teaching them to be creative and respectful in social situations (Centre of the Developing Child, 2024).

During early childhood children begin to learn how to use effective communication by using simple words (Wildová & Kropáčková, 2015). This oral communication develops as they grow, therefore when they reach the age of five their speech skills are able to be understood all of the

time (Judd, 2012). While there are many ways children can expand their oral language (Neha et al., 2020) ELSs are a crucial way for children to improve (Vincent & George, 2020). Oral transmission of knowledge is the traditional way of learning in New Zealand (Amopiu, 2019). Not only do ELSs expand children's oral skills, ELSs also help expand children's literacy skills (Wildová & Kropáčková, 2015). Literacy has been noted by Wildova & Kropackova (2015) and Derby (2023a) to be a tool we constantly expand on and use throughout our lifespan. It includes but is not limited to reading, writing, talking and listening (Derby, 2023a) and is crucial for a child to develop when they are young (Vincent & George, 2020). Becoming competent in early literacy skills will lead to better reading abilities and speech development (Wildová & Kropáčková, 2015). One should not however, overlook nor mistake Māori cultural literacy such as kapa haka and art forms as just cultural practices. These are traditional Māori forms of communication and continue to be important to many Māori. Understanding them as literacy not only adds value to their place in children's learning but also acknowledges them as "literacy practices that are crucial to the maintenance of their culture" (Glynn et al., 2006, P.2).

Understanding how ECEC can support child development is important for this research as it brings to light some of the future benefits such as early interventions of any intellectual or learning disabilities for the children. Understanding the benefits for children who may need early interventions could lead to a more supportive journey through school.

Summary

This review has explored traditional Māori society and the impact of the social constructs within that society on early childhood education for tamariki Māori. One of the biggest highlights is that tamariki Māori were raised by the collective, with the love and support of an extended family. Māori elders and other members of Māori society had a major impact on the development of their tamariki.

The review briefly looked at government initiatives in early childhood education which targeted Māori, Pasifika and those from low socio-economic backgrounds. It also explored child development theories with a particular focus on Māori. Whilst the theories explored do not

originate from New Zealand they are universal and have correlations to aspects of traditional Māori learning styles and tamariki Māori development.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) which focuses attention on contextual interaction as a major part of child development compliments the Māori notion of practical learning contexts to benefit the collective. Brofenbrenner's idea of a macro system where the influences of social and cultural values influence the learning environment of children is an important notion as it speaks to the intergenerational learning of Māori through taonga tuku iho.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) of child development also compliments Māori ideals of learning where in the early ages tamariki Māori build their trust in a collective group of people which results in learning taking place in many contexts including play. Learning through play is important in early childhood for fostering creative play and developing executive functions.

Another important factor which impacts on child development that was explored in the review is socio-economics. Children who come from low socio-economic areas have a tendency to be less successful when it comes to academic achievement. This is because of limited resources and limited life experiences. All of which impact early childhood development and learning. This research investigates this very notion of the impact of socio-economic factors on parental decision making about ECE. The next chapter will look into the methodology used for this research project.

CHAPTER THREE - METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Research comes into fruition by identifying a problem or question (Brew, 2001) regarding something that is not fully understood about the world or a situation (Booth et al., 2016). Research aims to advance knowledge (Brooks et al., 2019) or to create new knowledge on a given topic (Mishra & Alok, 2011; Mutch, 2013). Methodology refers to the research methods used throughout a project (MacCallum et al., 2019) and includes the approaches and research design used to help answer a research question (Mishra & Alok, 2011). It helps the researcher to gain knowledge in a way which is systematic and structured (Nasution, 2020) and can be chosen by the researcher based on their epistemological, ideological and ethical views (MacCallum et al., 2019). After taking into consideration that the participants of this project and the researcher are Māori it seemed most appropriate that the overarching framework is one that encourages the revitalisation of Māori knowledge whilst also uplifting the self-determination of Māori. This research has therefore followed a Kaupapa Māori methodology.

This methodology will help answer the overarching research question mentioned in the introduction chapter which is: What is Māori engagement with early childhood education centres like in a lower socio-economic community? In finding an answer to this question this research will contribute new knowledge (Song, 2011) to Māori engagement with ELS within a lower socio-economic community.

This chapter presents the research approach, my positionality as the researcher, the logic behind the research design, method of data gathering, data analysis and discusses ethical considerations.

Research Approach

For many years the notion that research has misrepresented Māori understanding, voice and ways of knowing as researchers has tended to marginalise Māori (Bishop, 1998; Cram et al., 2018). Smith (2012) provides insight into imperialism and colonialism and suggests that when it comes to research, it is about power. This power comes from the traditional research space where the

researcher controls the study and takes ownership of the knowledge gained for their own benefit and not the benefit of those being researched. Smith (2012) further contends that non-indigenous researchers tend to be looking through a lens of imperial eyes with little recognition of indigenous knowledge and beliefs. Whilst I as the researcher have entered into this study to gain a better understanding of the research topic and to add to the body of knowledge that is available, I seek to do this using a Kaupapa Māori approach which will allow for a shift of the power imbalance of traditional research. This research has been instigated by the community being researched and has taken some direction in consultation with that community. The research therefore has not been fully instigated by the researcher.

This study is a retrospective study using qualitative data. It is retrospective in that it focuses on decisions that participants have already made. The chosen approach for this project is Kaupapa Māori whilst the research design is a case study which uses semi-structured interviews as the main data gathering method. This research builds on a previous study that was instigated by workers of the same community centre who collected data from the community in 2019. In analysing the data they collected they found that a large proportion of Māori families had little to no engagement with ELSs for their children. In my study this community is a lower socio-economic community which Soni et al. (2022) would argue is the reason why engagement with ECE is not high.

Researcher's Positionality

Ko Māuao te maunga	Māuao is the mountain
Ko Tauranga te moana	Tauranga is the sea
Ko Takitimu te waka	Takaitimu is the waka
Ko Ngāti Ranginui te iwi	Ngāti Ranginui is the iwi
Ko Pirirākau te hapū	Pirirākau is the hapū
Ko Tutereinga te marae	Tutereinga is the marae
Ko Wāhanga te maunga	Wāhanga is the mountain
Ko Ōkataina te roto	Ōkataina is the lake
Ko Te Arawa te waka	Te Arawa is the waka
Ko Ngāti Tarāwhai te iwi	Ngāti Tarāwhai is the iwi
Ko Hinemihi te marae	Hinemihi is the marae

I am an *uri* (direct descendant) of Ngāti Ranginui and Ngāti Tarawhai from Tauranga and Rotorua respectively. I affiliate with these two iwi most strongly but I am also a descendant of Ngāi Te Rangi, Ngāti Koroki-Kahukura, Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāti Haua, Ngāti Maniapoto, Tūhorangi, Te Whanau-a-apanui, Te Whakatohea, Ngāphui and Ngāti Pikiao.

Although I whakapapa back to Tauranga and Rotorua, I have spent all of my life living in Hamilton. Despite this, my family and I travelled frequently to both Tauranga and Rotorua where I would spend my weekends and holidays surrounded by whānau or helping at the marae. I was privileged to do this as it meant I got to spend valuable time with kaumātua in my family doing what Smith (2023) claims our people do - "sit at the feet of kaumātua, listening twice as hard as you speak" (Nuri, 2024, p.30). It is from these experiences and countless other experiences which helped me to understand and respect all things Māori; who I am, where I have come from, where I belong, who I belong to, and the values and customs of my people.

It is from the teachings of my whānau and kaumātua that I aspired to achieve at school and achieve what I did, albeit in the later years of my secondary school journey. I aspired to be a teacher like those I spent most of my childhood around, however I was repeatedly told to consider a different career path by all of the teachers in my family hence, I decided that working with children who are challenged academically, socially or behaviourally would be my next ambition.

As a researcher in this project I am positioned both as an insider (someone who has been involved in and with the community that is being researched) and an outsider (someone who is not a community centre member). Positionality in terms of insider and outsider has been argued across the literature to be impractical as the positionality of a researcher is always in a state of flux (Bishop, 2011; Bukamal, 2022; Fletcher, 2014; Lin, 2015; Manohar et al., 2019) which can be seen in this research project. As a researcher who is Māori, having been involved with this community and being aware of how the community interacts and engages allows for a more sensitive approach and therefore I am able to ask more meaningful questions (Bishop, 2011). However, not living in the community where this project takes place means my positionality in this project changes between being an insider and being an outsider. Lin (2015) claims that being

an outsider to a research project can be beneficial as it allows the researcher to interpret the data gathered from a new view point thus, new knowledge can be created (Mutch, 2013). Secondly, as I am Māori I am considered to be what Bishop (2011) describes as an insider. Manohar et al. (2019) states that the advantage to being an insider is that the researcher will be able to gain the trust of participants due to their cultural commonalities therefore, the researcher will be able to form a working relationship with the participants.

Kaupapa Māori Research

Kāupapa Māori research emerged in the twentieth century as a contemporary discourse built on critical theories with the express concerns for the lived experiences and realities of Māori (Pihama et al., 2002). This approach considers the way in which Māori view the world. One way this can be achieved is through collaborative oral storytelling. It has been suggested that Kaupapa Māori research was built upon Paulo Freire's critical theory framework of conscientisation (Smith, 2002). Freire (1998) suggests that dominant societies have the power to silence oppressed societies into following the way the dominant society lives. This is reflected in social contexts with the oppressed societies needing to make radical structural changes to change the way in how people live in a particular society (Freire, 1998). In a New Zealand context this suggests that there is a power imbalance between Māori and Pākehā. In order for an oppressed Māori population to successfully emancipate from a dominant Pākehā population, Māori must be able and willing to make radical changes within their governance which can help transform their self-determination.

Smith (2003) posits that Kaupapa Māori is made up of both cultural and political components and transpired as a resurgence for Māori. This enabled Māori to improve their self-development in turn, transforming their self-determination. Following on from Freire's conscientisation framework both Smith (2003) and Pihama (2001) agree that Kaupapa Māori is a praxis rather than a theory. Freire (1998) writes that conscientisation is a mere reflection upon reality therefore Māori have become conscientised. Not only are they aware of the disparities but they have taken action for change. An example of this is the Kohanga Reo Movement. Kaupapa Māori began to emerge in New Zealand in the late twentieth century (Fitzsimons & Smith, 2000)

and Smith (2003) believes that this showed a shift in the mindsets of the Māori people. This belief is an expansion of what Pihama (2002) suggests as Kaupapa Māori not being new rather, it has been the way Māori people have passed knowledge down for generations (Pihama et al., 2002) in a collaborative way to benefit Māori people (Berryman et al., 2013).

Prior to Kaupapa Māori research, Māori were among one of the most researched peoples in the world (Bishop, 1997). It is from this research conducted by non-Māori through a Western academic lens that Māori have been faced with repeatedly being misrepresented (Bishop, 1998), leading Māori to distrust researchers and their processes (Hudson et al., 2016). However, in the revitalisation of Te Ao Māori (the Māori world) researchers began conducting research for the benefit of Māori, by Māori (Barnes, 2013; Cram et al., 2018; Walker et al., 2006) ensuring that Māori stories and voices were being shared with accuracy and legitimacy.

Kaupapa Māori methodology for this research evolved organically and was built on in this study as the focus was initiated by workers within the community centre . The research was initiated by Māori to benefit Māori. As the research participants are Māori the validity and legitimacy of knowledge and ways of being will be highlighted in this research (Smith et al., 2012). In having the research initiated by the community centre and the participants validity and legitimacy highlighted I as the researcher will be held accountable to all the participants to ensure the control and ownership of their stories remains with them. I as the researcher will be held accountable by ensuring participants receive their transcripts within one week of the interviews and that as the researcher I am able to answer any queries about the project when asked. Whilst Kaupapa Māori research is all encompassing of culturally responsive methodology it is set apart by the fact that it is initiated by Māori for Māori. This particular research has followed Russell Bishop's IBRLA Framework (Bishop, 1997).

The IBRLA Framework

The IBRLA framework helps the researcher to question the role in which power plays out in their research, which differs from that of research ethics. It asks critical questions such as; who initiated the research? Who will gain directly from the research? Whose ideologies and

epistemologies are represented? Who is the researcher accountable to? (Bishop, 1997). It is important to understand Bishop's framework as it enables the research participants to have a voice in what the research represents thus, the power of knowledge does not lie solely with the researcher.

This particular model by Bishop (1997) was at the forefront of the researcher's mind both prior to and during the research process. This was to ensure the research was valid, fair and the ownership rights were given to the correct people.

Initiation

The research project was initiated by Māori for Māori (Barnes, 2013; Cram, 1993; Walker et al., 2006). My interest paired with the ECE workers' interest in low engagement rates in ECE for Māori families in the community was a catalyst for this study. It is from this interest that the research question arose.

Benefits

The intention of this research was to benefit the community in which this research took place. The study aimed to explore and gain a better understanding regarding Māori families engagement with ELS in the area. It is hoped that not only will this bring forth a better understanding for the community, it will also provide the community centre with recommendations from members of their community for possible new ventures within the centre.

Representation

Traditionally, research has greatly misrepresented the views of Māori (Bishop, 1997) which has created tension between Māori and research institutions (Smith, 2002). To alleviate any concerns the participants had over how their stories would be shared, it was continually made known to the participants that the recordings and transcriptions of the interviews would be written as their reality rather than that of the researchers. All participants were made aware that their raw data

would not be made public in the write up of the research; rather, their raw data would be collated into themes.

Legitimacy

As all the participants involved in this research were Māori, the research took for granted the validity and legitimacy of Māori language, culture and knowledge (Smith et al., 2012). Further to this, as participants were involved in individual semi-structured interviews the researcher used thematic analysis of the data which added to the legitimacy.

Accountability

Due to Kaupapa Māori methodology being adhered to, I as the researcher was held accountable to all parties involved in the research project – the community centre, the workers of the centre who initiated the project and all of the participants. Throughout the research, participants were able to communicate with the researcher if they wished to know more about the project. Transcripts were shared with the participants within one week of the interview taking place. Participants were also given a summary of facts sheet at the conclusion of the project.

As the gathering of data included interviews, the researcher was mindful of the cultural responsibilities they needed to adhere to; thus, the Community-up approach was used.

Community-Up Approach

The Community-Up Approach was designed by Linda Smith (2005) who used values from Smith (1999) and guidelines from Cram (2001). This approach was used during the interviews and research for this project. The joint values and guidelines are as follows:

Table 1: ***Cultural values and guidelines followed in this research***

Cultural Value (Smith, 2005)	**Guideline (Cram, 2001)**	**Approach for this research**
Aroha ki te tangata	Respect for people	Importance of showing respect to all participants
He Kanohi kitea	The importance of meeting face to face	The notion of face to face meetings is important to Māori in building respectful and trusting relationships
Titiro, whakarongo... kōrero	Active listening	The researcher listened with intent and remained objective
Manaaki ki te tangata	Well being of the participants as interviews	Venue and times were considerate of participants and their whānau
Kia tupato	A warning to proceed with caution	Participants were aware of the whole process for the research
Kaua e takahia te mana o te tangata	Do not trample on anyone's mana	Respecting the views of each participant and remaining non-judgemental.
Kaua e mahaki	Be humble	Maintaining the position of a learner valuing the contributions of participants

The first cultural value is *Aroha ki te tangata:* Whilst the researcher guideline as proposed by Cram (2001) is a respect for people, this concept was followed as it was important to show respect for all parties involved in this research. The participants were able to choose a day and time that best suited them for their interview at a place they felt comfortable being in for an extended period of time. The interviews were conducted at a time participants were already visiting the centre to collect their children from the centres rangatahi program.

He Kanohi kitea: This concept regards the importance of meeting face to face. The notion of face to face meetings is important to Māori in building respectful and trusting relationships. It is crucial to meet participants and the community to build such relationships before handing them ethical consent forms.

Titiro, whakarongo... kōrero: This notion focuses on active listening. Active listening acts as a neutral ground where the interviewer remains objective to what is being said by the interviewee (Laske, 2013). This research follows more of a social-emotional listening approach where the researcher is more focused on the participants' life experiences. All the discussions regarding this research project were done face-to-face at the community centre.

Manaaki ki te tangata: This value is one of the utmost importance as it underpins a collaborative approach to research (Smith, 2005). Consideration was taken into account for the well being of the participants as interviews were done near the end of the day. Creating an environment that was appropriate for participants was important therefore participants who had younger children with them were welcome to have their children come and go from the interview as they pleased. Also, time was given to parents who needed to address their children's needs whilst the interview was taking place.

Kia tupato: This is a warning to those wanting to do research within the realm of Kaupapa Māori or culturally responsive methodologies. Each of the participants were aware of the research boundaries and remained culturally safe. Participants were given a set of guiding questions for the semi-structured interviews (Appendix 6) to help guide the conversation. Participants were also emailed or handed paper copies of their transcripts to check before analysis began.

Kaua e takahia te mana o te tangata: Do not trample on the mana of others (Smith, 2005). This was upheld throughout the research process as each of the participants had their voice heard by the researcher. As the researcher, I was mindful of what participants were saying and respected their views of education and engagement in and around educational centres.

Kaua e mahaki: Be humble. This value was important prior to meeting the research participants as it was important to not hold any prejudices against the community. In respecting this value, it was important not to flaunt any prior knowledge I held as a researcher.

This Community-up approach considers the knowledge and understanding of the research community and gives due respect to its participants. It ensures the mana of all participants is upheld throughout the research process and ensures the research project takes a qualitative research approach.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is aimed at making sense of the way people interpret phenomena around them (Brinkmann, 2017). It is the study of peoples' lived realities and experiences. Critical realism has been argued by Maxwell (2022) to be an important tool in qualitative research. Critical realism entails knowledge constructed through both experiences and the intelligence of an individual. Ontological realism and epistemological constructivism are both part of critical realism (Brinkmann, 2017; Maxwell, 2022) and are important for the research design. These two concepts are often used to resist the positivism approaches used in quantitative research, where knowledge is supported by numerical and scientifically proven methods. Successful qualitative research will use a variety of empirical methods to gather the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It attempts to create knowledge based on the understandings (Brinkmann, 2017) of participants using inductive logic (Mutch, 2013).

Design and Methods

The research design followed a kaupapa Māori approach and used a case study approach where a community centre was the focus of the research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants and the data gathered was analysed using a grounded theory approach.

Case studies

Case studies are an important tool when collecting qualitative data, because not only can they provide a plethora of qualitative data (Bernard et al., 2017) but they also draw attention to the experiences of a participant (Stake, 2005). Case studies are common in qualitative inquiry because they aid the development of a comprehensive understanding of a particular issue by providing a plethora of descriptive data (Bernard et al., 2017). This research uses an exploratory case study approach to gather information regarding participants' decision to engage or not engage their children in ECE. The exploratory case study was used to find the why of a real-life phenomenon as posed in the overarching research question. The approach was used to help the focus community centre to gain insights to inform strategy development in supporting whānau members of the community centre whose children do not attend ELSs. The community centre became aware of a large number of whānau community centre members whose children did not attend ELSs and wanted this research to help inform them of the preference that Māori whānau in their community had for ELSs to enable the centre to cater for this need.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data gathering method. This method was chosen to align with the Kaupapa Māori framework where the knowledge is shared from the participants in turn, the researcher can acknowledge they are also a learner (Smith, 2005). In using semi-structured interviews it ensures that the participants' voices are not misrepresented by the researcher (Bishop, 1999).

Semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to find common themes among the participants who have had similar experiences (Dunbar, 2008). The similar experiences for the participants in this study is the decision making of whether or not to send their children to an ELS. The questions in semi-structured interviews allow for data to be quickly available and are flexible which can benefit the researcher as they can modify how the interview progresses (Bernard et al., 2017). This means that although the format of each interview is similar, each individual interview is more fluid and can be altered. In these interviews the interviewer can ask any

questions that may emerge from the dialogue which can be answered by the interviewee (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Bernard et al. (2017) suggests that there are different probes that an interviewer may draw upon such as the 'Uh-huh' probe. For this particular research, the 'Uh-huh' probe was used most often. This probe is particularly useful when conducting interviews where it is essential to be an active listener (Laske, 2013). The 'Uh-huh' probe encourages participants to continue with their stories whilst the interviewer acknowledges what is being said by simply saying "yes" or "I see" (Bernard et al., 2017).

Grounded theory

Part of the research analysis for the semi-structured interviews followed the process of grounded theory. This approach is often used in the analysis of qualitative research (Gibson & Brown, 2009). In using grounded theory it is important to ensure that any theory generated comes from research collected not from literature read (Gibson & Brown, 2009). This is because grounded theory is a systematic iterative approach to data collection which results in the discovery of a theory (Gibson & Brown, 2009; Oktay, 2012). It relies on coding, tagging segments of text and distilling the raw data from participants into themes (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Once the interviews were complete and transcribed the interview transcripts were colour coded into themes for the two sub research questions to help create a theory for the main research question.

Data collection and analysis

The data for this research was collected through five semi-structured interviews. The recordings also ensured that the information represented in the research maintained the intention of the participants rather than being an interpretation of their contributions. This followed an iterative approach.

Qualitative data analysis has been argued by DiCiccio-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) to be concurrent with data collection. This allows for an iterative process during the collection of data as no new information emerges. In this research, participants only participated in one interview each although some were revisited for clarification. The analysis of this research involved

transcribing the interviews, coding the raw data and categorising the raw data into themes which aligns with what Brinkmann (2017) claims qualitative data analysis involves. Once the interviews were completed, the researcher transcribed each interview to return to the participant. This was done prior to the researcher beginning to collate, code and categorise the raw data. Once confirmation was received from participants that their transcripts were correct the process for collation began. Firstly the transcripts were analysed for common themes. These themes were then coded into colours. The research questions were used to help guide themes in the analysis. During the process of the analysis some further clarifying was needed and so this was done by way of revisiting questions with some of the participants. Analytical notes were also made by the researcher in the form of a journal and used to assist the theme collating process. These themes have been used as the basis of the emerging theories of why Māori whānau associated with the focus community centre are not engaging fully with ELSs.

Ethical considerations

Researchers are responsible for overseeing all ethical considerations throughout their research project (Kapiszewski & Wood, 2022). This means that ethical considerations must be approached with care when dealing with human participants as the research has the potential to cause unforeseen harm to participants.

Check and Schutt (2012) bring forth the notion that ethics is about protecting research subjects. This means that participants need to be fully informed about the research in which they participate, there is an openness and honesty between the researcher and that participants are competent enough to make decisions on their own. Researchers also need to be cautious when approaching potential participants as researchers must put aside their personal interests (Check & Schutt, 2012).

Research procedure

Prior to this project starting the researcher had attended and assisted in some community centre meetings. This gave an insight into the community that would be researched before actually beginning this study. The participants for this study are members of the community in which the research took place. The participants have children who attend the Rangatahi program at the community centre. After ethical approval participants were formally invited to be a part of this project. Participants were spoken to about the project and self-selected to take part.

Informed consent

The community board was approached and informed about this research taking place at a board meeting where all board members were present. During this meeting the community board passed a motion acknowledging and in support of this research taking place in their community. Written permission for this research was initially sought from the community centre (Appendix 1).

Participants received a paper copy of a cover letter that outlined what the project required of them as a participant (Appendix 2), an information sheet about the project (Appendix 3) alongside a page of important notes regarding the project (Appendix 4). Participants were also given a consent form (Appendix 5) which they completed and conversation prompts (Appendix 6) prior to their interview taking place. All participants were informed that they would be able to withdraw from the project if they chose to by emailing the researcher.

Access to participants

Participants were accessed through the community centre with the approval from the centre and community board. Potential participants were given an overview of what the research project would entail including a criteria list (Appendix 7). From this, they were able to take away an information sheet (Appendix 3), a sheet of important notes (Appendix 4) and a consent form (Appendix 5). These were all paper copies to ensure participants had the information they needed.

Data collection location

An important consideration for research is that of the research environment (Maxwell, 2022). The notion of a research environment does not just imply the actual setting. It includes but is not limited to the relationship between participant and researcher, supervisors and other stakeholders in the research (Maxwell, 2022). This research followed the IBRLA framework set forth by Bishop (1997) and the Community-Up Approach by Smith (2005) as both of these support not only each other but also Kaupapa Māori methodologies. Both the IBRLA framework (Bishop, 1997) and the Community-Up Approach (Smith, 2005) support Kaupapa Māori methodologies by providing guidelines for researcher conduct that are culturally sensitive.

Research environment

Interviews with each of the participants occurred at the community centre near the end of the day whilst parents were picking their children up from the Rangatahi program as mentioned earlier. This was done for convenience however, participants were able to arrange a different time if they wished. Participants chose their preferred day for the interview and arrangements were made for unforeseen circumstances. Each of the interviews began with a karakia (prayer) and light conversation prior to the recording taking place. As the researcher, I made sure to verbally go through the consent form with participants to ensure they understood what was required of them.

Anonymity/Confidentiality

As the interviews were sound recorded to ensure participants stories were accurate, the participants were informed of this and that pseudonyms would be used throughout this thesis. Pseudonyms were used so that anonymity and confidentiality of the participants was respected to the best of my ability as the researcher. Social and cultural considerations of participants were also taken into account for the interviews.

Participants

There were a total of five participants for this research with all five sending at least one child to an ELS while only two of the total five participants sent all of their children to an ELS.

Hariata is a mother in her early thirties and works within the childcare sector who grew up in Tauranga surrounded by extended family and being close to her marae. She has three children aged between eight and one year old. She attended a kōhanga reo when she was younger and has enrolled her youngest two children into kōhanga reo full time. Her oldest child began in kōhanga reo but soon afterwards was moved into Montessori education.

Tangiwai is in her early thirties and grew up in Christchurch surrounded by her family. She attended an ECEC and from what she can recall, the majority of the children in her extended family also attended ECECs. This participant has three children ranging from ages ten years – six months of which one attended an ECEC part time so she was able to complete her studies. After completing her studies, she pulled her son out of the ECEC.

Whetu is a father in his early thirties who grew up travelling New Zealand with his grandparents immersing in his Māori heritage. He has three children between the ages of ten and one year. Due to his travelling he did not attend an ELS instead he was taught about all things Māori by his extended whānau. His two youngest children are enrolled full time into kōhanga reo whilst his oldest son was enrolled into kindergarten.

Rangimarie is a mother in her early forties and works within the childcare sector. This participant grew up in Hamilton and did not attend an ECEC. She has three children ranging from ten to six years old with only one of her children having attended a mainstream ECEC while one of her children attended a kōhanga reo part time. This participant grew up surrounded by extended family who pushed for her to learn about the environment, how things happen and to extend the knowledge this participant had as a child.

Maeve is a mother in her early forties with five children ranging from ages fourteen to four years old. Although her older children do not fit with the criteria for this research project, when interviewing her we spoke only about her youngest three children as only one of them attended an ELS whilst two of them did not attend any ELS. Maeve grew up in Auckland but moved overseas for some time before returning back to New Zealand.

Summary

The overarching methodology used throughout this research project was Kaupapa Māori which legitimated and validated Māori ways of knowing and being. The researcher's position was in a state of flux which benefited this research as relationships were able to be formed with participants whilst the data was able to be analysed from an outsider's perspective. Case studies and semi-structured interviews were used as the main data gathering method which followed an iterative approach.

The use of Kaupapa Māori as a methodology was deemed to be advantageous for this research as meaningful relationships could be built with the participants who shared their experiences. There was a degree of trust prior to the research as the researcher had been seen attending community centre hui. There was also the fact that the research was undertaken to contribute to the wellbeing of members of the community centre. The research had been undertaken as a direct result of the perceived needs of the community workers within the centre. The experiences of the participants shaped the findings of this research.

CHAPTER FOUR - FINDINGS

Introduction

The previous methodology chapter indicated that this study collected qualitative data. This chapter will outline the themes that have emerged through interviews with the participants, both those who chose ECECs for their tamariki and those who did not. This chapter identifies the themes that helped to answer the overarching research question; What is Māori engagement with early childhood education like in a lower socio-economic area?

Presentation of the Data

One of the concerns about research of Māori is the authentic representation of Māori voice. In presenting the findings consideration has been given to the Kaupapa Māori methodology where the voices of the participants are shared as they intended. Themes were identified through the data gathered from the participants. I will begin by presenting this information as the main themes which were identified through the guidance of the three research questions. I will list the themes that emerged throughout the research questions and later expand on these themes. This is to allow for both the authentic voice of Māori participants to be heard and to ensure my personal opinion is limited to only the expansion of the themes.

After gaining signed approval from the participants for their transcript an initial analysis was made of those transcripts which involved the process of identifying key themes.

Key Themes

When reviewing the transcripts, there were many similar points that were raised by all of the participants. Some of these themes were highlighted when using the guiding questions (Appendix 6) however, other themes emerged during further prompting at the time of the initial interview and later when seeking clarification of points from the participants. The main themes that were identified from all three of the research questions were;

- Early life experiences with grandparents
- Choices of ELS Systems and the differences between mainstream ECEC and kōhanga reo. Another choice that was highlighted was whether to choose informal or formal education. The informal education included valuing time and learning from extended whānau members
- Parent commitments contribute to engagement in ELSs
- Te Ao Māori
- Parental aspirations for their children
- Early life environment
- Financial position

Early life experiences with grandparents

Early life experiences with grandparents was a common theme amongst participants who chose to keep their children home and not enrol them into an ELS. All of the participants were brought up in low socio-economic areas and therefore these experiences were important to them as children and also to them as parents. Whilst the participants considered these as early life experiences it transpired during the course of the interviews as they reflected on what they wanted for their own children, that they were talking about early learning experiences.

I had the freedom to be home with her... I could teach her myself... her and I had a lot of fun.

These were the words of Rangimarie who chose to keep her child home with her until she started school. Value had been placed on the mother's own personal childhood experience. This was her choice as it was similar to what she experienced in her childhood therefore, her personal experiences influenced her decision to keep her child home. She further explained:

They were spending a lot of time with me, my mum and dad ... my dad was teaching them how to ride bikes and all sorts of cool little things like that and going to the beach every weekend ... my dad was proactive with the kids and would go and pick puha somewhere with them.

It is experiences with the grandparents which were common amongst all of the participants whose children did not attend an ELS. Experiences with grandparents are ones that the parents remember clearly as it was with extended family, teaching their children the value of Te Ao Māori. It is clear that the practical life experiences were important to Rangimarie as is also evident with Hariata who similarly stated:

Just being around their koro, all the aunties, uncles you know...being brought up on the marae it's great...

Hariata clearly valued having her children brought up around the marae. This enabled her children to learn from extended whānau about the tikanga of where they whakapapa back to. It allowed the children to be immersed and engage with tikanga that was central to their people.

Hariata, Tangiwai and Ranigmarie, clearly valued their own early learning experiences and wished for their own children to experience the same rather than be placed in any organised ELS detached from whānau and whānau aspirations. However, not all of the participants kept their children away from ELS.

When speaking about the experiences her children had Maeve said:

I'm putting them out there, putting them in different situations with different kids.. preparing them for the real world

Maeve believed that this enabled her children to experience what it was like to interact with different children in different situations. Maeve referred to why she put her oldest children into an ELS. Similarly, Whetu explained why he sent his children to an ELS stating:

...Just go there to learn, to interact... You want them to learn so they don't have to be embarrassed if they're not passing tests or if they need extra help... teach them to get up even though they don't know time, teach them about their body clock

The explanation brings light to the experiences Whetu had in his childhood and him wanting something different for his children. He wants his children to experience ECE so they can learn and interact with their peers and begin their formal education journey. Clearly Whetu and Maeve's responses show that they both have valued the possibilities that are open to their children outside of the whānau. They see ELSs as an extension of their children's learning as they prepare them for the world outside of the whānau.

Choice of ELS systems

New Zealand is a bicultural nation and as such there are two pathways that one can choose from; either the mainstream path which is English language based or the Māori path which is te reo Māori based.

Mainstream ECEC Systems

The most common theme spoken about across all of the interviews was the option for children to attend mainstream ECECs. For the purpose of these findings mainstream ECECs include both Montessori and kindergartens.

If I left her in kindergarten, she would have thrived better... They communicated better, they weren't super strict, they had a good diet...

These were the words of Rangimarie who reflected on her decision to change her child from a mainstream ECEC to kōhanga reo. It was her belief that her child was better off at the mainstream ECEC rather than the kōhanga due to the way in which mainstream centres function. Rangimarie experienced both the kōhanga reo and mainstream systems and spoke to the differences between the two systems that she experienced personally. The way in which the centres work were spoken about by all the parents who sent their children to mainstream services. When speaking about these mainstream services all of the participants were content with the procedures that these centres followed and Tangiwai stated:

The process with enrolling him was really great... the centre was happy to have me come in with him and they were really welcoming and caring and that helped me...

It is processes such as enrolling a child that can be overwhelming for parents sending their children to an ECEC however Tangiwai had the help of the centre which enabled her to feel less overwhelmed and anxious.

Like Rangimarie, Whetu also had experience with both kōhanga reo and mainstream systems and was not easily persuaded on which system was better as both of them worked for his children. When talking about kindergartens Whetu said:

... kindergartens you go there to teach kids, get them to explore new things, play with toys, fall over... I don't mind whatever it is pākehā or kōhanga kids need to go

Speaking from personal experience, Whetu was not opposed to sending his children to either service. His aspirations for his children are to have better experiences than he did whether that be English or Māori medium. He did not notice a difference within the systems as both worked for what he wanted for his children.

When talking about why Tangiwai sent her children only to a mainstream ECEC she responded:

.. I'm not sure why I put my children into an early childhood centre... because there's lots of resources there and teachers are usually qualified and experienced with young kids

Tangiwai speaks about both the educational resources and human resources that are at mainstream centres. Having attended an ECEC herself, her personal experiences also helped her make the decision to send her youngest to an ECEC. Hariata also spoke about the resources that mainstream ECEC have in regards to keeping her child's mind stimulated.

I needed to keep his mind stimulated because he just wasn't engaging with it so I put him into ECE Montessori and he loved it. It kept his mind stimulated...

Hariata did not experience the mainstream system herself and was hesitant to send her child to a mainstream ECEC however, shortly after enrolling her son she came to the realisation that he was better off in Montessori due to the resources they provided.

Kōhanga reo systems

It has been noted that kōhanga reo language nests are a unique early learning centre based on total immersion of the Māori language and its values. This is different to mainstream ECECs where children are immersed in English and the values are not based on the Māori culture.

When speaking about kōhanga reo many of the participants acknowledged that they had chosen to send their children here because of the values kōhanga reo practiced. They suggested that these values were important to them but also implied that there might be pedagogical differences in approaches to learning.

> *Their learning styles are very different... it's not always about the curriculums...*

These were the words of Rangimarie whose youngest children thrived at the kōhanga reo they attended. Rangimarie's comments align with those of Hariata in regard to the different approaches to learning in which Hariata described when speaking about her experience with kōhanga reo.

> *It relates back to the marae in a lot of things. It's one of the pou in kōhanga... In kōhanga you're bringing them up in Te Ao Māori so they know when they go to their marae they know those rules…*

The cultural learnings and values that are instilled in children during their time at kōhanga reo is what parents valued such as the teaching of marae protocol. Kōhanga reo provides children with the foundational knowledge of Māori tikanga which the child can expand on as they grow up and experience more.

When speaking about kōhanga reo and what participants noticed, Maeve stated:

At kōhanga they are a bit more respectful to family and their aunties and uncles.. I noticed that the children who went to kindergarten were kind of all over the place, they didn't really listen...

Maeve valued kōhanga reo as it taught her children to be respectful of their elders. She was able to see the difference between her children and those who went to kindy as other close members of her family sent their children to ECEC. It is important to understand that this difference is from Maeve's own personal experiences and many other factors can contribute to what she noticed. Hariata added:

It's about the passion and the heart of the whaea, when they have that they know where to go, when the kids want to play, when the kids need to sleep... at kōhanga our three year old's rest and if they want to sleep they can...

Like Maeve, Hariata also valued the kōhanga reo system. The idea that not everyone at the centre was qualified but has the passion and heart for working alongside these children to help them grow with the values of Te Ao Māori is what helped Hariata choose to send her children to kōhanga reo.

Rangimarie and Whetu both also stated that although they enrolled at least one of their children into kōhanga reo it was not without challenges.

Kōhanga was more whānau led so when things happened with my girl they didn't tell me... but the kōhanga I sent her too wasn't very good

Due to this experience Rangimarie chose to keep her child at home until she moved back to Rotorua. This experience made her very reluctant to send her child to another ELS. Although Whetu did not go into detail about the challenges he faced with kōhanga he did say:

In the kōhanga system they sort of always have problems but it doesn't matter what kōhanga you go to there's always a problem

Even though Whetu had challenges within the kōhanga reo system, this did not deter his decision to send his children to kōhanga reo as the benefits outweighed the challenges.

Differences between mainstream ECEC and kōhanga reo

During the interviews, participants were asked what ECE meant to them and although some of their answers were vague they all shared similarities and spoke about the differences between mainstream ECEC and kōhanga reo. For this section it is important to note that not all of these participants sent their children to ELS and that some participants only sent one or two of their children to an ELS.

The most detailed personal description of what ECE meant to a participant was one which Hariata began with.

For me ECE is Montessori whereas kōhanga is so different. We teach them tikanga and things that you will do on the marae whereas in ECE they teach you lots of good things too but they just help the kids to be safe and learn like the ABC's

This description came about from Hariata as she works within the kōhanga reo system therefore speaks from her personal work experience. She also has experienced how both systems operate. Similarly Whetu also had experience with both systems and stated:

Kindy you just go there to teach kids how to play but in kōhanga you teach kids how to korero

Like Hariata, Whetu also experienced how both systems operated and therefore was also speaking from personal experience. Teaching children how to korero (talk) Māori is an important value held by Whetu. Continuing on from this Rangimarie explained it as:

Kōhanga is more a Māori thing and that's why my parents wanted my kids in kōhanga and not kindergarten

The idea that kōhanga is about Māori ideologies is what drew participants to send their children to these centres rather than to mainstream services. It was found to be the main reason the participants enrolled their children into kōhanga reo services. Maeve explained it by saying:

Kōhanga was more about heritage who you are, your whānau and kindergarten is more about education and real world kind of stuff

Similar to Rangimarie, Maeve finds that kōhanga is about knowing who you are and where you come from which is important to Māori people. A major attraction appeared to be that these parents feel culturally located in kōhanga reo centres as they were based on the values of their culture. These findings show that even though not all of these participants sent all of their children to ELS they still held some understanding of the differences between the two centres.

Informal or formal education?

Education was a common theme across all of the interviews with a varied response to what parents perceived education to be. Those who did not send their children to ELSs were strong in the belief that their children were being educated by their wider family and valued that learning more so than the formal education being taught in ELSs.

I wasn't too focused on them learning anything educational, more like just having fun and finding their way…

These are the words of Tangiwai which speaks more perhaps to the fact that parents believe learning can take place anywhere and is not exclusive to ECEC or ELCs. Tangiwai's response speaks to children learning about themselves first and what they are capable of doing. Rangimarie's perspective aligned with Tangiwai in regard to learning not being exclusive to ELS as she spoke about the early learning for her children:

... the earlier learning was learning te reo and tikanga and kawa.

This is learning Rangimarie valued which is similar to that of Tangiwai. However their views differ from the view of Whetu who stated:

You must go. It needs to be done. Your children need to go to early childcare education.

Whetu's belief is that ECE is needed for children. This belief stemmed from his personal experiences and the future worries he held for his children. He continued on to say:

I want them to learn as much as they can, be able to korero like actually talk, have whole conversations, be interesting, be intelligent, smart not just excel in sport like me.

It is through formal education that this father believed his children will be able to achieve the aspirations he has for them.

They got to learn reo, learn about their culture, they learn through waiata...

Maeve found that for all of her children, both those that went to ELSs and those that did not all learnt about their culture and where they come from. She found that all five of her children learnt best through waiata and commented:

I want them to be immersed into te reo Māori... I believe they can learn english anywhere... they'll learn english when they order a burger, get takeaways from the shops..

Hariata understands the value of education and wants her children to learn te reo Māori as they will learn english through the interactions they have with other people in their lifetime such as ordering takeaways or going to the supermarket.

The value of family time

Time spent with family was a popular value raised among participants. All of the participants had something to say about valuing the time their children spent with both the child's immediate and wider family.

When speaking about the early years of her children's life Tangiwai stated:

> *I wanted to spend as much time with them as I could... I wanted to spend those early years with them...*

For Tangiwai, spending time with all of her children while they were young is something that she valued as she was in a position to be able to spend time with her children which is something she did not get to experience growing up. Rangimarie also valued spending time with her children she stated:

> *I wanted to keep her all to myself. I just taught her myself.*

When speaking about wanting to keep her children to herself Rangimarie spoke from personal experience as growing up she was able to experience staying home with her family. However, circumstances changed when it came to her second child stating:

The second one I definitely sent her to daycare because she needed to go there...

Circumstances changed for Rangimarie which meant she had to enrol her child into an ECEC. Rangimarie and Whetu had similar upbringings in terms of being raised by whānau therefore when Whetu reflected on his personal experiences and the amount of time he spent with his wider family, he wanted his children to experience the same thing but with their mother as well. This meant they could learn from their wider family as well their mother therefore, increasing the amount of time their immediate family had together.

They get to stay with their mother... they get to be with their mum... The life skills you know... papa taught us how to karakia, Nana taught us about the gardens..

For Whetu his comments highlighted the importance he placed on his children spending time with their mother and their grandparents. This is similar to the findings of Hariata who described what family time looks like for her children.

They love going over to where we're from and just being with everyone over there... I can pass them to their koro, aunties, uncles, cousins...

Family time, such as this, was expressed and valued across all of the participants in this study because their wider families helped to grow the children's knowledge. It is the times children have with their grandparents that the participants appreciated and remembered because it enabled the children to form a bond and learn from those people who helped teach their parents.

Parent commitments contribute to engagement in ELSs

Participants in the research acknowledged that there were employment and study commitments that were factors to consider when placing their tamariki into ELSs.

Employment

An interesting theme that arose within some of the interviews was that of enrolling children into ELSs due to the parents' work circumstances or study requirements.

When Rangimarie began talking about enrolling her children into ECEC and ELS the reason behind it was not by choice rather it was due to outside circumstances.

... things change you know, economically and socially so I had to be at work all the time. If I could I would 100% have stayed home with my babies all day...

ECEC and ELSs provided a place for children to be looked after and cared for whilst parents are at work during the day. Having to work due to her personal circumstances meant that Rangimarie had to find an alternative way for her children to be taught and looked after. Rangimarie further explained how this impacted the time she spent with her younger children.

... I had to go back to work when she was six weeks old, so she has been raised in the system... with my second I could stay home with her for the first year and a half before I had to go back to work...

Due to circumstances outside of Rangimarie's control it meant she was not able to raise all of her children the way she wanted too. With her youngest child she had to return to work sooner than she would have liked therefore her youngest missed out on spending much time with her – something the child's siblings got to experience.

Study

Tangiwai enrolled her youngest child into an ECEC so that she could continue with her studies.

> *He was starting to make lots of noises and wanting more attention so I thought I will just put you into the preschool on campus because I feel like that's better than just sitting in a classroom and just listening to adults talk.*

Tangiwai only enrolled her son into the ECEC on campus on the days she had class otherwise he would be at home with her. She continued on to say:

Now that I've finished my studies I will keep him home

Both Tangiwai and Rangimarie kept their eldest children home with them while they were young and would have preferred to do this with all of their children, however they adapted to the circumstances they were faced with. Both Tangiwai and Rangimarie only enrolled their youngest children into ECEC and ELS for the time they needed to and no longer. When circumstances changed for Tangiwai she made the decision to withdraw her child from the ECEC as she preferred to care for her child at home.

Te Ao Māori

Another theme that arose throughout the interviews was that of Te Ao Māori and the way in which Māori learn and interact with the environment. Many of the participants wanted to keep their children close to family or close to home with Maeve stating:

They could be with their cousins.. have ties back to home...

Having ties back to home and spending time with cousins was something many of the participants spoke about. For Maeve in particular, it was important that her children maintained ties back home as she moved her family to another country before returning back to New Zealand.

However, for Whetu he preferred to bring his children up in a Te Ao Māori way and explained:

... I am trying to keep the language alive... te reo Māori is their first language... you can see them with their cousins being hard out talking Māori but then being able to live in both Te Ao Māori and Te Ao Pākehā worlds...

Whetu's words speak to the importance of his children being able to live in both a Māori world and a Pākehā world. It also touches on the importance of his children being able to speak Māori to aid in the revitalisation of the language.

Similarly, Hariata also spoke about how the Māori language was important to her and her children, she stated:

He's always learnt both reo Māori and english so I can korero out to him in Māori and he understands

Adding onto what both Hariata and Whetu commented, Rangimarie further explained the importance of her children learning te reo:

... my daughter can korero Māori with her Nan who is 100% fluent which is so cool...my parents actually changed their work schedules and took care of my kids...

The importance of the Māori language was evident within these three participants' interviews. Rangimarie also spoke to how her parents helped to raise her children and worked around their mokopuna (grandchildren) by changing their work schedules. Changing work schedules was not a possibility for Rangimarie therefore she appreciated what her parents did for her and her children.

Parental aspirations for their children

Each of the participants were asked what their aspirations were for their children and many of them shared similar responses.

Hariata started off by sharing that her aspirations for her children were:

Just to thrive in what they're doing and I will always encourage them to thrive in Te Ao Māori

This aspiration focuses mainly on the Te Ao Māori aspect of her children's lives which stemmed from the experiences she had growing up. Tangiwai also shared her aspirations which were:

I want them to feel comfortable socialising outside the whānau circle with all sorts of people instead of later having issues engaging outside. I hope they love learning and have bright futures.

Tangiwai's response highlighted the importance she placed on her children's learning of social skills in order to be able to engage with members of the public, rather than just within the family. She believed that learning social skills could help her children in the future to feel comfortable in public. This arose from the experiences that Tangiwai had growing up and how her children's early life experiences stemmed from what they do as a family.

Whetu and Rangimarie had similar aspirations for their children and Whetu stated:

I want them to be nice kids, to learn hard stuff, get out there but be respectful

Whetu's comment highlights the importance of mannerisms children can learn when they are younger. From these interviews mannerisms are taught well in both kōhanga reo and mainstream ELS. Rangimarie shared:

I just want them to be happy and kind. I'm not really bothered education wise I think they'll find what they want to do in life

Both Whetu and Rangimarie's comments emphasised on the child's wellbeing throughout their lifespan. Maeve was similar to Rangimarie, Maeve shared:

I just want them to be happy, allow them to do what they want to do

Maeve also focused on her child's wellbeing throughout their lifespan and allowed her children to grow in their own way.

All of the participants aspired for their children to be happy in what they choose to do with their lives however only Tangiwai and Whetu spoke about any educational aspirations for their children.

Early life environment

The early life environment in which children experience was another theme that arose from the interviews. For the purpose of this study the environment is the surroundings and conditions that a child lives and interacts in. All of the participants in this study changed the environment their children were in when they were younger by moving either cities or countries.

My kids were spending a lot of time in Akaroa with their Nan... we are originally from Christchurch and moved back here recently so I was anxious to put him in because he was coming to my studies with me since he was four weeks old..

These are the words of Tangiwai who spoke about moving from the South Island of New Zealand to the North Island and the anxieties that came along with it as a parent for her youngest

child. She described that the environment her oldest children were in included their grandparents and travelling between Akaroa and Christchurch before moving to the North Island.

Maeve temporarily moved countries therefore changing not only her children's educational environment but also changing the cultural environment they were living in.

... we moved overseas to Australia when they were little but when we moved back here so now they get to be with their cousins

Any change can affect children and they may find it hard to adapt, however Maeve's children would have experienced a change from being close to the wider family to having only immediate family near them. Moving back to New Zealand enabled her children to regain their cultural ties and to be surrounded by their cousins yet, again the children would have had to re adapt to their new environment.

Rangimarie changed her eldest children's environment when she moved back to her hometown of Rotorua before returning to Hamilton. She discussed the affects these changes had on her children:

Their home life affects their educational life... We moved to Rotorua and the good thing about being at home is that everyone's pretty much related.

Rangimarie's comment shines a light on the environment in which she wanted to bring her children up in – one that was similar to her experience. Moving back to her hometown meant that her children had their wider family close by which is similar to the reasons both Tangiwai and Maeve shared.

Not only does changing the places in which the children grow up matter for their environment, but so too does the places in which they were enrolled whether that be an ECEC or an ELS.

Tangiwai spoke about enrolling her youngest child into an ECEC on campus whilst she studied saying:

When he realised that the environment he was in was a good one he must have felt that so he just became more settled... you know kids walk in and when they are older they're more aware of what's happening around them....

Tangiwai's comment shows that whilst adults may change the environments in which their children are in, the children need time to adapt to their new environments. Changing environments and entering an unfamiliar environment can be a challenge for a child especially when they are used to spending time with their families.

Financial position

It is clear that for some of the participants their personal financial situation influenced whether or not their children entered formal early learning. Whilst parents may have wished to keep their children home with them their financial situations necessitated a move to the workforce therefore needing to send their children to an ELS.

Summary

The findings that have been shared in this chapter have shown that the participants clearly see kōhanga reo and ECECs as completely different entities each offering different opportunities. Preferences as to where their children attended were based on how each of the participants felt about a particular centre, their cultural needs and also their personal aspirations for their children. Whether or not children were sent to an ELS at all was not always a choice for the parents and was sometimes dictated by outlying factors such as financial capability. It would appear that the biggest disadvantage to the participants of sending children to an ELS was not spending time with their parents or the wider whānau and therefore losing the opportunity to learn from them about Te Ao Māori. The findings of this chapter will be discussed further in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE - DISCUSSION

Introduction

Supporting whānau to make informed choices about the ELSs available is part of the Ka Hikitia (Ministry of Education, 2024a) action plan for early learning. The plan seeks to support not only Māori whānau in their choices of ELSs but also to increase teacher capability in building productive partnerships with Māori whānau (Ministry of Education 2024a).

The Māori whānau who participated in this research value education in the lives of their tamariki. Choosing an ELS highlights the conflict between the learnings of taonga tuku iho and what Woller (2016) would call the imposed knowledge of a dominant culture. The participants want the best learning opportunities for their tamariki but what transpired during the research interviews is that they do not want it at the expense of their culture and language.

The key themes arising from the research questions will be discussed in this chapter. The research questions are as follows:

1. What is Māori engagement with early childhood education like within a lower socio-economic community?
2. What experiences do children have that don't attend an ECE centre?
3. What experiences did Māori parents in lower socio-economic areas have with early childhood learning?

Key Findings

The data gathered in the previous chapter suggest that there are a number of contributing factors to Māori engagement with ELS in low socio-economic areas. The first research question brought forward the themes of: understanding whānau priorities for their tamariki Māori and the differences between mainstream ECEC and kōhanga reo ELSs. The second research question brought to light the importance of family in the early years while research question three spoke mainly to cultural responsiveness. The data gathered suggested that there were not two but three

options for early learning for the participants. These three options being ECECs, kōhanga reo or home learning with whānau.

The data indicate that both kōhanga reo and mainstream ECECs are valued by the participants as having benefits to children however, this study found that amongst the participants one type of centre (kōhanga reo or mainstream) does not outweigh the other in regards to Māori engagement with them. What does weigh heavily in favour of one over the other is parents' strong desire for te ao Māori to be included in the service delivery. This is similar to the findings of the Ministry of Education (2022) which noted that those centres that implemented a te ao Māori approach to learning can lead to higher engagement rates with Māori families. The other factor which should not be ignored is that given the choice the majority of parents would have preferred not to send their tamariki to formal ELSs but would rather they engage in intergenerational learning with whānau which coincides with Hemara (2000). This is a contradiction to Soni et al. (2022) who believes low engagement is due to living in a low socio-economic area.

The findings suggest that whilst early learning is important to the participants' whānau their appreciation for how this happens comes in different forms. Whilst some of the participants would have preferred for the early learning to take place in the home environment with whānau as the key teachers others preferred ELSs. Each of the whānau had a personal preference, some having experienced both the language nest of kōhanga reo and ECECs. What was evident is that each of the participants wanted what was best for their tamariki.

The findings bring to light an understanding of whānau priorities for their tamariki Māori, the differences between the ELSs, the importance of family in the early years and culturally responsive practices for the ELSs.

When it comes to the aspirations of whānau for their tamariki, there was no mention by participants of wanting their tamariki to be academics but rather to be happy caring citizens with a love of learning, however learning may look. As mentioned by Maeve;

We have to weigh up what's more important. Yeah, like book education or life education.

What was noticeable by its absence from the responses of the participants but relevant to this research is the lack of reference to any curriculum in ELSs. Although Maeve did comment;

> *It's not all about the curriculums and stuff because they're trash to be honest.*

Although Maeve mentioned the curriculum she did not explicitly reference any by name. Throughout the interviews only one participant referred to their understanding of the principles of Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) which was Hariata who explained: "*It's one of the pou in kōhanga…"* The lack of participants mentioning Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) might suggest that they were unaware that a curriculum actually exists in ELSs. It might also therefore suggest that participants were unaware that ELSs are obligated to follow policies, guidelines and rules as set out by the law such as the Education and Training Act 2020. The Education and Training Act 2020 ensures that all levels of education including ELSs are giving effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Understanding whānau priorities for their tamariki Māori

The data collected in the previous chapter suggests that Māori engagement with ECE in a low socio-economic community varies; however, all of the participants sent at least one of their children to an ELS. This finding contradicts the finding of Willard et al. (2022) who found that those from low socio-economic areas are less likely to engage in ECE. Parent's past experiences whether it be; emotional, spiritual, physical, environmental or psychological, were all contributing factors as to whether they wanted to engage with any ELS for their tamariki which is similar to the findings of Kershaw et al. (2014). Kershaw et al. (2014) found that parents who had positive experiences in childhood were more likely to engage their children in similar experiences. This can be seen in the findings when parents spoke about what they remember from their childhood, the way they grew up and wanting their children to have either similar experiences or different experiences.

The early learning experiences of the tamariki as shared by the participants had a lot to do with their own early learning experiences. The preferred choices for early learning were based on

either positive or negative early childhood experiences of the participants which is again similar to what Kershaw et al. (2014) found. This finding is also similar to what Miller et al. (2011) found in regards to parents' recollection of their experiences influencing their decision to send their children to ELS or not. Whilst formal early learning was a consideration for the participants, informal learning weighed in heavily.

> *I don't want them to miss out on what I missed out on, so that's why I sent them to kōhanga reo. Hariata*

> *My dad was teaching them… so, those were the pleasures of having them home at that early age instead of just sending them straight off to preschool. Tangiwai*

The notion of the Bronfenbenner's (1979) ecological model of proximal processes is evident in these intergenerational experiences of the parents having learnt from their experiences and wanting to either continue those or improve them for their own children.

Whetu wanted his children to have a different upbringing than himself when it came to their early years. Although this led to him enrolling his children into an ELS, he still valued learning from the wider whānau. For other participants their early life experiences of growing up surrounded by and learning from extended family led to their reluctance in enrolling their children into an ELS. This aligns with Duncan and Shohamy (2016) suggesting that people use past memories, sensations and feelings to guide their decisions, thereby hopefully improving future outcomes such as tamariki Māori being more successful than the parents themselves. For many Māori there is still a strong sense of intergenerational collectivism where decision making can be influenced by the wider whānau. In the case of Rangimarie, her parents were also influential in the decision to send their children to kōhanga reo and not kindergarten.

Vykotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1997) is also evident in the decision making of these parents in that they wanted the best for their tamariki and the authentic practice of extended whānau as teachers featured high in their priorities for their early learning preference. For example, as Maeve shared, "*So my cousin was her first teacher."*

In Te Ao Māori it was common practice for grandparents and kaumātua (respected elders) to observe children, notice their strengths (Adds et al., 2011; Hemara, 2000) and nurture these, as much as it was to notice where support was necessary. The participants alluded to the preference for practical contexts for learning and this included play and talk. Whetu commented:

> *Being able to talk, being able to korero you know like actually talk, whole conversations, be interesting you know…*

The participants all prioritised their children being able to verbally communicate with other people which is one of the two forms of working memory Diamond (2013) writes about. Talk and practical experiences help children to develop organisational skills, mental flexibility and working memory.

Participants wanted what was best for their children in regards to learning with Whetu stating: *"You want them to learn so they don't have to be embarrassed if they're not passing tests or if they need extra help."* This was one of the reasons he chose to enrol his children into ELS which coincides with published literature (Coelho et al., 2024; Gambaro et al., 2015; Gillian, 2016). For example, engaging with ECE enhances the wellbeing of children while also ensuring access to quality education thereby lessening the impacts associated with intergenerational poverty (Postlewaight, 2016), which is common in low socio-economic areas. This is also supported by Coelho et al. (2024) who state that engagement with ECEC can minimise stress on children and reduce the disparity between different socioeconomic areas. Furthermore, Gambaro et al. (2015) similarly found that children from disadvantaged backgrounds (i.e., low socio-economic areas) are more positively impacted from attending ECEC compared with those with more affluent backgrounds.

The majority of participants expressed that their main reason for engaging with an ELS for their children was due to external circumstances changing such as; jobs, study or the economy which meant neither of the child's parents could stay at home. While it was not necessarily the choice they would have preferred for their children, there was no other option available. It has been

reported by Kral et al. (2021) that this is often an issue indigenous individuals/ communities face as traditionally their children are brought up with and around extended families.

My findings concurred with The Ministry of Education (2024) as my findings show that Māori parents were fortunate enough to have the option to engage with kōhanga reo or mainstream ECE services. This does not mean however, that non-Māori are excluded from kōhanga reo. While there was not a clear consensus on which type of ECE was preferred, some of the participants interviewed were able to give comparative statements between kindergarten and kōhanga reo as they had sent children to both. For example:

> *The kōhanga system they sort of just need to run... Always problems. Doesn't matter what kōhanga you go to there's always a problem. I really like the kindergarten. Whetu*

> *... He started in kōhanga reo and then when he was three, I needed to keep his mind stimulated because he just wasn't engaging with it. So I put him into ECE Montessori. Hariata*

It is apparent from the interviews that some participants did not agree that sending their children to kindergarten would be able to support their cultural needs.

> *I thought maybe if I left her in kindy she may have thrived better but then she wouldn't have her Te Ao Maori. Maeve*

Despite Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) providing a framework for an inclusive curriculum founded on Māori values and principles, some whānau had not felt assured their children would be in culturally safe places. My findings also showed there to be divided opinion on this among the participants with some expressing that their children would be culturally safe in either kōhanga reo or ECE. However, it should be noted that for some of the participants it was not necessarily the cultural safety that determined which ELS their children attended but rather that they hoped their tamariki would thrive in both Te Ao Māori and Te Ao Pākeha.

As previously mentioned, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) provides an inclusive curriculum that fosters a learners' identity thereby integrating cultural awareness from teachers. The document also states that tamariki Māori should have access to te reo Māori, tikanga and kawa in their ECE and that teachers should work alongside whānau to help children reach their potential. Although all ECEs adopt this framework, it is clear from the findings that the levels at which Te Ao Māori concepts and knowledge are incorporated vary from ELS to ELS. Participants reported that kōhanga reo is based on Te Ao Māori concepts and that they take a more whānau oriented approach to teaching the children than mainstream ECE. This was highlighted by the participants who suggested that in mainstream ECE they lack the knowledge of Māori values.

My findings showed the participants had no definitive preference between which ELS they engaged with and enrolled their child in as both kōhanga reo and mainstream ECECs had their benefits and fair share of challenges for parents. The challenges most parents faced included lack of communication between the centre and home whilst the benefits included the knowledge and growth children received from each ELS. Variations in ECE engagements within this community were found to be also due to individual parents' perceptions of the quality of education from either centre. Whetu stated that he did not mind if his children went to kōhanga reo or kindergarten, so long as they went somewhere, while other participants valued the environment, relationships and cultural connectedness of kōhanga reo over ECECs. These considerations reflect Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), in particular; the microsystem where people directly influence children, the mesosystem where models of interactions with others are developed into relationships, and the macrosystem which involves the social and cultural values of families. Therefore the individual and the context in which learning takes place impacts on their development.

The findings also show that parents are happy for their whānau to be involved in their child's early learning through means of teaching them in the way that Adds et al. (2011) claims to be traditional Māori times. This attests to Ritchie's (2014a) claim that Māori parents are more likely to engage with ELS if they are culturally responsive or run by Māori. My findings also support the evidence reported from the EPF programme. In terms of engagement in ECECs it is clear

from my findings that the centres or ELSs must have a strong sense of being culturally responsive to the needs of Māori children. According to O'Loughlin (2013) all mainstream ECECs in New Zealand are culturally responsive to the needs of Māori due to implementing the Te Whāriki framework. However, in my study some participants raised their concerns with this notion due to being overprotective of their children. These concerns were voiced around negative experiences with Māori non-whānau who were teaching their children. This raises the question of whether or not ELSs are the only places where quality interactions can take place. Much of the prevalent discourse within the literature seems to imply that ELSs are the only places these quality interactions take place and that unless tamariki attend such places they are neither engaged in quality education nor will they be school ready at age five (Gambaro et al., 2015; Judd, 2012; Shafiq et al., 2018; Willard et al., 2022). Aligning with Brofenbrenner's (1979) biological model of contextual interactions and Vygotsky's (1979) Zone of proximal development and scaffolded learning, the extended whānau as a third option to early learning should not be ignored particularly if parents value the learning that can occur from extended whānau teaching their children. Extended whānau may be an informal setting but such settings allow for aspects important to childrens' development including learning through play and executive functions.

Differences between mainstream ECEC and kōhanga reo ELS

A key theme identified in my findings were how the differences in pedagogies between ECECs and kōhanga reo were what drew parents towards or away from a particular setting. All of the participants who sent their child/ren to kōhanga reo appreciated that their child/ren were being immersed in their culture. However, some of the participants reported that kōhanga reo did not offer enough activities for their children's brains to stay stimulated for the amount of time they were attending. This stimulation is important as the first thousand days of a child's life are fundamental in laying the foundations for their brain development (Coelho et al., 2024) and that they needed to be in environments that stimulate learning (Coelho et al., 2024; Gambaro et al., 2015).

A lack of stimulation led to two of the participants withdrawing one of their children each out of kōhanga reo and enrolling them into a mainstream ECEC. Those who sent their child/ren to

mainstream ECECs suggested that due to mainstream ECECs having more resources that kept their children's minds stimulated, paired with the higher number of trained staff, the mainstream ECECs were deemed to be, by my participants, to be of a higher quality than the kōhanga reo. The number of trained staff at mainstream ECECs supports the view of Gambaro et al. (2015) that mainstream ECEC teachers often undergo professional learning to ensure adequate care for their students. Professional learning can also help achieve what Aos et al. (2004) describe as being one of the goals of ECE which is to improve the long term educational success rates of students. This is further highlighted in Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) with the support and development of teaching staff.

Both kōhanga reo and mainstream ECECs follow the Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) framework however, each follow the framework differently. According to the data, kōhanga reo focuses on a Te Ao Māori approach where children learn about the marae and all things Māori whereas Blakey et al. (2016) suggests mainstream ECECs focus on formally preparing children for school. This can be seen in the findings for this research as participants reported that their children could talk better and understand more complex sentences and learn the alphabet before starting school. Both mainstream ECEC and ELS can enhance children's cognitive potential through varying methods of scaffolding following Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development.

My findings also suggest that when children are enrolled into a mainstream ECEC they are provided with both qualified teachers and a formal learning environment that allows them to learn through play. Play was a common topic that was important to participants (e.g., "*...explore new things, play with toys, fall over…*" *Whetu*). Learning through play has been argued by Ginsburg et al. (2007), Parker et al. (2022) and Steed (2018) to be essential for child development. This is because, according to Dzainudin et al. (2019), it allows children to explore and interact with their environment in a supervised manner. Play also increases children's cognitive abilities as it improves the executive functions of inhibitory control and memory (Blakey et al., 2015) as well as social understanding (Schneider et al., 2005).

My findings suggest a strong connection between Māori engagement with ECE in a lower socio-economic community is dependent upon the parents first-hand experiences with ECE and whether or not someone in the wider whānau is able to care for the children if the parents have to work. For those who decided to engage with ECE for their children, the majority of participants' first choice was an ELS where children were immersed in their Māori culture. The participants whose children did not attend an ELS chose not to engage with the services as they preferred their children to stay home and learn from wider whānau about the importance of tikanga, kawa and the ability to korero te reo Māori (talk Māori).

Importance of family in the early years

Of the data gathered and analysed, time the children spent with family had the utmost importance for parents whose children did not attend an ECEC. Not attending an ECEC allowed children to spend more time with their parents and extended family which is where much of the children's early learning came from. Grandparents played a vital role in the early learning for these children as they were able to educate their grandchildren through traditional Māori learning styles such as pūrakau (Mikahere-Hall, 2017) in informal environments. This supports Adds et al. (2011) and Metge's (2015) statement of learning occurring everywhere for Māori. In learning from grandparents this data suggests that traditional ways of Māori learning can still be beneficial in modern times. Traditional methods can be implemented in contemporary times to teach the younger generations. Learning from elders brings to light the importance of a child's microsystem (Krishnan, 2010) and how interactions with those in the child's microsystem (Siraj & Huang, 2020) can impact how children's early learning can develop thus, coinciding with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The data for this research did not follow the trend Worrall (2009) found, which was that there is an increase in the number of grandparents raising their grandchildren in New Zealand. My study found that although parents preferred their children spending time with their grandparents and learning from them, the children were not being raised by their grandparents. For example Rangimarie spoke about how her father taught her children:

My dad was teaching them how to ride bikes and all sorts of cool little things like that and going to the beach every weekend ... My dad was proactive with the kids and would go and pick puha somewhere with them.

Following on from traditional Māori teaching styles the data supports the notion of Tuakana/ Teina which Peters (2003) describes as a scaffolding system. This scaffolding system enables a more capable person to help a less able person learn a new skill (Metge, 2015) such as a karakia, whākatauki or waiata (Amopiu, 2019) with the less able person needing less support as they begin to remember and memorise the correct words. This is the case with the extended Māori whānau supporting the child's learning and a preferred choice of some of the participants, even though the reality was that the financial position of some required them to be working parents and therefore this type of early learning was not possible. This scaffolding system however, can set the child up for what Vygotsky (1978) describes as success in the immediate future. This type of scaffolding coincides with 'The Zone of Proximal Development' (Vygotsky, 1978). The Tuakana/ Teina system Peters (2003) describes is based on sibling relationships which my findings indicate was also important. My data follows the trend set forth by Kiselica and Morrill-Richards (2007) and Metge (2015) claiming siblings can impact the way in which a child develops. My findings also align with those of Amopiu (2019) regarding learning from siblings. Parents who chose not to send their children to an ECEC reported that their children were able to experience learning from their grandparents and wider whānau.

Cultural responsiveness

The data gathered for this research came from participants who grew up and still live in a low socio-economic area. According to Letourneau et al. (2013) living in a low socio-economic area is considered to be a negative factor for child development due to the health and wellbeing concerns (Cowan, 2023; Walker et al., 2011). This research contends the notion that living in a low socio-economic area is a negative factor in child development. This could be due to the complex cultural, health and wellbeing aspects of these areas (Gillian, 2016) which can impact on the ability of whānau to access quality ECECs (Gillian, 2016). In my study I found that living in a low socio-economic area allowed children to spend more time with both their parents, grandparents and extended families which is where early learning occurred for both the parents

when they were younger and their children. It does not seem from this data that living in a low socio-economic area and staying at home with family is a negative factor for child development. In fact, an unexpected finding during the course of this research was that at least one parent from the participating families was studying at tertiary level.

My findings suggest that for those who sent at least one of their children to an ELS it was because of the ideologies of kōhanga reo which Walker (2016) describes as being traditional Māori learning styles. My data suggests that the kōhanga reo ideologies were important to all of the participants as according to Bennett (2007) it provides a place for children to be immersed in their culture and language. This supports what The Ministry of Education (2022) reported about Māori being more willing to engage in ECE if the centre is either run by Māori or is culturally responsive to the needs of Māori. My findings suggest that a more traditional Māori learning style was preferred however when it came to communication and forming relationships with parents the majority of the participants advocated for the mainstream ECECs. However, the participants reported that mainstream ECECs made parents feel welcome and found communication to be better than the kōhanga reo. In mainstream ECECs putting emphasis on parents feeling welcome coincides with the Te Whāriki framework (Ministry of Education, 2022). The welcoming and supportive nature of the mainstream ECECs encouraged parents to foster what Chan and Ritchie (2016) and Derby (2023) describe as strong partnerships between home and the ELS.

Although all of the participants lived in a low socio-economic area, each participant reported that the mainstream ECEC had more resources available. Participants' experiences do not support Crawford et al. (2020) claim that higher quality ECECs have more robust curriculums and resourcing as all of the centres in this study were in low socio-economic areas. The increase in resources allowed for children's minds to be stimulated and provided more opportunities for children to engage in play. My data indicates that children playing in their early childhood years is important as Whetu states: "*kindergarten you go there to teach kids, get them to explore new things, play with toys, fall over…"* This is because play enables children to learn and grow, supporting Stead's (2018) suggestion regarding the benefits of learning through play. The ages that Miller and Lang (2022) claim are most impacted by play is two to four years of age which is

when children would have attended an ELS. My data suggests that mainstream ECECs have more qualified teachers in comparison to kōhanga reo centres thus reinforcing Smith's (2015) statement about ECEC having more qualified teachers. The importance of trained early childhood teachers raised by Smith (2015) was also shown by one participant in particular stating that ECE teachers helped to diagnose one of her children with a learning disability which Shaughnessy and Kleyn (2012) state is common in low socio-economic environments.

My research findings were clear that if parents were in a position to keep their children home rather than send them to ELSs, they would. The findings show that for those children who did not attend an ELS their parents had the time to nurture, care and educate them. My findings for this research differed to those findings of Maloney (2004) and Friesen et al. (2008) as both researchers found that those who live in a low socio-economic community do not have tertiary qualifications whereas my research found that all of the participants in this research have either gained or are working towards a tertiary education qualification whilst coming from and living in a low socio-economic area. The participants who sent at least one of their children to an ELS was because of factors outside of their control however, parents were content with mainstream ECECs as they helped children to develop their oral and social skills outside of the home environment which Willard et al. (2022) stresses as being important for children's development.

Summary

The findings from chapter four acknowledge that no preference was found between the different medium centres and that according to the data discussed in this chapter all have advantages and disadvantages associated with them. Yes, early learning is important to the participants and they do value ELSs. They understand that each ELS has its benefits. However, given the choice most would prefer learning from whānau. The biggest contributing factors to this choice were that children spent more time with whānau and learning was of the kind that parents had experienced including Te Ao Māori. This chapter has also highlighted the areas that both kōhanga reo and mainstream ECECs could explore if they were to consider changes that would help parents feel comfortable with their children engaging in either system.

CHAPTER SIX - CONCLUSION

Introduction

This chapter will bring together the key findings and will discuss and identify the recommendations and limitations and potential for further research as a response to the research questions.

This research set out to answer the questions:

1. What is Māori engagement with early childhood centres like within a lower socio-economic community?
2. What experiences do children have who don't attend an early childhood education centre?
3. What experiences did Māori parents in lower socio-economic areas have with ELSs?

The research was instigated by the focus community centre to explore possible ways to increase the engagement of children into ELSs in the local area where this research took place. More importantly the community is looking to the possibility of providing an ELS to their community that is responsive to the community needs. The findings have shown that the Māori participants consider three options of ECE. These are mainstream ECECs, kōhanga reo and learning from whānau. The findings also show that there are a number of influencing factors that determine engagement in early learning settings. These include the experiences of both the children and the parents.

This chapter will conclude with the value this research has both for the focus community centre and ELSs across Aotearoa and in doing so it offers a glimpse of what Māori engagement in ELSs could look like.

Preferred early learning options

This research showed that Māori whānau interviewed from the focus community preferred early learning options which would be whānau based with a strong focus on cultural values and Te Ao Māori. It showed that Māori in this community wanted the best learning opportunities for their tamariki but that in their opinions this did not necessarily come from ELSs. Participants wanted the best learning opportunities without forsaking their culture and language. Though they valued learning from all perspectives there was a strong lean towards whānau based learning and navigating their environment. Maintaining a more traditional approach to learning that encapsulates Māori pedagogy and highlights the connection with nature is still valued by Māori whānau. The value placed on children learning about Te Ao Māori meant that parents' preferred the kōhanga reo ideologies; however not all practices within the kōhanga reo were appreciated. This meant kōhanga reo was not always the first choice of ELSs. The research found that some parents were drawn to mainstream ECECs when having to make a choice because of the resourcing and communication between the ELSs and whānau.

Priorities within ELSs for the participants, after cultural values and te reo Māori, included clear, regular and respectful communications with whānau. At times it was not the preferred but forced priorities that was a deciding factor on where tamariki were enrolled. Factors forcing this decision included financial constraints, work or study.

Māori engagement with early childhood education within a lower socio-economic community

In this particular low socio-economic area whānau have taken advantage of the variety of ELSs choices available to them with some whānau engaging with more than one type of ELS. They have considered priorities for learning based on their personal circumstances, whānau values and their personal beliefs of the systems within the ELS options. The responses to the research questions suggest that living in a low socio-economic area does not determine whether or not tamariki are engaged in ELSs. However, what is highlighted as a possibility for non-engagement is that parents prefer to have their young tamariki at home, beside parents and wider whānau

teaching them about what matters to them as parents. Te Ao Māori is what matters to them, that their tamariki grow up strong in their culture, language and therefore identity - all important components of the theories of child development mentioned in the Literature Review chapter. If there were no barriers to keeping their tamariki at home the research showed that the participants might have the best of both worlds, Te Ao Māori and Te Ao Pākeha. One with its intergenerational knowledge of taonga tuku iho and the other with its knowledge through a western lens.

Experiences of children who did not attend an ECE centre

The main experiences that children had who did not attend an ECEC were that they got to spend time with their parents, grandparents and extended whānau which enabled the children to learn from people other than their parents or people outside of their extended whānau. These experiences occurred mainly in the natural environment such as finding puha, adventurous outings such as the beach or marae and learning about whakapapa strongly supporting the notion that learning occurs everywhere for Māori (Adds et al., 2011; Metge, 2015). The majority of the participants had a similar upbringing to how they are raising their children with parents' preferences being to keep their children at home with them instead of sending them to an ELS. What is important about this is that although the literature speaks to the value of sending children to ELSs the participants have equally valued the learning that can occur when their children do not attend ELSs. Non-attendance at ELS was not seen as a negative experience nor did participants see this as a disadvantage. It was identified as an opportunity to spend time learning with whānau.

Experiences of Māori parents in lower socio-economic areas with early childhood learning

The life experiences of all of the participants began in low socio-economic areas. An unexpected outcome of this research is the acknowledgement that in each whānau there is a parent currently participating in some form of tertiary learning, highlighting the value that these Māori whānau have about learning. The parents' own prior experiences have played a large role in the way they

are choosing to raise their children. All of the participants grew up surrounded by whānau and living and learning about the Te Ao Māori ways. These are experiences they also want their tamariki to have.

Whilst many of the parents interviewed did not experience formal ECE, an important factor in their ECE choice was the positive experience they had during the enrolment process for their tamariki. Feeling comfortable and supported through this process helped them to feel welcome and to gain a sense of trust with the ECE educators. They were comfortable to leave their tamariki at the centres and trusted that the educators were trained professionals.

Recommendations

Despite government initiatives to promote Māori engagement in formal early childhood education, this research has shown that many Māori parents prefer to spend time with their preschool children and to have their children learn from extended whānau. The recommendations resulting from this research are of relevance for the focus community and for all ELSs throughout New Zealand. The recommendations are based on what the participants considered to be important factors in deciding which ELS to enrol their children at.

The community centre in the area where the study was carried out sought to explore why engagement rates with ELSs were low in the community and to seek solutions as a centre to help better support the needs of the community. There were a few areas highlighted in the interviews that the community centre could further investigate.

The purpose of this research was to find the reasons why members of the community did or did not send their tamariki to ELSs. It was not to find ways to encourage families, who chose for their child not to attend, to attend. Therefore, if the community centre wished to be responsive to the desires of their community, they would acknowledge that a high priority for their community was for parents to keep their preschool tamariki with them to enable them to learn family values within the korowai (cloak) of Te Ao Māori. A possible recommendation for the community centre would be to set aside a regular meeting place that would allow for tamariki Māori, their

immediate and extended whānau to come together as a collective. Skilled people amongst the whānau attending could be invited to pass on their knowledge not only to the parents but also the tamariki. This would follow the philosophy of the kōhanga reo where it would provide an opportunity for parents to learn alongside their tamariki. Other guests could be invited to talk to or teach the whānau about a wide variety of things from both Te Ao Māori and Te Ao Pākehā. This could be achieved in an informal setting or by creating an ECEC that could cater specifically to the needs of their community whilst maintaining the requirements of the Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) curriculum.

For those families thinking about enrolling their tamariki in an ELS, community meetings could be held informing parents about the benefits and consequences of enrolling their children into an ELS. Providing families with information about the different choices available may lead to Māori having more positive views on the formal education system which Smith (2022) argues has not yet happened.

It has been noted through this research that parents want what is best for their tamariki to thrive in their learning. Another recommendation would be that the centre could look into teaching members of their community about the importance of literacy which Derby (2023a) and Wildova and Kropackova (2015) claim is crucial for a child to develop when they are young. This would sit well with the families if the foundation for this literacy was based on the Māori pedagogy of teaching through oral language, waiata or the arts as most of the participants considered Te Ao Māori as an important factor in their choices. We only know what we know, so if parents do not know what lies ahead for their tamariki in terms of learning they will be unable to set goals for them. Parent information sessions could also benefit parents.

Providing families with the tools that they need to support their child in their early learning would be another recommendation. The community centre is positioned to liaise with other agencies to collaboratively create a toolkit that will support parents to help their tamariki to reach milestones not only developmental milestones, but also learning milestones that might be part of the early learning curriculum, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Exploring Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) and its principles might be helpful to parents who prefer not to send their tamariki to ELSs. Providing an opportunity for a workshop type activity to happen could be a goal of the community centre. With the goals set forth in *Te Whāriki* and the emphasis placed on family engagement (Cruse, 2017) it could be worthwhile for parents to be well acquainted with this document. The community centre could, if it does not already, implement the practices of Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) for their young children.

Having a member of the community centre dedicated to education would be a positive position for the community centre to be in. This member could explore the recommendations made in this research, devise an action plan that would be manageable and meaningful both to the community centre and its members.

The ultimate response to this survey would be for the community centre to establish an ELS that considered the factors presented in this study. It would need to follow the Ministry of Education guidelines but the points of difference for this ELS would be to allow parents to attend the ELS alongside their tamariki, involve extended whānau, provide learning opportunities for tamariki to explore and learn from the environment and to have a large focus on Te Ao Māori.

These recommendations will help the focus community centre which is situated in a low socio-economic area to act on the knowledge of why Māori engagement or non engagement in ECE within their catchment area is as it is. However, further research would need to be conducted with a larger cohort. It would also be beneficial to include participants from other low socio-economic areas from across the country to gather more voice on the matter and understand what the trends with ECE engagement are.

Recommendations for ELSs are reflective of the parents' voices gathered in this study. The highest priority it would seem is the inclusion of Te Ao Māori. This is something the parents looked for when searching for an ELS. The first recommendation then would be to include Te Ao Māori into their curriculum, to not only make it visible through wall displays but to make it a

living part of the ELS, one that is observable by parents. This could include regularly inviting kaumātua or extended whānau members to be part of the learning.

The second recommendation for ELSs would be effective communication between the ELS and home through means of email, phone calls or having face to face meetings with the teachers and parents; this would ensure parents understand the ELS philosophies and curriculum. This would mean that parents are clear about what guides the learning for their tamariki.

Given the well-known disadvantages, inequities and inequalities experienced by Māori, more work should be carried out with a larger group from multiple low socio-economic areas to better understand the needs of parents. Understanding why there is a decline in ECEC in these areas is important because all tamariki Māori should have access to quality education.

Limitations

I acknowledge that there are some limitations to this study and that the scope should not be taken out of context and used to make conclusive statements for larger communities. The first limitation of this study is time. Firstly, the time taken for the interviews to be conducted. The choice of timing was dictated both by availability of participants and the direction of the focus community centre. The interviews were carried out in the evenings, once participants had finished their work day and were then juggling their children's evening routines which could have led to participants not fully contributing as they were distracted by the needs of their tamariki.

Secondly, this study is a snapshot of participants' opinions at one specific point in time. Geographically, this research is based in one, small low socio-economic area in the North Island of New Zealand. Therefore, the data reported on in this thesis are only representative of the small community the interviews were carried out in. This is because it is specific to the focus community. Another limitation of the study was that it was based on a small sample size of five participants, all of whom were of Māori descent. Although the interview pool was small, the data collected provide insights into what a group of Māori parents think about ELSs and what their

driving factors were for using or not using them. These findings could contribute to providing recommendations to guide future research in these spaces.

Both a finding and a limitation to this research is the limited knowledge of participants of what ELSs offered in terms of curriculum. This meant that answers were based mostly on emotive experiences rather than a knowledge of what the ELSs provided through their philosophies and curriculum.

Summary

This study has found that the preferred choice of early learning for Māori parents' who participated in the research would be learning from whānau. However, as a collective group of participants there was no absolute preference between ECECs or kōhanga reo, the determining factor for choice was in the delivery of Te Ao Māori.

Māori engagement within the focus low socio-economic area in ELSs was varied, but what influences parents' choices is not the inability to choose but rather the lack of desire to choose formal early learning because they value the less formal learning that can be gained from extended whānau. ELSs that can create this whānau type learning environment would have a greater engagement success rate.

The ideas discussed in this chapter are important to the area of early childhood education because they highlight the reasons why parents in a disadvantaged low socio-economic area may or may not choose to use formal education for their tamariki Māori. They also give recommendations summarised from the voices of the people who are impacted.

Learning was valued by all of the participants. This value was noticed in the fact that at least one parent in each whānau was at the time of this research involved in tertiary education. Each of the participants was passionate about their tamariki having the best possible learning opportunities. In conclusion I leave you with the following whakatauaki composed by Apirana Ngata and written in the Te Whāriki curriculum document, which sums up the feelings of the participants.

E tipu e rea mō ngā rā o tōu ao.

Ko tō ringa ki ngā rākau o te Pākehā hei ara mō tō tinana.

Ko tō ngākau ki ngā taonga a ō tīpuna Māori hei tikitiki mō tō mahuna.

Kō tō wairua ki tō Atua, nāna nei ngā mea katoa.

Grow up and thrive for the days destined to you.

Your hands to the tools of the Pākehā to provide physical sustenance.

Your heart to the treasures of your ancestors to adorn your head.

Your soul to God to whom all things belong.

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APPENDIX 1 – LETTER TO THE CENTRE

Tēnā Koe,

As you are aware, I am currently enrolled in the Masters of Education programme with the University of Waikato. The research question that guides my thesis is 'What Māori engagement with early childhood education institutions is like within a lower socioeconomic community.'

I am writing to you to formally request to use your premises to conduct individual interviews with participants who will be self-selected members of your community who have agreed to participate in my research. I have chosen to have the Community Centre as the location where I will host the interviews as the premises is a safe and welcoming environment for the participants and myself. The planned interviews will take no longer than one hour however, time could differ depending on how the conversation flows. I will provide refreshments for the participants.

I am also writing to request your assistance on screening the participants that wish to participate. This will help keep myself as the researcher safe.

My supervisors for this project are Dr Melissa Derby and Ms Hazel Woodhouse who are both from the University of Waikato. If you have any queries or concerns about this project please do not hesitate to contact myself or my supervisors.

Dr Melissa Derby: melissa.derby@waikato.ac.nz
Ms Hazel Woodhouse: hazel.woodhouse@waikato.ac.nz

Ngā mihi,
Sinead Nuri
sn186@students.waikato.ac.nz

APPENDIX 2 – COVER LETTER

Tēna Koe,

My name is Sinead Nuri and I am currently enrolled in the Masters of Education programme at the University of Waikato.

I would like to look into the engagement in early childhood education centres (ECE) in your community. The community centre and I would like to know more about this. I have been asked by the centre to learn more about what Māori engagement in early childhood education is like in your community. My research question is: ***What Māori engagement with early childhood institutions is like in a lower socioeconomic community?*** The overall aim of this research is to better understand how Māori view and engage their *tamariki* (children) in the early education childhood system.

As part of this research, I will be conducting individual interviews with participants. The interviews should take 40 minutes but time could differ depending on participants' responses. These interviews will be held at the focus community centre.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you will be able to fully withdraw from the project up to two weeks (14 days) after finalising your transcript from the interview. This needs to be done in writing via email to myself.

Question prompts will be given to the participants prior to the interview taking place therefore, if any questions arise in the interviews that you would not like to answer, please let me know. You do not have to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable talking about.

If you are happy to participate please read and sign this consent form. The participation in this study may lead to better understanding of what Māori engagement in early childhood education is like in the community.

For this project, I will hold the role of researcher which means that it is my responsibility to protect you as a participant and to gather my data responsibly and ethically.

My supervisors for this project are Dr Melissa Derby and Ms Hazel Woodhouse. They may be contacted at any time during this project if you feel uncomfortable with either approaching me directly or with the way in which I conduct the research. Please don't hesitate to make contact with them. Their details are attached at the end of this letter.

Should you wish to discuss the research further or have any questions, I have attached an information sheet outlining the project and the potential commitment required by you as a participant. I have also attached some important notes that you may want to read over.

If you have any *pātai,* please feel free to contact me by email, my details are below.

Ngā mihi for your time,

Sinead Nuri
Email: sn186@students.waikato.ac.nz

Dr Melissa Derby: melissa.derby@waikato.ac.nz
Ms Hazel Woodhouse: hazel.woodhouse@waikato.ac.nz

APPENDIX 3 – INFORMATION SHEET

- You will be invited to attend an informal semi-structured interview facilitated by myself which will last approximately 30-40 minutes.
- The interviews will be recorded for the purpose of transcribing the interview correctly.
- I will transcribe the interview and send the transcription to you within one week (7 days) of the interview taking place. You will be able to retract or alter things you have said on this transcript and return it to me within 2 weeks (14 days) of receiving it.
- I will then make the appropriate changes to the transcript and return it to you as the participant to then sign it. This ensures there is no miscommunication on the transcripts.
- Using the transcripts, I will collate and analyse the information shared with me into themes to use in the write up of my thesis.
- I will use pseudonyms to ensure that personal information such as your name will not appear in the writing of my thesis.
- This project hopes to achieve finding out more about what Māori engagement with early childhood education (ECE) is like.

APPENDIX 4 – IMPORTANT NOTES

- The raw data will be seen and discussed with both of my supervisors – Dr Melissa Derby and Ms Hazel Woodhouse.
- The information given by all of the participants will be stored on a password protected computer. An external hard drive will also be used to save data; however, the hard drive and any paper copies regarding my thesis will be kept in a locked filing cabinet for at least five years after completing this study.
- An electronic copy of my thesis will be lodged in the University of Waikato Research Commons.
- The thesis and analysed data from all the participants may be used for scholarly publications and/or presentations.

APPENDIX 5 – PARTICIPANT CONSENT

I have read, or have had read to me, and I understand the Information Sheet attached. The details of this project have been explained to me and I am happy with answers to my questions. I understand that any information I give will remain confidential. I am able to ask questions and may choose not to answer any questions put to me. I am able to withdraw from the project at any time. I understand that participation is voluntary, I can withdraw my contributions anytime up until 14 days after acquiring the transcript.

1. I agree/do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.
2. I wish/do not wish to have my recordings returned to me.
3. I wish/do not wish to have data placed in an official archive.
4. I agree/do not agree to my interview being shared with any other professional individual or group.
5. I agree/do not agree with information generated through my interview being quoted in the thesis of this research.
6. I agree/do not agree to my information being used for other scholarly publications such as presentations at conferences.
7. I agree to being a collaborative member of the research team
8. I understand that given the small numbers in the focus group and the nature of the interviews, anonymity and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed from each other but in the write up of the thesis pseudonyms will be used.
9. I agree to keep any discussions that I am part of confidential.
10. I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Declaration by Participant:

I _____ hereby consent to take part in this study.

APPENDIX 6 – GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

1. Tell me about your experience at school including ECE
2. How has that experience influenced how you think about school or ECE for your children
3. What do you value about learning
4. What do you know about early childhood education
5. If you didn't attend an early childhood learning centre, how do you feel about that now?
6. What are the benefits of your children not attending an early childhood centre?
7. Why don't you send your children to ECE?
8. What might be the disadvantages to your children not attending an early childhood centre?
9. What are your aspirations for your children?

APPENDIX 7 - CRITERIA

Participants will;

- Have a child/ children who are 10 years or younger.
- Four of the participants will have a child/ children who did/did not attend an early childhood education centre.
- Four of the participants will have a child/ children who did/ do attend an early childhood education centre.
- Be of Māori descent.
- Be able to speak and understand English as this is the language participants will be asked questions in. If participants wish to answer some of the questions in Te reo Māori they can.
- Be reliable and trusted members of the community.