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**Waiata / Song**

## Hutia Te Rito

Hutia te rito
Hutia te rito o te harakeke
Kei hea te kōmako e kō
Kī mai ki ahau
He aha te mea nui
He aha te mea nui o te ao
Māku e kī atu
He Tangata, He Tangata
He Tangata Hi
Pluck the Baby (of a flax bush)
Pluck the baby
Pluck the baby of the flaxbush
Where will the bellbird sing
You ask me
What is the greatest thing
What is the greatest thing in the world
I will tell you
Tis People! Tis People
Tis People

**Adapted by Rose Pere**

# Contents

EDITORIAL

# For the Love of Our Babies: Keep Quality at the Heart of ECCE

**Assoc Prof Maria Cooper, Dr Justine O'Hara-Gregan, and Dr Kiri Gould**



**For a moment, imagine a country that listens to its babies first, shaping educational policy around what they need and desire. What might our babies say?**

> *Dear fellow citizen, we are small, but our will is strong. We thrive and feel joy when someone we know approaches us gently and with insight, responds to our cues, speaks our names, and waits for us to answer in the many ways we can. We need familiar faces, gentle voices, time to explore and play, stories and songs in our home languages. Please do not trade our stable settings for larger groups, unfamiliar faces, adults under pressure, and hurried hands. Give our teachers the education, support, and time to notice us. Keep our places calm, secure, and safe so our minds, bodies, and spirits can grow strong. You know we cannot vote or write submissions yet. We can only hope you support the kind of care and education we assume you would want for your own babies.*

We use 'babies' intentionally in this editorial to remind ourselves that children up to 3 years old are the youngest people in our education system. It is surreal to have to ask those at the helm of our nation to think of our babies and teachers, but our current reality in Aotearoa New Zealand forces the point. The political tide is moving towards sector changes that threaten the foundations of high-quality ECCE (early childhood care and education).

The Ministry for Regulation's sector review has been framed as trimming 'excessive and confusing' rules (RNZ, 2024), and Cabinet has accepted all recommendations for rapid implementation by national professional bodies, including the Ministry of Education and the Education Review Office. Yet leading academics, Teaching Council leaders, and many in the sector warn that removing regulated curriculum standards and weakening the role of qualified teachers will depress quality, place further unsustainable demands on staff, undermine research evidence on high-quality ECE, and compromise the implementation of the ECCE curriculum *Te Whāriki* which promotes evidence-based practices (Hoskin, 2025; Ministry of Education, 2017; Ministry for Regulation, 2025; RNZ, 2025).

Teachers working with babies have consistently called for better regulation around ratios and group size. They know that their complex jobs cannot be done by just anyone, under any conditions. So, it was disappointing that the review of regulations kept these two aspects out of scope. Instead, they will be considered in the ongoing ECE funding review, the findings of which are due late 2026 (Seymour, 2025). The terms of reference guiding the advisory group have asked to keep recommendations 'at least cost-neutral to the Crown' and consider balancing (in other words trading off) cost and quality to keep costs down. Alarmingly, teacher pay and ratios are explicitly pointed to as two key drivers of cost for the advisory group to consider. As opportunities for consultation of this review are still to come, it is imperative the sector provide strong feedback that quality for babies cannot be traded off. These policy developments are troubling for all children, families, and teachers, and most troubling for babies who rely most on consistent, skilled relationships and responsive environments for learning and well-being.

We already know what is needed. The first 1,000 days lay the foundational architecture for positive learning and well-being (Dalli, 2025). The longitudinal research team from Growing Up in New Zealand (GUiNZ) explains why this time is so critical:

> The first 1000 days of life, from conception until the child's second birthday, is a critical stage in a child's development, setting a foundation for: brain development; acquisition of language skills; physical development; gaining of social skills and cultural capacity; health and wellbeing. (Morton et al., 2014, p. 5)

For young children, especially those under 3 years old, quality is enacted in warm, responsive interactions with teachers, supported by genuine partnerships with families and communities. International evidence links teacher qualifications to observed interaction quality and child outcomes, while poor ratios, large group size, and staff turnover challenge team stability and raise stress (Melhuish et al., 2015; Slot, 2018). The current proposals for change potentially pave the way for high-stress environments and the neglect of babies in ECCE settings.

For the love of our babies, we need knowledgeable, qualified teachers who have the capacity to enact an ethics of care, who have the time and know-how to build warm, sensitive, and attuned relationships; calm, language-rich spaces; and respectful practices that keep children front and centre, as *Te Whāriki* intends (Ministry

of Education, 2017). When policy settings push services toward larger groups, reduced non-contact time, and lower expectations for qualifications, teachers carry the load. That load shows up as burnout, teachers leaving the profession, and disrupted relationships. Our babies will feel these effects. Longitudinal evidence from GUiNZ suggests that the impact of early stress and instability shows up later, if not now (Morton et al., 2014). Prevention and doing the right thing now is kinder and, to put it frankly, less costly than remediation. In response to current shifts, Dalli (2025) asks will we ever get it right, warning of "a clear risk that children's right to live a good life in ECE services will be denuded." (p. 1) We agree.

Our plea to the nation's policymakers is this: hear our babies and teachers. Pay close attention to what they need and desire. The thought-provoking articles in this issue remind us of what matters and what it takes to enact it.

White's *Multimodal meaning making with 1-year-olds* positions one-year-olds as active storytellers through gesture, gaze, and touch. We are reminded that teachers need time and skill to notice and respond, and that literacy begins in these multimodal exchanges, so staffing stability matters.

Probine et al.'s *Exploring unhurried pedagogies* highlights slow, relational, rights-affirming practice, characterised by listening, documentation, and the Māori concept of *Āta*, a practice of care, deliberation, and respectful relationships. These approaches resist school-pressured agendas and protect infants' and toddlers' agency. However, to sustain them, centres need qualified teachers, protected time, and policy that values relationships as foundational.

Guard's *Adagio interactions* argues for PRIME interactions (Presence, Rhythm, Intention, Multimodality, Ease). This supports the idea that babies thrive when educators can slow down and linger in responsive togetherness. Haste, large groups, and staff turnover counter the conditions babies need.

Probine and Denee's *Planting the Seed* makes the case for visual arts with infants and toddlers. Rich material exploration, guided by skilled, intentional kaiako/teachers builds identity, language, focus, and joy from the start. When arts are sidelined or rushed, children lose important ways to express themselves. Hence, time, staffing, and professional learning are needed to ensure visual arts-rich environments are a reality.

Audier's research summary on *Mentalisation* reminds us that 'keeping minds in mind' is core to safe, responsive care. Mentalisation allows kaiako/teachers to read babies' cues and respond sensitively, supporting regulation, secure relationships, and rights-promoting practice. Policy that devalues qualifications and non-contact time weakens this largely invisible expertise.

Christie's *Speaking up for tiny humans* reiterates that advocacy is urgent for ratios, small group sizes, and qualified teachers. Together, these form an iron triangle of quality that protects the well-being of our babies and reflects their "rights to protection and promotion of their health and wellbeing, to equitable access to learning opportunities, to recognition of their language, culture and identity and, increasingly, to agency in their own lives" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 12).

Our *leader interview* with Tongan centre leader and researcher Dr Jeanne Teisina explains a Tongan view of infants and toddlers as *heilala*, treasured, sacred, held by *fānau* (family), language, and place, and deserving of 'ofa (love), dignity, and time for relationships. Policy which ignores culture and whānau/family connections reduces babies to numbers and compromises belonging.

Siu, Cooper, Rockel, McMullen, and Powell's *Reflections on pedagogies of care* shows that caring pedagogy is relational, play-rich, and autonomy-supporting, with teachers as sensitive guides. This unity of care and learning is what *Te Whāriki* embodies.

Delaune and Quiñones' *Wellbeing for infants and toddlers* emphasise interdependence where babies' emotional states flow with teacher well-being, trust, rhythms, space, and place. Stretching teachers or cutting standards undermines these delicate connections and will be felt first and longest by babies.

Finally, O'Hara-Gregan's review of Meyling's *Guiding babies and toddlers at daycare* highlights why slow, respectful, relationship-based care is learned professional work, not 'babysitting.'

The connecting theme across these articles is simple: infants and toddlers, our heilala, our babies, deserve what we all deserve - a fair go. That requires resourcing, not removing, the non-negotiables: highly qualified teachers; low ratios and small group size; and staffing stability with pay parity, protected non-contact time, and ongoing professional learning focused on inclusive and responsive environments. These are the safeguards that keep our babies safe, learning, and well. If we prioritise these commitments, we uphold babies' rights, support families and communities, and respect the professional work and well-being of our teachers. If we disregard them, we risk long-term costs in the lives of children, their families, teachers, the ECCE sector, and across the wider society of Aotearoa New Zealand.

As a country, let's do more than imagine. Let's hear our babies and teachers, and shape policy around what they need now and every day.

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> **“When policy settings push services toward larger groups, reduced non-contact time, and lower expectations for qualifications, teachers carry the load. That load shows up as burnout, teachers leaving the profession, and disrupted relationships. Our babies will feel these effects.”**

PEER REVIEWED

# **Multimodal Meaning Making:** Teachers Sharing Stories with 1-year-old Children

**Dr Amanda White**

Responsive, reciprocal interactions are at the heart of communicating with young children in early childhood education (ECE) settings. Infants and toddlers under 2 years of age express themselves in embodied, nonverbal ways, and often with little spoken language. Little research, however, has explored infant-toddler communication in New Zealand's ECE contexts using a multimodal approach. In this paper, I explore the multimodal nature of shared story interactions and how this shapes teachers' efforts to understand and respond to the unspoken cues and competencies of 1-year-olds. Findings from a qualitative study employing multimodal ethnography are presented to illustrate how children and teachers actively use combinations of gestures, eye gaze, and touch in their efforts towards achieving intersubjectivity (shared moments of meaning) during story interactions. Based on these findings, I argue for multimodal perspectives to be prioritised when considering ways to support the meaning making of infants and toddlers within ECE literacy practices.

## Introduction

Responsive, reciprocal interactions underpin learning relationships in early childhood education (ECE) settings (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017). Teachers play a critical role in mediating children's learning in the context of social and cultural relationships, including learning about and through stories as an aspect of early literacy development (Williamson et al., 2023).

Evidence shows that infants and toddlers have competencies in sharing stories with others using gestures, facial expressions and vocalisations well before they can use verbal language (e.g., Arnott et al., 2021; Trevarthen & Delafield-Butt, 2013). This aligns with a multimodal perspective of communication and literacy (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress, 2017), which argues that people make meaning using combinations of oral, visual, auditory, tactile, gestural, and spatial modes, as well as the linguistic modes of talk and print. There is a risk, however, that young children's multimodal signs can easily be missed or misunderstood in busy ECE group settings, especially if others are unfamiliar with their specific nonverbal signals (McLeod et al., 2014; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2012).

This paper draws on findings from a qualitative case study in a culturally and linguistically diverse community of Aotearoa New Zealand (White, 2022) that explored the multimodal nature of story interactions experienced by 1-year-old children and their teachers in ECE settings. Three examples from everyday story contexts are presented to highlight ways in which combinations of gesture, eye contact, and touch are used as meaning-making modes alongside spoken words. Findings highlight the ways in which children and teachers co-create stories together, seeking intersubjectivity through a complex interplay of embodied and verbal cues.

## Multimodal Story Interactions

Stories are an important aspect of literacy through which young children learn to make sense of the world (Bruner, 1986). In *Te Whāriki*, New Zealand's bicultural early childhood curriculum, sociocultural underpinnings underlie the Communication/*Mana Reo* strand with aspirations for children to learn about the stories of their own and other cultures, using both nonverbal and verbal modes of communication (MoE, 2017). Across cultures, stories might be experienced by young children in multiple and diverse forms, including conversations, personal or family stories, role play, folk tales, and storybooks (White, 2022). In this sense, universal definitions of 'story' for young children can be potentially problematic, but one solution is to define children's story interactions by what they *do* – or in other words, "stories are a way of making meaning" (Kerry-Moran & Aerila, 2019, p. 3).

Research in group ECE settings has shown that shared meaning or intersubjectivity during learning interactions is co-created through a series of subtle, moment-by-moment shifts in attention, with mutual contributions from both children and teachers (Jacobson & Degotardi, 2022). Previous studies have highlighted the competencies of infants and toddlers as active sharers of meaning via stories, commonly expressing themselves using their whole bodies and sometimes with little or no spoken language (Olaussen, 2019; White et al., 2021). Arnott et al. (2021) argue that infants and toddlers have stories to share, even though their 'voice' may not always be verbal. A shift in thinking about voice to include children's unspoken, embodied actions, therefore, requires a shift for teachers in how they might think about their role as listeners during story interactions. Research suggests that observing and identifying the nonverbal cues of infants and toddlers is the first step in recognising

their interests and inquiries (Cooper et al., 2012). Noticing and recognising children's competencies and perspectives in this way requires teachers to slow down, observe and listen with close attention to the 'small details' shared by children and families over time (Clark, 2023; Clark & Flewitt, 2020).

Multimodal frameworks provide a way to consider how children might learn to create and share meaning with others beyond a narrow, traditional focus on literacy that encompasses only spoken and written language (Kalantzis et al., 2016; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). From a multimodal perspective, meaning is mediated through combinations of oral, visual, auditory, tactile, gestural, and spatial modes, not just through talk and print (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress, 2017). A view of multimodal literacy or literacies (Flewitt, 2008) aligns closely with a sociocultural framework in recognising the multiple, diverse ways that people represent and share meaning with others in their social and cultural contexts (Razfar & Gutiérrez, 2013). Despite scholars calling for increased attention to multimodal and multisensory pedagogies and practices (e.g., Pink, 2015; Pool et al., 2023), few studies have specifically explored the modes of gesture, eye gaze, and touch with 1-year-old toddlers within ECE literacy contexts.

In New Zealand, the small number of studies exploring story interactions with 1-year-olds has highlighted the multimodal competencies of both toddlers and adults in pursuit of intersubjectivity during everyday situations such as play, conversations, and mealtimes (Bateman & Gunnarsdottir, 2017; White & Padtoc, 2021; White et al., 2021). White et al. (2021), for example, documented the way in which one child and teacher used eye gaze in combination with body actions, speech, and vocalisations as they engaged in a personal story while eating lunch. Evidence from these ethnographic video studies has highlighted the way that both toddlers and adults make mutual contributions to intersubjectivity through their use of embodied actions, including gestures, eye gaze, touch, as well as the use of vocalisations and words.

Ethnographic video methods were also used in a study of story interactions with 1-year-olds in a Norwegian ECE setting. Toddlers initiated stories that evolved further through conversation and play when teachers noticed children's embodied actions, gestures, and vocalisations and provided opportunities for their stories to continue, as in a "shared orchestration of meaning" (Olaussen, 2022, p. 148). Other recent studies abroad have focused on the role of touch as part of shared teacher-child interactions, allowing 2-year-old children to explore multicultural experiences in an ECE setting (Samuelsson, 2022), and the use of touch and smell in exploring scratch-and-sniff books with toddlers at home (Kucirkova & Jensen, 2023). Given the current prevalence of technologies throughout society, there has also been a recent increase in research focusing on toddlers' use of touch while engaging with digital technologies such as touchscreens (e.g., Samuelsson et al., 2021) and colouring/drawing apps on tablets (e.g., Lanna & Oro, 2019).

This paper reports findings from a case study that explored story sharing between 1-year-old toddlers and others in a culturally and linguistically diverse community of Aotearoa New Zealand. Drawing on multimodal perspectives, I present three examples of everyday story contexts in ECE settings to highlight how children and teachers use combinations of unspoken modes - gesture, eye gaze and touch - alongside verbal language in their mutual contributions towards intersubjectivity.

## Methodology and Methods

In this paper, I present selected findings from a qualitative case study of eight 1-year-old toddlers and seven teachers across two ECE centres (White, 2022). Centres were carefully chosen to ensure they represented the diverse range of cultures in this community. Both were community-based centres with a Christian ethos that welcomed families from a wide range of religious backgrounds. Participating families represented Māori, Samoan, Filipino, Indian, Middle Eastern, and European cultures. All families spoke at least one language other than English at home. Teachers and parents were invited to take part in the study, with parents giving proxy consent for their children.

The overarching aim of this research was to explore how 1-year-old toddlers engaged in stories across their homes and ECE settings. The study drew on multimodal ethnography (Flewitt, 2011; Kress, 2011), a research approach combining the fine-grained analysis of how people communicate using multiple modes (visual, spatial, tactile, oral, and auditory) over an extended period of time, while aiming to situate those actions in social and cultural contexts. Multiple sources of data included observations in home and ECE settings; interviews with teachers and families; and video footage collected during visits. This paper focuses on data relating to teacher-child interactions in the ECE setting.

Analysed using multimodal analysis (Bezemer & Jewitt, 2010) and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020) to highlight patterns of story relationships experienced by toddlers across home and ECE settings. Video methods were critical in allowing the up-close, careful analysis of teacher–child interactions in order to reveal complex patterns of nonverbal and verbal communication. In this article, I present three examples that illustrate the active contributions of 1-year-old toddlers and teachers as they used combinations of touch, gesture and eye gaze during story interactions in the ECE contexts.

Observations and interviews with participants were carried out over a period of 8 months. After 3 months, once participants were familiar with my presence as a participant–observer, I gained permission from parents and teachers to video-record story interactions as they occurred spontaneously in the ECE settings. Combining multimodal ethnography with video methods was a slow research approach that took time (Clark, 2023) and involved careful consideration of the ethics involved in recording toddlers' interactions (Rutanen et al., 2018).

This article addresses one aspect of the study that responds to the following research question: "How is intersubjectivity (shared moments of meaning) navigated between toddlers and others as they share stories together?" In this paper, I specifically tease out data relating to the unspoken modes of gesture, eye gaze and touch used by both toddlers and teachers in the ECE settings.

## Use of Gesture, Eye Gaze and Touch During Three Story Examples

Three examples are presented here to illustrate ways in which teachers and children intentionally used combinations of gestures, eye gaze and touch alongside other modes as they engaged in story interactions together. Selected findings also highlight three different contexts identified by teachers as being typical, everyday moments where stories with 1-year-olds might naturally occur in their ECE settings, either 1:1 or in small groups: *1) Karakia at kai time,*

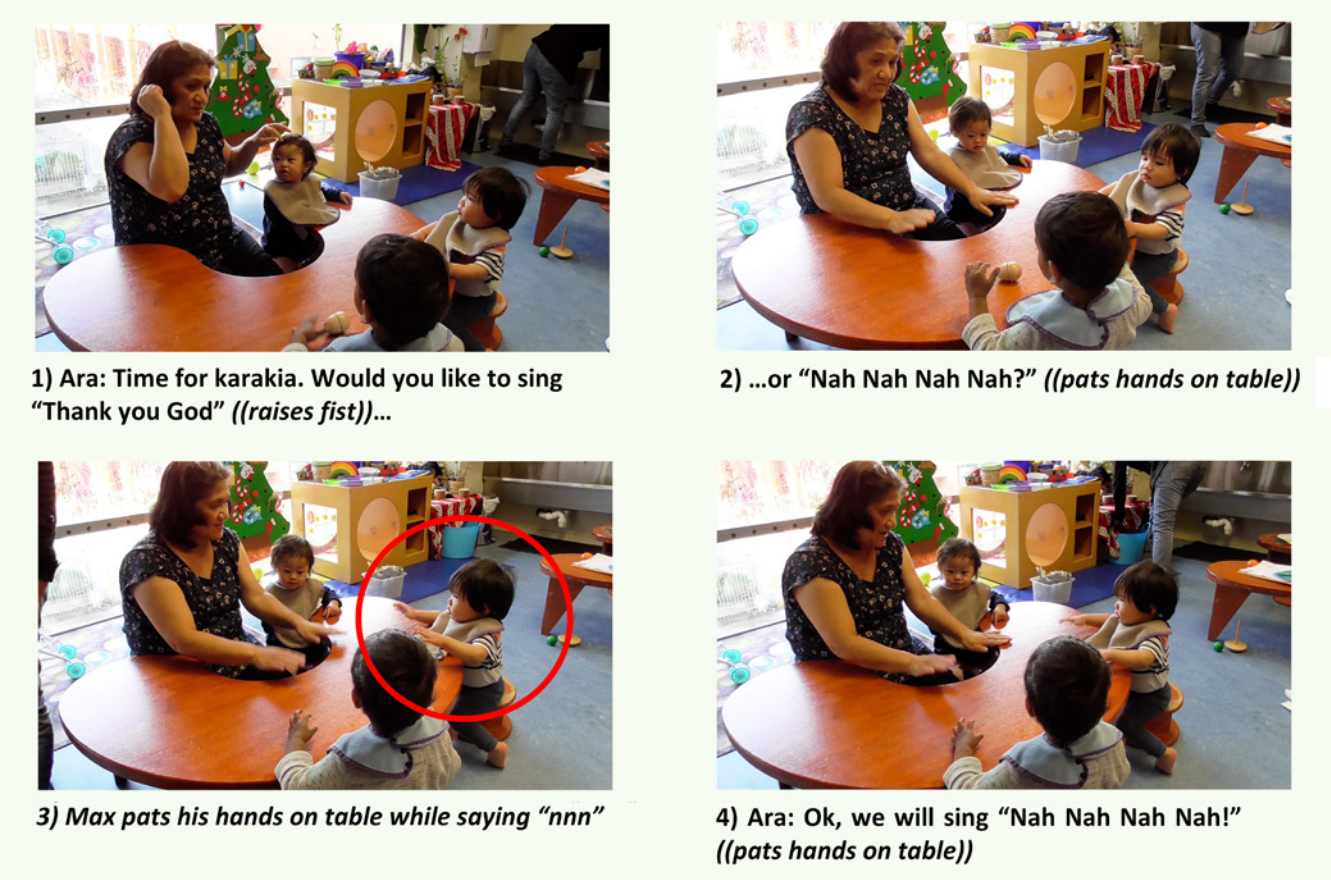


*Figure 1. Choosing karakia together.*

*2) Conversational stories during play, and 3) Sharing songs using a picture book.*

In presenting each of these examples, I include photo stills extracted from the video data and pseudonyms to increase confidentiality. A short commentary of the unfolding action surrounding each multimodal interaction is provided for each story context, describing how the use of gestures, eye gaze and touch alongside other modes illustrate the purposefulness of both teachers and children as they seek attunement and the shared understanding of meaning.

**Example 1 - Karakia at Kai Time**

Example 1 illustrates how daily routines, like *karakia* (prayer) at *kai* (food/meal) times, provided a predictability that helped toddlers and teachers make sense of one another as they shared stories together. Teachers described daily *karakia* as being an aspect of story sharing, as they were often expressed in the form of small songs or rhymes with some repetition and structure. In this example, teacher Ara offers a group of three toddlers the opportunity to choose the *karakia* they wanted to sing before eating their *kai*, presenting them with two choices using her actions accompanied by words (Figure 1).

As shown in Figure 1, Ara offers the children the choice of *karakia* between *Thank You God* (puts her fist up in the air) and *Nah, Nah, Nah, Nah, We Thank You Lord* (pats hands on table) before eating their kai. Ara's consistent pairing of these gestures alongside her use of eye contact and spoken words on every occasion meant that toddlers understood when and how to engage with this *karakia* using gestures, so that Ara could interpret their responses. In photo 3, Max (circled) responds to Ara's question by patting his hands on the table, while also making direct eye contact with Ara and saying "nnn", to express that he would like to choose the karakia, *Nah, Nah, Nah, Nah, We Thank You Lord.*

**Example 2 - Conversational Story During Play**

Example 2 demonstrates how toddler Sammy shares part of a personal story with teacher Christine using eye contact and words as they sat outside on the verandah playing with the Duplo clocks. Suddenly, Sammy looked up and pointed when he saw and heard his father's truck go past on the road behind the garden fence. Figure 2 shows the eye contact used in this exchange, with Sammy initiating the interaction, directing Christine's attention to the truck going past by concurrently combining the modes of eye gaze, pointing, and words. This transcript shows the dynamic way that Sammy coordinates his pointing gesture with his words and eye gaze (shown in red arrows) to establish joint attention with Christine as part of his attempt to share meaning with her.

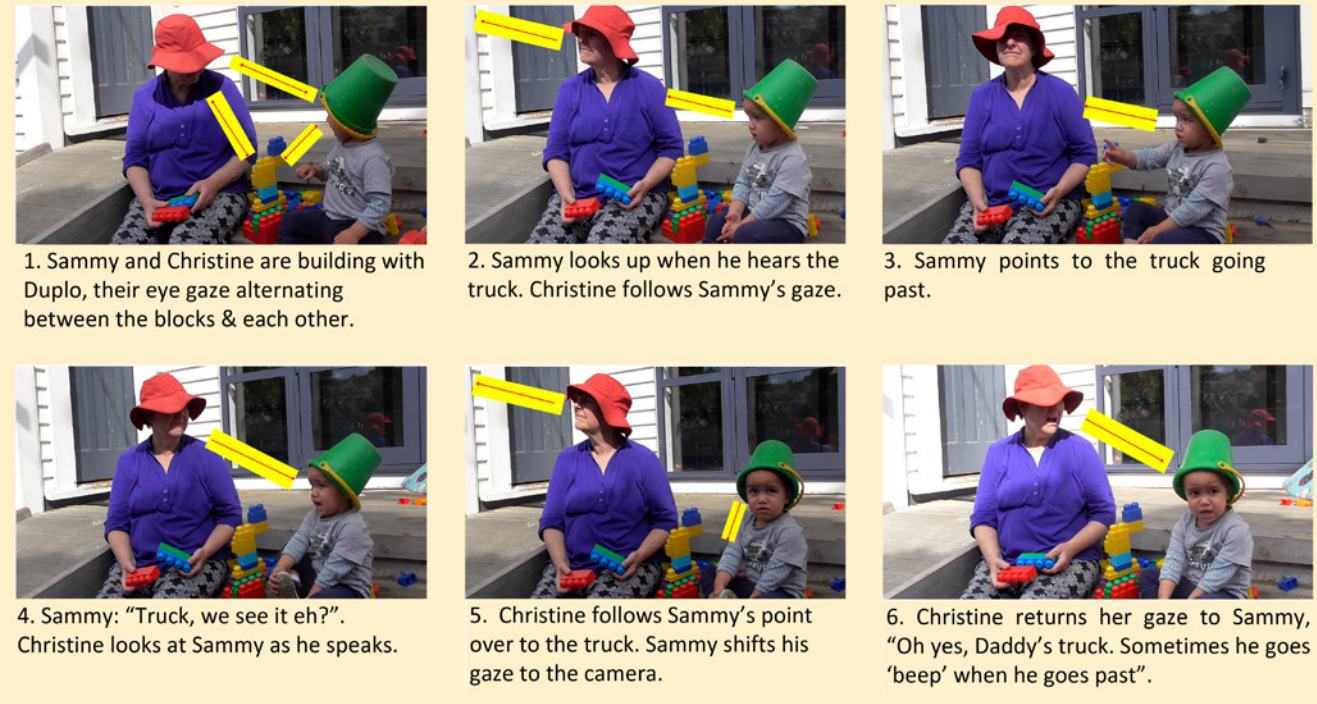


***Figure 2.*** *Sammy and Christine share a personal story using eye gaze, gestures and words.*

This example also highlights the way in which Christine follows Sammy's initiation via his eye gaze, pointing, and verbal language to help him co-construct a fuller account of the story using her own eye contact, words and actions. In her interview, Christine later explained that, a few weeks earlier, Sammy's father had stopped by the centre in his truck to deliver more nappies for him, and Sammy had been very proud to have his dad there. With this knowledge, Christine was able to understand the deeper significance of the truck for Sammy by noticing his multimodal cues in the moment, while situating those cues in the wider social and cultural context of his everyday life and relationships.

**Example 3 - Sharing Songs Using a Picturebook**

Example 3 illustrates the purposefulness of 1-year-old Max, who makes collaborative bids towards building intersubjectivity using touch, eye gaze and gesture while engaging in a song and picture book with his teacher, Amy, and his peer JT. The interaction begins when Max walks over to where Amy and JT are sitting on the floor. Amy is singing a *Wiggles* song while looking at a corresponding picture in the book. Figure 3 shows Max's willingness to participate in the song as he walks over to Amy and JT, stands beside them, and puts his left hand on Amy's shoulder, watching her face intently as he waits for the Wiggles song to finish, and an opportunity to be involved.

***Figure 3.*** *Max touches Amy's shoulder - waiting, looking and listening.*

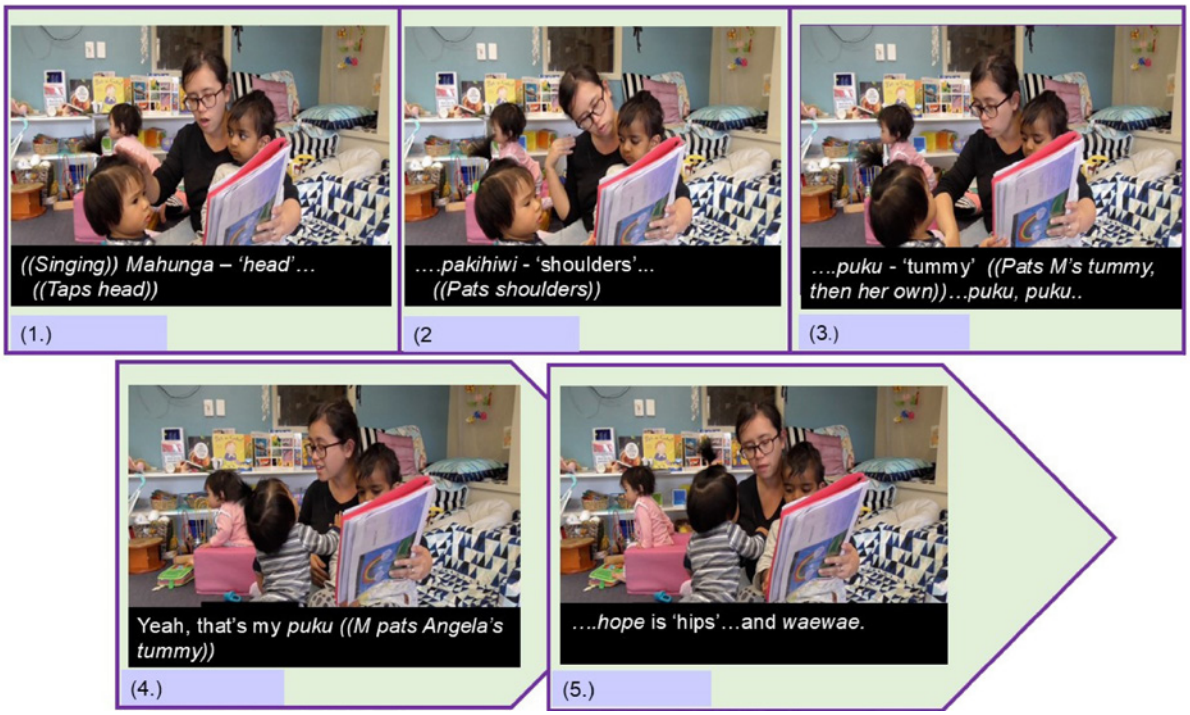


***Figure 4.*** *Max, JT, and Amy engage in Māhunga Pakihiwi, a song about parts of the body in te reo Māori.*

After the page is turned, Amy starts singing a new song, *Māhunga Pakihiwi* in te reo Māori, which includes vocabulary relating to parts of the body. At the start of the new song, Max takes the opportunity to sit down and join in, positioning himself in closer proximity to the action by sitting right in front of Amy so that he can participate in gestures involving touch and movement.

Figure 4 shows the way in which Amy combines her use of touch, gestures and eye gaze with her spoken language(s) as she reaches over to children to touch and name each body part while singing and naming them in te reo and English. Max responds to her touch at one point (Picture 4) by reaching over and patting Amy's puku (tummy), copying the touch action that she had done to him in Picture 3.

Together, these three examples illustrate the ways in which the modes of gesture, eye gaze and touch were used intentionally by children and teachers in various combinations, and with other modes, in different story contexts in ECE settings.

## Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, findings from three everyday story contexts illustrate how 1-year-old toddlers and teachers made mutual contributions to intersubjectivity using combinations of spoken and unspoken modes - specifically gestures, eye gaze and touch - in the ECE settings.

- In the first example, toddler Max communicated his choice of *karakia* at *kai* time by responding to teacher Ara's question using his eye contact, gestures and vocalisation ("nnn").
- In the second example, Sammy and Christine shared joint attention using eye gaze, gestures, and words in a conversational story during play. Christine drew on Sammy's cues 'in the moment', as well as her background knowledge of recent events, to piece together the significance of Sammy seeing the truck go past.
- In the third example, toddler Max purposefully signalled his interest in joining in singing with the picturebook through his use of touch and eye gaze. Max waited and listened, placing his hand on Amy's shoulder and looking at her face until the next song begins. Once given this opportunity, Max then sat down and interacted with Amy and JT with reciprocal use of eye gaze, touch, and gestures.

Findings of this research project align with those of other studies showing that intersubjectivity is a multimodal, collaborative process involving both child and adult contributions that are embodied and verbal (Olaussen, 2022; White et al., 2021). Jacobson and Degotardi (2022) have described the process of shared attention and meaning in ECE settings as a finely tuned, reciprocal "dance of co-regulation" between children and teachers (p. 12). As in a dance, both children and adults make intentional moves towards seeking and maintaining a shared understanding and attunement, while also making sense of those cues within social and cultural contexts that are constantly dynamic and evolving.

This study shows the ways in which toddlers and teachers play an active role in co-creating stories together in ECE settings. A multimodal framework provides a lens to see toddlers as competent communicators and story navigators who initiated and responded in unspoken, and sometimes spoken, ways. Similarly, taking a multimodal approach also highlighted the intentional efforts of teachers as story partners and listeners. In these examples, teachers created space and opportunities for toddlers to engage in story interactions using gesture, eye gaze and touch - whether it was by offering the choice of *karakia* via gesture; by noticing the significance of eye contact and pointing when a truck goes past; or by including a child when they showed a willingness to be involved via his touch, waiting and watching with intent. Multimodal ethnography with video (Flewitt, 2011; Kress, 2011) provided a methodology sensitive enough to document specific cues of

meaning, while also situating them in the social and cultural events of people's everyday lives and relationships.

Reconceptualising early literacy pedagogies in ECE settings as multimodal and multisensorial (Pink, 2015; Pool et al., 2023) is an important step towards understanding toddlers' competencies as storytellers. In addition, the findings of this study highlight the critical importance of teachers as communicative partners and 'listeners' to the multimodal ways that 1-year-old toddlers share stories (Arnott et al., 2021). Cooper et al. (2012) have argued that observing the nonverbal signals of infants and toddlers is the starting point for teachers to understand children's interests and inquiries. Other scholars have also called for a slowed-down pace in order to create space for the kind of attentive listening required to fully understand and interpret children's cues. According to Clark and Flewitt (2020), "unless we allow time, space and materials to support children's diverse ways of making sense of the social worlds they encounter, then their competencies can remain largely unarticulated" (p. 12). While intersubjectivity is a collaborative process between teachers and children, it is teachers who have responsibility for creating opportunities for children to be seen, heard, and accurately understood as they use combinations of modes including gesture, eye gaze and touch in their story interactions.

In this paper, findings from three everyday story contexts have illustrated the multimodal nature of story interactions experienced by 1-year-olds and their teachers in a culturally and linguistically diverse community of Aotearoa New Zealand. Gesture, eye gaze and touch are important unspoken modes of meaning used by both children and teachers in the pursuit of intersubjectivity during story interactions. Taking a multimodal approach was critical to revealing the competencies of 1-year-olds in actively co-constructing meaning. Exploring the embodied, unspoken modes of gesture, touch and eye gaze also highlighted the critical role of teachers in listening and creating opportunities to respond and extend children's contributions. This paper reinforces the embodied, collaborative nature of story interactions that take place during everyday moments in ECE settings and that are strongly embedded in social and cultural relationships.


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> **"As in a dance, both children and adults make intentional moves towards seeking and maintaining a shared understanding and attunement, while also making sense of those cues within social and cultural contexts that are constantly dynamic and evolving."**

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PEER REVIEWED

# **Kia Tōtika te Haere:** Exploring Unhurried Pedagogies through Child Led Inquiry Learning with Infants and Toddlers

**Dr Sarah Probine, Dr Yo Heta-Lensen, Dr Rachael S. Burke, Jo Perry, and Joanne Alderson**





This paper explores how inquiry with infants and toddlers can be meaningfully enacted through slow, relational pedagogies that foreground deep listening, documentation, and sustained engagement with people, place, and materials. Drawing on narrative inquiry from two early childhood centres in Aotearoa New Zealand, we examine how kaiako create time and space for infants' and toddlers' working theories to unfold through embodied, sensory-rich experiences. We highlight three key strategies: relational practice, pedagogical documentation, and attuned listening, as foundational to inquiry with the very youngest learners. Framed through the concept of *Āta* (Pohatu, 2013), we consider how these strategies align with Māori values of respect, reflection, and reciprocity, offering a culturally grounded lens for unhurried pedagogy. We argue that in the current political climate, inquiry with infants and toddlers is both a pedagogical and political stance, affirming infants' and toddlers' rights to agency, participation, and meaningful learning from birth.

## Introduction

Infants and toddlers are born with an innate drive to make sense of their world through connection, exploration, and relationship (Hedges, 2022; Lewin-Benham, 2023). In early childhood education (ECE), children's inquiry, also referred to as investigations or project work, centres children's questions, theories, and interests as the foundation for sustained, co-constructed learning (Probine et al., 2024). This approach often begins with kaiako noticing an emerging interest or pattern in play. Through cycles of observation, reflection, and responsive planning, kaiako create experiences that deepen children's engagement and allow theories to unfold. These experiences are ideally collective, grounded in shared meaning-making, and supported by pedagogical documentation. Photographs, learning stories, and artefacts help kaiako interpret learning and plan intentional next steps, ensuring inquiries evolve in relationship with the child's thinking (Denee & Cherrington, 2023).

In Aotearoa, inquiry approaches have been shaped by the philosophy of Reggio Emilia, which views infants, toddlers and young children as capable protagonists in their learning and teachers as co-researchers (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017; Rinaldi, 2006). While widely embraced in ECE, much of the research and professional focus has centred on older children. Less attention has been given to how inquiry can be meaningfully enacted with infants and toddlers, whose ways of knowing are expressed through sensory, relational, and preverbal means (Dalli et al., 2011; Lewin-Benham, 2023). This paper draws upon our ongoing research exploring how early childhood kaiako in Aotearoa interpret and enact inquiry with infants, toddlers, and young children.

Our findings suggest that inquiry with infants and toddlers requires a distinctive pedagogical stance, one grounded in deep listening, attuned observation, and sustained relational engagement. Strategies such as multi-modal documentation, open-ended material exploration, and deliberate planning emerged as critical. Together, these support a pedagogy of slowing down, making space for infants and toddlers to revisit ideas, develop working theories, and participate meaningfully over time. This aligns with Clark's (2023) notion of slow pedagogy, an approach that values presence, connection, and deep engagement over immediacy or output.

However, given that inquiry approaches in Aotearoa have evolved primarily through Euro-Western frameworks, it is important to consider how Māori perspectives might enrich this work. Concepts such as *Āta*, described by Taia Pohatu (2013) as a practice of care, deliberation, and respectful relationships, offer a culturally grounded lens through which to reimagine inquiry. *Āta* invites kaiako to attend with integrity to timing, space, and relational context, aligning closely with the intentions of slow pedagogy.

Framed through *Āta* (Pohatu, 2013), inquiry can support the development of bicultural habits of mind, dispositions and ethical commitments that guide kaiako to think and act in ways that honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Heta-Lensen, 2025). These are cultivated through sustained engagement with Māori values and practices. In this paper, we first outline the theoretical foundations underpinning inquiry with infants and toddlers, then examine three interconnected strategies: relational engagement, attuned listening, and pedagogical documentation, before considering how the potential of *Āta* may further enrich slow, inquiry-based pedagogies in Aotearoa.

## Infants and Toddlers as Capable, Communicative and Theorising Learners

*Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) positions infants and toddlers as capable, confident learners with rights to agency, dignity, and voice. This aligns with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC, 1989), which affirms all children, including infants and toddlers, have the right to express their views and have them taken seriously. Despite these commitments, pedagogical practices with infants and toddlers often emphasise care as curriculum, drawing on philosophies such as those of Pikler and Gerber (Denee, 2024). While respectful caregiving is foundational, Denee (2024) cautions that an exclusive focus on routines can obscure infants' rich capacities for inquiry and reduce kaiako to passive observers.

Cheeseman (2017) similarly critiques the dominance of attachment-based discourses, warning that overemphasis on emotional care can limit recognition of infants' intellectual and creative potential. She introduces the concept of *mind-mindedness*, highlighting infants as "mental agents" who initiate encounters, express intentions, and build theories. This view calls for pedagogical approaches that nurture inquiry dispositions from birth.

Māori perspectives offer further affirmation of infants' innate capacities. The late Rangimarie Rose Pere (1997) described mokopuna as born powerful, carrying divine potential through their inherent mana. Rameka (2022) reinforces mana as a guiding principle in kaiako–mokopuna relationships, a value also central to *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017). These understandings are echoed in neuroscience and sociocultural theory, which demonstrate infants' biological predisposition to inquire, hypothesise, and build working theories from birth (Hedges, 2022; Lewin-Benham, 2023). Supporting these capabilities calls for pedagogical approaches that centre relational engagement, sustained exploration, and co-construction. Inquiry pedagogies position kaiako as co-researchers who listen closely, revisit experiences, and support theory-building as it emerges through infants, toddlers and young children's actions, interests, and encounters.

## Relational Pedagogies and the Role of the Kaiako

Ritchie (2024) frames teaching as an ethical and political act grounded in values of respect, care, and reciprocal engagement. This perspective moves the role of the kaiako beyond caregiving as maintenance toward fostering sustained, co-constructed encounters where infants and toddlers' ideas, interests, and theories are actively recognised and nurtured. Relational pedagogies such as children's inquiry position teaching and learning as fundamentally co-constructed through ongoing, ethical relationships between kaiako, children, families, and environments.

For infants and toddlers, inquiry emerges through relational engagement through deep observation, attuned listening, and revisiting experiences over time. This stance recognises relationships as the medium through which learning unfolds. In alignment with these ideas, Cheeseman (2017), drawing on Levinas's philosophy of ethical encounters, introduces the notion of response-ableness. Rather than positioning the educator as the expert responsible for knowing and acting upon the infant's needs, response-ableness calls kaiako to be susceptible, open, and attentive to the invitations and learning agendas initiated by infants themselves. This requires vulnerability and a willingness to set aside certainty and control, creating space for genuine co-inquiry. Inquiry-focused pedagogy, therefore, recognises infants and toddlers as competent partners in knowledge-building, requiring kaiako to embody a relational ethic of listening, responsiveness, and shared exploration. These pedagogies have been shaped by both local cultural values and international influences, particularly the Reggio Emilia approach, which views infants and toddlers as capable protagonists and teachers as co-researchers in the learning process.

## Global Influences on Children's Inquiry Pedagogies

In Aotearoa, inquiry-based pedagogies have been significantly influenced by international theories and models, particularly sociocultural and social-constructivist theories, and pedagogical ideas from Reggio Emilia (Rinaldi, 2006). While these approaches have inspired meaningful shifts in early childhood education, especially in recognising infants and toddlers as capable, curious learners, they also carry the risk of diminishing indigenous perspectives if adopted uncritically. A further issue, raised by scholars such as Ritchie (2024), Heta-Lensen (2022), and Forsyth and Kung (2007), is that the dominance of Euro-Western frameworks can obscure the culturally grounded, relational, and collective ways of knowing embedded in Māori worldviews. This highlights the need to reimagine inquiry in ways grounded in local cultural values and relationships. In response to these concerns, there is a growing recognition of the need for frameworks that are both pedagogically robust and culturally situated. One such framework is *Te Āta Takepū* (Pohatu, 2013), which offers a distinctly Māori perspective on relational, reflective, and unhurried practice.

## *Āta* as Unhurried Pedagogy

*Te Āta Takepū* is a holistic model first developed by Pohatu in 2013 as an applied practice tool to guide respectful relationships in the social services field. Five elements form *Te Āta Takepū*, which Pohatu explains need to be understood individually and as part of a whole process of respectful engagement. Summarised, these elements include:

- **A focus on relationships:** Negotiating boundaries, creating and holding safe space
- **A focus on behaviour:** Appropriate engagement in relationships with people, kaupapa and environments.
- **A focus on perceptions:** These are intensified by creating quality space of time (wā) and place (wāhi). To create quality space, effort is required of the participants framed within notions of respectfulness, the spirit of reciprocity and of reflection. It is here that discipline develops as we integrate understandings of people, behaviours and spaces and our responses to them. These elements are seen as the necessary prerequisites to critical analysis.
- **A focus on transformation as part of the relationship:** Planning and strategising occurs (Pohatu, 2013, p. 15).

*Āta* is not a linear process but a cyclical one that is as much concerned with appropriate processes for entering into and exiting from the spaces of engagement as the relationships that occur within. Applying *Te Āta Takepū* in the early childhood context guides kaiako to become unhurried through fostering practices that entail:

- **Deliberate engagement:** Approaching interactions with infants and toddlers and whānau thoughtfully, ensuring that each engagement is meaningful and respectful.

- **Fostering deep relationships:** Building connections grounded in mutual respect and understanding, recognising the importance of each child's background and experiences.
- **Being reflective practitioners:** Continuously reflecting on our own cultural perspectives and biases to create an inclusive learning environment.

Integrating *Te Āta Takepū* as proposed by Pohatu (2013) emphasises carefulness, respect, and intentionality. This aligns closely with Clark's (2023) concept of slow pedagogy. Both advocate for practices that honour infants and toddlers and their whānau in place-based, relational, and unhurried ways. While relevant for all kaiako and children in Aotearoa, the creation of *Te Āta Takepū* was a recognition by the author of the capacity of te reo Māori to give depth of meaning to takepū Māori (Māori principles). Given that language is the precursor to understanding, Pohatu (2013) argues that te reo Māori is the precursor to deeper understandings of tikanga and mātauranga Māori knowledge. As our research has explored (Probine et al., 2024), embedding children's inquiry within the unique cultural landscape of Aotearoa requires pedagogies that centre te ao Māori values and uphold the commitments of Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

It is important to note that *Te Āta Takepū* was not an explicit framework used by the kaiako in this research. Rather, it was applied by the research team as a conceptual lens, prompted by our recognition of strong resonances between these centres' practices and the principles of *Āta*. These reflections emerged post-data collection and form part of our evolving thinking and ongoing commitment to centring mātauranga Māori within our research and writing.

## Methodology

This two-phase study was situated within an interpretivist paradigm, recognising that both researchers and participants bring cultural and experiential perspectives that shape meaning-making.

The research aimed to deepen understanding about how children's inquiry is interpreted and sustained in Aotearoa early childhood settings. It focused on three questions:

- What theoretical and pedagogical influences have shaped kaiako inquiry practices?
- How do interpretations of inquiry-based learning shape pedagogy and practice?
- How does children's inquiry impact learning?

Phase one involved a national online survey of licensed ECE services, exploring how kaiako understood and enacted inquiry. Based on responses, six diverse centres were invited to participate in phase two. Data collection included semi-structured interviews with kaiako and leaders, alongside analysis of documentation such as photographs, learning stories, planning records, and reflections. In some cases, researchers also conducted direct observations. This article draws on data from two of these centres, Daisies Early Education & Care Centre and Little Doves Early Learning Centre, which had a particular focus on infants and toddlers within their inquiry-based practices.

The research was underpinned by sociocultural (Vygotsky, 1978) and bioecological theories (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As the research progressed, the ensuing analysis was also informed by Kaupapa Māori theories (Smith, 2017). Ethical approval was obtained, with all kaiako giving informed consent. Although anonymity was offered, all centres opted to be named. Children's assent was sensitively sought through age-appropriate methods.

A narrative inquiry design supported authentic data gathering, allowing themes to emerge from lived experiences and epistemological stances (Clandinin, 2014; Mayer & Meissel, 2023). This approach foregrounded history, culture, and place, providing space for kaiako to re-story their inquiry journeys with integrity (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Data was analysed thematically through an iterative, collaborative process. Regular wānanga enabled shared reflection and interpretation, ensuring multiple perspectives were considered. The goal was not generalisation, but to illuminate rich, localised narratives that reflect the complexity of children's inquiry in Aotearoa.

## Findings and Discussion

This section explores how inquiry with infants and toddlers is interpreted and enacted in two early childhood settings in Aotearoa: Daisies Early Childhood Education and Care Centre and Little Doves Early Learning Centre. Both centres participated in our research and contributed inquiry stories published in our forthcoming book (Probine et al., 2025). Drawing on these narratives, we examine three intersecting pedagogical themes: the relational dimensions of time, people, place, and materials; slowing down to listen; and the role of pedagogical documentation. These strategies align closely with both Clark's (2023) concept of slow pedagogy and Pohatu's (2013) notion of *Āta*, an Indigenous Māori theory that guides kaiako in fostering relational, respectful, and intentional inquiry practices with infants and toddlers. These strategies were found to be key in supporting deep, sustained inquiry with infants and toddlers.

At both Daisies and Little Doves, inquiry is a dynamic, co-constructed process beginning with close observation of infants' and toddlers' explorations and interactions. At Daisies, each inquiry is sparked by a centre-wide provocation developed through collective kaiako wānanga. Small groups (rōpū iti) then pursue these ideas at their own pace, supported by weekly planning meetings where documentation is analysed and interpreted. At both centres, kaiako collaboratively develop two interrelated questions: one focused on infants' and toddlers' interests and working theories, and one pedagogical question aimed at deepening their teaching practice. These questions are revisited during team meetings and inform the direction of ongoing inquiry. Kaiako view themselves as co-researchers, engaging in careful listening, responsive documentation, and intentional teaching that remains open to how infants and toddlers engage with materials and provocations. Daily rhythms are structured to protect extended periods for inquiry, enabling infants and toddlers to revisit materials, explore ideas, and engage in sustained, unhurried dialogue. These processes reflect the principles of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), and are shaped by a commitment to relational pedagogy, slow time, and connection to place.

### Relationships with Time, People, Places, and Materials

At both Daisies and Little Doves, inquiry with infants and toddlers is supported by intentional pedagogies that frame time as essential for deep engagement. Rather than dividing the day into discrete routines, kaiako slow their practice to create spacious, unhurried rhythms that enable infants and toddlers to engage meaningfully with people, materials, and place. This valuing of time extends to the professional culture of both teaching teams. Each centre has spent

years developing inquiry-based approaches, supported by strong, collegial relationships. At Daisies, the team's shared inquiry focus enables collective planning and reflection, giving the team 'a shared purpose.' At Little Doves, long-standing team relationships foster trust and a shared commitment to slow, relational practice. These teams prioritise time to think together, explore uncertainty, and remain open to where inquiries may lead.

***Figure 1:*** *Explorations of how acorns move at Little Doves.*

This valuing of time is embedded in the daily rhythm. Both centres encourage infants and toddlers to revisit materials and ideas across days, weeks, or months. At Little Doves, toddlers and kaiako returned daily to an oak tree in the garden, forming an ongoing relationship with the fallen acorns beneath it. They became 'acorn researchers,' sorting, classifying, and theorising over time (Figure 1). These were not isolated moments of curiosity, but layered, evolving engagements. At Daisies, a community walk led toddlers to discover painted rocks. This experience sparked an inquiry that continued at the centre, as the toddlers painted their own rocks to place in local gardens—an act of connection and contribution (Figure 2).

This emphasis on relationships extended to materials themselves. Drawing on relational materialist perspectives (Kind, 2014), materials were viewed as active participants in the inquiry. They invited attention, prompted responses, and provided challenges. Wonder emerged through sustained engagement and opportunities to revisit materials. As the group returned, they developed new ideas and intentions; the materials' affordances shifted, supporting the development of working theories through embodied, often preverbal, engagement. Relationships transformed through repeated exposure to people, places, and materials, enriching both toddlers' experiences and kaiako pedagogical understandings (Rinaldi, 2006). Drawing on *Te Āta Takepū* developed by Pohatu (2013, p. 15), we can associate this example with the takepū, *Āta-haere*, defined as being intentional; approaching the situation reflectively, moving with respect and integrity towards the relationships they observe and their significance.

***Figure 2.*** *Painted rocks at Daisies are carefully arranged to dry.*

Connection to place also shaped inquiry. Local environments were not seen as backdrops but as dynamic contributors to learning. Recurring visits, familiarity, and sensory exploration grounded these inquiries in place-based, relational knowing. Thoughtfully designed yet flexible environments enabled infants and toddlers to engage in open-ended play and inquiry (Dinkel et al., 2019). From a cultural-historical perspective, such practices allow kaiako to observe and respond to infants' and toddlers' natural movements, interests, and ways of relating. Trust in infants' capacities to lead their play supports autonomy and honours their unique ways of thinking

and doing (Cooper & Quiñones, 2020). As one kaiako from Daisies reflected, slowing down and listening to infants' cues created space for 'intimate conversations'—moments that nurtured responsive, reciprocal relationships (MoE, 2017).

## Slowing Down to Listen

At both Daisies and Little Doves, slowing down to listen is an embedded pedagogical stance. Listening is understood not as passive hearing, but as a relational and ethical act that recognises infants and toddlers as capable communicators. This approach allows kaiako to become attuned to preverbal languages such as subtle cues expressed through gesture, movement, facial expression, and vocalisation, which often signal the beginnings of an inquiry.

Kaiako described how slowing down enables them to move beyond surface-level interests to uncover deeper patterns of engagement. At Little Doves, for instance, the acorn inquiry began when toddlers repeatedly returned to fallen acorns beneath an oak tree. By closely observing how they sorted, transported, and told stories about the acorns, kaiako recognised an emerging inquiry. Their documentation and collaborative reflection helped them plan meaningful provocations that extended this learning. A similar process occurred at Daisies, where toddlers discovered painted rocks during a nature walk. A rock brought back to the centre became a shared focus, and rather than rushing to act, kaiako spent time engaging with the toddlers and reflecting together. This led to the idea of creating their own painted 'Daisies rocks', affirming toddlers' ideas and sustaining their interest. Drawing on *Te Āta Takepū* (Pohatu, 2013), we can associate this example with *āta-whakamārama*, which is concerned to inform through reflective deliberation. Concern to ensure the channels of communication at spiritual, emotional, and intellectual level of the receiver (in this case, the tamariki mokopuna) are understood, respected and valued. This practice of attuned listening is tightly interwoven with reflection, which links to the takepū of *āta-whakarongo* defined by Pohatu (2013) as listening with reflective deliberation. This requires patience and gives space to "... listen and communicate to the heart, mind, soul of the speaker (insert communicator), context and environment" (Pohatu, 2013, p. 15). Pohatu (2013) emphasises conscious participation of all senses, the natural inclusion of trust, integrity and respectfulness as part of *āta whakarongo*.

Slowing down also enabled kaiako to reflect on their own teaching. Through documentation and team dialogue, they considered how their timing, tone, and responses shaped toddlers' engagement. At Daisies, kaiako described "tossing the ball" as a metaphor for intentional pacing, allowing time for toddlers to respond before acting. These approaches echo Clark (2023), who suggests that time, rhythm, and repetition open deeper pedagogical possibilities. Daniels (2021) similarly highlights the power of collective, recurring moments of connection, through which shared meaning emerges through rhythm and movement. For preverbal learners, embodied listening creates the conditions for secure relationships and meaningful inquiry. In this way, slowing down is not passive but an intentional, ethical stance, one that honours infants' rights to be heard, to participate, and to lead their own learning. Through this care-full listening, kaiako cultivate fertile ground for inquiry, where even the smallest gestures can evolve into rich, co-constructed investigations.

## Pedagogical Documentation

Pedagogical documentation plays a central role in inquiry with infants and toddlers, particularly because they are often preverbal, embodied learners. Documentation offers a means for kaiako to make visible the gestures, expressions, movements, and working theories of infants and toddlers, allowing them to trace how learning emerges and deepens over time. At Little Doves, kaiako used multi-modal group learning stories and voiced-over videos that not only showcased toddlers' ongoing inquiries but also articulated the pedagogical decisions behind them. These artefacts were shared with whānau to foster transparency and strengthen home-centre connections. In both settings, documentation was embedded in a culture of collaborative review, where regular team meetings supported collective reflection and interpretation, guided by pedagogical leaders. This process enabled a slow, thoughtful cycle of noticing and responding that sustained inquiry over time.

Documentation also helped kaiako slow down and reflect together. As Sonya from Little Doves noted, "It helps us to talk about children's learning, we are unpacking learning, we are interpreting. We've broken it down so that we can celebrate the tiny, and we're not making these great big claims." Through this lens, documentation becomes a tool for recognising subtle shifts in infants' and toddlers' learning, valuing small discoveries that may otherwise go unnoticed. It also enables infants and toddlers to revisit previous experiences, deepening connections and supporting continuity in inquiry. Importantly, documentation is never neutral. As Biffi (2019) reminds us, it reflects the values and assumptions of the kaiako who produce it. This is echoed in *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), which affirms infants' and toddlers' right to be heard and understood, and positions them as contributors to their communities. By centring infants' and toddlers' ideas and expressions, pedagogical documentation becomes a democratic and political act, one that affirms kaiako as co-researchers who listen, interpret, and plan in close relationship with children.

Together, these three interwoven pedagogical strategies: relational engagement with time, place, people, and materials; slowing down to listen; and pedagogical documentation, create the conditions in which inquiry with infants and toddlers can take root and flourish. They support kaiako to be present, responsive, and intentional, enabling them to recognise and extend working theories over time. These approaches cultivate a culture of inquiry grounded in trust, curiosity, and collaboration, positioning both infants and toddlers and kaiako as active co-constructors of knowledge. In doing so, they expand the pedagogical landscape beyond caregiving alone, foregrounding infants' and toddlers' rights to participate in rich, sustained learning encounters from birth. While these strategies strongly align with emerging frameworks of slow pedagogy, their potential must also be critically examined within broader social, cultural, and political contexts of Aotearoa.

## Positioning Children's Inquiry as a Counter-Cultural Stance

In the current early childhood education landscape in Aotearoa, kaiako face increasing systemic pressures, including staffing shortages, qualification rollbacks, and heightened compliance demands (Mitchell, 2019). These pressures can prioritise efficiency, regulation, and routine at the expense of reflection, dialogue, and

presence. As a result, the experiences of infants and toddlers may become constrained by rigid routines, surveillance, and a focus on safety and control. These trends mirror broader neoliberal discourses that frame 'quality' in terms of measurable outcomes, positioning education as a service and children as future economic contributors (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Ritchie, 2024; Ritchie, 2025).

Within this context, inquiry-based pedagogies offer a meaningful counterpoint. Choosing to engage in slow, relational inquiry with infants and toddlers is both a pedagogical and political act that affirms infants' and toddlers' rights to agency, cultural identity, and meaningful participation. Ritchie (2025) argues that "the present moment calls for new old imaginaries, unknowing, unlearning, relearning ways of knowing, relating, desiring, imagining, creating, and doing" (p. 22). Pedagogies grounded in trust and connectedness invite alternative ways of being and knowing that resist the dominant logics of performance and control. Children's inquiry disrupts these narratives by positioning infants and toddlers as active, competent co-constructors of meaning. Rather than accelerating through content, slow pedagogies reclaim time for reflection, connection, and collaboration. As Clark (2023) notes, this commitment to slowness is not about doing less, it is about attending more deeply. In this way, inquiry becomes a stance that honours infants' and toddlers' rhythms and rights while challenging the logics that often undermine relational, responsive teaching.

## Grounding Children's Inquiry in Bi-cultural Practice

As interest in slow pedagogies grows, it is essential to critically consider how these approaches intersect with Indigenous worldviews and temporalities. Without care, such frameworks risk replicating the silencing of Māori ethics of care and relationality. Both Pohatu (2013) and Clark (2023) offer models that emphasise deliberate attention to time, relationships, and reflection. In the settings explored in this research, kaiako privileged deep connection with people, place, and materials, enacting a relational, inquiry-driven pedagogy grounded in respect, care, and reciprocity. These practices affirm infants and toddlers as contributors to their learning communities.

Within the framework of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), both the principles of *Āta* and slow pedagogy are reflected in the curriculum's emphasis on holistic development, relationships, and the empowerment of infants and toddlers as competent learners. *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) also encourages kaiako to create learning environments that are responsive to the cultural identities and individual needs of each child. Every child in Aotearoa is the benefactor of an identity that includes recognition of Māori knowledge and language. *Āta* is an approach that creates space for kaiako and mokopuna to develop bi-cultural habits of mind by enabling opportunities to engage in ngā takepū Māori (Māori principles), deepening our understandings of some of the concepts we encounter in *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017).

## Conclusion

This paper has explored how inquiry with infants and toddlers can be meaningfully enacted through slow, relational pedagogies grounded in deep listening, documentation, and sustained connection with people, place, and materials. These practices affirm infants and toddlers as capable, theory-building learners whose inquiries unfold through embodied, social, and sensory experiences. By centring infants' and toddlers' interests and ways of knowing, children's inquiry offers a pedagogical and political stance that challenges dominant narratives of efficiency and standardisation and reclaims early childhood education as a space for critical, co-constructed learning. It affirms kaiako as co-researchers, whose thoughtful, responsive practice supports deep engagement over time. Framed through the potential of *Āta*, children's inquiry can also cultivate bi-cultural practices grounded in respect, care, and reflection, deepening our understanding of what it means to slow down and attend with integrity to the relationships at the heart of learning. *Āta* reminds us that unhurried pedagogy is not only an ethical choice, but a counter-cultural one, requiring intentional time and space to honour the relationships infants are forming with people and place.

As we continue to reflect on our findings, we believe that *Āta* offers significant potential as a conceptual and practical tool for ECE kaiako seeking to deepen their inquiry practices. While not explicitly drawn upon by participating kaiako during the research, we observed strong synergies between their unhurried, relational approaches and the principles of *Āta*. In future professional development, kaiako may find value in engaging with *Te Āta Takepū* alongside *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) and Te Whatu Pōkeka (MoE, 2009), particularly when considering how care, respect, and deliberation are enacted in documentation and inquiry practices. We see the concepts within *Āta* as offering a powerful frame for supporting culturally grounded pedagogies, enriching understandings of inquiry as a relational and ethical process. We encourage kaiako to explore these ideas further through dialogue, reading, and collaborative inquiry.

Kia tōtika te haere!

> **"For infants and toddlers, inquiry emerges through relational engagement through deep observation, attuned listening, and revisiting experiences over time. This stance recognises relationships as the medium through which learning unfolds."**

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PEER REVIEWED

# **Adagio Interactions –** Rhythmic, Relational Being With Babies in Early Childhood Education

Dr Caroline Guard

Authentic opportunities to 'be with' infants and toddlers in unhurried relational moments of care and playfulness are often overshadowed by external organisational demands that drive efficient and adult-led practices in early childhood settings. This article introduces the concept of 'Adagio Interactions' as an innovative approach to strengthen relational pedagogies and assist early childhood educators to source opportunities for sustained, unhurried pedagogical encounters with infants and toddlers. Adagio Interactions comprise of several 'beats' (Presence, Rhythm, Intention, Multimodality and Ease) which place emphasis on the importance of consciously thinking about how interactions with young children play out in early childhood and how they should be the leading component of early childhood pedagogies. 'Adagio', a borrowed term from the creative arts, brings together several philosophical perspectives, including Froebelian principles and Bakhtin's concept of Dialogism, where unity, connection and rhythmic togetherness are achieved through a balancing of power and morality in the ways educators connect with and spend time with very young children amid rising neoliberal priorities in early childhood.

## Introduction

Beyond the baby's first social experiences in the family home, for many young children, regular attendance at an early childhood centre is a familiar part of daily life (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021). As such, forging bonds with others outside the family unit involves experimenting with early communication skills and entering a complex journey of emotional learning. Early childhood centres hold potential to offer relationship rich spaces that can advance the emotional and social development of babies (Jacobson & Degotardi, 2022; Thümmler et al., 2022). Fostering a relational pedagogy is an internationally recognised feature of high-quality early childhood education (OECD, 2021). Theorising what relationship centric practice looks like has been well documented (Dalli et al., 2011; Page, 2018), but too often policy and practice fail to reflect its significance (Zeedyk, 2020). For example, if babies are "handled by many different people-each with their different way of holding, soothing and talking..." (Fleer & Linke, 2016, p. 9), there may be long-term implications for the child's emotional wellbeing should this become customary practice (Datler et al., 2010; Ilyka et al., 2021). Several studies have called for the complexities associated with establishing emotionally containing relationships with very young children (Andrew, 2015; Elfer et al., 2018) to be expanded. Additionally, detailed analysis of how moment-by-moment interactions develop in professional contexts is insufficient (Laurin et al., 2021; Walton & Darkes Sutcliffe, 2021). Aspiring to enact relational rich spaces is usually a central priority for educators, though the reality is often more complicated with professional conflicts surfacing in everyday care practices (Aslanian, 2022; Cliffe & Solvason, 2022; Guard, 2023). Guard (2023) identifies 'competing tensions' where organisational demands become entangled with relational caregiving, resulting in missed opportunities for rich connection and relationship formation.

Cliffe and Solvason (2022) cite neoliberal and reductionist approaches as detrimental to relational pedagogy. Similarly, Clark (2020, 2022) and others (see Moss & Cameron, 2020) have widely critiqued the current early childhood education landscape in England, claiming it places unnecessary demands on young children and the workforce. To challenge this, Clark advocates adopting a Slow Pedagogy (Clark, 2020) where time is stretched in favour of children's agendas and developmental capabilities. Taking the 'longer view' when fostering consciously unhurried care routines promotes new opportunities for connection and advances a child's autonomy (Clark, 2022). French (2021) believes fostering a 'slow relational pedagogy' enriches pedagogies for very young children, ensuring educators are 'in tune with' and think about how they enact caregiving routines with babies. More recently, Sorrells and Madrid Akpovo (2024) argue for a 'slow ethic of care' as a fundamental construct of early childhood pedagogy.

This article introduces the concept of 'Adagio Interactions' as an innovative approach to strengthen relational pedagogies and assist early childhood educators to source opportunities for unhurried and sustained pedagogical encounters with babies and toddlers. Drawing on data from my PhD study, completed in England between 2018-2023, the paper examines the theoretical roots of Adagio as an emergent concept in early childhood pedagogy.

Note that in this paper, 'babies' is used to describe children aged between 0 and 12 months, as it is customary terminology in England early childhood education. It is acknowledged that infant/s is more widely recognised in international literature. Young children refer to those under three years of age.

## English Early Childhood Education Context

In England, babies can enrolled in early childhood centres from around 3 months old, though most begin their early childhood education journey between the ages of 9-12 months, aligning with the end of statutory parental leave in the UK. Often referred to as 'day nurseries', these settings offer group-based care for children up to the age of 5 until they enter formal education. Usually, these settings are open 5 days a week between 7.30 am and 6.30 pm. Early childhood systems in England are convoluted, with most organisations being private, independent or voluntary (Cameron & Moss, 2020). Typically, 'baby rooms' describe the spaces the youngest children occupy in settings as many are designed to accommodate age and stage rather than family mix groupings more familiar internationally. The Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum (Department for Education, 2023) is the statutory early years framework that informs pedagogy in England, and most settings are regulated by the Office for Standards in Education and Skills.

## The Rhythmic Foundations of Early Dialogic Connection

The early rhythmic dance of connection between babies and parents is recognised as the basis of early communication (Malloch & Trevarthen, 2009; Stern, 2002). Connecting with another person, feeling their presence, and knowing they are tuned in during moments of intimacy is an essential driver in the formation of early relationships. Emerging from the theory of infant intersubjectivity, communicative musicality (Malloch, 1999; Malloch & Trevarthen, 2009) describes the dynamic, rhythmic, micro moments of emotion and expression shared between a mother and baby. Communicative musicality is visible when a baby and adult co-construct authentic, meaningful, intimate communication, often through intuitive (Papoušek & Papoušek, 1981) playful encounters where their voices are shared in unity. Malloch (1999) argues that over time, such communications often fall 'in sync' as together the baby and adult adopt shared temporal qualities and rituals in coordination with one another. The dimensions of pulse, quality, and narrative aid the creation of harmonious co-constructed encounters, creating the contours of voice acts (Malloch et al., 2020) in a reciprocal manner. Dynamic storytelling unfolds through movement and rhythms within communication narratives, which visibly offer an introduction, chorus, crescendo and end point within the dyadic relational encounters that unfold authentically between babies and loving adults. Culturally and socially situated, emergent storylines are responsive to environmental factors. It is in these moments of vitality that emotion, intention and interest originate (Delafield-Butt & Reddy, 2025; Malloch, 1999) and the baby's sense of being with another establishes confidence in the reciprocal nature of belonging.

There has been very little appreciation of the potential for these types of interactions to unfold between babies and other caregivers outside the immediate family unit. Regardless, early childhood educators are frequently guided to inaugurate rich, loving relationships within the essence of early childhood pedagogy (Department for Education, 2023; Ministry of Education, 2017). International policy guidance necessitates strong relationships as the cornerstone of quality (OECD, 2021) yet offers scarce guidance regarding the essence and realities of such unfolding relationships. The dynamic interplay between advancing communications and emotional tenets of care in professional contexts are largely assumed to be attainable everyday occurrences with few questioning the reality of its enactment.

## The Study

An ethnographic methodology comprising observations (written and video), interviews with parents, and reflective dialogues with baby room educators via Video Interaction Dialogue Model (Guard, 2023), was employed. Theoretically framed by Friedrich Froebel's principles of early education (Froebel Trust, 2025), Bakhtin's notion of Dialogism (Bakhtin, 1986, 1990) and Hedegaard's (2009) Wholeness approach arising from a Cultural Historical perspective (Hedegaard & Fleer, 2008), the study sought to examine the emerging communication narratives between baby and educators, and the baby's role within these encounters. Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee at the university where the study took place. Analysis of data was managed through research protocol analysis (Hedegaard & Fleer, 2008) and constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). A wide range of ethnographic data documented how babies engaged in intentional communications to connect with and sustain relational connections with educators.

The article will now briefly examine two of the theoretical influences that underpin the formation of Adagio interactions.

## Unity and Connectedness

Froebel's principles of early education heavily influenced the genesis of the project. Specifically, the principles, unity and connectedness, were interwoven into all aspects and remained traceable in the findings. Through a contemporary application, Bruce (2021) reaffirms Froebel's message of seeing unity linked to the child's emerging concept of self. Unity is about the individual learning how they are connected to all aspects of the world, the emotional and physical spaces and linking "learning through and with others and relationships with matters of the universe" (Bruce, 2021, pp. 33-34). Young children move towards a place of unity when they develop their human spirit through the acquisition of freedom and independence. Froebel makes explicit and recurrent reference to the role of belonging and identity in family contexts, citing love and respect to drive forward the child's place in the world (Froebel, in Lilley, 1967). Such notions inform our contemporary application of Froebelian early childhood philosophy (Bloch, 2023; Bruce et al., 2023).

In the context of this study, unity is visible in the ways in which babies and educators connect deeply in everyday practices. The more frequent and wide ranging these encounters, the more the "inner life" of the child is aroused (Froebel, in Lilley, 1967, p. 76). Developing a relational history rooted in *being with* (Stern, 2002) each other promotes an enduring bond that has potential to strengthen the child's sense of belonging and respect the great significance of their early communication expressions.

## Dialogism

Bakhtin's (1986) ontological concept of dialogism enriches understanding of early relationships, particularly when thinking about communicative musicality. Theoretically, early dialogic encounters are understood to influence the child's value in their

own self, constructing "his personality from outside" and increasing awareness of himself as a "something" (Bakhtin, 1990, p. 50). Like Malloch (1999), a Bakhtinian perspective asserts, every interaction develops from the sediments of "language crumbs" (White, 2015, p. 69) learnt from previous social exchange, which informs its emerging narrative structure. Therefore, each communication feeds into the continuum of connection in early childhood and shapes the next. Similar to contemporary developmental science, and Froebelian philosophy, dialogism points to the baby's innate desire to perform social acts of bonding observable in the gestures, expressions, utterances, emotions, laughter and silences that unfold through engagement with social partners. Bakhtin (1986) stresses the individuality of each child's emerging chain of communication, in essence, seeking to script themselves a space in social environments and intentionally associate themselves with others. Essentially, the visibility of social acts relies heavily on being received or answered by a social partner. Bakhtin makes explicit reference to the moral responsibility of 'the other' to answer the authored advances. Unfolding answerability and authorship between two creates a unique framing for dialogic exchange where we can 'linger intently' (Bakhtin, 1990, p. 64) in togetherness. It is through such lingering the baby can experience the affectionate tones of love associated with being with others in a mutual dialogic act and learns his place in the world (Bakhtin, 1990; White, 2015).

## Findings

The project generated a range of findings, some of which have been documented in other papers (Guard, 2023a; Guard, 2023b; Guard, 2024). This article focuses specifically on two key findings to illustrate how the concept of Adagio Interactions came to be.

### Hurried Care Routines

Many of the interactions between babies and educators recorded were hurried, transient, fragile, and often disconnected. This aligns with findings from similar studies (Goouch & Powell, 2013). There was little space or opportunity for babies to repair and reconnect their relationships with educators due to the pace and erratic rhythm of encounters.

The way temporal dimensions shaped interactions was particularly heightened during care routines such as sleep and mealtimes. Efficiency and haste were replete across all data sets and appeared to permeate every aspect of routine caregiving. Though its origins seemed less distinct, possibly driven by the need to work 'ever faster' (Clark, 2022) or maintain presumed professional duties.

Educator dialogue captured Alma's reflections,

> *I think mealtimes are quite an important social time where you can sit. Well, where you 'should be able' to sit and chat, like you do at home. So why is it not done here too... I suppose it is a busy time.*

Here, possibly for the first time, Alma begins to question the purpose of mealtime routines. Offering social spaces for babies to engage in authentic 'chatter' with adults sits firmly within Alma's professional values, though cannot always be achieved due to 'busyness' and other priorities. Whilst a rhythm is evident in the day, the tempo of such pace sits uncomfortably with Alma, and she begins a professional journey of reflection as she continues to think deeply about other aspects of care routines.

One video clip captured a sharp contrast of caregiving practices

***Image 1.*** *The urgency to sleep – educator physicality embodying speed and disconnection from the children which prolonged settling.*

during sleep routines. Though difficult to determine from **image 1**, adult voices, background noise and significant physical movement of adults and children seemed to directly contrast the intention of a calm sleep environment.

An entry in my own researcher field diary captures the visceral rippling of hurried sleep routines on the environment.

> *My whole body is tense. The way they are rubbing the children's backs so hastily raises anxiety in me, and I think back to settling my own children and the moments of closeness and being snuggled up with them at home. This is not a calm, sleep environment, I can feel the children's emotions and see the desperation in the staff body language to get the children to sleep so they can go on lunch. I feel so uncomfortable that the babies are experiencing this... . Field Diary, 09/10/2019*

Alma notes her own physicality embodying speed and disconnection from the children which was paradoxical during sleep times.

> *There is a lot of noise going on, too much noise, we shouldn't be talking that loud, really.*
>
> *She's lost that contact with me; she's come right up to me to turn round to see me... It's that moment I take my hand off her, she's moving towards me.*

She also reflects on how her own physicality influences the baby's experience of the encounter.

> *I have changed my tempo, or maybe she's ready to settle. I am much slower now. She's settling. I am quite rocky at first. I stroked her head slower than back. I am much calmer and smoother. Yeh, I never looked at this before. This kind of closeness doesn't happen, not even in nappy changes. It's nice to see.*

Making links between slowing practice to release space to 'be with' the babies is an important realisation for educators. The video dialogue also brought about an unsettling realisation that such moments are infrequently attained or situated within spaces that are hard to reach when juggling professional responsibilities. Froebel believed that the growth of relationships must be the educator's guiding motivation, and with this comes uncomfortable reflection. Kalliala (2011) notes educators who do not really 'see' the child's subtle offerings are not fulfilling their pedagogical responsibility. On

the contrary, in Alma's case, viewing the video footage so palpably resulted in a transformative consciousness to enact adjusted practices to reconnect with her deep-rooted values and beliefs about the purpose of early education.

## Being a Slow and Still Presence with Babies

Data revealed how educators felt they were not afforded enough pedagogical time to 'be with babies' for sustained interactions. An inconsistency between organisational demand and professional aspiration for greater interactional time existed, with one educator claiming such communications were not viewed as 'sacred' or important. Comparably, others reflected that if they paused to extend interactions with babies, they felt they were perceived by others not to be 'not working hard enough'.

Whilst time rich interactions in the data sets were limited, those captured did offer hope and illustrate unfolding storytelling, engaging emotions and reciprocity. Characterised as slower, intimate, playful and reciprocal in formation, the encounters often engaged the use of affectionate touch and humour, which intensified as time went on. Educators were authentically emotionally and physically present, with few other distractions and in turn, babies were seen to be confident, animated and engage higher levels of communicative and emotional maturity.

Educator Clare reflects,

> *I think there is just something special about the extra contact with them, being able to feel that you are actually there with them.*

She goes on,

> *...just taking that moment just to 'take them in' because every day is just so hectic, you don't have much time to have those slow, still moments. It is important.*

***Image 2.*** *There is something special when you pause to 'take them in'.*

It was in the moments of slowness that companionship depicted in **image 2**, deep respect, and attunedness to one another's intentions was visible. Markedly, the interactions documented in this study did not arise from routine caregiving such as nappy changing or mealtimes (although the author notes the rich potential during these encounters, see Bussey et al., 2021, for an example) but arose either during spontaneous, authentic play episodes or occasional sleep routines. Babies would often take initiative, and the educator would pause and respond, either by mirroring or extending the encounter in new ways such as affectionate touch, e.g. tickling or singing. The interactions were simple, requiring little or no equipment other than the educator themselves.

> *'It's a nice feeling. It just felt like something very simple and really silly. Like, there was no equipment...no toys, no nothing and she seemed like she wanted to just talk, and I talked back, and that was it!'*

***Image 3.*** *The simplicity of interactions – 'just us'*

Educators took pride in their practice when reviewing footage of animated and physical vitality.

> *... he has my undivided attention ... I love that, it's lovely. Look at his little face.*

Bakhtin's (1990) reflections on emerging dialogism is helpful to understand the journey the baby and educator experience.

> *... there is an equally profound difference between my inner experience of my own body and the recognition of its outer value by other people-my right to the loving acceptance or recognition of my exterior by others: this recognition or acceptance descends on me from others like a gift...* (p.49)

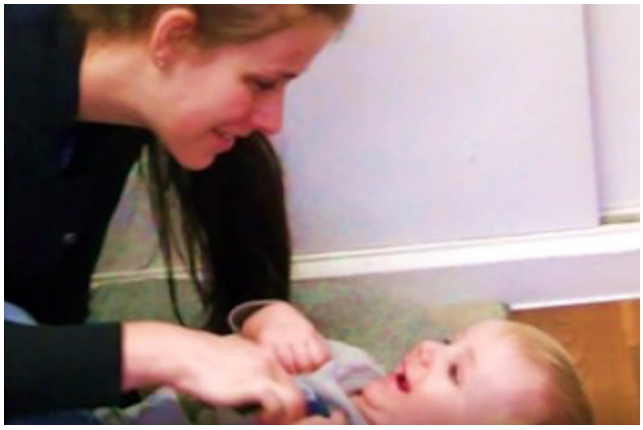

***Image 4.*** *'Look at his little face' - Playful togetherness comprising affectionate touch and humour characterises adagio interactions.*

Gifting focused attention stimulated a 'vitality' (Stern, 1985) in the babies and, in parallel, elevated educator confidence to extend the interaction. Both social partners were motivated to retain closeness, to provoke and to invite the other into further engagement. Babies, for example, intentionally placed their hands on educators if there was indication that they may be drawn away, even momentarily.

Consistent across the extended interactions captured were the correlation between time and increased communication complexity. The longer the interaction went on, the more interconnected the baby's communication patterns become, and the more coordinated the emerging story became.

## The Beating Rhythm of Adagio Interactions

**Why the term Adagio?**

An established Italian term in several artistic areas, including music and dance, its application beyond the creative arts is minimal. Adagio's English translation is 'to slow' and be 'at ease'. In music *adagio* characterises a slowing tempo, marking a change in melody contrasting faster, allegro concerto. With origins going back over 400 years, it offers structure to musical expression and fusion of segments and tempo. Adagio contours the 'music-time' relationship which commands a harmonious and calm unity within a musical piece, which is important to its relevance to this study. Todi (2020) suggests adagio evokes sensory moments of intense gravity, which can be both emotive and serene, aligning to the emotional-volitional tones of love (Bakhtin, 1990) traceable in interactions documented in this study. In choreographic terms, adagio represents a succession of movements and transformation of artistic line and form. Engaging the whole-body, adagio can be achieved through 'natural gesture' and 'simplicity of movements' (Todi, 2020), allowing for synchronised movement and improvisation in preparation and performance. Usually performed on stage by two partners moving in 'perfect harmony' who engage a succession of slow but rhythmic movements. Historically, the adagio became an essential part of soloistic duets, the partner elevating and extending the movement potential of the first dancer.

Very little has been written about adagio as a concept, with Todi (2020) the only contemporary publication drawing attention to its origin. Todi (2020) notes how the term transports between artistic areas, and I propose it can transcend the early education sphere as a valuable pedagogical construct for relational care. It aligns closely to the need for slow and achieving a sense of 'timefullness' (Clark, 2022; Tovey, 2017) and harmonious connection. Its chorographical application is particularly helpful to visualise emergent communication narratives comprising rhythmic movements and responses to each other. Discernible is the way adagio is performed as a duet, one partner reliant upon the other, corresponding with Bakhtin's (1990) moral answerability during dialogic encounters and Froebel's concept of unity and connectedness (Bruce, 2021).

## The Characteristics of Adagio Interactions

Adagio interactions arise in the most ordinary of circumstances but can have an extraordinary influence on the child's wellbeing and learning in early childhood education. This requires educators to be conscious of how they form, extend and sustain communications with children to develop a continuum of connection and inform emerging relationships. Through moments of adagio rich encounters, the educator consciously slows their pace of practice to tune into, engage with and respond to the baby's communication cues. Through reading the baby's intentions, the educator and baby enter a narrative of unique togetherness where a distinct and rhythmic structure unfolds through playful, intimate and intentional acts. The back and forth 'serve and return' (Center on the Developing Child, 2019) exchange can be explicitly visible, or the encounter might comprise greater subtlety of soft touch and physical closeness. Repeated unions, overtime strengthens potential for strong relational connections to form resulting in the child and educator feeling a sense of unity and validation.

Adagio comprises several components (beats) which, when achieved, promotes rich relational pedagogy where the child takes on a leading role. The beats of **P**resence, **R**hythm, Intention, **M**ultimodality and **E**ase present the acronym **PRIME**, placing emphasis on how interactions and early relationship formation should be the leading component of early childhood pedagogies.

**Presence**

Being able to orient oneself emotionally and physically towards a relational encounter epitomises presence (Dalli et al., 2011; French, 2021). Being physically present long enough to establish opportunities for interaction and being emotionally available for deep connection are foundational. Educators in my study found they were often only fleetingly with babies, checking in, or moving between children or activity spaces, rather than establishing moments of stillness where just 'being' in proximity to the child felt enough. Companionship and demonstrating 'intersubjective awareness' (Malloch & Trevarthen, 2002) are essential to connecting with young children and co-constructing relationships. The roots of companionship are founded in the affectionate responsiveness and emotional attunement. Marwick (2016) refers to interpersonal emotional positioning to explain how supportive or unsupportive educators are during interactional moments. When educator emotional sensitivity informs interactions, these moments graduate to a new level, advancing communications and constructing strong, trusting relationships.

**Rhythmic and Respectful**

Rhythmic and respectful interactions offer potential to 'go on an adventure' together, to learn about how one another likes to interact, and establish a confidence in unity. This takes time and patience, and each interaction builds upon the other, a continuum of closeness that has potential to form a strong relationship (Mitchelmore et al., 2017). Trevarthen's (2018) words are helpful to envisage how rhythmic rituals emerge,

> *Eyes, head, hands and arms, and legs dance in harmony, and the mouth sings, inspired by the pulse of a secret melody that attracts and responds to affectionate companionship that supports actions and feelings of the whole body. (*p. 17)

Rhythm brings together temporal qualities and intense focus in the moment, it can arise intrinsically and join with others at times, necessitating adjustment to individual beats to join in sync (Mazokopaki & Kugiumutzakis, 2009). It is likely that during early joining of beats, rhythms may miss time or conflict with one another, and it is here that consistency in caregiving and perseverance is key. Establishing familiar rituals that are unique to each educator-baby dyad is essential in advancing the child's social and emotional confidence. As this forms, so too do the respectful pauses, attuned replies and evolving validation of each social partner. Each educator will bond in a slightly different way with every child, that is to be expected and only enriches relational pedagogy.

**Intentional**

Each social partner is viewed as an author who intentionally engages voice acts to bond with others (Bakhtin, 1991). From the baby's perspective, their intentional acts of voice draw their inner life into the outer world (Bruce, 2021) demonstrating their competence as social partners. Voice acts are always deliberate and intend to influence the social space (Guard, 2023). Intentions align to concepts of time, requiring each individual to learn the timing of the other's communication cues (Reddy, 2015). Educators are consciously aware of how they listen in and engage appropriate responses to validate the child's existence. Adagio interactions unfold with intention and assume a structured narrative unique to each dyad that can be revisited and expanded upon each time the baby and educator reunite. Time and space may differ, but the intentional relational history formed strengthens and intentional communications can become more complex and coordinated.

**Multimodal**

The structure of early dialogue foregrounds a range of communication modes corresponding with recognised research (Stern, 2002; Trevarthen, 1999; Trevarthen & Delafield-Butt, 2014; Wall et al., 2019). Coordinated communication patterns are visible through subtle eye gaze, physical movements, facial expressions, vocalisations and silences. The multimodality of adagio interactions can be subtle or explicit in the way it manifests. For example, encounters of 'stretched time' (Clark, 2022) comprise playfulness and humour, where both partners play an equal role in the unfolding episode. Or encounters might involve very close, slow and intimate proximity, for example being physically bonded through a cuddle or affectionate touch or gaze. The couple may be still or subtly swaying backwards and forwards. Adagio does not always have to endure verbal or obvious expression. Rather, the subtleties of gesture, gaze, silence and expression often foreground opportunity for animated, energetic and rhythmic play to evolve in line with the formation of trust and feeling secure with one another.

**Ease**

Feeling at ease with one another elevates each social partner's ability to calm and take pleasure in interactions. To feel at ease typically correlates with feeling confident enough to slow down and focus 'in the moment'. This does not mean adagio interactions have to be 'slow'. On the contrary, they may be highly intense, energetic and playful, but the educator remains at ease with child, rather than experiencing a sense of guilt that they have other pressing duties. Deliberately finding beats in the day for slower, relaxed interactions takes professional confidence and integrity. Educators must feel that their team 'has their back' and recognise the significance of being 'at ease' with children in moments of care, learning and playfulness. The entanglement of emotion, regulations, professional desire and intentions can often eclipse educators' capacity to find space to slow (Clark, 2022). Therefore, consciously affording space for adagio interactions may authentically unfold in the moment, or should organisational challenges ensue, educators can seek to plan structured time to enter adagio spaces. Thus, adagio can complement any pedagogical approach and enrich encounters for children and adults of all ages.

## Final Reflections

This article has introduced the concept of Adagio Interactions as having rich potential to strengthen relational encounters in early childhood education. The author is not naïve to the ever-changing challenges facing the early childhood sector internationally and recognises in other publications the cultural and political tensions that may overshadow opportunities for adagio to be successfully implemented (Guard, 2023a, Guard, 2023b, Guard, 2024). Nevertheless, the concept builds upon recognisable tenets of pedagogy and unites research disciplines drawing directly from infant psychology and early education. Adagio promotes authentic *being with* babies and young children, despite the international backdrop of increasing neoliberal agendas. The concept acts as a pedagogical tool for educators to feel they have permission to wallow in their social interactions with babies or source ways to plan time for intense interactional moments. Adagio takes early childhood practice back to its foundations, where close, reciprocal, respectful interactions foreground emergent pedagogies. The PRIME characteristics remind educators and policy makers of the tenets associated with forming and prioritising relational caregiving through rhythmic, sensitively timed and intentional togetherness.

> **"Through moments of adagio rich encounters, the educator consciously slows their pace of practice to tune into, engage with and respond to the baby's communication cues. Through reading the baby's intentions, the educator and baby enter a narrative of unique togetherness where a distinct and rhythmic structure unfolds through playful, intimate and intentional acts."**

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PEER REVIEWED

# **Planting the Seed:** Early Encounters with Art and Materials for Infants and Toddlers

**Dr Sarah Probine and Dr Rachel Denee**

This article reports findings from a qualitative case study exploring visual arts pedagogy for infants and toddlers in four early childhood education settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. Drawing on interviews, observations, and document analysis, the research examined how kaiako (teachers) designed and facilitated culturally responsive, intentional visual arts experiences. Findings highlight the importance of relational pedagogy, sustained engagement with rich materials, and teachers' views of infants and toddlers as capable, agentic learners. Teachers described their practice as a dynamic "dance" of stepping back to honour children's exploration and stepping forward to sensitively guide and extend. Organisational conditions, including leadership support and collaborative inquiry, were essential for embedding visual arts as a valued part of the curriculum. The study underscores the transformative potential of early visual arts experiences for fostering identity, wellbeing, and dispositions for learning and calls for strengthened guidance and professional development in this area.

## Introduction

This article introduces initial findings from a current research project examining infants' and toddlers' experiences of visual arts material exploration in early childhood education (ECE) in Aotearoa New Zealand. The study investigates how encounters with visual arts materials shape children's participation, meaning-making, and sense of self from their earliest experiences in ECE. By focusing on effective pedagogical practice, this research seeks to illuminate how visual arts can be meaningfully integrated into infant and toddler programmes to support holistic development, cultural identity, and a sense of belonging. *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) defines holistic development as encompassing "cognitive (hinengaro), physical (tinana), emotional (whatumanawa), spiritual (wairua), and social and cultural dimensions" (p. 19) and recognises these aspects are intrinsically intertwined.

Although there is growing recognition of infants and toddlers as capable, agentic learners, research on their engagement with visual arts remains limited, both in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally. Existing studies have largely focused on art museum contexts or informal parent–child interactions in community spaces (Danko-McGhee, 2023; Palmer et al., 2021). While these have offered insights into aesthetic experience and early meaning-making, there is less known about how visual arts are understood and enacted in ECE settings designed specifically for infants and toddlers.

Our earlier work identified significant gaps in kaiako (teacher) confidence and understanding around visual arts pedagogy in the early years. As a result, visual arts experiences for infants and toddlers were often underdeveloped, inconsistent, or missing altogether from daily programmes (Denee, 2024). This absence risks overlooking the potential of the arts to foster early communication, cultural connection, and a strong sense of self. When visual arts experiences are attuned to children's interests, cultural identities, and developmental needs, they can contribute powerfully to the construction of identity and community (Richards & Terreni, 2022; Wrightson & Heta-Lensen, 2013). In this study, we use the term "material exploration" to emphasise infants' and toddlers' sensory and process-based engagement with a wide range of visual arts materials. These early encounters are not focused on representation or end products, but rather on inquiry, experimentation, and relationship-building through materials.

In response, this study explores what effective, intentional visual arts pedagogy looks like for infants and toddlers in ECE settings. Through interviews, observations, and pedagogical documentation, we have examined how teachers design, interpret, and reflect on visual arts experiences with the youngest learners. Particular attention has been paid to the ways materials are offered, how children respond, and how documentation practices support reflection and planning. Ultimately, our research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of visual arts and material exploration and how these experiences can be integrated meaningfully into infant and toddler curricula. By illuminating the practices and thinking of kaiako in this space, we seek to support ongoing professional inquiry and offer new insights into the role of the arts in the lives of our youngest citizens.

## What the Visual Arts Offer as a Unique Learning Domain

Visual arts material exploration offers infants and toddlers unique opportunities for embodied, sensory-rich learning that cannot be replicated in other domains. Far from being passive or decorative, the visual arts engage the youngest learners holistically—through observation, movement, and touch (Lewin-Benham, 2023; Danko-McGhee, 2023), while also supporting the emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of development described in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017). Infants and toddlers explore the world not through abstract reasoning, but through their bodies. Their encounters with rich materials support sensory integration, proprioceptive awareness, and the development of fine motor skills (Lewin-Benham, 2023).

These interactions lay vital foundations for higher-order thinking, language, and planning by stimulating neural pathways during the brain's most formative years (Lewin-Benham, 2023). As movement and cognition occupy overlapping regions of the brain, material exploration supports not only physical development but also the ability to sequence actions, sustain focus, and develop dispositions such as perseverance and curiosity. Aesthetic, sensorial environments have also been linked to increased attention and inquiry-based learning (Danko-McGhee, 2023).

## How Visual Arts Experiences Support Learning and Development

Engagement with visual arts in the infant and toddler years supports a wide range of learning and development. These experiences foster communication, collaboration, cultural identity, and physical coordination, all of which are central to early development. Infants and toddlers are learning to express their ideas and emotions through many different modes or "languages." The visual arts offer a powerful communicative tool, particularly for children who are still developing verbal language. Exploring their thinking through mark-making, gesture, or manipulation of materials can help infants and toddlers externalise and share their ideas, while also supporting receptive and oral language development (Richards & Terreni, 2022; Visser, 2013). As Visser (2004) notes, even infants' earliest engagements with visual imagery are moments of visual literacy, which builds a foundation for symbolic thinking.

Visual arts experiences also promote investigation. As children test materials through trial and error, they explore cause and effect, patterns, and relationships, all key elements of early scientific thinking (Danko-McGhee, 2023; Richards & Terreni, 2022). These exploratory moments become collaborative opportunities when children engage in shared discovery, often communicating through gaze, gesture, or imitation before language emerges.

Engaging with visual arts also provides an environment for cultural expression, relationship and identity formation. Every culture holds rich visual traditions, and the visual arts offer an avenue for infants and toddlers to engage with and celebrate these (Heta-Lensen & Wrightson, 2019). Relational pedagogy recognises that children are born into connection and thrive through meaningful, reciprocal relationships—not only with adults, but with peers, environments, and materials (Cliffe & Solvason, 2023). Equally significant is the joy and meaning that creative experiences bring. For infants and toddlers, visual arts material exploration is not only a means of learning, it is a source of pleasure, relationships, and wellbeing.

## Challenges and Tensions

Despite the rich learning potential of visual arts for infants and toddlers, significant challenges persist in practice. Our earlier research identified that kaiako can lack confidence and understanding regarding visual arts in the early years, often leading to limited or absent experiences (Denee, 2024). Participants in Denee's (2024) study frequently described visual arts with infants and toddlers as "tricky," "challenging," or "limited." Some noted they did not maintain a dedicated art area for this age group, offering experiences only occasionally. One respondent explained that increasing toddler enrolment had shifted the team's focus "more toward other things such as safety and routines."

When visual arts are deprioritised or infrequent, children may miss out on rich opportunities for cultural expression, sensory engagement, and communication (Denee, 2024). Such limited provision may reflect narrow views of very young children as primarily in need of care and protection, rather than as capable, agentic participants in their own learning. Cheeseman (2017) challenges these constructions, advocating for pedagogies that position infants as initiators and protagonists in their encounters with the world. While relational pedagogy and care are foundational to infant and toddler education (Cliffe & Solvason, 2023; Sandilands, 2016), overemphasis on protection, routines, or hands-off philosophies can unintentionally limit agency, creative exploration, and the development of working theories (Denee, 2024; Salamon & Harrison, 2015). Agency refers to the capacity of infants and toddlers to act purposefully, make choices, and influence their experiences and interactions in ways that reflect their intentions and developing identities (Hedges, 2021). Such engagements support the development of working theories, which are the evolving ideas and understandings that children develop as they make sense of their experiences, test possibilities, and explore personally meaningful questions and interests (Hedges, 2022).

Curriculum guidance may also contribute to this tension. *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) affirms that all children are "competent and confident learners and communicators" (p. 5), and encourages infants' and toddlers' engagement with the visual arts, including mark-making, symbolic awareness, and sensory-rich materials. Sensory-rich materials are those that deeply engage infants' and toddlers' senses, inviting exploration through touch, sight, movement, and sometimes sound or smell, for example, clay or natural materials (Lewin-Benham, 2023). These references, however, are largely framed through a materials-based, child-led lens. For instance, the curriculum states that "toddlers have opportunities for active exploration and creative expression with the support, but not the interference, of kaiako" (p. 48). While well-intentioned, this framing may inadvertently diminish the teacher's role, casting kaiako as passive supporters rather than active co-constructors of learning. Without clearer guidance on the intentional, relational, and interpretive dimensions of visual arts pedagogy, kaiako may lack the confidence or clarity needed to offer rich, sustained arts experiences.

While existing literature focuses on what infants and toddlers gain from the arts, there is limited discussion of what intentional, meaningful visual arts pedagogy looks like in practice.

## Methods

This study employed a qualitative multiple case study approach to investigate meaningful and effective visual arts pedagogy for

infants and toddlers in four early childhood education (ECE) settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. Case study research is particularly well-suited to examining complex practices and generating rich, in-depth understandings of how phenomena unfold in real-world settings (Stake, 2013; Yin, 2014). This approach allowed us to explore the nuanced ways kaiako design, facilitate, and reflect on visual arts experiences with very young children.

Centres were purposively selected through the researchers' professional networks based on their demonstrated commitment to regularly including visual arts in the infant and toddler curriculum through relational, responsive pedagogies. This research has been designed to highlight the voices of practising teachers and leaders and examples of positive and effective pedagogical practices. Therefore, the participants and their centres have agreed to be named in this study, allowing their ideas and co-constructed knowledge to be attributed to them. The following table details the four settings and the participants:

| ECE service | Location | Participants |
|---|---|---|
| Little Doves Early Learning Centre | Auckland | Jaime, Mieke, Ruby, Sarah, Sonya and Heather |
| Real Kids Early Learning Centre | Auckland | Anita, Winoa, Louise, Cami, Mary, Mihee. |
| Hill Street Early Childhood Centre | Wellington | Claire, Sinead. |
| Daisies Early Education & Care Centre | Wellington | Hannah, Linda, Sarah, Cheri. |

***Table 1:*** *Participants and Settings*

Data collection was conducted over two months and involved multiple methods. At each site, semi-structured interviews were carried out with teachers and leaders to explore their practices and perceptions regarding visual arts pedagogy for the youngest children. Semi-structured interviews enable researchers to explore participants' experiences in their own words while allowing flexibility to pursue emerging themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interview questions focused on teachers' understandings of the role of visual arts, influences such as theories and philosophies, how they planned and facilitated experiences, and how they responded to infants' and toddlers' diverse cultural identities and ways of engaging with materials.

Observations were undertaken to document children's interactions with visual arts materials and the pedagogical strategies teachers used to support exploration. The children in the observed experiences were between 6 months and 2 years 6 months of age. Observations captured both planned experiences and spontaneous moments of engagement, providing insight into how visual arts were embedded within daily routines and relationships. Photographs, video clips, and detailed field notes were used to record contextual details, teacher-child interactions, and children's responses to materials (Stake, 2013).

Key documents were also collected and analysed, including centre philosophy statements, curriculum planning documents, and pedagogical documentation such as learning stories and wall displays. Document analysis helped triangulate findings and offered further understanding of how visual arts were positioned within each centre's culture, values, and curriculum priorities (Yin, 2014).

Data were coded inductively to identify patterns and themes across sites (Braun & Clarke, 2019), with attention to practices that fostered culturally responsive, sustained, and meaningful engagement. Throughout analysis, we aimed to foreground the voices of kaiako and the experiences of infants and toddlers to highlight the relational and contextual nature of visual arts pedagogy. Ultimately, these methods were designed to elicit rich descriptions and new insights into the transformative potential of visual arts as a foundational aspect of education for the youngest learners in Aotearoa New Zealand.

## Findings and Discussion

### A Foundation of Relational Pedagogy

Across all four settings, relational pedagogy was central to meaningful visual arts engagement with infants and toddlers. Kaiako emphasised the importance of knowing children well to be able to recognise moments of interest and offer responsive experiences with materials. As Mihee from Real Kids shared, "when they see a teacher who builds trusting relationships... that invites them to the experience... they know that it's safe to touch, safe to explore." Strong relationships with families also supported participation and a shared understanding of the value of arts-based learning. For example, Hannah from Daisies reflected, "we started a canvas with the parents, and then we let their tamariki add to it too... it was a nice way to enhance their belonging."

Relationships between kaiako were also vital. Shared philosophies and a collective belief in the value of visual arts enabled intentional, consistent practice. Mieke from Little Doves explained, "It's not just one teacher who values the arts, it's the whole team... we can go deeper with the children because we're all working toward the same thing." These relational commitments were informed by frameworks such as Resources for Infant Educators (RIE), Reggio Emilia, sociocultural theory, and bioecological perspectives, all of which emphasise the importance of strong, attuned relationships in early learning (Dalli et al., 2011; Lewin-Benham, 2023; Sandilands, 2016). These influences were evident in teachers' attentiveness to emotional wellbeing throughout visual arts experiences. Kaiako welcomed children onto their laps, noticed signs of sensory discomfort, and responded to children's non-verbal cues signalling readiness to end an experience.

***Figure 1.*** *Jaime from Little Doves offers security and presence, enabling toddlers to explore paint with confidence and curiosity.*

These relational commitments also included deep thinking about how to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi through bicultural practice. Teachers described how they wove Māori concepts and material choices into visual arts pedagogy in intentional ways. For example, the teaching team at Real Kids reflected,

> *We centre our practice around the concept of Te Taiao, the natural world, and Te Tumatauranga, the origins of knowledge. Resources such as clay, water, foliage, plants, and sand are natural, open-ended materials gathered from our local area. These materials are not only tactile and sensory-rich, but also deeply connected to our place, whakapapa, and community identity.*

This reflection illustrates how bicultural values can be reflected through relationships with place and can be meaningfully enacted through material choices and intentional arts pedagogy (Heta-Lensen & Wrightson, 2019).

Relational pedagogy is widely recognised as foundational in infant and toddler education (Cliffe & Solvason, 2023; Dalli et al., 2011). These findings suggest it also shapes how visual arts experiences unfold. When trust, respect, and cultural responsiveness are embedded in relationships with children, whānau, and colleagues, kaiako are more attuned to children's expressions, more confident in planning sustained experiences, and better positioned to advocate for the arts as a core part of early learning.

## An Image of Children as Competent Learners

Across all four settings, kaiako held a view of infants and toddlers as capable, curious, and deserving of meaningful, complex learning experiences. Rather than seeing very young children as passive recipients of care, teachers described them as "researchers" and "investigators" engaged in real-time exploration and theory-building. As Ruby, from Little Doves, explained:

> *Infants and toddlers have the right to these ways of playing and expressing themselves, to work through whatever their theories are at that time, researching as they are playing with visual arts mediums.*

***Figure 2.** Printmaking as inquiry: With kaiako support, toddlers at Daisies explore materials as researchers, building working theories through hands-on engagement.*

This image of the child was crucial in shaping pedagogical decision-making, particularly around the materials made available. Teachers selected resources not for their simplicity or ease of cleanup, but for their potential to provoke inquiry, extend thinking, and respond to children's interests. Rich, open-ended materials such as soft clay, fine sand, and quality drawing tools were chosen to support satisfying, sensory exploration and enable children to revisit ideas and build working theories through hands-on engagement. These findings reinforce that teachers' image of the child is foundational to curriculum decisions (Malaguzzi, 1994). Our findings suggest that when infants and toddlers are seen as capable learners, kaiako are more likely to offer expressive, sustained experiences that affirm children's agency and identity from the start.

## Teachers as Researchers

At each of the four participating settings, kaiako positioned themselves not only as facilitators of learning but as researchers alongside children. A strong culture of inquiry shaped teaching teams' approaches to visual arts, with kaiako regularly engaging in collegial dialogue to reflect critically on their values, decisions, and practices. Teachers questioned what effective visual arts pedagogy looks like in the infant and toddler years, and how their assumptions or habits might support, or limit, children's engagement. As Sarah at Little Doves explained,

> *We are always looking, through every inquiry, always looking to make sure that there is challenge and learning for the teachers as well as for the children. So, you want to be feeling like you're moving into new territory, so that you're just as curious and excited as the children are.*

This researcher stance was supported through pedagogical documentation, highly valued as a way to make learning visible and inform teaching. Teachers used documentation to revisit children's experiences, both to understand learning and to guide what might come next.

***Figure 3.** Louise from Real Kids carefully documents as Anita works with a small group of children.*

In these settings, planning was not formulaic, but a dynamic and thoughtful process. Teachers selected materials, introduced ideas, and offered support with intention, shaped by their evolving understanding of learning. As Oliveira-Formosinho and Peeters (2019) argue, documentation invites kaiako to see themselves and children as co-constructors of learning, fostering a participatory and agentic approach. These findings highlight teacher inquiry as a vital aspect of curriculum development, particularly in under-theorised areas such as visual arts with infants and toddlers.

## Organisational Conditions

Across all four settings, strong organisational structures enabled rich visual arts experiences for infants and toddlers. In particular, leadership that valued the arts played a pivotal role in making this work visible, viable, and valued. Affirming findings from our previous studies (Denee et al., 2024), centre leaders shaped routines, timetables, and systems that prioritised time for exploration and teacher collaboration. This included allocating non-contact time, scheduling regular meetings for pedagogical dialogue, and coordinating responsibilities so kaiako could remain present and responsive during arts experiences.

Mary, atelierista at Real Kids, described how these conditions were intentionally created:

> *We make time for it. We make space for it, and we put it into our day. And there's always a teacher assigned... You make the agreements with the adults in the room, and you make explicit the policies and procedures that go to programme delivery. I think we are also very lucky in the sense that [our leadership] understands that they're staffing for the curriculum.*

This collective commitment fostered collaborative teams who supported each other, whether through shared planning, documentation, or stepping in so others could remain engaged with children. All four services also identified above-ratio staffing as essential. None operated at the minimum 1:5 ratio, and each linked their ability to offer sustained visual arts learning to adequate staffing.

## The Physical Environment and Material Choices

The study showed that teachers made deliberate, responsive decisions about how visual arts experiences were offered through material choices and environmental arrangements. At Real Kids, kaiako integrated visual arts within the main classroom, enabling children to engage at their own pace and revisit materials throughout the day. Materials were abundant, reusable, and open-ended, supporting sustained exploration.

In contrast, Hill Street, Daisies, and Little Doves took a more structured approach, scheduling small-group sessions where two to five children worked closely with one or two teachers while others managed routines and other spaces. All settings also ensured open access to art materials alongside these planned experiences.

Across sites, teachers selected materials that invited deep inquiry and considered sustainability. As Cami, Centre Director at Real Kids, explained, "the materials are chosen for their quality and for the type of experience that you want to give children." Teachers integrated technology, created inviting atmospheres with music and lighting, and emphasised offering the same materials over time to build familiarity and skill. Sarah, Head Teacher at Daisies, noted this helps children "build relationships with the materials and then learn the purpose of how they could be used." As Hedges (2022) argues, curriculum that sustains children's evolving interests over time can foster metacognitive development and support the formation of learner identities grounded in curiosity, capability, and connection.

***Figure 4.*** *Claire from Hill Street models how to roll clay, inviting infants into sustained, sensory-rich material exploration.*

These practices reflected a shared commitment to designing rich, aesthetically engaging environments that honoured infants' and toddlers' capacities for inquiry. While previous research has often emphasised child-led, free-play exploration (Ministry of Education, 2017), this study highlights kaiako's active and nuanced role in balancing open-endedness with intentional guidance and support when offering materials in the ECE environment.

## Pedagogical Approaches to Support Sustained Engagement

Across all observations, we identified pedagogical practices that supported infants' and toddlers' deep engagement with visual arts materials. Teachers described this as a dynamic "dance" of stepping back to honour children's independent exploration and stepping forward to sensitively guide or extend. Claire from Hill Street likened teaching to being "an octopus with many tentacles," requiring flexibility, responsiveness, and the ability to offer new possibilities without imposing fixed outcomes. Mieke at Little Doves reflected,

> *We imitate a lot of what they do in response to their involvement and interactions... it becomes that reciprocal kind of dance where you make them eager to share more. You know, 'I can see you. I see what you're doing, and it's exciting to me.'*

These findings align with research emphasising the relational and co-constructed nature of early arts engagement (Danko-McGhee, 2023; Lewin-Benham, 2023; Richards & Terreni, 2022). They support Salamon and Harrison's (2015) argument that high-quality pedagogy balances autonomy with sensitive guidance and demonstrates how nuanced actions can foster sustained inquiry for infants and toddlers in Aotearoa New Zealand ECE contexts.

## Value of These Experiences for Infants and Toddlers

Teachers in this study articulated the profound value of visual arts experiences for infants and toddlers, describing them as foundational to identity, wellbeing, and lifelong learning. Claire, from Hill Street, expressed:

> *It fills the soul of a child ...we have an obligation to instil the arts early on so that they have different ways of experiencing and being a human being... If we can instil it now then hopefully children will keep valuing that.*

Across all settings, visual arts supported holistic development, nurturing children's sense of self, emotional expression, and connection with others. Dispositional learning was evident, as children showed confidence, perseverance, curiosity, and the ability to navigate uncertainty. Teachers observed delight and wonder as children explored how materials moved and changed in response to their actions. Through sustained engagement, they developed early working theories about materials and practised new techniques, such as grasping clay or using brushes. Visual arts supported communication and language development by offering opportunities for symbolic expression alongside spoken language. Learning was sensory-rich and embodied, strengthening motor coordination.

Mary, from Real Kids, reflected on the long-term impact of these experiences, noting that preschoolers who had engaged deeply with the arts showed confidence and skills that supported later learning. These findings echo research highlighting the multidimensional benefits of early visual arts (Danko-McGhee, 2023; Lewin-Benham, 2023) and reinforce the role of the arts in fostering identity, belonging, and capability from the earliest years.

## Implications and Conclusion

This study contributes new insights into the potential of visual arts experiences as a foundational aspect of early childhood education for infants and toddlers. Across all four settings, kaiako demonstrated that when visual arts are positioned as integral rather than peripheral, they can nurture children's identities, foster dispositions such as curiosity and perseverance, and strengthen relationships with people, places, and materials.

A key implication is the need to challenge persistent assumptions that very young children require primarily basic care rather than complex, expressive learning opportunities (Cheeseman, 2017; Salamon & Harrison, 2015). Our findings reinforce that infants and toddlers are capable, agentic learners who benefit from rich aesthetic environments and responsive, intentional pedagogy. This view aligns with the image of the child reflected in *Te Whāriki* as a competent and confident learner and communicator (Ministry of Education, 2017). As Sarah from Little Doves said,

> *Care is the curriculum, but care alone is not the curriculum. There's still plenty of scope for a really rich, wide curriculum for infants and toddlers, and that's what they deserve...*
>
> *I think sometimes, in fact, we risk limiting the lives of infants if we interpret the curriculum as care alone.*

To support this shift in thinking, kaiako need access to professional learning that builds confidence, deepens understanding, and supports sustained engagement in visual arts pedagogy. This could include collaborative inquiry within professional learning communities, hands-on experimentation with materials, and reflection on pedagogical documentation. Mentoring from experienced colleagues and time for slow, iterative learning were identified in this study and elsewhere (Denee et al., 2024) as particularly effective in helping teachers challenge assumptions and develop more intentional, arts-based approaches with infants and toddlers.

The study also highlights the importance of teacher inquiry and collective professional reflection in sustaining high-quality visual arts practice. When kaiako position themselves as researchers alongside children, they remain open to new possibilities and maintain a culture of curiosity and responsiveness (Probine et al., 2024). Leaders played a critical role in enabling this culture through supportive structures such as non-contact time, pedagogical documentation, and shared planning, aligning with Denee's (2018) research.

Another implication is the value of sustained engagement with materials over time. Rather than offering visual arts as isolated or occasional activities, teachers in this study created environments where infants and toddlers could return to materials, deepen their familiarity, and extend their working theories. This practice affirms the role of repetition and revisiting in building confidence, skill, and a sense of belonging (Hedges, 2022). Teachers interested in focusing on their visual arts practice with infants and toddlers could begin by considering how time could be reframed to enable this. As Clarke (2022) suggests, beginning by examining one aspect of time in the centre and making small shifts can lead to significant impacts for infants and toddlers' learning and wellbeing.

For policy and curriculum development, these findings suggest that clearer guidance is needed on the relational and interpretive dimensions of visual arts pedagogy. While *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) encourages open-ended, sensory-rich experiences, there is scope to more explicitly articulate the role of the kaiako as active in designing, provoking, and extending children's visual arts exploration. Strengthening professional learning opportunities in this area could build teacher confidence and ensure visual arts are consistently embedded in infant and toddler programmes (Denee et al., 2024).

In conclusion, visual arts experiences in the early years are not an optional extra but a vital part of how infants and toddlers come to know themselves and the world. By making space for these encounters, physically, relationally, and pedagogically, kaiako plant the seeds of lifelong curiosity, creativity, and connection.

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RESEARCH SUMMARY

# **'Listening' to Infants and Toddlers:** The Role of Mentalisation in Teaching Practice

**Melanie Audier**

As a teacher, I recognised that exploring mentalisation in my doctoral research could shine a light on a social-cognitive process that is utilised by many teachers instinctively but is not often discussed in our profession as a skill that could be further developed. I endeavoured to make these often-invisible practices visible by exploring how teachers experience and use mentalisation in their interactions with infants and toddlers.

Infant pedagogies consistently emphasise relational practice, emotional attunement, and sensitive, responsive caregiving as foundational to supporting children's holistic development (Brownlee, 2014; Mason, 2023; O'Toole et al., 2019). However, the complex social, emotional, and cognitive competencies required of teachers to enact these pedagogies are often understated in both policy and practice discourses. My research explored how early childhood teachers engaged in mentalisation — the social-cognitive process of interpreting one's own and others' thoughts, emotions, and intentions — in everyday teaching interactions with children under the age of 2. By better understanding how teachers mentalise in everyday practice, we can strengthen relational teaching approaches that support child wellbeing and learning from the earliest years.

Mentalisation has been well explored in psychology, but its application in early childhood education (ECE) settings remains underexamined. However, the limited research available suggests teachers utilise mentalisation regularly in interpretations of children's facial expressions, anticipating their behaviour, or adjusting a response based on individual needs. Emerging research in ECE has associated more frequent use of mentalisation skills in educators with a range of positive outcomes for children, including secure relationships, emotion regulation, social competence and the development of theory of mind (Andrews et al., 2020; Mata López et al., 2020). In ECE literature, these positive outcomes are more commonly discussed in relation to topics such as attunement, serve and return, self-regulation, relational pedagogies, and intentional teaching. The social-cognitive process of mentalisation is common across all of these practices, which highlights that while research specific to mentalisation in ECE environments is recent, it is possibly a foundational process that was assumed in earlier research or described with different terminology.

Apart from the research literature, there is also considerable implicit reference to mentalisation in policy documents relevant to ECE. For example, expectations for mentalisation-based practice can be observed throughout *Te Whāriki* in its guidance on observing cues and fostering respectful relationships (Audier et al., 2024; Ministry of Education, 2017). Furthermore, mentalisation plays a critical role in upholding children's rights, serving as the social-cognitive process through which educators interpret verbal and non-verbal cues to determine a child's best interests (Article 3) and to ensure their views are meaningfully considered (Article 12) in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989).

The methods I employed to capture teachers' experiences of mentalisation included video observations, video-stimulated recall (VSR), and interviews. Information about the research process was provided to all participants, and informed consent was obtained from both teachers and parents. Given the shared nature of the early childhood environment, complete anonymity for teacher participants could not be guaranteed; however, careful measures were taken to protect confidentiality and ensure that all published data respects participants' privacy. Video observations captured everyday moments between teachers and infants (exclusively in settings for children under 2 years). These were followed by video-stimulated recall, wherein teachers watched footage of their practice and reflected on what they had been thinking, feeling, or noticing in the moment. Finally, a semi-structured interview was conducted to determine teachers' beliefs and understandings of mentalisation in the context of their practice as well as more broadly. This combined process offered rich insights into the subtle, relational, and intentional work that takes place in teaching.

## Mentalisation in Practice

At its core, mentalisation is a process teachers utilise to 'keep minds in mind.' It involves noticing a child's cues (e.g., body language), imagining what the child might be thinking or feeling, and using that understanding to guide a sensitive and appropriate response. The following is an example that illustrates the iterative process of mentalisation as Sandy's interpretations of Quin's (23 months) communication inform her responses.

> *Quin picks up a cup and holding it out to Sandy, he says, "Da-we". Sandy responds by extending her hand. Quin*

*places the cup on her hand. "Thank you", Sandy says as she pulls the cup toward herself and adds, "Do you want me to hold it? I could put it here?" As she begins to place the cup on the table, Quin reaches for the cup again. "Do you want it next to you?" Sandy asks as she places the cup next to Quin. He pushes it away. Quin extends his hand toward the cup again, but this time with fingers extended wide. "Oh!" Sandy places the cup next to Quin, but he continues holding his hand out, rotating it to show Sandy the top of his hand that is marked with a dot. "You've got a dot", Sandy says, and then extends and rotates her hand in a similar way. "Look, I have a dot too", she says.*

This example demonstrated how Sandy's mentalisation informed her responsive interaction with Quin through careful observation, interpretation, and reinterpretation. Throughout the exchange, Sandy remained attentive to Quin's shifting focus, updating her understanding of his intention in real time – first responding to his request about the cup, then adjusting as his attention turned to a dot on his hand. She adapted both her actions (e.g., what she did with the cup) and her focus (e.g., shifting from the cup to his hand) in response to her interpretation of what he was trying to communicate.

During the VSR interview, Sandy reviewed the video footage of her practice and reflected on the interaction. She said,

> *He definitely wanted the cup there. I think that [I] was very much listening to him, and then he realised he had a dot on his hand. Then I was extending his language by showing that I had a dot on my hand.*

Her comment highlights how she understood 'listening' not only as hearing words, but as being attentive to embodied cues and shifts in intention. She then refers to extending Quin's language, which requires awareness of Quin's ongoing development that highlights the role of memory and reflection in mentalising practice. In this way, Sandy's responsiveness was grounded in the moment as well as informed by a broader understanding of Quin over time, resulting in an individualised interaction that supported Quin's social-cognitive learning.

Interactions and reflections such as this occurred consistently among the participants in my study. Teachers proactively learned about each child through observation, conversations with families, and collaborative team dialogue to help them effectively interpret cues, respond thoughtfully, and support children's learning. Further, mentalisation supported not only one-on-one interactions, but also inclusive group practices, such as acknowledging each child during a mealtime or supporting turn-taking in shared play.

In her interview, Sandy reflected on her interactions with the language of serve-and-return, which many teachers might be familiar with from Harvard's Center for the Developing Child ("Three Core Concepts in Early Development," 2020) and Professor Shonkoff (Shonkoff & Bales, 2011). Sandy stated, "It's very much [a] serve and return process where we [teachers] have got to be open to being returned". The value of examining these serve-and-return interactions through the magnifying glass of mentalisation is that it reveals the multifaceted and dynamic processes that are happening in real time. My research was also able to document that these processes are supported by previous learning and understanding of the child, their background (e.g., family and culture), and shared observations across the teaching team (collaborative practice).

## Implications of this Research

Understanding mentalisation as an integral part of teaching practice highlights the cognitive and emotional work teachers do to nurture secure, responsive relationships. It provides an opportunity to talk about practice in a way that recognises thoughtfulness and expertise behind intentional teaching practices.

When mentalisation is cultivated and prioritised, teachers are encouraged to observe more carefully and value relational knowledge. Becoming more aware of mentalisation processes can deepen reflective practice (i.e., personal reflection, team discussions, and professional learning conversations) through thoughtful consideration of children's underlying emotions and intentions.

While 'mentalisation' may sound like a technical term, it's something many early childhood teachers are already doing every day. Recognising and naming it provides additional language to discuss the relational heart of teaching and cultivation of a shared understanding of what high-quality, responsive ECE truly looks like. Teaching is not just about planning experiences or guiding behaviour; it's about building relationships wherein children feel seen, safe, and have their capabilities recognised. When teachers truly listen and hold children's minds in mind, they offer connection, respect, and the opportunity to be deeply understood.

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# Speaking Up for Tiny Humans

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**Toni Christie**

The benefits of attending good quality early childhood education for tamariki, their whānau, and wider society are well-documented and wide-reaching (Barnett, 2003; Dalli & White, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2008). Yet, we still must convince the public and people in power of our value to society.

As Minister for early childhood education, David Seymour has stated that he would like to see a 'thriving market' for our 'industry.' This clearly shows that he does not understand that early childhood education is a *profession* requiring and deserving adequate public investment for the public good provided.

Sadly, the deregulation of early childhood education will impact the future of Aotearoa disproportionately to the amount of 'savings' it might offer government. It is our responsibility to speak up.

## Advocacy for Children

Children have so little power over anything about their lives. They don't choose the family they are born into; the service where they attend early childhood education (ECE) or the kaiako who will directly care for and educate them; they don't decide how long they will attend their service each day; they don't get to vote for the political party that will best serve their interests.

*Advocacy* is the presentation of a position or a cause by argument rather than direct action (Kenny, 1999). *Agency* is the capacity of individuals to exert power and act swiftly in times of need. Early childhood teachers use their agency to raise the profession in the eyes of the public through strong leadership that produces positive outcomes (Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018).


***Figure 1.*** 1:4 make it law. *Passionate advocates Marc Battle and Max Christie join the Ketekete Mai Hikoi from Te Papa to Parliament in 2023.*

*Activism* is advocacy and agency that encompasses direct action and is used to influence policy, programme initiatives, and legislation (Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018).

Young children need advocates, agents and activists. As a teaching profession, early childhood teachers are in a powerful and privileged position to advocate on behalf of children, and we must do whatever is in our power to enable their voices to be heard.

## Advocacy for our profession

We can become desensitised to the politics in ECE because it seems we are treated as a perpetual political football, but this time it feels different. Between the recommendations from a regulatory review that downplay the importance of curriculum and qualifications, and the legislation passed under urgency that will alter the course of pay equity and pay parity, children and those who have chosen a career in early childhood have the most to lose.

We cannot leave it up to Minister Seymour to decide the future direction of our precious profession. We have fought hard for decades to align ourselves with other qualified teachers in the compulsory sector. Now, more than ever before, we must advocate and activate strongly against the erosion of our world-class ECE system in New Zealand.

## How Can We Make a Difference?

It is easy to feel overwhelmed or hopeless and just assume that our voice won't matter. But collectively our voices can be heard, and we can speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves.

Rodd (2013) says that early childhood leaders are required to be politically active to:

- Work proactively to inform governments about the needs and requirements of children and families
- Reinforce the crucial role of early childhood in promoting child and family wellbeing
- Highlight emerging issues and important concerns for those responsible for making decisions that support children and families in communities and society.

I was reminded recently by a colleague that even the use of the term 'teacher' is a political statement that reinforces our social standing within the community. Being intentional about the language we use to describe children, their learning, and our profession (as opposed to 'kids' who are 'cute' in our 'industry') impacts how others view our vital role as teachers in ECE services. Other ways we can advocate include:

- Contacting local media
- Signing petitions
- Contacting local members of parliament
- Letting our families and communities know how important a good quality early childhood experience is to the health and development of every human being.

## What Are the Messages We Want to Share When We Advocate?

There are three factors that we know from decades of research-based evidence make a difference to the quality of education and care experienced for children in their earliest years. These have been referred to in the literature as the 'iron triangle' of quality:

- **Good teacher to child ratios.** The minimum requirements in NZ are not acceptable, particularly for our 2–3-year-olds, which is why many providers operate to a much better standard. But not every service, which means that some of our infants, toddlers and young children will be experiencing toxic stress.


***Figure 2.*** What we are asking for is not unreasonable. *Toni Christie addresses a protest group from the steps of Parliament.*

- **Small group sizes.** There is no current regulation pertaining to group size, yet we know that smaller groups mean less stress and more attachment and quality interactions for children.
- **Qualified teachers.** We are plagued by a public perception that because anyone can be a parent then just anyone will do to 'babysit' young children. We value our unqualified kaiako who are supported by others in the team with more formalised knowledge and expertise. Previous strategic plans have always had a 100% qualified workforce as their end goal and our level of qualifications in ECE in Aotearoa is the envy of other countries, and this must remain our aspiration.

Other important messages we can share to support people's understanding of the importance of investment in ECE include:

- Economic evaluations consistently show that the benefits of public investment in ECE outweigh the costs. Economics professor James Heckman and others calculate that for every $1 spent in ECE, up to $16 is returned in future social costs.
- Teachers in ECE deserve fair and equitable pay for their significant contribution to a public good.
- The first 1,000 days of life will determine the quality of the next 32,000 (Morreau, 2016).
- We've been conditioned in ECE to be grateful for every crumb we are thrown. We're supposed to be content that we receive a meagre 14% of what is spent on education and yet the critical development happening in early childhood would suggest a far greater investment is warranted.
- ECE is a public good that has been systemically underfunded and undervalued. It feels as though our current government would like us to return to 50 years ago where we are just "nice people" who are prepared to be underpaid and undervalued, to raise other people's children while they go out to do 'real' work for 'real' pay.
- Unintended consequences arise when people who are not experts in ECE make the decisions for our sector instead of with us.

## Points of Importance When Dealing With Media

When we get the opportunity to speak with media:

- Remain composed. Passion mustn't spill over into anger or tears, or we lose the respect of our audience.
- Stick to the point. Steer the dialogue back to the few points you want to make clearly whenever it moves to less relevant issues.
- Keep it simple. The public do not have the same working knowledge of our complex sector.
- Slow down. Messages need to be delivered at a pace that can be understood.

## What We Urgently Need Now and into the Future for ECE in NZ

- Bi-partisan evidence-based reform that includes addressing our woefully inadequate minimum ratios and mandates group size and teacher qualifications.
- Adequate government investment to ensure the fair and equitable pay of early childhood teachers.
- An adequate workforce strategy. We don't entice more teachers by suggesting they needn't be qualified to teach.

***Figure 3.*** Giant toddler puppets. *We created these to make children visible in our advocacy.*

Stamopoulos and Barblett (2018) suggest as activists, early childhood leaders will be persistent in lobbying stakeholders, policymakers and politicians. They will become politically savvy, act as change agents and find other change agents, use the media and understand the political parameters of early childhood. Let's do exactly that with passion and courage on behalf of the tiny humans of Aotearoa.

Scan the QR code below to access a radio interview that highlights Toni Christie's advocacy in the media. Listen to Toni Christie speak to Kathryn Ryan on RNZ about the possible consequences of the proposed changes to regulations in ECE.

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# Seeing Infants and Toddlers as Heilala (High-Ranking Flowers): A Tongan Perspective

Dr Jeanne Teisina and Assoc Prof Maria Cooper

*"Oceania is us. We are the sea, we are the ocean, we must wake up to this ancient truth"*

*-Our sea of islands, Epeli Hau'ofa, 1994.*

Hau'ofa's (1994) words remind us that Pacific children enter our early childhood settings already connected and whole. Dr Jeanne Teisina (Hofoa, Vava'u), Tongan centre leader and co-researcher on our TLRI project exploring Pacific leadership in ECE, showed this during our interview *talanoa* (open talk) by describing infants and toddlers in her centre as *heilala* (a high-ranking flower in the Tongan culture), treasured and nestled within their families, languages, cultures, and places. What follows brings Jeanne's insights and my (Maria) reflections forward, organised by themes that arose during our *talanoa*. We provide simple English translations for the Tongan terms but acknowledge that their underlying meaning may not be fully conveyed in the English translation. This move allows us to uphold the integrity of the Tongan language while making it accessible to a broader audience.

## Infants and Toddlers as *Fānau* and *Heilala*

Jeanne began our talanoa with a firm belief that "children are not age bands but *fānau* (family members)." She elaborated,

> *We have a term that encapsulates all our children here: they are fānau, and our under twos, we call them heilala. The heilala is placed at the top of the hierarchy of kakala (fragrant garlands) within the Tongan culture to represent our most precious treasure.*

For Jeanne, this meant understanding children's connections to their families as a foundational starting point for teachers' roles and responsibilities in the centre.

For context, the *heilala*, Tonga's national flower, holds high-ranking status, and is the heart of the *kakala* or flower garlands that are gathered, strung, and gifted to honour someone. The beauty and scent of the *heilala* are associated with chiefly respect and blessings. Jeanne's use of *heilala* for infants and toddlers signalled a high regard and a commitment to care for them with *'ofa* (love), dignity, and respect. I sensed the depth of this concept, not simply because it is a Tongan cultural term, but because it symbolises how the youngest children are revered, welcomed, held, and cared for at *Akoteu Kato Kakala*, Jeanne's Tongan centre in South Auckland.

Jeanne's use of *fānau* and *heilala* together immediately placed dignity, respect, and relationships at the centre of her team's practices. She clarified that these terms do not reject Western labels but help "to contextualise things in a way that is meaningful for us." This consideration ensures babies are not just "in the under-twos room," but are seen and understood as people of status who arrive carrying their families and places with them.

Seeing infants and toddlers as *heilala* and part of a *fānau* suggests a deep value for relationship-building and nurturing, and the time needed to do this well. It stirs up images of welcoming each child by name, learning the story behind their name, and caring for them in ways that nurture these connections and identities. I found resonance between Jeanne's ideas and the increasing focus on slow pedagogy across the sector, an approach that seeks to reclaim time by focusing on the temporality of practice (e.g., Green & Clark, 2024). I also saw alignment with Matapo et al.'s (2023) *Pepe Meamea* framework, developed by Samoan scholars to ensure continuity in cultural well-being and belonging for Samoan infants and toddlers (*pepe meamea*) in Aotearoa. Both Jeanne and Matapo et al. (2023) emphasise the importance of ensuring Pacific children feel seen, heard, and valued, not as names on a list, but as *koloa* (treasures) whose connections and identities are foundational to their early childhood experiences.

## *Koloa* and *'Ofa*, Rituals and Beginnings

As our talanoa deepened, Jeanne often returned to the concepts of *koloa* (treasures) and *'ofa*(love). Her words held strong feeling: "This is the care and the love, the *'ofa* that we need to nurture the *heilala* with." Such ideas painted a picture of care and learning as inseparable, inherently relational, and shaped by cultural values. I reflected on how this perspective challenges the individualistic lens of learning and development that often dominates early childhood education (ECE) conversations. Indeed, Jeanne's perspective offers a Tongan lens for interpreting the principle of Kotahitanga-Holistic Development in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), where *aroha* (Māori: "love, compassion, empathy, affection", p. 66) is upheld as a guiding value, affirming the value of warm relationships and collective well-being.

The conceptualisation of *koloa* (treasures) became even clearer when Jeanne connected it to the cultural rituals surrounding the early life of a Tongan baby. She shared how much happens before a *pēpē* (baby) even arrives at the centre:

> The nuance of *koloa* is very deep. When we see our babies, we think about the name, the importance of the name they carry, and the ritual of how the father's sister, the *fahu* or *mehikitanga*, names the baby. There's also a ritual of ceremony known as the *fakatāpui*. Once a baby is born, there is a period of taboo. You're not allowed to take the baby anywhere outside of your home, except to the hospital, because it's very sacred. This is the time you build your relationship with your baby and your little family. And that nurturance, that period of time, certain rituals take place during that time until you unveil or remove that taboo. The first place you go to is church, so your baby can get blessed and baptised, and then you are allowed to take your baby outside of your home to other places. So that ritual of *fakatāpui*, which happens before the baby comes into the centre, is very important for us to be aware of and to respect and honour. Then, when you look after the *koloa*, you do the best you can for them, the best they deserve within your practice, including the village behind the babies that come into your care. This is why I always think about *fānau koloa* (family treasures), and its complexities and multiplicities.

Jeanne's description of the *fakatāpui* period, a sacred phase of protection and closeness after birth, highlights the importance of securing the bond between baby and family in recognition of the sacred familial connection. A newborn baby is considered *tapu* (sacred) in the Tongan culture. The spiritual ceremony of lifting the *tapu* marks the baby's transition to the wider world. I sat with these ideas, reflecting on how often children's transitions outside of a Tongan context are approached with the same care and reverence. Jeanne's perspective signals that children's relational worlds are already within them before they enter ECE. The teacher's role then becomes one of recognising and strengthening these connections, supporting each child's ability to thrive in ECE and beyond.

For Jeanne, *heilala* is not just about the child. It is about caring for the child with *'ofa* (love), viewing them as *koloa* (treasures), and recognising the *whakapapa* (Māori: genealogical links) and *kāinga* (Tongan: extended family/community) they bring with them as they enter ECE.

## From the *'Api* (Home) to the *'Api ako* (Centre)

Jeanne described recognising children's connections as *'alaha manongi* (searching for fragrance), adding, "This is what we think of when we look at our children." This idea suggests that centre practices seek out the essence of what is valuable. Jeanne's insights emphasise the need to listen, to ask, and to let family practices shape teaching practices in the centre. I see synergies between Jeanne's ideas and the concept of understanding family pedagogy and funds of knowledge, which focus on co-creating curriculum through meaningful teacher-family interactions (Lovatt et al., 2017). In practice, a family might prefer fewer teachers to hold their baby at first or request a quiet and calm space. Knowing they can bring cultural artefacts from home might provide reassurance for new parents and familiar and familial comfort for their baby. The key is to value these beginnings and the sacred connections between children and their families, embodying the principle of *Ngā Hononga*-Relationships in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017).

As centre leader, Jeanne values these beginnings by understanding the child's move from home (*'api*) to the centre (*'api ako*) as a handover of relationships, not just routines. "You start building the *vā* from the *'api*. And then you gift all of that to the *'api ako*." Through my Samoan lens, I wondered if this was about the relational space (*vā*) between people, which needs to be held and nurtured with care. Jeanne confirmed this. It seemed then, that the idea of gifting relationships, assuming that the work on these relationships will continue, goes beyond a transactional notion of relationships. It reframes transitions as shared relational work over time, rather than a one-time event.

## Leadership as Service and Legacy

When I asked Jeanne what guides her practice as a leader, she spoke about being present: "If there's anything, it's showing up for children and families, making sure that I can contribute to building a foundation of quality *ako* (Māori: teaching and learning) within their sense of Tongan identity." Her words revealed a quiet strength and genuine conviction for her work.

Jeanne's leadership reaches beyond the centre. She described standing alongside the families in practical ways, like running a workshop on saving money, helping with form-filling, or being a referee for their studies or a job. For her, these acts of service are not additional to her role; they are part of supporting families to thrive, ensuring their babies thrive. She added, "Weaving the *fe'unu* (joining strands) will ensure that they will never forget who they are," evoking an image of a weaver who holds and joins the strands, creating something strong, tightly connected, and long-lasting.

One of the driving forces behind Jeanne's leadership is living her mother's legacy. Jeanne views her own leadership as a natural extension of her mother's sacrifices and dedication to establishing the centre, which had humble beginnings in a garage in 1999:

> When you see what your mum has done, you know you are your mother's daughter. You've seen what she's done, the sweat and tears and the sacrifices she has made to get the centre up and running. It just lives through me like you are walking and trying to wear those big shoes, and no pressure about it. It's just naturally my calling.

This personal and intergenerational commitment to leadership is not about pressure but about returning to and building on the foundation her mother built. Jeanne's leadership is deeply personal and reflects a respect for her mother's work and the heart to carry it forward with a similar level of care and integrity.

Jeanne also acknowledged the tension of working within Aotearoa's ECE system, where much of what matters most to them - relationships, cultural identity, and language - can be hard to explain outside of practice "because we know they should be embedded in our daily practices." They are also hard to measure. "Often, when people are assessing the way we do our work, those things are not important to them, but it's important to the *fānau*, to the families, and therefore, it's important to us," she said. Jeanne's experiences seem especially relevant in the current political climate. When policy narrows its gaze to only what is measurable and separates learning from identity, it risks overlooking the very foundations of children's well-being and belonging. Jeanne adds that without understanding the nuanced and holistic concept of *fānau koloa* (family treasures),

babies can be reduced to "just a number" who "come through the door."

Her leadership approach to this challenge is practical and hopeful, reflecting her optimism even as she navigates tensions. Rather than over-explaining cultural nuance to ensure everyone fully understands, she shares just enough to help others see the value of their work. She explained, "At least one will get it, and then that person can continue to share it with the next," reminding me that learning can spread from person to person, a process she finds "very rewarding."

## Starting With Something Small

When I asked Jeanne what she would like non-Pacific leaders and teachers to consider for Tongan *heilala* in their centres, she commented: "Open your hearts, understand what *'ofa* means for our *heilala*." She emphasised, "It's small steps, building that understanding ... understanding where they're from ... approaching them with humility ... and starting by saying hello, *Mālō e lelei*." Jeanne was clear, "We're not wanting them to speak Tongan fully, but we can start with something small." In my view, these gestures of welcome tell families their identities, languages, and places are valued. Jeanne reiterated, "Once you open your heart and get to know the child and family, everything else will fall into place."

Returning to where we started, Hau'ofa's (1994) words also remind us that we are not alone when we act from who we are, as we are held in a large web of connections. Jeanne's *heilala* sits within this same way of thinking. The youngest children are not alone. They are treasured, valued, and held in high regard. They arrive already connected and whole. Our role in ECE is to recognise and strengthen those connections, welcome them with warmth and respect, and let them guide us. Jeanne put it simply: "*Heilala* come with their *whakapapa* (Māori: genealogical links) and all the richness of connections they bring. We begin there, we start with *'ofa* and stay with it."

For me, the core of Jeanne's message is that by embracing the relational connections and cultural identity of each *heilala*, and honouring the time they need for a positive transition between *'api* (home) and *'api ako* (centre), leaders and teachers can foster a strong(er) sense of identity, belonging and well-being (Teisina, 2021). This deeply relational work builds a robust foundation for ongoing learning and development (Lovatt et al., 2017; Teisina, 2021) and challenges those who underestimate the central role of culture in how Pacific people see the world, live their lives, and experience education.

Based on our *talanoa* (open talk), the following reflective questions invite leaders and teachers to reflect on how their practices can embrace Pacific *heilala*, their identities, and the relational connections and cultural foundations they bring into ECE centres:

- What philosophical words underpin your view and understanding of Pacific infants and toddlers, and what do those words ask of you?
- How do your everyday practices honour the sacredness of relationships (*vā*) and the connections Pacific children bring with them?
- How can you incorporate family stories, the meaning of children's names, and cultural practices into your documentation and transitions to ensure Pacific children and their families are seen and valued?
- How do your learning stories foreground nurturing connections with people and place, in addition to Pacific children's skills, knowledge, and attitudes? How could you make family practices and identity more visible in your documentation?
- For non-Pacific teachers, what Pacific (e.g., Tongan) greetings or phrases can you use daily with Pacific (e.g., Tongan) children and their families?

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## Tongan – English Glossary

| | |
|---|---|
| *'alaha manongi* | - search for fragrance |
| *'api* | - home |
| *'api ako* | - learning place/centre |
| *fahu or mehikitanga* | - father's sister/aunt |
| *fakatāpui* | - a period of sacred protection and later the lifting of that protection |
| *fānau* | - children/family members |
| *fānau koloa* | - family treasures |
| *fe'unu* | - joining strands |
| *fonua* | - placenta, land, kinship ties |
| *heilala* | - the highest-ranking flower, used here for infants and toddlers |
| *kāinga* | - extended family/community |
| *kakala* | - fragrant flower garlands |
| *koloa* | - treasures/valuables |
| *Mālō e lelei* | - Greetings |
| *'ofa* | - love and care in action |
| *pēpē* | - baby |
| *talanoa* | - open talk |
| *tapu* | - sacred |
| *vā* | - relational space |

EDITORIAL REVIEW:

# Reflections on Pedagogies of Care: A Shared Commitment Across Borders

**Dr Carrey Tik-Sze Siu, Assoc Prof Maria Cooper, Jean Rockel, Prof Mary Benson McMullen, and Dr Sacha Powell**

In a recent presentation based on our new book, *Pedagogies of care with one-year-olds: Exploring Froebelian connections in four countries* (Cooper et al., 2025), we offered the audience a nuanced exploration of care and education practices across four countries. Guided by Froebelian principles, we reflected on the main insights, unique challenges, and cultural specificities of caring for one-year-olds in early childhood group settings. This reflective article shares key learnings from that presentation and considers the implications for teachers (kaiako, practitioners, educators) working with infants and toddlers in New Zealand and worldwide.

## Introduction

What shapes pedagogies of care with one-year-olds? What do environments centred on pedagogical care with one-year-olds look like in different countries? These and similar questions have driven our research team since 2016, when we first came together with a shared concern – the often-overlooked role of the teacher in nurturing one-year-olds' learning and developmental journeys in caring, relational, and responsive ways.

What did we learn from our research with infant-toddler teachers in early childhood education (ECE) centres in Hong Kong, China (HK), Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ), the United States (US), and England (EN)? Despite differences in contexts, we found a unifying commitment to fostering autonomy, valuing childhood, and embracing the power of play. We explored these shared values through a unique methodology, LIVME (Layered Interpretation of Video-cued Multivocal Elicitation)(Cooper et al., 2022). This allowed for deep, dialogic engagement with teachers, families, and researchers across cultures. We drew on an understanding of culture as encompassing:

> *A broad spectrum of values, belief systems, social behaviours and norms that influence our perceptions, decisions and interactions. ... Culture is embedded in how we think and respond to others, permeating our everyday existence and influencing both our present actions and future intentions. (Cooper et al., 2025, p. 16)*

What also emerged was a kaleidoscopic view of pedagogies of care – similar in principle but distinct in practice. This metaphor, introduced by Sacha (EN), captures the dynamic interplay of cultural nuances, shared humanity, and Froebelian educational philosophy that shaped our project findings.

## Nurturing Autonomy: Freedom with Sensitive Guidance

Carrey's (HK) reflections on autonomy highlighted both convergence and divergence in practice. Across all four countries, teachers aimed to support one-year-olds to be autonomous learners. Yet, the

approach to promoting children's autonomy varied significantly.

In Hong Kong, autonomy was closely linked to self-care and responsibility. Children were encouraged to feed and dress themselves, sort their belongings, and engage in structured challenges. This approach, shaped by Confucian values, emphasised independence as a form of respect and a foundation for future learning.

In contrast, the approach in NZ, as shaped by the bicultural curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017), supported children's autonomy through exploration and relational guidance. A teacher sitting beside a child, gently expanding their play through questions, resonates with Froebel's idea of freedom with guidance. Here, autonomy was not about self-sufficiency alone but about supporting a child's agency within the context of their relationship.

These differences highlight the importance of cultural humility in early childhood care and education. Carrey (HK) noted that no single approach is superior; each reflects deeply held cultural beliefs and values. For teachers, this invites a reflective stance in considering how they understand children's autonomy in their context and how adult guidance can be both sensitive and empowering.

## Valuing Childhood: Being, Becoming, and Mana

Mary's (US) reflections on the Froebelian principle of *Valuing Childhood in Its Own Right* offered a powerful critique of outcome-driven thinking. In the US, she observed a tendency for teachers to prioritise future success, often at the expense of present-moment engagement. She argued that teaching ABCs and numbers to babies can risk overlooking the richness of being, a concept central to Froebel's philosophy.

In NZ, the concept of *mana* (spiritual power and prestige) provided a compelling counterpoint. As Maria (NZ) explained, a Māori perspective views *mana* as the inherent power and prestige each child carries, connected to their whakapapa (genealogical links) and cultural identity. *Valuing childhood,* then, means nurturing this *mana* through respectful, joyful relationships while remembering who and where children come from.

This perspective is echoed in *Te Whāriki*'s (MoE, 2017) emphasis on holistic development and the importance of cultural identity. It also resonates with Froebel's belief that each period of development is valuable in itself – not merely a preparation for the next. For teachers, this invites a shift from 'readiness' to presence – from preparing children for the future to honouring who they are now, in the present moment. It also calls for culturally responsive practices that recognise and uplift each child's unique contributions, capabilities, and heritage.

## Creativity and the Power of Symbols: Listening With Our Eyes

Jean's (NZ) reflections on creativity challenged conventional notions of artistic talent and introduced a broader, more inclusive view. Drawing on Froebelian principles and contemporary theorists, she described creativity as a process involving curiosity, imagination, originality, challenge, and problem-solving.

In the NZ ECE setting, this was vividly illustrated through children's embodied play – balancing on tyres, exploring movements, and developing working theories about the focus of their play with peers. Teachers played an essential role in preparing environments that invited exploration and in 'listening with our eyes as well as our ears' to children's cues.

This emphasis on embodied communication and symbolic representation aligns with Froebel's view of play as a medium for expressing inner thoughts and making meaning. It also highlights the importance of teacher responsiveness – being attuned to children's interests, emotions, relationships with peers, and emerging theories.

For teachers, Jean's (NZ) reflections offer a reminder that creativity is not confined to products of art activities. It is present in every moment of exploration, every gesture of curiosity, and every attempt to make sense of the world. Supporting creativity means creating environments for learning, challenge, possibility, safety, and flexibility.

## Play as Pedagogy: Cultural Interpretations and Shared Joy

Maria's (NZ) reflections on play revealed both universal appreciation and cultural variation. While the teachers in all four countries valued play for one-year-olds, their definitions and practices differed. In Hong Kong, structured activities with adult guidance were seen as one form of play, while in other contexts, adults expected play to be more child-led.

These differences were not merely pedagogical. They reflected deeper cultural beliefs about learning, time, and the role of teachers. In England, for instance, teachers emphasised the importance of unhurried time and quiet presence, allowing children to lead their play. In NZ, the Māori concept of ako – reciprocal teaching and learning – highlights that children, including babies, teach adults through play, not just the other way round.

Across all ECE settings, the environment played a central role. From urban high-rises in Hong Kong to community-connected nurseries in England, we found that the physical and social spaces shaped the play experiences of one-year-olds. Materials, resources, and access to nature varied, but the commitment to supporting meaningful play was a common goal.

For teachers, this points to the importance of contextual awareness. Supporting play means understanding local values, family expectations, and environmental possibilities. It also means recognising play as a fertile ground for learning, joy, and relationships.

## Unity and Diversity: Towards a Pedagogy of Care

Sacha's concluding reflections brought the threads together through Froebel's principle of Unity. The team's analysis of the many layers of data revealed that pedagogical practices often spanned multiple Froebelian principles, reinforcing the interconnectedness of all aspects of learning. Care, autonomy, creativity, and play were not separate domains but part of a unified whole.

At the same time, the cross-country study embraced diversity, recognising that pedagogies of care must be culturally responsive, critically reflective, and relationally grounded. The LIVME methodology we utilised in our work allowed for respectful exploration of commonalities and differences, while avoiding judgement and embracing complexity.

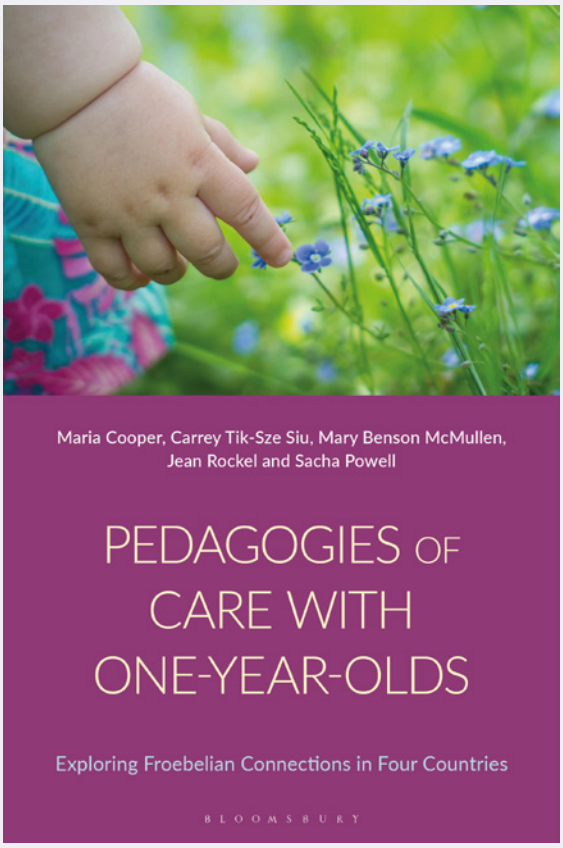
This dual commitment to unity and diversity offers a helpful framework. It invites us to see each child, no matter their age, as a whole person already connected to family, culture, and community.

It encourages us to consider designing learning experiences and environments of care that honour this wholeness. It also challenges us to reflect on their assumptions, to listen deeply, and to find ways to co-create curriculum with what one-year-olds and their families teach us.

## Implications for Practice with Infants and Toddlers

For teachers in NZ and around the world, we see this cross-cultural study as offering insights and affirmations that validate the importance of their role with infants and toddlers. While teachers worldwide have common values, they enact them in unique ways. Our study has shown us that societal goals, curriculum frameworks, and community priorities significantly shape care practices with one-year-olds in group settings.

Finally, our study reminds us of the value of embracing reflective practice with young children to question, listen to, and learn from children, families, and colleagues. This critical mindset supports co-creating educational environments and experiences because they are deeply caring, respectful, inclusive, and joyful.




## Book copies

Our newly published book, Pedagogies of care with one-year-olds: Exploring Froebelian connections in four countries, is available for purchase at the following site:

https://www.bloomsbury.com/in/pedagogies-of-care-with-oneyearolds-9781350367371/

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EDITORIAL REVIEW:

# Wellbeing for Infants and Toddlers in the Context of Early Childhood Education

Dr Andrea Delaune and
Assoc Prof Gloria Quinones

## Introduction

As researchers and advocates for wellbeing for infants and toddlers, we want to take the opportunity within this reflective piece to stress that *interdependence* is a crucial dimension of any conceptualisation of wellbeing within the early childhood educational context. The idea of interdependence of wellbeing is not new; this pairing of concepts has been part of the Aotearoa early childhood curriculum since 2017, in the phrase: "the wellbeing of each child is interdependent with the wellbeing of their kaiako, parents, and whānau" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 20). What is new is the increasing urgency that needs to be given to this conceptual dyad, particularly in light of a range of pressing issues and concerns that face infant and toddler wellbeing locally (such as the early childhood regulatory review) and globally (war, climate issues, and the cost-of-living crisis).

As co-editors of a recent international research collaboration focusing upon understanding and expanding the concept of wellbeing (Quinones & Delaune, 2025), we have had the privilege of seeing an international group of researchers represent complex relationships and balances of interdependence in multiple early childhood education contexts. These studies, which contribute to an edited collection of research titled *Wellbeing for infants and toddlers in education and care: International perspectives* have convinced us of the need for further examination of what interdependence of wellbeing might offer to infant and toddler pedagogies, policy development, and rights-based frameworks. We wish to share key learnings from a cross-analysis of the researchers' findings, to provoke new thinking about the notion of the interdependence of wellbeing, and hopefully inspire kaiako, educationalists, and researchers to consider what insights they might have to offer to this area of inquiry.

## Interdependent Wellbeing is Affective, With Flows of Energy From One to Another

There are dynamic flows of energy between infants/toddlers and others in the early childhood environment that affectively impact experiential feelings of wellbeing. While attunement is often strongly beneficial between the infant and the kaiako when positive feelings of wellbeing flow between one individual to another, attunement also leaves open spaces for the negative feelings related to excessive stress and tension to be transmitted (Manning-Morton, 2025). Touch is a key point of transmission, as touch has communicative dimensions to it (Manning-Morton, 2025), but equally, smiles, attentiveness, and eye-contact (or the lack thereof) can transmit energetic flows of wellbeing from one individual to another (Neder et al., 2025). This is a careful nuance of the interdependence of wellbeing, as it highlights the critical need for kaiako wellbeing to be carefully nurtured so that the flows of energy within the early childhood setting enhance feelings of wellbeing for all. We are alerted to the positive potentiality of simple practical strategies to enhance kaiako feelings of wellbeing, such as a daily yoga practice that aims to restore multiple dimensions of wellbeing, including physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing (O'Hara-Gregan et al., 2025), or the practice of the moral imagination through 'a lens of love' to enhance infant-kaiako relationships (Delaune, 2025). These practices reinforce the interdependent nature of wellbeing, as kaiako are afforded new insights into their own health and wellness, which in turn enhances their approaches to infant wellbeing in a positive cycle of recursive momentum.

These ideas are not news to most people who know about early childhood education, as it only takes walking into an early childhood setting to sense the flows of energy within the space and know whether you feel comfortable or uncomfortable. However, we reinforce the point that such feelings of comfort or discomfort are representative of the interdependent nature of wellbeing, which can be carefully considered as a space for development.

## Interdependent Wellbeing is Grounded in Trusting Relationships of Mutual Dependency

Individuals who can rely upon each other with trust and who know that they can depend upon each other when needed, contribute to experiences of wellbeing within the context of an early childhood setting. Gaches (2025) provides a sensitive and honest representation of infant and toddler teachers' work as 'juggling' which highlights the interdependence and reliance of teachers upon each other to ensure that wellbeing is enhanced for everyone. Their recognition of the need for both individual and collective strength for the system to function effectively is akin to what Owen (2024) describes as 'interdependent sentience', where individuals who are working individually, but are collectively reliant upon each other, develop and hone skills of interdependent awareness and flow of working that offers new understandings into the nature of group, as

well as individual, knowledge. Such interdependent sentience relies upon a strong foundation of knowledge about what constitutes wellbeing so that teachers can rely upon each other to mutually develop and produce feelings of positive wellbeing in the context of the early childhood setting (Araújo, 2025). But it is also constituted through the mutual dependence that infants have upon each other in their everyday relationships of communal activities (such as mealtime experiences), and the teachers' facilitation of these events (Stapleton et al., 2025). In Stapleton et al.'s (2025) study, they describe how a shift in mealtime practices, whilst initially generated from a concern about teacher stress, produced unexpected relationships of mutual dependence between infants who trusted each other as mealtime companions, sharing kai, a joke, a laugh, and the pleasurable experience of eating as a communal event.

Teachers are active participants in nurturing young children, giving focused attention to infants and supporting their wellbeing through relationships of interdependence. This interdependence emphasises the importance of recognising and responding to the emotional and developmental needs of young children. As Delaune (2025) notes, "love is the bridge between us and others so we can appreciate a more accurate understanding of who they are and how they deserve to be seen" (p. 98). Understanding young children's wellbeing as part of their good life is not only an emotional undertaking, but also an opportunity to value the interdependent relationships that teachers share with the children in their care.

## Interdependent Wellbeing Goes Beyond Human-Centric Relationships, and is Grounded in Time and Space.

Conceptualisations of wellbeing that expand beyond human-centric positioning and identify wellbeing as a complex nexus of relationships between people, places, and things in delicate balances of mutual dependence are highly represented by the researchers. Drawing on Karen Barad's concept of 'intra-connectivity,' wellbeing is seen as emerging through the ongoing, dynamic interrelationships between things, forces, and beings (Boyd & Tesar, 2025).

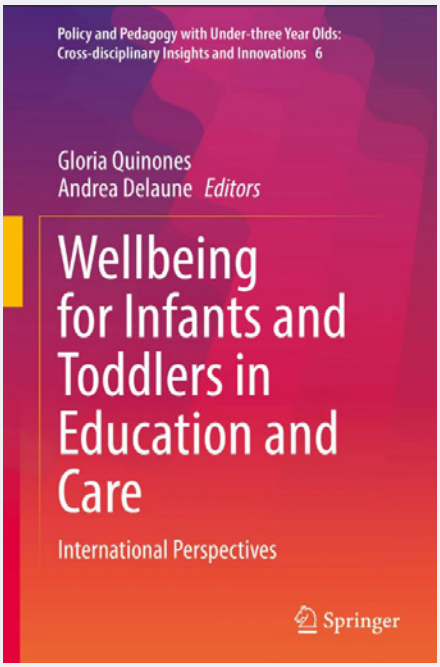
Wellbeing is also conceptualised as a metaphysical manifestation of immanence that brings a wide range of experiences – life, pedagogies, policies, teacher, toddler and all – together into complex relationality that resists compartmentalised, limiting, and linear arrangements of wellbeing (Reinertsen, 2025). Wellbeing is also conceptualised as complexities of rhythms and senses that are temporal in their nature, grounded in place, and constituting the infant in a 'person-thing-place' embodiment of shifting corporeality in the flow of time (Quinones, 2025). Infant-toddler wellbeing is supported through slowing down, taking time, and engaging in contemplation, which allow for deeper appreciation of our encounters with them— who they are and what they are becoming (Quinones, 2025). Wellbeing is also asserted to be constituted with the physical environment, through the objects of value that generate feelings of wellbeing for the infant (Norman, 2025; Sotiropoulou et al., 2025).

The central thread amongst these incredibly diverse conceptualisations is the interdependent nature of wellbeing, as it is constituted with, to, and through people, places, and things. Here, we reassert our claim made earlier that the representation of interdependent wellbeing as multidirectional, multifaceted, and constitutive of complex connections and directionalities should be advanced further to ensure these subtle distinctions in wellbeing are not lost. Interdependent wellbeing involves delicate nuances of connection and mutual dependence, which can enhance the appreciation of wellbeing from more than a theoretical positioning, influencing policy and practice-based positions as well.

## Concluding Thoughts

The interdependence of wellbeing is necessarily, profoundly, and paradoxically complex and affective, dissolving subjectivities and collectivising concepts such as autonomy, empowerment, inclusion, identity, knowing, and self-worth. Wellbeing becomes wellbeings, not a target for achievement and attainment because of targeted actions and prescribed practices, but woven together inclusively through an appreciation of infants and toddlers as metaphysical beings, and knowing knowers of affect, whilst equally appreciating the 'not-knowing' that is necessary for teachers, politicians, and other members of the community to possibilise (Epstein, 2019) for infant and toddler pedagogy, policy, and practice.

Wellbeing is part of a vibrant multiplicity of knowledges that can come together to resituate wellbeing as a destination somewhere in the future, as something we are always working towards, and *interdependent* wellbeing is sensitive to the relationships, mutual dependencies, and affective flows of energy within and beyond human-human connections. To consider the practicalities of interdependent wellbeing within the everyday life of the early childhood centre requires sensitivity to the presence and flows of wellbeing within moments as they occur throughout days with human and more than human others.




## Book copies

Our newly published book is available for purchase here:

https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-89376-6

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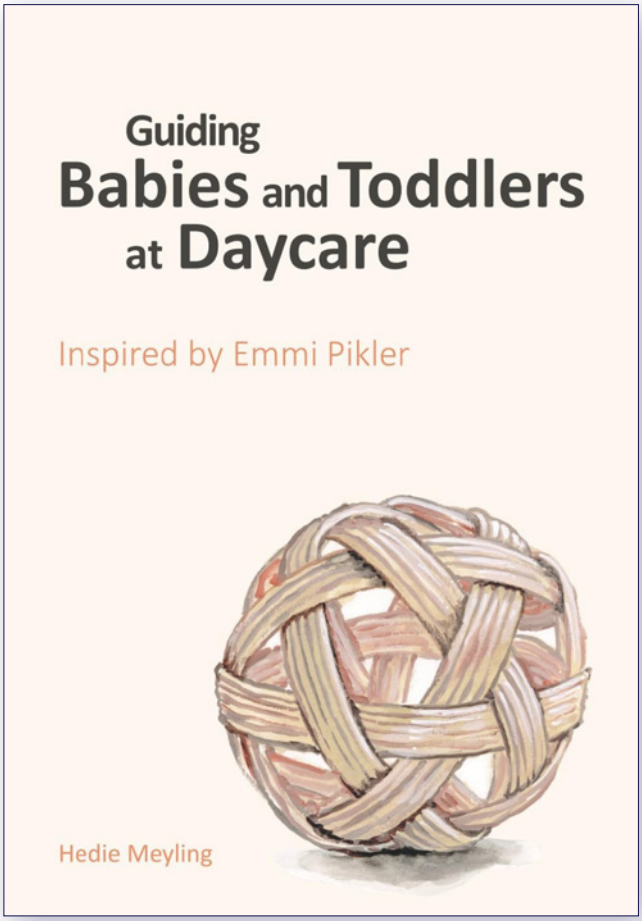
BOOK REVIEW

# Guiding Babies and Toddlers at Daycare: Inspired by Emmi Pikler by Hedie Meyling

Reviewed by Dr Justine O'Hara-Gregan




The name Emmi Pikler is familiar to many kaiako/teachers in Aotearoa, New Zealand and internationally, particularly those who work with infants and toddlers. Some know of Pikler primarily as the teacher and mentor of Magda Gerber and a key influence in the development of Gerber's Resources for Infant Educarers (RIE)/ Educaring® approach. Others may be aware of Pikler's work as a paediatrician in Hungary where she set up the Lóczy Residential Nursery in 1946 and developed her now renowned pedagogy of respect. A small number of kaiako/teachers in New Zealand have completed specialised professional learning and development in the Pikler approach; however, for many, their understandings have developed in a more piecemeal fashion.

*Guiding babies and toddlers at daycare: Inspired by Emmi Pikler* (2023) by Hedie Meyling provides valuable information about the Pikler approach, what it can look like in practice, and the theoretical perspectives that underpin the key principles of the approach. I note here that the use of 'daycare' is a term some kaiako/teachers would challenge in the New Zealand context, while recognising different terms are used internationally for services which provide care and education for young children. Although written in the context of the Netherlands, the book highlights key principles of Pikler's pedagogical approach which align well with the New Zealand national early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki*, and its learning outcomes that foreground "the mana of the child and the importance of respectful, reciprocal and responsive relationships" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 7).

Hedie Meyling was a young mother living in the Netherlands when she first learnt of Emmi Pikler's work. Pikler's view of the child, and the principles of autonomy, trust and respect at the heart of her pedagogy, resonated with Meyling so much that she founded the Emmi Pikler Foundation Netherlands in 1999 in order to share Pikler's vision more widely. Hedie Meyling has completed Pikler training in Budapest, Munich and Berlin and is also an Infant Mental Health Specialist and Experiential Family Therapist. She is part of the Pikler® Verband Europe and is a teacher of the Pikler® pedagogue training programme in the Netherlands. This book draws on Meyling's over 20 years of experience with the Pikler approach, and in it, she shares information and insights into the Pikler approach in practice as well as the theoretical perspective that underpins the approach.

*Guiding babies and toddlers at daycare: Inspired by Emmi Pikler* is divided into two parts. The first part of the book is written as a story told from the perspective of a young woman called Hannah who is completing an internship/practicum with the baby group in a small early childhood setting in the Netherlands, which is inspired by the pedagogy of Emmi Pikler. The second part of the book provides a theoretical perspective on the events described by Hannah in her narrative.

The book opens with a foreword by child psychologist Anna Tardos, the daughter of Emmi Pikler, and former president of the Hungarian Pikler Lóczy Association. Tardos endorses the book and highlights that its narrative style and practical examples bring Pikler's pedagogy to life. I agree with this, as the observations written by the fictitious 'Hannah, the new intern' are relatable and insightful. At the beginning of the narrative about her internship/practicum experience, Hannah highlights her frustration at being asked to spend the first week sitting and observing. Hannah's feeling of boredom, anger and offence that she was not allowed to do anything or play with the children is something I have also heard from a few early childhood students in Aotearoa, New Zealand, when they first begin a practicum experience in a Pikler-inspired early childhood setting. Like Hannah, these student teachers have commented that the teachers move really slowly and that the narrating by teachers of what the children are doing seems "a bit over the top." After learning more about the Pikler approach, like Hannah, most student teachers come to an appreciation of the rationale for taking time to slow down and observe, and see the value of this for their own practice, the relationships they build with children, and for the children's learning and development.

The first part of the book is written from Hannah's perspective as she observes a full day in the baby room of the centre at the end of her internship/practicum. Hannah's narrative focuses in detail on the experiences of eight children aged 5 to 24 months who attend the centre. A variety of situations unfold during the day, and each of these provides opportunities for discussion of how Emmi Pikler's approach can be applied in practice.

The central thread in the first part of the book is Hannah's 'story' of the day at the centre including conversations with parents and narration of what is happening for the children. For example,

> *Hello Bram, now you're in my arms... yes, mummy is still here. Mummy is putting your food in the fridge and your clothes in your basket. Today you've come here again to play and eat and sleep. I'm going to put you in the high playpen now. (Meyling, 2023, p. 21)*

Between sections of Hannah's narrative, text blocks are inserted to provide explanations of context and also of the Pikler approach and other ideas that are informing the pedagogy and practice of the teachers in the centre. For example,

> *According to Pikler, children can sit if they can get into and out of the sitting position by themselves. That is the moment when the child is ready to sit – physically, as the muscles and the vertebrae of the spine are sufficiently developed, as well as mentally and emotionally. (Meyling, 2023, p. 29)*

Interspersed throughout the narrative are also reflective prompts and questions directed at the reader, and related to what is happening in the narrative shared by Hannah. For example,

> *Question: As a child, did you also have places to retreat to – maybe secret ones? When did you go there? How does it feel to think back to this now? (Meyling, 2023, p. 106)*

The first part of the book is very accessible and engaging, and the 'characters' of the teachers, parents and children in Hannah's narrative and their behaviours and interactions may feel familiar to anyone who has worked in an early childhood setting. The strength of this book for me is how relatable it is while also providing such clear examples of Pikler-inspired pedagogy in a variety of 'everyday' scenarios. Concepts such as autonomy, relationships, self-regulation and trust are made concrete through the examples shared in Hannah's observation.

The second section of the book is titled "The Theoretical Perspective" and provides further explanation of the Pikler approach in relation to a range of topics, including settling in at daycare; free movement and stages of motor development; meaningful cooperation in care routines; assessment and self-assessment in early childhood settings; play as learning; and ergonomics for adults and children.

Section two concludes with a discussion of the *Pikler Convention on the Rights of Children in Childcare*. The ten rights set out are inspired by the *United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child* but specifically focus on what children in early childhood settings have the right to expect from the adults who care for them. While there are many areas of alignment with the principles and strands of *Te Whāriki*, e.g., the child's right to wellbeing, the importance of working in partnership with whānau (Ministry of Education, 2017), the Pikler Convention also offers opportunities for kaiako/teachers to reflect on their practice. For example, a teaching team might reflect on whether their practice supports children's "right to receive personal attention during their care and for their physical needs to be met, without any form of haste" (Meyling, 2023, p. 182).

*Guiding babies and toddlers at daycare: Inspired by Emmi Pikler* will have relevance to those who care for and educate infants and toddlers and who have an interest in learning more about the Pikler approach and its practical application. It is informative, accessible, and enjoyable to read.

## References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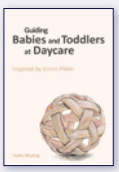


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If you wish to purchase a copy of *'Guiding babies and toddlers at daycare: Inspired by Emmi Pikler'*, Nurture People Charitable Trust has been granted distribution rights in Australasia.

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# List of Contributors

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**Dr Rachael S. Burke** is a Senior Lecturer in Education at Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology in Tauranga, where she teaches on the Master of Teaching (Early Childhood Education) programme. Rachael trained as a social anthropologist and she has conducted ethnographic research in Aotearoa, Japan and the Pacific. Her research interests include cross-cultural education, social justice, and implicit cultural practices in early childhood settings.

**Toni Christie** is the Director of the Childspace Early Childhood Institute in Wellington, NZ. She is passionate about early childhood education and children's rights and has authored several popular books for early childhood practitioners and leaders, including Leading with Heart and Soul, Respect and Relationships: a practical guide to secure connections in early childhood, and Rituals: making the everyday extraordinary in early childhood. Toni holds a Master of Education with merit from Victoria University in Wellington. She works in an advisory capacity with various early childhood institutions, delivers professional development worldwide, and has delivered significant guidance, consulting, and research projects for the New Zealand government. Toni enjoys her many roles in life as wife, mother, author, advocate, keynote speaker, marriage celebrant, Justice of the Peace, editor, musician, artist, and mentor. She loves to sing, dance, and play with her family, friends, and colleagues every day!

**Dr Maria Cooper** is an Associate Professor of early childhood education at the University of Auckland. She explores issues in infant-toddler pedagogy, educational leadership, and early years curriculum, including from diverse cultural perspectives. Maria is a co-editor of The First Years Journal, founding director of the Early Childhood Seminar Series, a fully registered teacher, and an experienced mentor.

**Dr Andrea Delaune** is a Senior Lecturer in early childhood education, at Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha | University of Canterbury. She has over twenty years of experience working in early childhood settings, most of these with infants and toddlers. Andrea's research is focussed upon pedagogical ethics, situating teaching as an ethical concern between teachers, children, and families. Her current research promotes the value of the moral imagination to enhance attentive pedagogy in early childhood education.

**Dr Rachel Denee** is a Lecturer in ECE at Te Herenga Waka, Victoria University of Wellington. Her research has focused on visual arts pedagogy, intentional teaching, professional learning, and leadership in early childhood contexts. Rachel has worked in various teaching and leadership roles across the early childhood sector for 25 years; this practical experience informs her academic research. Rachel is the pedagogical leader for Daisies Early Education & Care Centre in Wellington, NZ, and she is inspired by the excellent infant-toddler teachers there.

**Dr Caroline Guard** is an academic and consultant who currently works at the Department for Social Policy and Intervention, University of Oxford, England. She also works part time as an early childhood educator. Caroline's research focusses on the rights and voices of infants and toddlers, specifically focussing on early relationships, wellbeing and sense of belonging. Her research is influenced by the philosophical views of Frederich Froebel, Mikhail Bakhtin and Emmi Pikler. Following completion of her PhD in 2023, Caroline developed the concept 'Adagio Interactions' to promote 'being with' infants and toddlers in unhurried, child centred pedagogies.

**Dr Yo Heta-Lensen** has a background in critical theory and Kaupapa Māori as theory, and praxis. She has taught in bi-lingual and Māori immersion settings and has a teaching background that spans from early childhood through to tertiary education. As an experienced teacher educator, Yo is deeply interested in hauora and teacher wellbeing, and the role of the teacher in supporting learners to reach their potential. Her research background is in qualitative Kaupapa Māori research. Her research interests reside in transformative education, and include indigenous language revitalisation, sacred pedagogies and ecologies of care, social and environmental justice issues, indigenous education, Māori digital literacies and critical literacy for in early childhood. Yo is a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Culture and Society, at Te Wānanga Aronui o Tāmaki Makau Rau, Auckland University of Technology.

**Dr Mary Benson McMullen** is Professor of Early Childhood Education, Indiana University USA. She studies factors influencing healthy development and learning in birth-to-three-year-olds in group settings internationally and professionals' wellbeing. She passionately advocates for and teaches about respectful, responsive support for the wellbeing of children, families and early childhood professionals.

**Dr Justine O'Hara-Gregan** is a Professional Teaching Fellow at the University of Auckland teaching in early childhood initial teacher education. Justine has a particular interest in infant and toddler pedagogies and her doctoral research was focussed on the practice of mindful self-compassion to support EC teacher wellbeing.

**Jo Perry** is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at Manukau Institute of Technology, Auckland. She teaches in the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood Teaching). Jo's research interests are the relationships between the processes of teaching and learning, educational technologies, teaching in the 21st century, and research pedagogies. She has presented her research at national and international conferences.

**Dr Sacha Powell** is Chief Executive Officer of The Froebel Trust, which promotes the philosophy and principles of Friedrich Froebel in 21st century Early Years practice. Prior to working in the charity sector, she was Professor of Early Childhood Care and Education at Canterbury Christ Church University in England.

**Dr Sarah Probine** is a Senior Lecturer at Te Wānanga Aronui o Tāmaki Makau Rau, Auckland University of Technology. Her research interests centre on visual arts pedagogy and children's inquiry in early childhood education, with a particular focus on how these approaches can foster deep, collaborative, and creative learning. Sarah has led this research project since 2021. She is especially passionate about increasing the visibility of the rich, theoretically grounded work of early childhood kaiako in Aotearoa, and is committed to fostering meaningful connections, critical reflection, and innovation within the sector.

**Dr Gloria Quinones** is Associate Professor of Early Childhood at Monash University in Melbourne. Her research focuses on postqualitative approaches to education and research with very young children. She has published extensively on studies with babies and toddlers, with a particular emphasis on affect and embodiment.

**Jean Rockel**, QSM, is an Honorary Researcher at Auckland University. Jean has spent 21 years developing and lecturing in infant-education courses and participating in government policy initiatives. She is a strong advocate for infant teachers. Jean established and was the first editor of NZ Journal of Infant and Toddler Education.

**Dr Carrey Tik-Sze Siu** is a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand. Formerly she was Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education at the Education University of Hong Kong. She studies infant-toddler development in support of culturally responsive programmes for under 2s.

**Dr Jeanne Teisina** was born in Vava'u, Tonga. She was raised by her grandparents before moving to Aotearoa in 1995. Her doctoral study at AUT explored the concept of 'self' through Tongan philosophic thought. Her involvement in Tongan ECE as a leader-manager have drawn her attention to the cultural problems inherent in the regulatory context and curriculum frameworks of the New Zealand ECE sector. Jeanne is actively involved within her Kainga Ako community from ECE to tertiary education and is married with three daughters. She is currently Associate Investigator of a national TLRI research project exploring Pacific leadership in ECE.

**Dr Amanda White** completed her PhD at the University of Auckland. Amanda's doctoral research focused on early childhood communication and literacies, using video methods to explore children's multimodal story interactions. The findings of this study make an original contribution to our understandings of how parents and teachers interact with young children in diverse communities and offers evidence for the conceptualisation of infants and toddlers as multimodal storytellers and meaning makers. Prior to completing her PhD, Amanda worked as a speech-language therapist. She is now a Researcher | Kairangahau at the New Zealand Council of Educational Research (NZCER). Email amanda.white@nzcer.org.nz

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