NEW ZEALAND JOURNAL OF INFANT AND TODDLER EDUCATION

The first years

Ngā Tau Tuatahi



2026 | Volume 28 | Issue 1

Waipapa Taumata Rau
University of Auckland

The firstyears
Ngā Tau Tuatahi

Editors Collective
Maria Cooper, Kiri Gould, Justine O'Hara-Gregan

External Editorial Team Members
Louise Gorst, Helen Hedges, Jean Rockel (Honorary Editor), and Sue Stover

Guest Editors
Andrea Delaune and Gloria Quiñones

Peer Reviewed Journal

The First Years Ngā Tau Tuatahi is a peer reviewed journal, including two kinds of articles published: one quality assured by engagement with the editor and one quality assured through double blind-peer review. We welcome submissions of articles from researchers, academics, practitioners, and others interested in infant-toddler education and care. The editorial team may consider the provision of a mentor to offer support to new and emerging writers. The editors make the final decision regarding whether the manuscript is accepted for publication, before and after review, and may seek further advice from members of the external editorial team.

The First Years Ngā Tau Tuatahi journal publication is subject to the copyright provisions of Creative Commons (Attribution-NonCommercial) License. For full details of this license, please see here.

If you are interested in writing a piece for the journal, please read the information for contributors at www.auckland.ac.nz/first-years then send your contribution to firstyearsjournal@auckland.ac.nz

ISSN: 1175-0529



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: Emotional rights and relational wellbeing in the first years 4
by Dr Andrea Delaune and Assoc Prof Gloria Quiñones (Guest Editors)

Commentary: Celebrating 30 years of infants and toddlers in Te Whāriki 6
by Maria Cooper and Justine O'Hara-Gregan

Emotional labour of infant-toddler teachers 7
by Saba Javed and Andrea Delaune (peer reviewed)

He tītī huatahi: Following the uniqueness of each tamaiti as intentional teaching 12
by Roberta Carvalho, Michael Gaffney, Sonya Gaches, and Alex Gunn (peer reviewed)

The dilution of the lap: Educator-child ratios and relational presence in the toddler-kindergarten transition 17
by Gillian O'Connor (peer reviewed)

Imagining and responding to infants' emotional worlds: Teachers' mentalisation and the realisation of children's emotional rights 24
by Melanie Audier (peer reviewed)

Advocating for a specialised infant-toddler programme in initial teacher education 29
by Jean Rockel (peer reviewed)

Research summary: Education and care without recognition: Teaching assistants, the forgotten half of Chile's ECE workforce 35
by Felipe Godoy (peer reviewed)

Research summary: A relational reading of subjectification: Everyday care and the professional standing of infant and toddler educators 39
by Yan Peng (peer reviewed)

The First Years Journal Leader Interview Series: An interview with leader Tabbi Taylor-Harris 43
by Andrea Delaune

Editorial review: Being with babies: Establishing a sense of belonging in early childhood settings 46
by Amanda Norman and Caroline Guard

List of Contributors 50

EDITORIAL

Emotional Rights and Relational Wellbeing in the First Years

Dr Andrea Delaune and
Assoc Prof Gloria Quiñones (Guest Editors)







> **Infants and toddlers flourish when they are listened to, responded to, cared for, emotionally recognised, and supported within communities that value their humanity.”**

This special issue argues that infant and toddler wellbeing is not merely a developmental precursor to future success but a matter of present wellbeing for long-term flourishing, dignity, and emotional rights across the lifespan. The authors’ contributions to this special issue traverse diverse theoretical, empirical, conceptual, and practice-based contributions, collectively challenging individualised and developmentalist accounts of wellbeing, demonstrating instead that flourishing emerges through relationships. Infants and toddlers flourish when they are listened to, responded to, cared for, emotionally recognised, and supported within communities that value their humanity. The articles further demonstrate that such wellbeing and emotional rights depend not only on infants and toddlers themselves but also on the wellbeing, professional recognition, preparation, and working conditions of those who care for them.

There are several themes that emerge across the articles, which we would like to highlight as points for advocacy within early childhood education policy, particularly in the context of an upcoming election where change to conditional arrangements in infant and toddler education can be advanced.

Firstly, long-term wellbeing starts early in life, particularly through everyday relational encounters. Across the contributions, infant and toddler wellbeing ripples through everyday relationships. Whether through Carvalho and colleagues' exploration of care-full teaching, Norman and Guard's emphasis on "being with" babies, or Tabbi Taylor-Harris' reflections on interdependent wellbeing, the authors collectively highlight the significance of attuned, responsive, and emotionally available relationships in young children's lives. These papers challenge instrumental views of wellbeing as an outcome to be measured, instead illustrating how belonging, trust, emotional security, and agency emerge through countless moments of connection between children and those who care for them.

A second theme threaded through the special issue is the recognition of infants and toddlers as rights-bearing persons whose experiences, expressions, intentions, and emotions matter. Peng argues that children's emotional rights are realised when educators notice, interpret, and respond to infants' communicative gestures and expressions, and Audier highlights how teachers help infants and toddlers make sense of their emotions, develop emotional understanding, and express themselves, while O'Connor demonstrates how institutional structures can either support or constrain access to the relational conditions necessary for children to feel safe, heard, and valued. Across these contributions, emotional rights are not presented as abstract principles but as lived realities that depend upon recognition, participation, and responsive relationships.

Another thematic element arises through direct challenges to historical distinctions between care and education, specifically where authors argue that care itself constitutes an essential form of pedagogical and ethical practice. Godoy's examination of teaching assistants in Chile reveals how caring and teaching are inseparable in the everyday lives of young children. Rockel extends this argument by advocating for specialised infant-toddler teacher education, emphasising that working with the youngest children requires distinctive knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Together, these papers make visible forms of professional expertise that are frequently overlooked, arguing that care should be recognised not as a lesser activity but as a complex pedagogical practice through which children learn about themselves, others, and the world around them.

Finally, and potentially the most prevalent contribution made within this special issue, is the message that infant and toddler wellbeing is fundamentally interdependent. Children's opportunities to experience wellbeing, for longer-term flourishing, are inseparable from the wellbeing of educators, families, and the wider systems within which relationships occur. Javed and Delaune highlight the emotional labour undertaken by infant-toddler educators and the importance of recognising educators' emotional wellbeing as integral to their practice. O'Connor demonstrates how structural conditions such as educator-child ratios shape the possibilities for relational responsiveness, while Godoy reveals the consequences of failing to recognise and adequately support key members of the early childhood workforce. Rockel advocates for specialised preparation and professional learning, and Tabbi Taylor-Harris explicitly links children's emotional wellbeing to the wellbeing, confidence, and support available to their teachers. Taken together, these contributions suggest that flourishing is not an individual accomplishment but a collective achievement that depends upon policies, practices, relationships, and professional conditions that enable communities of care to thrive.

Collectively, the contributions in this special issue remind us that infants and toddlers are not simply future learners, future citizens, or future adults. They are people living lives in the present, with emotional rights, relationships, interests, aspirations, and ways of being that matter ***here and now***. Their wellbeing cannot be reduced to developmental outcomes or future competencies. Instead, they emerge through relationships characterised by responsiveness, belonging, emotional attunement, and care, which are inseparable from the wellbeing of those who care for them and from the structural conditions that support relational practice. Taken together, these contributions call for a renewed commitment to recognising infant and toddler education and care as pedagogical, emotional wellbeing as relational, and flourishing as a collective accomplishment that emerges within everyday early childhood settings.

Andrea: andrea.delaune@canterbury.ac.nz

Gloria: gloria.Quiñones@monash.edu

> **"Children's opportunities to experience wellbeing, for longer-term flourishing, are inseparable from the wellbeing of educators, families, and the wider systems within which relationships occur."**

COMMENTARY

Celebrating 30 Years of Infants and Toddlers in *Te Whāriki*

Maria Cooper and Justine O'Hara-Gregan





The recent *Education Gazette* issue celebrating 30 years of the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* has been a timely reminder of the taonga (treasure) that has guided Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood sector for three decades. It also prompted us to reflect on what *Te Whāriki* has meant for infants and toddlers, and how its inclusive approach continues to inform how we care for and educate our youngest children, in collaboration with families and communities.

At the core of *Te Whāriki* is a commitment to valuing every child. This commitment has ensured that infants and toddlers are given a recognised and respected place within the curriculum. *Te Whāriki* positions the first years as a time of meaningful learning and development, rather than just a preparation stage for future "real" learning. It recognises infants and toddlers as people and learners in the here and now, and as individuals with particular capabilities, goals, and ways of communicating and relating. The research base shows that, for infants, curriculum is fluid and enacted through warm, responsive relationships and in the identity-shaping moments of being comforted, held, fed, changed, listened to, sung with, and included. For toddlers, curriculum occurs through exploration, opportunities for developing independence and interdependence, and active participation with others. There is recognition in *Te Whāriki* that important foundational learning begins and deepens in relationships, and that even the youngest children can influence their own experiences.

Following its refresh in 2017, *Te Whāriki* continues to offer a humane account of what it means to learn and be well, and what is needed for this. *Te Whāriki* recognises that infants' and toddlers' learning and development cannot be meaningfully understood outside relationships with people, places, and things. Relational learning gives life and meaning to the curriculum's principles, strands, and learning outcomes for infants and toddlers. The centrality of relationships promoted in Te Whariki provides an enduring touchstone for kaiako, including teachers and other professionals, at a worrying time of rapid policy change. This period encompasses regulatory and funding reviews that affect the conditions of ECE provision, alongside renewed concerns and polarising arguments about what constitutes valued learning and "school readiness."

We are concerned that political agendas and the pursuit of votes appear to be taking precedence over the application of broad and rigorous educational research, which highlights the importance of valuing infants and toddlers for who they are, and who and what they bring to their early childhood settings. Any future move towards a narrower, more prescribed curriculum risks privileging adult control, prematurely introducing a schoolified curriculum, and standardising content that is inappropriate for the first years. Whose interests would such a shift serve? In our view, it would run counter to the research available, which provides strong evidence of infants' and toddlers' initiative and agency, their holistic ways of making sense of the world, and the deep relational learning central to an empowering early childhood experience.

More than ever, kaiako need to be critically aware of the policy environment, to pay close attention to how policy rhetoric shapes their roles and responsibilities, the conditions in which ECE is provided, and the curriculum possibilities for infants and toddlers. Kaiako must continue to act ethically and intentionally to uphold the openness and flexibility of *Te Whāriki* as a humane, responsive curriculum, while reflecting on what it means to be "accountable" to infants and toddlers, their families, and communities as compliance-based accountability and other pressures increase. Accountability is more than what we can measure, count, record, and compare. It also includes building and sustaining meaningful relationships and protecting children's right to rich and enriching learning experiences. We believe the sector's history of collective advocacy offers a solid foundation for continuing to keep all children, including our youngest, at the centre of our thinking and practice.

The stories shared in the *Education Gazette* anniversary issue provide an opportunity to pause and reflect. Celebrating 30 years of *Te Whāriki* is not just about looking back, but about restating our commitment to valuing the youngest children in education as we move into the next decade with hope. It is also a call to ensure that policy and funding decisions support, rather than compromise, the right of infants and toddlers, and of all children, to a curriculum that values childhood and is shaped by sound educational knowledge and evidence.

PEER REVIEWED

Emotional Labour of Infant-Toddler Teachers

Saba Javed and Andrea Delaune





This conceptual paper examines the centrality of emotional labour (EL) in the early childhood setting, particularly for teachers who are working with infants and toddlers. These teachers are continuously expected to manage, express, and regulate their emotions to meet relational and professional expectations. Martha Nussbaum's philosophical ideas, which reconceptualise emotions as highly cognitive, evaluative, intelligent, and essential for human wellbeing, provide a foundation for understanding the emotional dimension of teachers' work. By foregrounding emotions in this way, the study positions them not as irrational forces but as central to enhancing relational pedagogy and wellbeing. This paper highlights that emotional labour is embedded in the daily professional lives of infant and toddler teachers but remains insufficiently recognised in policy documents, such as *Te Whāriki*, which demand structural support and acknowledgement of teachers' emotional efforts to enhance their wellbeing.

Introduction

As researchers and advocates for the emotional wellbeing of infants, toddlers, and their teachers, we take this opportunity to emphasise that emotions are an essential and integral component of early childhood education (ECE). Despite a growing body of international literature on emotional labour across many professions, research on emotional labour within ECE is only just gaining traction, with much scope for expansion. Much of the existing literature originates from studies conducted in other countries, which may not fully reflect the experiences of early childhood educators in New Zealand (Carey & Sutton, 2024). Consequently, the emotional realities of ECE teachers often remain under-represented within the emotional labour literature (Carey & Sutton, 2024; Jena-Crottet, 2017).

Emotional labour is a concept introduced by Arlie Hochschild (1983), who defined it as "the management of feelings to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" and argued that emotional labour is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). It involves aligning emotional expressions with professional expectations, regardless of whether these emotions genuinely reflect an individual's internal experiences.

According to Grandey and Sayre (2019), emotional labour involves positioning one's emotional expressions to meet the requirements of a profession. This emotional effort is common in teaching, where educators are expected to regulate their emotional displays as part of their professional responsibilities.

To manage emotional expectations, two common strategies are employed: surface acting and deep acting (Tiwari et al., 2020). According to Yin et al. (2019), "surface acting involves faking unfelt emotions or hiding inner feelings, while deep acting involves modifying or changing the truly felt emotions into more desirable ones via reappraisal or attention deployment" (p. 28). Surface acting refers to changing external emotional expressions without altering internal feelings (Horner et al., 2020). For example, an educator may smile, maintain patience, and display calmness while interacting with a challenging child, despite experiencing frustration internally. Although surface acting may be meeting professional expectations for demonstrating certain 'correct' emotions, presenting a particular emotional sense, displaying emotions that are not genuinely felt may create internal tension between expressed and experienced emotions.

In contrast, deep acting involves attempting to genuinely experience the emotions required by professional expectations (Tiwari et al., 2020). Rather than simply adjusting outward expressions, individuals actively modify their internal emotional state so that their displayed emotions become more authentic. In an ECE context, when a child repeatedly demonstrates challenging behaviour, a teacher may initially experience irritation or frustration. However, by recognising that the child may be struggling to regulate emotions and requires additional support, the teacher may develop genuine patience and empathy, allowing a more supportive response. Although this may appear to be preferable to surface acting, nevertheless, deep acting can also result in self-alienation, as individuals may experience a disconnect between their authentic emotions and the emotions they are expected to display.

ECE educators are repeatedly required to engage in emotional labour throughout their working day. They are expected to maintain a calm, positive, and supportive demeanour while fulfilling their caregiving and teaching responsibilities (Ng et al., 2025). Infant and toddler teachers play a vital role in children's social, cognitive, and emotional development. During the first three years of life, children

are highly dependent on their teachers, who provide comfort and create emotionally safe and nurturing environments (Halls & Sakr, 2025). In infant and toddler settings, emotional interactions are multidirectional, requiring teachers to simultaneously respond to and manage the emotional needs of children (Brophy-Herb et al., 2022). This complexity highlights why emotional labour is not incidental but embedded within infant and toddler pedagogy.

The current paper draws on Martha Nussbaum's (2001) philosophical understanding of emotions as intelligent, meaningful, and ethically grounded. Nussbaum argues that emotions are powerful cognitive and evaluative forces that shape human lives. Emotions are not merely internal feelings; they are inner sensations that influence how individuals interpret situations and affect decision-making, interpersonal relationships, and overall wellbeing. Furthermore, she argues that human flourishing depends on emotions, explaining that humans cannot plausibly omit the role of emotions within life once they acknowledge how emotions influence judgements and actions according to what is of importance to the individual. This emphasises that emotions guide individuals towards what they consider important and valuable, therefore bringing into question the ways in which emotional labour may suppress or redirect what matters.

By bringing these perspectives together, this conceptual paper seeks to address the gap by positioning emotions as a central and integral component of ECE rather than viewing them as something to be managed. Acknowledging teachers' emotions is essential not only for their wellbeing but also for the quality of relationships and learning environments they create (Carey & Sutton, 2024). This introduction provides the foundation for examining emotional labour in infant and toddler settings and exploring why Nussbaum's (2001) philosophical understanding of emotions is important for teacher wellbeing.

This paper proceeds in four parts. First, it introduces emotional labour, and the strategies teachers use to manage emotional expectations. Second, it examines why emotional labour is particularly significant in infant–toddler pedagogy, where relational reciprocity and inter-embodiment shape daily practice. Third, it explores Nussbaum's philosophical framing of emotions to highlight their role in teachers' wellbeing and ethical decision-making. Finally, it analyses how emotions are positioned within *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) and discusses the practical implications for teachers' emotional experiences. Together, these sections argue that emotional labour is central to infant–toddler teaching but remains insufficiently recognised in policy and practice, highlighting the need for greater structural support for teachers' emotional wellbeing.

Why Emotions Matter in an Infant/Toddler Teacher's Practice

Infant and toddler pedagogies form a delicate interconnection between cognition and affect as a "dynamic unity of a person within their social environment, that shows intellect (cognition) and affect (emotion) as a whole system" (Quiñones et al., 2021, p. 5). Emotions are not subsidiary to the practice of teaching; they are comprised within the dynamic unity of being an infant and (or) toddler pedagogue. Emotionality is a dimension of the 'push and pull' of relational reciprocity (Halls & Sakr, 2025). What is often described as 'serve and return' interactions cannot be characterised as biomechanics, but must be understood as relational interactivity, grounded in emotions of joy and excitement when one feels a connection and frustration and anger if one is not being responded to as one imagined. Emotionality in infant and toddler pedagogy is also 'interembodiment', which can be understood as the moments of relational interaction that influence an emotional bond (Lupton, 2013). For example, when time spent together impacts emotional connections that are growing between infant and adult, ranging from warmth and intimacy when emotions are joyful, to challenging and frustrating when infant-adult relationships are strained (Lupton, 2013). It is in these emotional interactive spaces intersecting with the 'professional' nature of infant-teacher relationships in ECE, that emotional labour can occur.

Furthermore, this characterisation of emotional relational interactivity so far is somewhat simplistic in relation to the emotional flows within an early childhood centre. The scenarios have been 'adult-infant/toddler', however this is rarely the case in group care settings. Although singular adult-infant/toddler relationships may illustrate a bi-directional flow of 'serve and return', more frequently the emotional flows are multidirectional, with multiple infants' emotional expressions and responses being shared and responded to by the infant teacher or teachers, or by other infants or children in the space. As identified above, the close connection between ECE teachers and children's emotional needs means

> **"From this perspective, emotions are not barriers to rational thinking but are central to ethical reasoning, decision-making, and human flourishing because they provide insight into individuals' values and concerns."**

teachers' emotional expressions matter in the early childhood setting. Furthermore, there is an expectational understanding that infants' emotional expressions will be responded to (Ministry of Education, 2017), without regard for the dimensions of emotional labour within infant/toddler teachers' work. These critical aspects of one's profession need further examination, one that the concepts of Martha Nussbaum can support to deepen realistic and practical understandings of the role of emotions within life, and within teaching.

Nussbaum's Reconceptualisation of Emotions

Nussbaum (2001) is an eminent philosopher whose contemporary work has made a significant contribution to the philosophy of emotions. In *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (2001), she challenges the traditional view that emotions are merely irrational impulses or "animal energies" (p. i) disconnected from thought and human flourishing. Instead, she argues that emotions are intelligent, cognitive, and evaluative responses that reveal what individuals care about and value. From this perspective, emotions are not barriers to rational thinking but are central to ethical reasoning, decision-making, and human flourishing because they provide insight into individuals' values and concerns.

Nussbaum (2001) argues that emotions involve value judgments because they reflect what people consider significant for their wellbeing and relationships. For example, when an early childhood teacher experiences frustration, concern, or worry, these emotions are not simply irrational reactions. Rather, they may indicate important concerns about children's wellbeing, professional responsibilities, or the quality of teaching practice. Therefore, emotions can provide meaningful information that supports reflection and professional judgement rather than being feelings that should simply be controlled or suppressed.

This perspective provides an important philosophical lens for understanding emotional labour in early childhood education. Emotional labour often requires teachers to regulate or suppress their genuine emotions in order to display professionally appropriate emotions, such as remaining calm, patient, and consistently positive (Hochschild, 1983). However, if we take Nussbaum's (2001) suggestion that emotions are intelligent and meaningful evaluations, then excessive suppression may prevent teachers from recognising important signals about their own wellbeing, ethical concerns, and professional values. Emotional labour that prioritises emotional control over emotional understanding may therefore contribute to emotional dissonance and reduced wellbeing.

Building on this argument, Nussbaum (2001) states that emotions "cannot, for example, easily be sidelined" (p. 1), emphasising that emotions should be acknowledged because they are fundamental to human flourishing. Within early childhood education, opportunities for teachers to recognise, express, and reflect on their emotions may strengthen emotional wellbeing and professional practice. Reflective discussions, supportive leadership, and collegial relationships can help teachers process challenging emotional experiences rather than simply managing them through emotional regulation.

Nussbaum (2001) further connects emotions with human vulnerability and argues that individuals are not completely self-sufficient but depend on others for care, love, support, and meaningful relationships. Rather than viewing vulnerability as a weakness, she considers it an essential aspect of human life. She explains that acknowledging emotional needs contributes to healthy relationships and ethical communities, stating that "all are permitted to be imperfect and needy, and it is an essential part of regard for humanity" (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 11). This perspective has important implications for early childhood teachers, whose work is often shaped by expectations of emotional control and constant professionalism. Recognising teachers' vulnerability can support self-compassion, collegial relationships, and healthier professional environments.

Nussbaum's (2001) philosophy also connects emotions with human flourishing by addressing the fundamental question, "How should a human being live?" She argues that flourishing requires individuals to understand themselves as meaningful beings whose emotions provide insight into what they value. For early childhood teachers, recognising and reflecting on emotional experiences can support ethical decision-making, strengthen relationships with children and families, and encourage authentic professional practice.

Overall, Nussbaum's (2001) theory reframes emotions as valuable sources of knowledge rather than irrational feelings that must be managed. Applied to emotional labour in early childhood education, this perspective suggests that teachers' emotions can provide important insights into children's needs, professional challenges, and ethical responsibilities. Feelings such as concern, frustration, empathy, and joy can guide reflective practice and support responsive relationships.

Nussbaum's (2001) philosophy carries significant implications for early childhood educators because it reframes emotions as meaningful sources of knowledge rather than irrational reactions that must be controlled. For teachers working in emotionally demanding environments, this perspective suggests that feelings such as frustration, concern, empathy, or discomfort provide important insights into children's needs, relational dynamics, and ethical responsibilities. Instead of suppressing emotions to meet expectations of constant positivity and composure, educators benefit from acknowledging and reflecting on their emotional experiences as part of professional judgement. This approach reduces emotional labour and supports teacher wellbeing by validating vulnerability as a natural and valuable aspect of human interaction. It also encourages early childhood centres to create supportive, reflective spaces where teachers can openly discuss emotional challenges, strengthen collegial relationships, and make more ethically grounded decisions.

Understanding Emotions in *Te Whāriki* Through Nussbaum

Emotions are a part of the Aotearoa New Zealand curriculum framework, with multiple explicit and implicit mentions of the concept of emotions throughout the curriculum document. Infants are described as experiencing rapid socio-emotional growth, with a need for "sensitive adults to respond to their individual care needs" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 13), for they are developing a sense of trust that these emotional needs will be responded to. Emotionality is understood holistically, as a dimension or facet of overall human development. Furthermore, emotionality is specifically identified as an aspect of the early childhood context, because it is identified that the 'emotional state' of the context will influence the potential learning that can occur within the space.

In this way, emotional expressions are not merely by-products of the environment, but rather a space for careful consideration to ensure infants' learning is supported. Whilst the authors have some questions to raise about the terminology being used here (for arguably, is 'learning' the only consideration in relation to what is of value in the early childhood space?), the reality is that teachers' emotional expressions are a facet of a curated 'emotional state' of the space. When infants' emotions are heightened, teachers respond by ensuring they do not cross over into excessive distress. When they are low, teachers raise the spirits through positive and buoyant interactions. As stated within *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), "Infants are developing trust that their... emotional... needs will be met in predictable ways." (p. 14). This involves the educator not only reading what the emotional expression of the infant is, but considering how they will respond in a way best suited to supporting learning.

The terminology, although directly out of *Te Whāriki*, is being used in a deliberately provocative manner to encourage considered thought from reader. What does it mean to 'curate' emotions in a space? What does it mean to 'read' an infant's emotions and determine an emotionally poised response that will 'best support learning?' These are questions that could benefit from a deeper understanding of Nussbaum's understanding of the intelligence of emotions, particularly how such intelligence can support the teacher to notice when their emotional expressions matter to their overall sense of wellbeing. When emotions are understood as rational, intelligent, cognitive evaluations of one's potential threats or benefits to wellbeing, then teachers' emotions are not a resource within the space, but a fundamental aspect of their overall personal wellness.

Practical Implications: How Can These Be Brought into the Early Childhood Context?

Try to consider whether your emotional reactions to a situation are 'deep acting' or 'surface acting'. Consider the following question, "Am I really feeling this, or am I aligning my behaviour in response to Professional requirements for the setting?"

Try to consider how *frequently* you need to enact 'surface acting' in relation to 'deep acting', and also in relation to genuine emotional expressions in the early childhood space. The ultimate question really is "how often am I controlling my emotions, and how often do I express emotions that are emergent in relation to my own feelings?"

Try to consider how you reorient your emotions of frustration or irritation, and what specific strategies you use to do so, for example:

> Do you redirect your attention to something different?
>
> Do you possibilise ways in which to see it from the child's perspective?
>
> Do you envision your professional responsibilities and think about the expectations for yourself in line with whānau, colleagues, and the child themselves?

Try to consider how you are understanding your emotions as cues towards what may be potential threats or enhancements of wellbeing. For example, ask yourself:

> Is this emotion telling me that I might be at risk of potential hurt in alignment with my values?
>
> Is this emotion telling me that I might be on the path of something joyful and beneficial in alignment with my values?

How am I understanding my emotional expressions as a part of the 'interdependence of wellbeing' within the early childhood environment?

> How am I understanding my experiences of emotional labour as an affective relationship with the child and whānau?
>
> How am I considering my strategies of deep acting and surface acting in relation to children's wellbeing?
>
> How can I influence strategic or structural elements of the early childhood context that are impacting my emotions?

Conclusion

This study has discussed emotional labour and teacher wellbeing in early childhood education, highlighting the importance of understanding emotions as intelligent and evaluative experiences. It has argued that emotional labour is a central, complex, and structurally embedded dimension of ECE, particularly within infant and toddler settings where relational, affective, and moment-to-moment interactions shape daily practice. Teachers working with infants and toddlers continuously regulate their emotional expressions through surface acting and deep acting, not simply as personal choices but as professional expectations that sustain emotionally responsive environments.

Within these relationally dense settings, emotional labour intensifies as teachers respond simultaneously to multiple emotional cues, and uphold the expectations outlined in *Te Whāriki*. Yet, while the curriculum emphasises children's emotional needs, it offers limited acknowledgement of the emotional effort required from teachers to meet these demands. This lack of structural recognition risks contributing to emotional labour and diminished wellbeing.

Drawing on Nussbaum's (2001) philosophical ideas, this paper positions emotions as intelligent, evaluative judgments essential for ethical reasoning and human flourishing. When teachers' emotions are suppressed or regulated through emotional labour, opportunities for reflection, authenticity, and professional insight are reduced. Recognising teachers' emotional experiences as meaningful rather than merely as expressions to be managed supports healthier professional practice and strengthens ethical decision-making.

A critical shift is therefore needed within early childhood policy and organisational structures. Supporting teachers' emotional wellbeing requires creating professional spaces where emotions can be acknowledged, reflected upon, and valued. Such recognition is essential not only for sustaining teacher wellbeing but also for enhancing the relational quality of infant–toddler pedagogy and the environments in which young children learn and flourish.

> **For early childhood teachers, recognising and reflecting on emotional experiences can support ethical decision-making, strengthen relationships with children and families, and encourage authentic professional practice.”**

References

Brophy-Herb, H. E., Brincks, A., Cook, J. L., Stacks, A., Vallotton, C. D., Frosch, C., Carson, R., Wheeler, R., Perkins, H. A., & Jennings, P. A. (2022). Stress intensity and exhaustion among infant and toddler teachers: Descriptive analysis and associations with sources of stress and coping strategy use. *Early Education and Development, 34*(7), 1545-1564. https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2022.2151399

Carey, S., & Sutton, A. (2024). Early childhood teachers' emotional labour: The role of job and personal resources in protecting well-being. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 142*, 104699. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2024.104699

Grandey, A. A., & Sayre, G. M. (2019). Emotional labor: Regulating emotions for a wage. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 28*(2), 131-137. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1177/0963721418812771

Halls, K., & Sakr, M. (2025). Constructions of babyhood among baby room leaders in the *UK. Journal of Early Childhood Research, 23*(1), 18-30. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X241279348

Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. University of California Press.

Horner, C., Brown, E., Mehta, S., & Scanlon, C. L. (2020). Feeling and acting like a teacher: Reconceptualizing teachers' emotional labor. *Teachers College Record, 122*(5), 1-36. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146812012200502

Jena-Crottet, A. (2017). Early childhood teachers' emotional labour. *New Zealand International Research in Early Childhood Education, 20*(2), 19-33. https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.675313221536539

Lupton, D. (2013). Infant embodiment and interembodiment: A review of sociocultural perspectives. *Childhood, 20*(1), 37-50. https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568212447244

Ministry of Education. Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga. (2017). *Te Whāriki: He whāriki matauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum*. https://tewhariki.tahurangi.education.govt.nz/te-wh-riki-early-childhood-curriculum-document/5637184332.p

Ng, J., Wong, S., & Hadley, F. (2025). A study of emotional labour among early childhood teachers: Extending the job demands-resources model. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 54*(4), 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-025-02077-5

Nussbaum, M. C. (2001). *Upheavals of thought: The intelligence of emotions*. Cambridge University Press.

Purper, C. J., Thai, Y., Frederick, T. V., & Farris, S. (2023). Exploring the challenge of teachers' emotional labor in early childhood settings. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 51*(4), 781-789. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01345-y

Quiñones, G., Ridgeway, A., & Li, L. (2021). *Affective early childhood pedagogy for infant-toddlers*. Springer.

Tiwari, A., Saraff, S., & Nair, R. (2020). Impact of emotional labor on burnout and subjective well-being of female counselors and female teachers. *Journal of Psychosocial Research, 15*(2), 1-10. https://doi.org/10.32381/JPR.2020.15.02.14

Yin, H., Huang, S., & Chen, G. (2019). The relationships between teachers' emotional labor and their burnout and satisfaction: A meta-analytic review. *Educational Research Review*, 28, 100283. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2019.100283

Zhang, Q., Yin, J., Chen, H., Zhang, Q., & Wu, W. (2020). Emotional labor among early childhood teachers: Frequency, antecedents, and consequences. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education, 34*(2), 288-305. https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2019.16758

PEER REVIEWED

He Tītī Huatahi: Following the Uniqueness of Each Tamaiti as Intentional Teaching

Roberta Carvalho, Michael Gaffney, Sonya Gaches, and Alex Gunn

This article describes research where we set out to reveal the intentionality of kaiako within their observable practice of caring for young tamariki in their early childhood education (ECE) settings. In doing so, we show how they prioritise relationality and emotional learning. The data for this project came from visiting lecturers noting caring moments when mentor kaiako of our student teachers were involved in care of/for/with tamariki. If mentor kaiako agreed for the resulting narrative to be used in the research, they were then interviewed about the contextual understandings that were important to their decision-making. Analysis of the findings shows that the kaiako are very intentional in their mahi, both by drawing on their knowledge of and aspirations for individual tamaiti, their whakaaro about what is important in that moment and how the environment affords learning opportunities when knowledge, aspiration, and whakaaro are brought together. This happens in moments that might pass by student teachers and others as insignificant, yet these interactions reveal how the emotional learning of each tamaiti is supported.

Introduction

Within the relationality of teaching as part of a team of teachers working across a group of infants and toddlers, there is the challenge of making sure everyone is okay, if not better than okay. We talk about wellbeing and what it means for tamariki as part of the curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2017), sometimes forgetting it is important for kaiako as well (Rockel & Fryer, 2016). Kaiako strive to create a sense of wellbeing and belonging that will provide the whāriki for tamariki to feel involved and curious about the environment around them (Quiñones & Delaune, 2025). For the youngest members of the community, they have their ways of letting us know that all is not well in the world. It is how the adults, and other tamariki, usually respond in these moments that shape how tamariki feel about the people, places and things that make up the setting (Ministry of Education, 2019). Is it magic that makes all this possible? Does it happen by accident, or is there a way to understand the kaiako intentionality that brings about great learning spaces for our youngest tamariki?



(L-R) Sonya Gaches, Roberta Carvalho, Michael Gaffney, Alex Gunn.

Student kaiako are in the process of noticing and recognising these features. However, in busy spaces, they can struggle to 'connect the dots' that other kaiako recognise from their prior experiences and specialised knowledges. This research project emerged from wanting to find ways to alert student kaiako to the intentionality of the more experienced kaiako with whom they were working. It is not easy to 'push the pause button' during the moments of a busy day so that a more experienced kaiako can explain 'what just happened'. They themselves may need a bit of time to unpack it all as well (Elliott et al., 2011; Loughran, 2019), and so we were looking for ways to support this learning for our student kaiako.

Care-full Teaching

When we started this project, the focus on 'care-full' was about profiling mentor kaiako as being 'considered' in their decision-making, underpinned by knowledge of tamariki, whānau, and centre life, as well as the aspirations that drive the trajectory of learning for each of these.

> Care-full teaching as an idea speaks to the intentional and complex decisions being made by teachers as they engage in close and deliberate teaching moments with young children in ECE. Sometimes these moments occur within care routines, but not exclusively. (Gaches et al., 2024, p. 14)

As we explored the content of the narratives of these moments, we recognised that care-full also referenced the wellbeing and belonging of mokopuna in all its forms – physical routines, healthy bodies, and relationships to people, places, and things. This would be the 'everyday care' in the more common understanding of care, drawing on Bussey and Hill (2017), Cooper and Quiñones (2022), Rockel (2009), and Gaches (2025).

Elsewhere, we have elaborated on how the decision-making constituted political acts to prioritise the mana and rights of tamariki in care interactions (Gunn et al., 2025). Understandings of mana are framed within the four principles of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), and it is the principle of Kotahitanga/Holistic development that reminds us to weave all dimensions of learning, including the emotional, into a child's whāriki (Lee et al., 2013). While Article 29 (purpose of education) in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) is an obvious starting point to think about children's rights to emotional development, it is Article 12 (being heard) and 13 (freedom of expression) that encourage kaiako to think about what this means for infants and toddlers.

In our own study, four themes emerged across the kaiako practices of care-full teaching, which we identify as 'political' acts. This included resisting wider normative expectations by acknowledging the individual needs of the child, localising interactions based on the knowledge of the child and whānau, using critical pedagogies to address power relationships, and listening to the dissent of tamariki within interactions. The work of the kaiako involves decentering adult discourses, institutional demands and decontextualised expectations for learning, in order to create ECE spaces that empower tamariki to demonstrate and practice their capability and confidence.

In relation to the recent sector interest in self-regulation (Clifford et al., 2024), socio-emotional learning (Houghton-Katipa, 2024) or social competence (McLaughlin et al., 2017), we see the focus on the child outcomes rather than on the social ecology of the setting. In *He Māpuna te Tamaiti*, infants and toddlers are moving toward the goal of self-regulation via co-regulation provided by caregivers (Ministry of Education, 2019). This is not so much a 'co' as in the co-construction sense, but more like that in a co-ordination role where agency is assumed to remain with the kaiako. This misses the interdependent nature of emotional regulation, where both adults and tamariki are learning to self-regulate together within the same moment. Instead, we can reconceptualise these learning moments as "the co-creation of meaningful reciprocal relationships" (Rockel & Fryer, 2016, p. 75), where adults need to be aware of their own self-regulation to support that of tamariki. Continuing this idea, we suggest it would be more appropriate to say that we grow our emotional learning collectively.

The aim of this article is to elaborate on the care-full teaching that occurs when co-regulation is more evident in moments with infants and toddlers. We know that those tamariki with less verbal language still have their means of communicating to others what they feel is important.

Undertaking the Research

When individual members of the university early childhood team visited student kaiako on professional placement, there were moments when we saw mentor teachers respond to tamariki in particular ways that made us think "that seemed like an important moment together" and reflected what we call 'Care-full' teaching. We have become interested in exploring teachers' intentionality within the early childhood curriculum. By analysing the reasons kaiako make the decisions they do, and by thinking about the knowledge and experience they draw from as they interact with tamariki, we wanted to make visible to student teachers the thoughtfulness and intentionality of these teachers.

Our intention was to formalise those moments that we noticed into a research project. We would mention to the mentor teacher what we had just noticed and ask them if they would be okay with the moment being written as a narrative passage with a view to including it in our project. This narrative was then accompanied by a broader explanation of the project to which they would be contributing. If there was an initial agreement, a short narrative of the episode would be sent to the kaiako within a week, and a time then made to undertake a follow up interview of about 30 minutes.

Kaiako were asked to annotate and correct features of the emerging narrative and consider the following questions:

- What was going on in this moment, from your perspective? What were you doing/intending?
- What previous information/knowledge did you draw upon when you were in this interaction? (previous experiences, shared history, family information, etc)
- Were you thinking about any particular learning dispositions/ working theories in that moment? If so, which and why?
- What other considerations were informing your decision-making about how to respond to/interact with the child and/or this teaching and learning moment?

These questions were then used as the basis for the follow-up interview that provided much of the contextual information to better understand the moment that was observed. The kaiako would also formally consent to their participation and note how they would like to be identified. Later, the narrative would be returned one last time for kaiako to finalise any further details. All other names were anonymised. All kaiako were happy to be identified by their first name. Ethical approval was received from the University Human Ethics Committee.

We ended up with 13 narrative descriptions and explanations from eleven different mentor kaiako. The university early childhood team then reviewed these thematically with a view to understanding the broader ideas that kaiako use to explain their experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In particular, we collectively reviewed the teaching strategies we identified kaiako using MacNaughton and Williams (2009). We also wanted to know what they prioritised as they told their story of the moment in terms of their intentionality and what knowledges they were drawing on in their explanation. Two narratives written by the first author were selected for this article. They were chosen because they focus on an infant and a toddler to highlight both the intentionality and emotional learning for this age group. Both centres are busy places and group sizes are not small, especially when compared to settings for 0- to 2-year-olds. One is a mixed-age centre, and the other is a kindergarten where the youngest tamaiti can begin at age 2. Thus, the children are younger than the average age of those attending.

Narrative one – Monique and Māia

The first narrative took place in a kindergarten for 2- to 4-year-olds, and the child involved was one of the youngest in the setting.

> *Roberta visited a kindergarten on a cold, sunny morning and a group of children were playing in the water trough. Monique, our mentor teacher, was sitting right next to the trough, so Roberta sat next to her. Māia, a two-year-old kōtiro, was playing amongst the other mokopuna. She turned to Monique and said "wet", Monique confirmed*

that and asked if Māia had finished playing in water, Māia nodded in agreement. She then proceeded to take off her apron and then hand her jacket to Monique. Monique checked if Māia wanted the jacket on, upon confirmation Monique replied: "Kei te pai, I can help you put it on."

Monique then handed the jacket back in a way that it was already in an easy position for Māia to start putting it back on. Māia started putting one arm in, Monique was close by, smiling at her. As Māia proceeded to put in the other arm, her elbow got caught. Monique told Māia that her elbow was folded, that was why it was stuck. She explained that the arm needed to move upwards to be able to slide in. "Shall I hold this side of the jacket up, Māia?" Māia took a moment to think about the plan and then nodded. While Monique held the empty side of the jacket, Māia tried different moves until her wee arm slid through the long sleeve.

They smiled at each other. Māia then pointed at the zip and said "close." Monique replied: "You want to zip up. Ka pai. I will get you started and you can finish off." Monique then put the two ends of the zipper together and Māia finished zipping it up. Monique said with a gentle voice and a smile "All done now! You are now ready to go and play!" Māia smiled back and ran to play outside.

Monique helped us understand what was happening by further explaining that Māia comes from a big whānau, with a busy lifestyle, and that Māia likes to try new things and values working independently/doing tasks by herself. Monique aspires to support Māia's interests and dispositions by creating spaces and opportunities where Māia can work on her emotional learning. Monique mentioned in the interview that "taking the time to listen to tamaiti and not rushing" was an important part of her practice. In this moment, it was important for Monique to stay present with Māia and, in so doing, provided an emotional pou while the young tamaiti focused on this challenging task. What is not obvious from the narrative is knowing what would have happened if Monique had not stayed but instead moved away. She told Roberta that perseverance was a particular focus for Māia and that if she is provided support, she was much better at achieving her goal of doing such activities "independently."

Māia's whānau, who have been part of the kindergarten community for some years, also want kaiako to utilise mana enhancing approaches that give Māia time to try new things, with support. Monique creates a safe emotional space for Māia to work independently on her own terms without being hurried.

When Roberta and Monique sat down to kōrero, Roberta understood the depth of the relationship Monique had with Māia's whānau. They were whānau Māori that valued the nurturing of the mana of their mokopuna through respect and aroha. Monique's practice prioritises those same values and she told Roberta that she is committed to "listen to mokopuna and give them time to think and work things out themselves, building on their self-esteem and emotional resilience."

Narrative two – Grace and Jay

In the second narrative, Roberta was visiting a mixed-age centre in the morning and observed an interaction in the pēpi area of this busy setting.

Grace, our mentor teacher, was about to change a 4-month-old pēpi, Jay, into a onesie while having a kōrero with other kaiako about some earlier routines. There were two toddlers playing close by. When she was half-way through dressing him, Jay decided otherwise and became very wriggly, managing to undress completely. Grace responded to the 'wriggliness' by putting Jay on the floor. She then started talking to him. She offered Jay a small toy that was lying close by and the pēpi started playing and having a conversation with Grace. The two toddlers came closer and joined in the kōrero. Jay was happy and completely involved in the conversation. Grace kept interacting with the three tamariki, laughing, talking and responding to them. Then she sensed a change in the pace of the play, Jay got wriggly again. Grace gathered up Jay and gave him a cuddle and gently, while chatting away to him, started the dressing process all over again. The two toddlers went back to their play and Grace resumed giving the other kaiako an update on the earlier routines.

Later, Grace told us that Jay had had a 'rough night' and a very early start, which is why he wanted to sleep longer. However, Jay's parents have him on a sleep limit of an hour for the morning moe. Grace shared that while there can be differing opinions around care routines, she feels it is important to work in partnership with whānau. Jay's parents are young first-time parents and as the 'primary care person' for Jay in the centre, Grace is committed to supporting them in this new journey of parenthood.

Grace was also very aware that Jay was not very happy, as he was still tired. She wanted Jay to understand that even though he was up earlier than he wanted, she was there to support him, with cuddles and conversations, as well as the familiar routine of changing clothes and getting kai, so that he was ready to play and have fun with other tamariki.

Grace also shared with Roberta that Jay woke up from this morning's moe earlier than they would have liked and found it difficult to calm down. By slowing down and following Jay's lead, Grace made it clear to Jay that she was listening to his needs and preferences. Grace was able to genuinely respond to Jay, clearly signalling trust and responsiveness, because she had a well-established and close relationship with Jay and his whānau.

This was not about competing demands but rather, in this scenario, Grace is balancing her understanding of what the whānau wants and how to support Jay within that situation. Her approach is to maintain, as much as possible, the familiar routines for him and to make it easier for Jay to remain calm and settled in the moment. Grace has built up the trust between them so that Jay knows she will look after him, and as a kaiako, she is drawing on the relational and emotional practices they have established together.

Discussion

These two narratives are examples of teachers making decisions that privilege children's emotional wellbeing, mana, and rights. These episodes illustrate kaiako responding to mokopuna in a very intentional and deliberate way to support them and their learning. The narratives demonstrate that care-full teaching is strongly connected to teachers' relational ethics and political choices (Gaches et al., 2024). This is underpinned by knowledge

of the individual tamaiti, whānau, of usual routines for each tamaiti, aspirations for their learning, and kaiako understanding of what will support learning in the moment (Gaches, 2025).

In a holistic sense, this learning in the moment is inclusive of knowing what each tamaiti has been capable of in the past, and making a judgment of what they are capable of now. Grace understood that what Jay was up for on this particular day was not the same as other days because Jay was tired from a 'rough night'. Likewise, Monique knew how much support Māia would need in order to be successful in putting on her jacket. Jordan (2009) describes how this approach of listening to children expressing themselves is what is required to shift learning from teacher-led scaffolding to that which is co-constructed between kaiako and tamariki, and involves a shift in power across the relationship.

When Monique created time and space for Māia to 'independently' put on the jacket, it was with a view as to what Māia wanted to do, and knowing what support she might need so she could achieve her goal. Unhurried support not only required knowing how Māia tends to interact, but also locating that tendency within the particular day and moment. This is reflective of the responsive kaiako upholding Articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) by giving space for tamariki to be heard and to express themselves.

This enactment of Articles 12 and 13 is also exemplified in the narrative of Grace and Jay. Grace is listening to Jay's mauri, his 'wriggliness', and is thereby recognising how Jay is expressing himself, which is acknowledging his mana. He is not being judged as naughty or being disruptive of adult wishes. She acknowledges what he wants, but also understands this in relation to what whānau want and Jay's previous night of restless sleep. Again, the approach is unhurried on the part of Grace. She privileged pēpi Jay's wellbeing when she gave him time to settle before being dressed, and this was supported by other tamariki in the vicinity.

In both cases, the kaiako know they must quickly learn what each tamaiti is capable of in the moment, and tamariki must find ways to communicate how they are feeling, thinking, and physically being, so that the kaiako can be successful in this task. Kaiako must be very good listeners of tamariki expressing themselves, in the broad sense of Article 12 and 13 in UNCRC (United Nations General Assembly, 1989), and reflective of ako in the moment where both pēpi and kaiako are in a reciprocal and collaborative relationship together (Hemara, 2000; Rockel & Fryer, 2016).

The deliberate choices made by Monique and Grace supported the wellbeing of Māia and Jay in a holistic approach and in a way that is also unhurried (Clark, 2023). The findings from our research project showed that by being care-full when responding to children, kaiako uphold the principles of *Te Whāriki* so as to enact the vision statement for tamariki to be "confident and competent learners and communicators..." (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 5).

The narratives reflect on what might be thought of as 'small' moments in a much longer day, but each was important for teaching the individual tamaiti about themselves, others, and the ECE setting in which they spend their time. The challenge for student kaiako is to 'see' the accumulation of these many moments as the result of intentional practice and start to understand what this might look like as part of their own teaching practice.

Glossary of Te Reo Māori terms

Ako	*learning and teaching are happening together*
Kaiako	*teachers and educators, both qualified and unqualified, in Aotearoa/New Zealand.*
Kotahitanga	*unity and collective action*
Kōrero	*talk, a chat*
Mahi	*work*
Mana	*agency and authority of people, individuals and collectives.*
Mauri	*life force or energy*
Moe	*a sleep*
Mokopuna	*grandchild; in Te Whāriki, mokopuna refers to intergenerational connectedness*
Pēpi	*baby*
Pou	*a pole or post, often used for supporting other objects*
Tamaiti	*singular term for child*
Tamariki	*plural term for children*
Whakaaro	*thoughts*
Whānau	*family*

The findings from our research project showed that by being care-full when responding to children, kaiako uphold the principles of Te Whāriki so as to enact the vision statement for tamariki to be "confident and competent learners and communicators..."

(Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 5).

References

Bussey, K., & Hill, D. (2017). Care as curriculum: Investigating teachers' views on the learning in care. *Early Child Development and Care, 187*(1), 128-137. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2016.1152963

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research.* Jossey-Bass.

Clark, A. (2023). *Slow knowledge and the unhurried child: Time for slow pedagogies in early childhood education*. Routledge.

Clifford, A. E., Schaughency, E., Das, S., Riordan, J., Carroll, J. L., & Reese, E. (2024). Tender shoots: Effects of a preschool shared reading and reminiscing initiative on parent-child interactions and for socio-emotional and self-regulation outcomes after school entry. *Learning and Individual Differences, 112*, 102443. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2024.102443

Cooper, M., & Quiñones, G. (2022). Toddlers as the one-caring: Co-authoring play narratives and identities of care. *Early Child Development and Care, 192*(6), 964-979. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2020.1826465

Elliott, J. G., Stemler, S. E., Sternberg, R. J., Grigorenko, E. L., & Hoffman, N. (2011). The socially skilled teacher and the development of tacit knowledge. *British Educational Research Journal*, *37*(1), Journal, 31(1), 83-103. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920903420016

Gaches, S. (2025). Juggling in three dimensions all the time: Complex interdependencies in infant and toddler settings. In G. Quiñones & A. Delaune (Eds.), *Wellbeing for infants and toddlers in education and care: International perspectives* (pp. 119-134). Springer.

Gaches, S., Gunn, A., Gaffney, M., & Carvalho, R. (2024). Refocusing care as central to teaching within ECE. *Early Childhood Folio, 28*(1), 13-17. https://doi.org/10.18296/ecf.1137

Gunn, A. C., Carvalho, R., Gaches, S., & Gaffney, M. (2025). Preservice teachers learning about mentors' care(full) teaching. *Proceedings of the New Zealand Association for Research in Education (NZARE) Conference.*

Hemara W. (2000). *Māori pedagogy: A view from the literature.* NZ Council for Educational Research.

Houghton-Katipa, J. (2024). He awa whiria: Braiding social and emotional learning with bicultural and intentional teaching. *New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, 21*(2), 175-196. https://doi.org/10.24135/teacherswork.v21i2.629

Jordan, B. (2009). Scaffolding learning and co-constructing understandings. In A. Anning, J. Cullen, & M. Fleer (Eds.), *Early childhood education: Society and culture (*2nd ed, pp. 39-52). SAGE.

Lee, W., Carr, M., Soutar, B., & Mitchell, L. (2013). *Understanding the Te Whāriki approach: Early years education in practice.* Routledge.

Loughran, J. (2019). Pedagogical reasoning: The foundation of the professional knowledge of teaching. *Teachers and Teaching, 25*(5), 523-535. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2019.1633294

MacNaughton, G., & Williams, G. (2009). *Techniques for teaching young children: Choices for theory and practice* (3rd ed.). Pearson Education Australia.

McLaughlin, T., Aspden, K., & Clarke, L. (2017). How do teachers support children's social-emotional competence? Strategies for teachers. *Early Childhood Folio, 21*(2), 21-27. https://doi.org/10.18296/ecf.0041

Ministry of Education. Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga. (2017). *Te Whāriki: He whāriki matauranga mo ̄ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum.* https://tewhariki.tahurangi.education.govt.nz/te-wh-riki-early-childhood-curriculum-document/5637184332.p

Ministry of Education. Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga. (2019). *He māpuna te tamaiti: Supporting social and emotional competence in early learning.* https://tewhariki.tahurangi.education.govt.nz/he-m-puna-te-tamaiti/5637164247.p

Quiñones, G., & Delaune, A. (2025). Interdependencies and possibilities for infant-toddler wellbeing in early childhood education. In G. Quiñones & A. Delaune (Eds.), *Wellbeing for infants and toddlers in education and care: International perspectives* (pp. 1-14). Springer.

Rockel, J. (2009). A pedagogy of care: Moving beyond the margins of managing work and minding babies. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, 34*(3), 1-8. https://doi.org/10.1177/183693910903400302

Rockel, J., & Fryer, N. (2016). "Put on your oxygen mask before assisting others": Exploring the socio-emotional aspects of reciprocity in early relationships. *He Kupu, 4,* 72-80. https://www.hekupu.ac.nz/article/put-your-oxygen-mask-assisting-others-exploring-socio-emotional-aspects-reciprocity-early

United Nations General Assembly. (1989). *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.* Te Puna Kōkiri/Office of the Commissioner for Children.

PEER REVIEWED

The Dilution of the Lap: Educator-Child Ratios and Relational Presence in the Toddler-Kindergarten Transition

Gillian O'Connor



This paper examines a largely overlooked transition within early childhood education and care (ECEC): the internal move from toddler to kindergarten rooms in long-day care settings. While transitions into early childhood services and formal schooling have received significant scholarly attention, this internal change of room remains underexplored despite its impact on children's wellbeing, sense of belonging, and emotional security. Drawing on practice-based vignettes, this paper explores how this transition is experienced by children, families, and educators, with particular attention to the shift in educator-child ratios that commonly accompanies the move, typically jumping from 1:4 to 1:11 (educator:child) within the Australian context. This structural change is conceptualised as a "dilution of the lap": a reduction in opportunities for sustained emotional connection, co-regulation, and relational attunement at a time when many children require increased support. The paper argues that these structural conditions sit in tension with the relational commitments embedded in *Te Whāriki* and Australia's *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF), both of which position wellbeing as emerging from secure, responsive relationships. By bringing visibility to this often-hidden transition, the paper contributes to discussions of children's emotional rights, educators' workload, and the structural conditions that shape relational practice. It calls for a shift in focus from a child's individual "readiness" towards greater attention to the conditions that enable sustained relational support during periods of change.

Keywords:
intra-centre transitions; toddler to kindergarten; educator–child ratios; relational pedagogy; wellbeing; emotional rights; EYLF; *Te Whāriki*

Transitions within Early Childhood Education and Care

Transitions are a significant aspect of young children's experiences within early childhood education and care (ECEC). As children move through different educational contexts, these experiences shape their engagement with people, places, and everyday practices (Griebel & Niesel, 2009; Recchia & Dvorakova, 2012). Rather than being viewed as discrete events or developmental milestones, transitions are increasingly understood as relational processes that unfold within the social and institutional contexts of children's lives (Dockett & Perry, 2014). From this perspective, transitions are lived experiences that emerge through relationships and participation rather than matters of individual readiness alone.

Research on transitions in ECEC has predominantly focused on children's entry into early childhood services and their transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). In contrast, movements between rooms within the same setting remain underexplored (Gath et al., 2024). Where these experiences have been examined, attention has primarily focused on infant-to-toddler transitions and continuity of care (e.g., Degotardi et al., 2017). As a result, the transition from the toddler room to the kindergarten room remains relatively overlooked. Little is known about how children, families, and educators experience this change or how it may influence children's wellbeing and access to relational support.

Although routine in many early childhood settings, the transition from the toddler room to the kindergarten room can significantly reshape children's everyday experiences. Transitions involve changes in relationships, participation, and the social contexts in which children live and learn (Griebel & Niesel, 2009). As children enter a new room, they encounter different ways of participating, relating, and belonging (Harju et al., 2024; O'Farrelly & Hennessy, 2014). This transition may therefore involve not only adapting to a new environment but also negotiating changing access to relationships that support emotional security and wellbeing (Binfield-Skøie, 2025).

While intra-centre transitions may involve considerable relational and emotional adjustment, they are often understood as routine, age-based progression within early childhood settings (Fincham & Fellner, 2016). Within this framing, transitions are commonly positioned as natural steps towards increasing independence and are marked through celebratory practices and discourses of readiness (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). Consequently, less attention has been given to the relational implications of these moves and the organisational conditions through which they are experienced (Gath et al., 2024).

This paper begins to address this gap by examining the toddler-to-kindergarten transition as it is lived in practice. In this paper, the term toddler-to-kindergarten transition refers specifically to the intra-centre move from a toddler room to a kindergarten room within a long-day care service. It argues that the move involves not simply a change of room, but a reorganisation of the relational conditions in which care is provided, including a substantial increase in educator-child ratios. The paper introduces the concept of the dilution of the lap to consider how this structural shift may be experienced by children as changes in access to relational support. In doing so, it brings into focus a tension between curriculum frameworks that position secure, responsive relationships as foundational to wellbeing and the structural conditions within which these relationships are enacted (Australian Government Department of Education [AGDE], 2022; Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017).

The Toddler to Kindergarten Classroom Transition

Relational approaches to early childhood education position children's wellbeing and development as emerging through emotionally responsive and attuned relationships (Recchia, 2012). Similarly, *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) and the *Early Years Learning Framework* (AGDE, 2022) identify wellbeing and belonging as grounded in children's experiences of connection, responsiveness, and emotional support. Such relationships are particularly important during periods of change, when continuity and emotional availability provide children with a sense of security and support confident participation in new environments (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; MoE, 2017). The conditions through which these relationships are enacted, however, can change substantially during the toddler-to-kindergarten transition.

Toddler rooms are typically characterised by close and responsive caregiving relationships, supported by smaller group sizes and lower educator-child ratios (Degotardi et al., 2017). These conditions provide opportunities for sustained relational support and one-to-one interaction, including moments of physical closeness, comfort, and reassurance (Degotardi et al., 2017; Recchia, 2012). In contrast, kindergarten rooms generally operate within a different relational context, with larger groups and greater expectations for children's autonomy and participation, influencing how children access educator support throughout the day.

In the Australian context, the transition from toddler to kindergarten room may coincide with a substantial change in the minimum educator-child ratios. In Victoria, the required ratio is 1:4 for children from birth to 36 months and 1:11 for children from 36 months to preschool age (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2026). Although ratios do not determine relationship quality in a simple or linear manner, higher ratios require educators to distribute their attention across larger groups, limiting opportunities for sustained and individualised interaction (Perlman et al., 2017; Slot, 2018). Consequently, the toddler-to-kindergarten transition represents a significant change in the structural conditions that support relational care.

Drawing on Cultural-Historical perspectives, children do not experience structural arrangements directly; rather, they experience their effects through the relationships and social practices that shape everyday life (Hedegaard, 2012). During periods of transition, when children are navigating unfamiliar environments and expectations (Harju et al., 2024), access to relational support becomes particularly significant. A tension therefore emerges between curriculum frameworks that position secure, responsive relationships as central to children's wellbeing (AGDE, 2022; MoE, 2017) and the institutional conditions associated with the transition from the toddler room to the kindergarten room. It is within this tension, between commitments to children's wellbeing and belonging and the structural realities of increased educator-child ratios, that the concept of the dilution of the lap emerges.

The lap is understood both literally and symbolically as a relational space of closeness, comfort, and co-regulation through which young children experience safety, belonging, and care (Bowlby, 1988). Rather than implying diminished educator commitment, the concept highlights how structural conditions redistribute educators' relational presence across larger groups of children. As a result, the toddler-to-kindergarten transition involves more than movement between rooms; it reconfigures the conditions through which care and relational support are enacted and experienced.

Drawing on two practice-based vignettes, the following section explores how children, families, and educators experienced these changing relational conditions across two differing contexts.

Methodology and Author Positioning

To explore the toddler-to-kindergarten transition as it is experienced in everyday practice, this paper draws on two reflective, practice-based vignettes. Vignettes can provide rich accounts of everyday life and make visible dimensions of experience that might otherwise remain obscured (Degotardi et al., 2017). In this paper, they are used to examine how organisational conditions shape children's access to relational support during transition.

The author occupies a dual position as both an early childhood researcher and the mother of the twin girls described in these accounts. This position provided opportunities for close observation and reflection while also shaping the interpretation of the experiences presented. Consistent with reflexive qualitative inquiry, the vignettes are understood as situated and interpretive accounts rather than objective representations of experience (Berger, 2015).

Reflective Vignettes

The following vignettes draw on experiences of supporting twin girls through the transition from a toddler room to a kindergarten room in two different long-day care centres in Victoria, Australia. Together, they illustrate how children's experiences of transition are shaped by the relational conditions created within different educational settings. Particular attention is given to how structural and relational conditions, including educator-child ratios, shape opportunities for connection and co-regulation during this period of change.

The twins had attended their original centre from eight months of age for three days each week. Over time, they developed strong, trusting relationships with educators and appeared settled, confident, and engaged in the toddler room. Their family similarly experienced continuity and confidence in the care provided. At 34 months, the centre advised that the twins would transition to the kindergarten room, supported by a two-week orientation process involving short visits alongside familiar educators.

The first vignette describes the twins' experience following this transition, while the second examines a subsequent move to a different centre after the family withdrew from the original service. These accounts are drawn from reflective notes and informal conversations with educators.

Vignette One: Transitioning from the Toddler to the Kindergarten Room

On the morning of their first drop-off in the new room, the twins were visibly distressed. They cried, refused to enter, and clung tightly to their older sisters, who had come in to help them settle. The room felt loud, busy, and highly active. A large number of children were already present, including several older children who were later explained as part of a morning 'family grouping' arrangement. Two educators were supporting the room. They acknowledged the twins warmly with smiles and waves from across the room, but neither was immediately available to engage closely with them. Later, one of the educators invited the twins to sit and draw but was called away to assist another child. She explained that an additional staff member would arrive at 9:00 am and that the older children would soon move to their own room. While the educators were caring and responsive, their attention was necessarily divided across many children and competing demands.

Despite educators' efforts to reassure them, the twins remained distressed during the separation. At pick-up that afternoon, the twins appeared unusually subdued, and this pattern continued for a number of days. Their sleep became disrupted, and they became increasingly hesitant about attending the centre, often expressing concern about their new room.

Following discussions with the centre director, a revised transition plan was introduced. The twins began their day in the toddler room before moving to the kindergarten room later in the morning. This initially reduced distress at drop-off, with mornings remaining calm and separations more manageable. However, the arrangement could not be sustained due to staffing and attendance requirements. When the original routine resumed, the distress returned. Ultimately, the family made the difficult decision to withdraw the twins and seek an alternative setting.

Vignette Two: Transitioning to a Different Centre

The twins were subsequently enrolled in a different long-day care centre. During orientation, the centre emphasised relationships and emotional wellbeing as central to its approach. The kindergarten room was staffed by four educators for 23 children and had direct access to a large outdoor environment. On their first day, educators met the twins at their level, offering calm interaction, reassurance, and physical proximity. When they became upset during separation, educators remained close, sitting beside them, reading books, offering a lap, and holding them when needed. This approach continued over the following days. At each drop-off, educators provided consistent emotional and physical support through shared books, conversation, cuddles, and gentle invitations to join activities. By the third day, the twins separated without visible distress. Within a short period, the twins appeared settled, engaged, and confident in their new environment, and their family felt reassured.

Analysis and Discussion

Drawing on Hedegaard's (2012) cultural-historical wholeness approach, the following discussion explores how children's experiences of transition are shaped not only by everyday relationships and interactions but also by the institutional and societal conditions within which these relationships are enacted.

Children's experiences of transition are shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including centre philosophy, staff continuity, physical environments, group composition, and educator-child ratios (Slot, 2018). A distinctive structural feature of the toddler-to-kindergarten transition, however, is the substantial increase in educator-child ratios that commonly accompanies the move. While the vignettes do not suggest that ratios alone determine children's experiences, they draw attention to how this particular structural change may alter the conditions under which relational support is enacted (Perlman et al., 2017; Slot, 2018). Accordingly, this discussion foregrounds educator-child ratios as a significant structural feature of the transition and considers how they may shape children's access to relational support.

> **"The concept of the dilution of the lap draws attention to how the distribution of educators' attention across larger groups can reduce opportunities for the close, sustained forms of care that may be particularly significant during periods of transition."**

The Child's Perspective: The Dilution of the Lap

From the child's perspective, the transition from the toddler room to kindergarten involves a fundamental reconfiguration of relational support. It is well established that close, emotionally responsive relationships are foundational to children's wellbeing and development (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1988). Although this understanding emerged largely from studies of parent-child relationships, contemporary literature emphasises that children's relational worlds extend to other significant adults, including educators (Khadka, 2022). Within ECEC settings, educator-child relationships serve as critical sources of emotional security and continuity (Howes & Spieker, 2008; Spilt & Koomen, 2022). For very young children, this relational security is frequently enacted through embodied practices of care, combining physical proximity with active co-regulation (Taggart, 2016). As children move from the toddler room to kindergarten, access to these embodied forms of care may undergo substantial change. Understanding the toddler-to-kindergarten transition, therefore, requires critical attention to how shifting relational dynamics shape children's lived experiences of comfort and belonging within the new environment.

Transition research highlights the importance of familiarity and supportive relationships as children navigate new settings (Dockett & Perry, 2014; Griebel & Niesel, 2009). Recent research further conceptualises transition as an ongoing relational process shaped through children's everyday interactions and relationships rather than a discrete event (Harju et al., 2024). Viewed in this way, the toddler-to-kindergarten transition may involve a more substantial emotional and relational shift than its characterisation as a routine movement between age groups suggests.

The two vignettes illustrate how the twins' experiences of transition were shaped by the relational conditions within each setting. In the second setting, educators remained consistently available during moments of uncertainty, staying physically close and offering reassurance as the twins navigated the kindergarten environment. By contrast, although educators in the first setting responded to the twins' needs, opportunities for sustained relational presence appeared more limited as attention was distributed across a larger group of children. These contrasting experiences align with research demonstrating that structural features, including educator-child ratios and group size, shape the conditions under which children experience relational support and emotional security (Perlman et al., 2017; Slot, 2018). As Taggart (2016) argues, organisational conditions influence the extent to which very young children can access embodied and relational forms of care. The contrasting experiences in the vignettes, therefore, illustrate how children's access to relational support is shaped by the organisational conditions within which transitions occur.

Both settings incorporated orientation processes, including visits to the kindergarten room and opportunities to spend time in the new environment prior to transition. However, the vignettes suggest that continuity in the physical environment did not necessarily translate into continuity in the experience of care. The twins entered environments with which they had become familiar, yet the opportunities available to them for reassurance and physical closeness differed once they entered the rooms full-time. These contrasting experiences highlight that the toddler-to-kindergarten transition is not a discrete event completed through orientation, but an ongoing process shaped through children's everyday interactions and relationships (Harju et al., 2024).

> **"Supporting children effectively therefore requires consideration of the conditions that enable educators to remain emotionally and relationally available after the initial move occurs."**

Taken together, the vignettes suggest that the relational dimensions of the toddler-to-kindergarten transition warrant greater attention. While the move is often framed as a routine developmental progression towards greater independence, the vignettes show that it can also involve significant changes in children's access to familiar forms of relational support. It is this change that the concept of the dilution of the lap seeks to illuminate. From the child's perspective, the transition may mean fewer opportunities for the physical closeness, comfort, and co-regulation that characterised everyday experiences in the toddler room. In this sense, the transition is not simply a change in room or routine, but a change in the relational conditions through which children experience security, comfort, and belonging.

The Educator's Perspective: Relational Presence and Structural Constraints

From the educator's perspective, supporting children as they transition from the toddler to the kindergarten room involves responding to individual emotional needs while simultaneously attending to the wider group. This work is undertaken within organisational conditions that shape educators' opportunities to provide sustained physical and emotional availability. Maintaining such responsiveness relies on relational attunement (Spilt & Koomen, 2022), a central dimension of early childhood practice (Griebel & Niesel, 2009; Quiñones et al., 2021). The vignettes illustrate how differing organisational contexts influenced educators' opportunities for relational engagement during the twins' transition.

In Vignette One, the twins entered a setting characterised by a larger group size and higher educator-child ratio. Although their distress was acknowledged through waving and invitations to participate, educators were often unable to move physically closer or remain alongside them. Opportunities for sustained proximity and emotional availability appeared more constrained as attention was distributed across the wider group. Structural features of early childhood settings have been identified as important influences on the quality of responsive and individualised interactions (Perlman et al., 2017; Slot, 2018). The vignette, therefore, highlights the challenges educators may encounter when attempting to remain responsive to individual children while also meeting the needs of the wider group.

These challenges draw attention to the often-overlooked emotional and relational responsibilities embedded within early childhood practice (Quiñones et al., 2021). Dalli (2006) conceptualises care as an active practice of attuned responsiveness to children's emotional and relational needs. Similarly, Quiñones et al. (2021) position affective attunement as a critical, though often invisible, dimension of professional work. During periods of transition, such attunement may become particularly important as children encounter unfamiliar routines, environments, and relationships. When opportunities for proximity or sustained presence are constrained, educators may need to balance responsiveness to individual children with responsibility for the wider group. The experience presented in Vignette One, therefore, highlights the emotional dimensions of early childhood practice and the challenges involved in sustaining responsive, relational care during the toddler-to-kindergarten transition (Dalli, 2006; Quiñones et al., 2021).

In contrast, the second vignette illustrates how different structural arrangements can create greater opportunities for educators to remain physically and emotionally present. In Vignette Two, a lower educator-child ratio appeared to enable more sustained engagement and physical proximity, allowing educators to engage in attuned interactions with children. Delaune and Quiñones' (2026) work highlights the significance of educators as transformational objects who can support children's psychological shifts during periods of disequilibrium. From this perspective, emotionally attuned relationships can provide the relational support through which children negotiate experiences of uncertainty and disequilibrium. Vignette Two illustrates how structural conditions that enable sustained educator presence may create greater opportunities for educators to fulfil this transformational role, providing children with relational support as they negotiate the uncertainties of transition.

Taken together, the vignettes illustrate the work involved in supporting children through the toddler-to-kindergarten transition and the organisational conditions within which this work is undertaken. In both settings, educators responded to children's emotional needs while simultaneously attending to the wider group; however, opportunities to provide sustained proximity, availability, and attunement appeared to differ across the two organisational contexts. The concept of the dilution of the lap draws attention to how the distribution of educators' attention across larger groups can reduce opportunities for the close, sustained forms of care that may be particularly significant during periods of transition. While the influence of educator-child ratios and group size on interaction quality is well established (Perlman et al., 2017; Slot, 2018), less attention has been given to how these structural conditions intersect with internal room-to-room transitions and the work involved in supporting children through them. The concept of the dilution of the lap therefore draws attention to how organisational reconfigurations associated with the toddler-to-kindergarten transition may shape educators' opportunities to sustain the relational presence through which children are supported during periods of transition.

The Societal Perspective: Structural Tension

From a societal perspective, the significance of the toddler-to-kindergarten transition lies in the tension it reveals between the relational aspirations of early childhood education and the conditions through which those aspirations are enacted. Both *Te Whāriki* and Australia's *Early Years Learning Framework* position wellbeing, belonging, learning, and participation within secure and responsive relationships (AGDE, 2022; MoE, 2017). The vignettes suggest that these relational commitments cannot be considered independently of the organisational and policy contexts that shape everyday experiences of care and education.

This tension can be understood through cultural-historical perspectives, which position children's development and wellbeing as emerging through participation in socially and institutionally organised practices (Hedegaard, 2012). From this perspective, relationships are inseparable from the contexts in which they occur. Organisational arrangements, routines, and institutional structures shape opportunities for participation and influence how relationships are experienced in everyday settings. Children's experiences of belonging, emotional security, and wellbeing are therefore closely connected to the conditions through which relational support is provided (Hedegaard, 2012).

The concept of the dilution of the lap draws attention to how the toddler-to-kindergarten transition may involve changes in children's access to emotional connection, co-regulation, and relational support. Rather than viewing transition primarily as a matter of children's readiness or adjustment, the concept directs attention to the conditions through which transition is experienced (Dockett & Perry, 2014; Griebel & Niesel, 2009). As the vignettes suggest, the move to kindergarten may alter children's opportunities for closeness, co-regulation, and support from familiar educators, thereby shaping the relational conditions through which transition is experienced.

These considerations are also significant from a children's rights perspective. Children's rights scholarship emphasises that rights are realised through everyday experiences and opportunities for participation rather than through formal policy commitments alone (Lundy, 2007; Petriwskyj et al., 2014). Within ECEC settings, opportunities for wellbeing, belonging, and participation are closely linked to children's access to trusting and supportive relationships (Petriwskyj et al., 2014). From this perspective, the dilution of the lap raises important questions about how children's rights are realised during the transition from the toddler room to the kindergarten room.

From a societal perspective, the toddler-to-kindergarten transition invites greater attention to the relationship between relational aspirations and structural realities. The dilution of the lap makes visible an often-overlooked consequence of this transition by highlighting how organisational arrangements shape opportunities for the sustained relational encounters that curriculum frameworks position as foundational to children's wellbeing. Supporting successful transitions requires attention not only to pedagogy

and transition practices but also to the organisational and policy conditions that make these relationships possible during the move to the kindergarten room.

Practice and Policy Implications

This analysis highlights the need for ECEC transition policies and practices to recognise the toddler-to-kindergarten move as a relational transition, rather than simply a room change or a step towards independence. ECEC policy must look beyond orientation visits and other preparatory activities. While orientation can foster initial familiarity and continuity, transition is an ongoing relational process (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; Griebel & Niesel, 2009). Supporting children effectively, therefore, requires consideration of the conditions that enable educators to remain emotionally and relationally available after the initial move occurs.

Higher educator-child ratios have been associated with fewer opportunities for individualised attention, co-regulation, and emotional support (Perlman et al., 2017; Slot, 2018). As discussed earlier, in Australia, the toddler-to-kindergarten transition may coincide with a substantial increase in educator-child ratios. In Victoria, the required ratio changes from 1:4 for children from birth to 36 months to 1:11 for children aged 36 months to preschool age (ACECQA, 2026). While ratios alone do not determine pedagogical quality, such a significant difference in staffing requirements changes the conditions within which relationships are enacted. This has implications for children's opportunities to access sustained relational support and for educators' capacity to remain relationally available during periods of transition.

Ultimately, the dilution of the lap draws attention to how organisational decisions are experienced by children in everyday practice. Rather than focusing solely on children's readiness for transition, policy and practice must also consider whether environments are equipped to provide the relational support children need. This is essential if the relational commitments of early childhood curricula are to be realised in practice.

Limitations and Future Directions

This paper draws on literature and reflective, practice-based vignettes from two early childhood settings. While such accounts can illuminate the lived and relational dimensions of practice (Ruming & McFarland, 2022), they are necessarily situated and shaped by the author's interpretations, particularly given the dual role of researcher and mother.

The contrasting experiences presented cannot be understood in relation to educator-child ratios alone. Children's experiences of transition are shaped by broader organisational and relational contexts (Dockett & Perry, 2014; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). Accordingly, educator-child ratios are considered not as a singular explanatory mechanism, but as one visible aspect of the structural conditions that shape children's access to relational support and educators' opportunities for relational engagement during the toddler-to-kindergarten transition.

The concept of the dilution of the lap is offered as an exploratory and generative conceptual tool rather than a definitive account. Further research is needed to examine how changes in access to relational support shape children's wellbeing, belonging, and participation during transition, and how organisational conditions, including educator-child ratios and group size, influence educators' capacity to sustain emotionally attuned relationships across diverse ECEC contexts.

Conclusion

Drawing on literature and practice-based reflections, this paper has examined the toddler-to-kindergarten transition as a significant yet often overlooked transition within ECEC. Through the concept of the dilution of the lap, it has explored how the structural changes accompanying this move may shape children's experiences of emotional connection and relational support, while also influencing educators' opportunities for attuned and responsive engagement.

The discussion has argued that these structural conditions sit in tension with the relational commitments embedded within *Te Whāriki* and the *Early Years Learning Framework*, both of which position wellbeing and belonging as emerging through secure and responsive relationships. While educators may remain deeply committed to relational practice, opportunities to sustain such relationships are shaped by the organisational conditions within which care is enacted.

By bringing visibility to this often-overlooked transition, the concept of the dilution of the lap contributes to broader discussions of children's emotional rights, the emotional and relational work of educators, and the structural conditions that shape relational practice. Ultimately, the toddler-to-kindergarten transition exposes a fundamental tension within contemporary ECEC: secure and responsive relationships are positioned as central to children's wellbeing, yet the structural conditions accompanying this transition may simultaneously constrain opportunities for those relationships. Until this tension is addressed, the relational commitments embedded within *Te Whāriki* and the *Early Years Learning Framework* may continue to exceed the conditions available for their enactment in everyday practice.

References

Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the strange situation*. Lawrence Erlbaum.

Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority. (2026). *Guide to the National Quality Framework*. https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2026-07/Guide-to-the-NQF-260731.pdf

Australian Government Department of Education. (2022). *Belonging, being and becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia* (Version 2.0). Commonwealth of Australia. https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-01/EYLF-2022-V2.0.pdf

Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research, 15*(2), 219-234. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475

Binfield-Skøie, T. (2025). Negotiations of subject positions and belonging when children transition within early childhood education and care institutions. *Early Years*, 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2025.2579515

Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development*. Basic Books.

Dalli, C., White, E. J., Rockel, J., Duhn, I., Buchanan, E., Davidson, S., Ganly, S., & Wang, B. (2011). *Quality early childhood education for under-two-year-olds: What should it look like? A literature review*. Ministry of Education. https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/ECE/quality-ece-for-under-2-year-olds

Degotardi, S., Page, J., & White, E. J. (2017). (Re)conceptualising relationships in infant-toddler pedagogy. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, *18*(4), 355–361. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949117742760

Delaune, A., & Quiñones, G. (2026). Emotional transitions: The role of infant educators as transformational objects. *International Journal of Early Childhood*. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13158-025-00461-1

Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2007). *Transitions to school: Perceptions, expectations, experiences*. UNSW Press.

Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2014). *Continuity of learning: A resource to support effective transition to school and school age care*. Australian Government Department of Education. https://www.education.gov.au/early-childhood/resources/continuity-learning-resource-support-effective-transition-school-and-school-age-care

Fabian, H., & Dunlop, A.-W. (Eds.). (2007). *Informing transitions in the early years: Research, policy and practice*. Open University Press.

Fincham, E. N., & Fellner, A. R. (2016). Transitional practice: Teachers and children in-between classrooms in one early childhood centre. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, *14*(3), 310–323. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X14552874

Gath, M. E., Herold, L., Hunkin, E., McNair, L. J., Redder, B., Rutanen, N., & White, E. J. (2024). Infants' emotional and social experiences during and after the transition to early childhood education and care. *Journal of Early Childhood Research, 22*(1), 88-105. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X231195706

Griebel, W., & Niesel, R. (2009). A developmental psychology perspective in transition research. In J. Dunlop & H. Fabian (Eds.), *Transitions in the early years* (pp. 19-30). Routledge.

Harju, K., Vuorisalo, M., Paananen, M., & Rutanen, N. (2024). Children's transitions in early childhood education and care: various combinations of dis-/continuities. *Early Years, 44*(3-4), 735–750. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2023.2232951

Hedegaard, M. (2012). Analyzing children's learning and development in everyday practices from a cultural-historical perspective. In M. Hedegaard, A. Edwards, & M. Fleer (Eds.), *Motives in children's development: Cultural-historical approaches* (pp. 127–142). Cambridge University Press.

Howes, C., & Spieker, S. (2008). Attachment relationships in the context of multiple caregivers. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (2nd ed., pp. 317-332). Guilford Press.

Khadka, C. (2022). The evolution of attachment theory: From Bowlby to modern perspectives. *TUTA Journal, 10*(1), 125–140. https://doi.org/10.3126/tutaj.v10i1.74328

Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice' is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal, 33*(6), 927-942. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033

Ministry of Education. Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga. (2017). *Te Whāriki: He whāriki matauranga mo ̄ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum.* https://tewhariki.tahurangi.education.govt.nz/te-wh-riki-early-childhood-curriculum-document/5637184332.p

O'Farrelly, C., & Hennessy, E. (2014). Watching transitions unfold: A mixed-methods study of toddlers' transitions within early childhood care and education settings. *Early Years, 34*(4), 329–347. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2014.968838

Perlman, M., Fletcher, B., Falenchuk, O., Brunsek, A., McMullen, E., & Shah, P. S. (2017). Child-staff ratios in early childhood education and care settings and child outcomes: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLOS ONE, 12*(1), e0170256. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0170256

Petriwskyj, A., Thorpe, K., & Tayler, C. (2014). Towards inclusion: provision for diversity in the transition to school. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, *22*(4), 359–379. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2014.911078

Quiñones, G., Li, L., & Ridgway, A. (2021). *Affective early childhood pedagogy for infant-toddlers*. Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-73527-2

Recchia, S. L. (2012). Caregiver–child relationships as a context for continuity in child care. *Early Years*, *32*(2), 143–157. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2012.693908

Recchia, S. L., & Dvorakova, K. (2012). How three young toddlers transition from an infant to a toddler child care classroom: Exploring the influence of peer relationships, teacher expectations, and changing social contexts. *Early Education and Development, 23*(2), 181–201. https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2012.630824

Ruming, N., & McFarland, L. (2022). 'When we sat together, it just worked' : Supporting individual and collaborative reflective practice in a team of early childhood educators. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, *47*(1), Article 18369391211052683. https://doi.org/10.1177/18369391211052683

Slot, P. (2018), "Structural characteristics and process quality in early childhood education and care: A literature review", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 176, OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/edaf3793-en.

Spilt, J. L., & Koomen, H. M. Y. (2022). Three decades of research on individual teacher-child relationships: A chronological review of prominent attachment-based themes. *Frontiers in Education, 7*, Article 920985. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.920985

Taggart, G. (2016). Compassionate pedagogy: The ethics of care in early childhood professionalism. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, *24*(2), 173-185. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2014.970847

PEER REVIEWED

Imagining and Responding to Infants' Emotional Worlds: Teachers' Mentalisation and the Realisation of Children's Emotional Rights

Melanie Audier



Children's emotional rights are realised through everyday relational practices in which teachers recognise, interpret, and respond to infants' emotional experiences. This article draws on mentalisation literature, infant pedagogy, and insights from my research exploring teachers' experiences of mentalisation with infants to examine how teachers uphold infants' emotional rights relationally. Mentalisation refers to the process of imagining, interpreting, and responding to the emotions, thoughts, and intentions underlying behaviour. Although mentalisation is an emerging term in ECEC, it is already reflected in Te Whāriki, and enacted through relational pedagogies such as emotion socialisation, emotion naming and validation, relational repair, and collaborative reflection. These practices enable infants and young children to be understood as intentional emotional beings whose perspectives can be recognised and responded to. Strengthening mentalising capacity through reflection, collaborative discussion, and supportive professional environments enables teachers to uphold children's emotional rights in daily practice.

Introduction

In early childhood education and care (ECEC) contexts, children's emotional rights are realised through reciprocal relationships with teachers who recognise, interpret, and respond to their emotional experiences as meaningful, intentional, and worthy of understanding. While infants are active participants in their learning (Trevarthen & Aitken, 2001), they are also fundamentally dependent on emotionally responsive relationships to honour their rights and foster healthy socio-emotional development (Mascolo, 2020; World Association for Infant Mental Health [WAIMH], 2016). Through repeated experiences of co-regulation, caregivers help infants recognise, express, and gradually manage their emotions (Shanker, 2014). Emotional development is therefore not solely an individual achievement but a relational process that emerges through consistent patterns of sensitive and responsive care (Mascolo, 2020; Shanker, 2014). This underscores the important role of teachers in supporting emotional development and honouring emotional rights.

Within these relationships, the process of imagining and responding to children's emotional experiences is essential. The process of making sense of the invisible world of emotions, thoughts, and intentions is referred to as mentalisation (Farkas et al., 2017; Fonagy et al., 2018). Although mentalisation is a relatively recent focus within ECEC scholarship, relational practices consistent with a mentalising approach are already embedded and encouraged throughout Te Whāriki and teacher practice (Audier et al., 2024; Ministry of Education, 2017). To honour the rights of infants, adults need to be alert and attuned to their capabilities and agency in addition to their vulnerability, dependence, and learning (Press & Cheeseman, 2022).

This article draws on mentalisation literature, infant pedagogy, and insights from my research exploring teachers' experiences of mentalisation with infants under the age of two to examine how teachers uphold infants' emotional rights relationally. Although infancy and toddlerhood are not consistently defined by age, this article focuses on children from birth to 2 years, encompassing infancy and the early period of toddlerhood. This age grouping is consistent with the age range that is often accommodated in infant rooms in New Zealand early childhood settings. Particular attention is given to how mentalisation is enacted in everyday practice, and the role of collaborative team cultures in sustaining emotionally responsive environments.

Emotional Rights

This article uses the term emotional rights as a conceptual framing for considering aspects of established children's rights that relate to children's emotional experiences, expression, relationships, and development. This framing draws on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) and the World Association for Infant Mental Health's (2016) position paper on the rights of infants, which seeks to extend consideration of infant rights beyond those explicitly addressed in the UNCRC. Notably, WAIMH's position paper is situated within theoretical and cultural assumptions about caregiving that may have limited application in diverse cultural contexts (Lewis, 2005; Singer, 1993).

Although mentalisation may contribute to the realisation of many children's rights, this article focuses on four rights (UNCRC, 1989) that are particularly relevant to teachers' capacity to understand

> **As mentalisation is central to the enactment of emotional rights, developing teachers' capacity for reflective and curious interpretation of children's experiences is an important aspect of emotionally responsive practice."**

infants' inner experiences: the right to be heard (Article 12), the right to freedom of expression (Article 13), the right to protection from physical or mental harm (Article 19), and the right to education that supports the development of children's personalities, talents, and abilities (Article 29). While the UNCRC provides the foundation for the rights considered here, WAIMH (2016) extends this by explicitly highlighting relational importance. It argues that infants have a right to sensitive and responsive relationships, emotional safety, nurturance, and early educational experiences that support healthy development. Together, these rights provide a basis for examining how infants' emotional experiences can be recognised, expressed, protected, and supported within early childhood education.

While these rights are often discussed in legal or policy terms, they are realised through everyday relationships and interactions. For infants and toddlers, whose views, feelings, and intentions are often communicated non-verbally, teachers play a particularly important role in honouring infants' emotional rights by recognising and responding to their inner experiences. This relational understanding is central to understanding how mentalisation may be involved in the enactment of children's emotional rights within early childhood education.

Why Mentalisation Matters

Mentalisation can be understood as a relational process that teachers draw on when imagining and responding to infants' emotional worlds (Kalland et al., 2022). In practice, mentalisation involves making sense of behaviour by imagining the underlying emotions, thoughts, desires, or intentions behind behaviour (Mata López et al., 2022). Mentalisation is closely connected to emotion as it is through this process that people recognise the meaning behind their own emotional experiences and those of others (Farkas et al., 2017; Fonagy et al., 2018). Mentalisation has considerable overlap with related concepts, including theory of mind (ToM), empathy, perspective taking, mind-mindedness, reflective functioning, and insightfulness. Rather than being understood as discrete and mutually exclusive constructs, these concepts can be considered overlapping capacities within the broader umbrella of mentalisation (Luyten et al., 2020). Through the mentalisation process, emotions become experiences that can be recognised, communicated, and managed rather than simply reacted to (Fonagy et al., 2018). For example, when an infant reaches for a toy, a teacher may infer that the infant wants the toy and respond accordingly by passing it to them. While interpretations and responses such as this are often made automatically, more complex situations require consideration and reflection. For instance, when settling a new infant into the centre, a teacher may not immediately be able to determine what the infant is communicating, as they are unfamiliar with their non-verbal cues. Rather than making assumptions, the teacher may remain curious, observing the infant's cues, responding, and adjusting their understanding in light of the infant's reactions. Although some aspects of mentalisation become automatic through repeated experience and familiarity, it also remains an iterative process requiring teachers to draw on emotional, cognitive, and relational resources.

In many respects, mentalisation reflects the process of noticing, recognising, and responding described in Te Whāriki, with teachers seeking to understand the feelings, intentions, and perspectives that may lie beneath children's behaviour (Audier et al., 2024; Ministry of Education, 2017). Importantly, even with the best intentions, mentalisation may be inaccurate, and teachers may misread or over-interpret an infant's internal state (Helmerhorst et al., 2019). Therefore, it is important for teachers to remain sensitive to children's responses to their mentalising actions. Through being sensitive to children's feelings and perspectives, mentalisation supports empathy and emotional responsiveness (Recktenvald & Donelli, 2019; Santelices et al., 2023). If emotional rights involve children being understood and responded to with sensitivity, then mentalisation becomes central to how those rights are enacted in practice. Importantly, this capacity can be strengthened through reflection, collaborative discussions, and professional learning (Marttila et al., 2024).

How Teachers Support Emotional Learning Through Mentalisation

While mentalisation is often described as a thinking process, it becomes visible through everyday interactions and relationships that support children's emotional rights. The following examples illustrate how mentalisation is enacted in practice through emotion coaching, scaffolding emotional understanding, relational repair, and collaborative reflection. These practices are not separate from mentalisation, rather, they represent the ways in which teachers' mentalising processes become visible in everyday interactions.

Emotion Socialisation

Children's emotional rights are supported when teachers treat emotions as meaningful experiences that are worthy of attention and understanding. Emotion socialisation refers to the ways adults support children's developing understanding and regulation of emotions through their responses to children's emotional experiences, their conversations about emotions, and their own expression of emotion (Denham et al., 2012; Ornaghi et al., 2022). Emotion socialisation begins in infancy, although the ways it is enacted change as children develop. For example, in infancy, children rely on caregivers for co-regulation, with teachers responding sensitively to emotional cues and supporting infants to manage distress (Ministry of Education, 2017; Shanker, 2016). As children develop, teachers increasingly support them to recognise and communicate emotions, navigate social interactions, and manage peer conflicts (Clarke et al., 2019; Ministry of Education, 2017). Based on the findings of their study, Ornaghi and colleagues (2022) argue that ECEC teachers drew on different emotion socialisation styles depending on the situation, including coaching, dismissive, and amplification styles. These different styles illustrate that emotion socialisation is not a single approach but encompasses different ways teachers respond to children's emotional experiences. Emotion coaching is particularly relevant to mentalisation as it involves acknowledging feelings, exploring possible reasons for those feelings, and supporting children to communicate and manage emotions in developmentally appropriate ways, rather than dismissing, distracting from, or correcting emotions.

Through conversations about feelings, including reflecting on present and past emotional experiences, teachers help infants and toddlers make sense of their emotions, develop emotional understanding, and express themselves. For infants, this may occur primarily through responsive interactions and co-regulation, as teachers interpret and respond to verbal and non-verbal emotional cues (Ministry of Education, 2017). As children develop greater communicative capacities, teachers can increasingly use emotion talk and reflection to help children make sense of their emotional experiences (Andrews et al., 2020; Ministry of Education, 2017; Voltmer & von Salisch, 2022). Therefore, emotion coaching can reflect a mentalising approach as teachers seek to understand the feelings and intentions underlying children's emotional expressions rather than responding only to observable behaviour (Ornaghi et al., 2020). Research suggests that emotion coaching enhances children's emotional understanding, emotional perspective-taking, self-regulation, and positive social skills (Grazzani et al., 2016; Thompson & Lagattuta, 2006). In this way, emotion socialisation and coaching realise infants' rights to be heard (Article 13) and express themselves (Article 12) (UNCRC, 1989).

Giving Words to Emotional Experience

For infants and toddlers, emotional experiences often emerge before they can be fully communicated through language, creating an important role for teachers in helping make sense of their emotions. Where emotion coaching focuses on responding to children's emotional experiences, mentalising teachers also support children to gradually develop the language and concepts needed to understand those experiences. Mentalising teachers support emotional development by offering words for children's feelings, intentions, and perspectives. Through conversations about emotions and gentle narration of social misunderstandings and resolutions

“Through conversations about feelings, including reflecting on present and past emotional experiences, teachers help infants and toddlers make sense of their emotions, develop emotional understanding, and express themselves.”

(Helmerhorst et al., 2019), teachers help children connect internal experiences with language and meaning. Questions such as “I wonder if…” or “Did you feel…?” invite children to reflect on emotions and perspectives, while discussions about both current and past experiences help children make sense of their social and emotional worlds. By repeatedly hearing and using descriptive emotional language, children develop a richer understanding of their own minds and the minds of others (Wu et al., 2021).

Stories and imaginative play can also provide emotionally safe spaces for infants and young children to explore feelings and perspectives reflectively rather than in response to their own experiences. For example, teachers may describe emotions or wonder aloud about what another person or storybook character might be feeling (Wu et al., 2021). By wondering together about characters' emotions, intentions, and motivations, teachers invite children to consider complex or even conflicting feelings without the pressure of regulating their own emotions or determining how to respond (Alvarenga et al., 2020; Kalland et al., 2022). These shared reflections help infants and children explore complex emotions, consider multiple perspectives, and develop empathy (Kalland et al., 2022). Through these interactions, teachers support children by offering language that helps them gradually understand and communicate their emotional experiences until these capacities can be internalised and used independently (Fonagy et al., 2018). This process affirms children's rights through fostering children's development as individuals (Article 29) and self-expression (Article 13).

Relational Repair and Emotional Safety

Children's emotional rights are supported not only through sensitive interactions but also through the ways teachers respond when relationships become strained. Relational ruptures are an inevitable part of human relationships, including those between teachers and infants (Shai & Fonagy, 2014). Emotionally supportive environments are therefore not conflict-free environments, but environments where distress, disappointment, and misunderstanding can be safely repaired (Recktenvald & Donelli, 2019; Shai & Fonagy, 2014). Mentalisation supports repair as it allows teachers to move beyond behaviour and consider the feelings, needs, and intentions that may have contributed to the interaction. This creates space for teachers to wonder what the child may be experiencing rather than assuming that their behaviour reflects intentional defiance or non-compliance. Teachers support relational repair by acknowledging mistakes, returning after conflict, helping children process difficult emotions, and modelling empathy and accountability. Therefore, through mentalisation, teachers can recognise and repair emotional harm and honour infants' right to protection from emotional harm (Article 19)(UNCRC, 1989). Through these experiences, children learn that emotions can be expressed, understood, and worked through within supportive relationships. In this sense, emotional safety emerges not from perfection, but from the consistent availability of responsive and repairing relationships.

Collaborative Mentalisation and Shared Understanding

Although mentalisation is often discussed as an individual process, determining children's emotional experiences, triggers, and comforts is often a shared responsibility. In my doctoral research exploring nursery teachers' experiences of mentalisation, teachers described the importance of collaborative reflection and emotionally supportive team cultures (Audier, 2026). Teachers shared observations, discussed possible meanings behind children's behaviour, and worked together to decide how best to respond. Through these conversations, teachers were able to draw on one another's perspectives, develop shared understandings, and coordinate their actions in ways that supported individual children and the wider group (Audier, 2026).

Collaborative mentalisation also extends beyond teaching teams. Information shared by parents and family can provide valuable insights into infants' experiences, interests, routines, and emotional needs at home, while teachers can contribute observations from the early childhood setting (Ministry of Education, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2006). Bringing these perspectives together can support a richer understanding of children's emotional worlds and promote greater continuity between contexts. Through collaboration, adults are better positioned to provide consistent, responsive, and emotionally attuned care.

Cultivating Mentalisation in Practice

Mentalisation is a mental and relational process through which children's emotional rights are enacted in everyday ECEC contexts. Infants' rights to have their emotions recognised, understood, and responded to depend on teachers' capacity to interpret behaviour in terms of underlying feelings, thoughts, and needs. While mentalisation is not a new practice that teachers must add to their work, making it more visible provides a framework for understanding how teachers support infants' emotional learning and uphold their emotional rights. By intentionally reflecting on children's experiences, remaining curious about their perspectives, and engaging in shared reflection with colleagues and families, teachers can continue to strengthen the relationships that enable children to feel understood, valued, and supported.

As mentalisation is central to the enactment of emotional rights, developing teachers' capacity for reflective and curious interpretation of children's experiences is an important aspect of emotionally responsive practice. Although further research is needed within early childhood contexts, existing literature suggests that mentalising capacities may be strengthened through reflection, professional learning, and deeper knowledge of children's emotional development (Marttila et al., 2024; Ornaghi et al., 2020). Reviewing video footage of everyday interactions can provide another valuable opportunity to notice emotional cues and reflect on responses that may have been difficult to see in the moment (Audier, 2026; Marttila et al., 2024). Opportunities for collaborative reflection are equally important (Audier, 2026). During team meetings, informal conversations, or reflective supervision, teachers can revisit challenging interactions and wonder together about what a child may have been feeling, needing, or communicating. Reflecting on or discussing questions such as "What might have been happening for this child?" or "What else could explain their behaviour?" encourages curiosity, challenges assumptions, and deepens understanding of children's emotional experiences (Alvarenga et al., 2020; Ornaghi et al., 2020). In this way, mentalising practice is strengthened through both individual and collective reflection.

However, sustaining mentalising practice requires recognising that emotionally responsive relationships are shaped not only by teachers, but by the contexts in which those relationships occur (Audier, 2026). Mentalising practice is strengthened when teachers have sufficient time, manageable workloads, and opportunities to build strong relationships with children and families (Audier & Friesen, 2026). Organisational cultures that value reflective practice, emotional wellbeing, and ongoing professional learning further support teachers to remain responsive, particularly during challenging situations (Audier & Friesen, 2026). This reflects the WAIMH's (2016) recognition that emotionally responsive relationships do not emerge in isolation, they are supported by the policies, structures, and communities surrounding infants and their caregivers.

Conclusion

Children's emotional rights are therefore realised in everyday practice in how teachers notice, interpret, and respond to infants' emotions with care. Mentalisation offers one way of understanding and strengthening these relational processes through emotion socialisation, giving words to emotional experiences, relational repair, and collaborative reflection. Therefore, enabling infants to be heard, to express themselves, to be protected from harm, and to develop as capable individuals. Realising these rights consistently, however, depends not only on teachers' mentalising skill but on the time, workload, and professional culture that cultivates mentalisation. Strengthening both is essential if infants and young children are to be understood, valued, and responded to as intentional emotional beings.

References

Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the strange situation*. Lawrence Erlbaum.

Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority. (2026). *Guide to the National Quality Framework*. https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2026-07/Guide-to-the-NQF-260731.pdf

Australian Government Department of Education. (2022). *Belonging, being and becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia* (Version 2.0). Commonwealth of Australia. https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-01/EYLF-2022-V2.0.pdf

Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research, 15*(2), 219-234. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475

Binfield-Skøie, T. (2025). Negotiations of subject positions and belonging when children transition within early childhood education and care institutions. *Early Years*, 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2025.2579515

Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development*. Basic Books.

Dalli, C., White, E. J., Rockel, J., Duhn, I., Buchanan, E., Davidson, S., Ganly, S., & Wang, B. (2011). *Quality early childhood education for under-two-year-olds: What should it look like? A literature review*. Ministry of Education. https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/ECE/quality-ece-for-under-2-year-olds

Degotardi, S., Page, J., & White, E. J. (2017). (Re)conceptualising relationships in infant-toddler pedagogy. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, *18*(4), 355–361. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949117742760

Delaune, A., & Quiñones, G. (2026). Emotional transitions: The role of infant educators as transformational objects. *International Journal of Early Childhood*. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13158-025-00461-1

Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2007). *Transitions to school: Perceptions, expectations, experiences*. UNSW Press.

Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2014). *Continuity of learning: A resource to support effective transition to school and school age care*. Australian Government Department of Education. https://www.education.gov.au/early-childhood/resources/continuity-learning-resource-support-effective-transition-school-and-school-age-care

Fabian, H., & Dunlop, A.-W. (Eds.). (2007). *Informing transitions in the early years: Research, policy and practice*. Open University Press.

Fincham, E. N., & Fellner, A. R. (2016). Transitional practice: Teachers and children in-between classrooms in one early childhood centre. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, *14*(3), 310–323. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X14552874

Gath, M. E., Herold, L., Hunkin, E., McNair, L. J., Redder, B., Rutanen, N., & White, E. J. (2024). Infants' emotional and social experiences during and after the transition to early childhood education and care. *Journal of Early Childhood Research, 22*(1), 88-105. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X231195706

Griebel, W., & Niesel, R. (2009). A developmental psychology perspective in transition research. In J. Dunlop & H. Fabian (Eds.), *Transitions in the early years* (pp. 19-30). Routledge.

Harju, K., Vuorisalo, M., Paananen, M., & Rutanen, N. (2024). Children's transitions in early childhood education and care: various combinations of dis-/continuities. *Early Years, 44*(3-4), 735–750. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2023.2232951

Hedegaard, M. (2012). Analyzing children's learning and development in everyday practices from a cultural-historical perspective. In M. Hedegaard, A. Edwards, & M. Fleer (Eds.), *Motives in children's development: Cultural-historical approaches* (pp. 127–142). Cambridge University Press.

Howes, C., & Spieker, S. (2008). Attachment relationships in the context of multiple caregivers. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (2nd ed., pp. 317-332). Guilford Press.

Khadka, C. (2022). The evolution of attachment theory: From Bowlby to modern perspectives. *TUTA Journal, 10*(1), 125–140. https://doi.org/10.3126/tutaj.v10i1.74328

Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice' is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal, 33*(6), 927-942. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033

Ministry of Education. Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga. (2017). *Te Whāriki: He whāriki matauranga mo ̄ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum.* https://tewhariki.tahurangi.education.govt.nz/te-wh-riki-early-childhood-curriculum-document/5637184332.p

O'Farrelly, C., & Hennessy, E. (2014). Watching transitions unfold: A mixed-methods study of toddlers' transitions within early childhood care and education settings. *Early Years, 34*(4), 329–347. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2014.968838

Perlman, M., Fletcher, B., Falenchuk, O., Brunsek, A., McMullen, E., & Shah, P. S. (2017). Child-staff ratios in early childhood education and care settings and child outcomes: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLOS ONE, 12*(1), e0170256. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0170256

Petriwskyj, A., Thorpe, K., & Tayler, C. (2014). Towards inclusion: provision for diversity in the transition to school. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, *22*(4), 359–379. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2014.911078

Quiñones, G., Li, L., & Ridgway, A. (2021). *Affective early childhood pedagogy for infant-toddlers*. Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-73527-2

Recchia, S. L. (2012). Caregiver–child relationships as a context for continuity in child care. *Early Years*, *32*(2), 143–157. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2012.693908

Recchia, S. L., & Dvorakova, K. (2012). How three young toddlers transition from an infant to a toddler child care classroom: Exploring the influence of peer relationships, teacher expectations, and changing social contexts. *Early Education and Development, 23*(2), 181–201. https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2012.630824

Ruming, N., & McFarland, L. (2022). 'When we sat together, it just worked' : Supporting individual and collaborative reflective practice in a team of early childhood educators. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, *47*(1), Article 18369391211052683. https://doi.org/10.1177/18369391211052683

Slot, P. (2018), "Structural characteristics and process quality in early childhood education and care: A literature review", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 176, OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/edaf3793-en.

Spilt, J. L., & Koomen, H. M. Y. (2022). Three decades of research on individual teacher-child relationships: A chronological review of prominent attachment-based themes. *Frontiers in Education, 7*, Article 920985. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.920985

Taggart, G. (2016). Compassionate pedagogy: the ethics of care in early childhood professionalism. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, *24*(2), 173-185. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2014.970847

Advocating for a Specialised Infant-Toddler Programme in Initial Teacher Education

Jean Rockel



"Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle," said Alice (Carroll, 1865). This article reflects on issues that relate to advocacy for excellent teachers of children in the first years – a time when the search for a child's identity is explored by teacher and child with meaningful pedagogy. Such issues illustrate how changes in discourse as a result of social change impact pedagogy and reveal the professional complexities of care and education in initial teacher education (ITE) in Aotearoa New Zealand today. This situation reveals the power of discourse to shape practice in early childhood care and education, and that this, in turn, shapes how teachers see children or children see themselves.

At the turn of the new century, the Director of the Teacher Registration Board, John Langley, prophetically stated:

> *Early childhood education needs the very best teachers with the very best teacher education and qualifications. Being good child minders is not going to be enough. (Langley, 2000, as cited in Kelly, 2001, p. 8)*

It is helpful to broaden the picture to identify changes in context historically, socially, and politically when questioning practice, advocating for teachers of infants and toddlers, and seeking specialised ITE programmes that provide leadership and guidance to the sector.

From Historical Social Change to Contemporary Practice

In order to recognise origins of theory in past practices, it is helpful to examine different perspectives and see its evolution. The power of language is reflected in the process of evolutionary psychology. The discourse of "early childhood" is one that has evolved and dictated the way in which a young child has been regarded. Some historians have argued that pre-modern Western societies lacked a distinct concept of early childhood and often viewed children as miniature adults (Woods, 2005). Traditional Māori society accorded young children a particularly cherished status. Māori children were regarded as taonga of the whānau (family) and hapū (sub-tribe), representing the future continuity of the people, and were nurtured collectively by extended kin (Higgins & Meredith, n.d.).

A similarly altruistic view of this life stage was evidenced in the fourth century. Plato (427-347 BC) claimed that "children were a form of 'riches' and advocated that they be valued and nurtured because they would become the future leaders and guardians of their society" (Woods, 2005, p. viii). These are wise thoughts, and the populace could challenge whether this is reflected in society in Aotearoa New Zealand today, in terms of how very young children are valued and nurtured.

In the 17th century, philosophers emerged, such as John Locke (1632-1704), who suggested children were like a blank slate to be shaped by their experiences (Woods, 2005). Locke's ideas often led to restrictive and punitive child-rearing measures as children were expected to conform to the moral expectations of the adult world. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) believed in the inherent goodness of children and emphasised the value of education and nurturing during this formative stage (Ariès, 1962). These ideas began to instigate change in social attitudes towards very young children and continue to impact attitudes and practice today.

A German thinker, who could be described as the founder of early childhood education, Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) contributed significantly to ideas on how children learn, recognising that children's intellectual development began from birth and advocating play as a medium for learning – ideas promulgated today (Woods, 2005). Linked to Rousseau's thinking, Froebel promoted the analogy of tending and cultivating a child's nature, focusing on a child-centred perspective of learning, and drawing on observations of a child's own interests and activity. Froebel's ideas continue to form the basis of curriculum and continuing educational practice today across the world, including the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) in Aotearoa New Zealand, inspired by Froebelian scholar Helen May and colleagues. This influence is illustrated in a recent study exploring Froebelian connections across four countries today (Cooper et al., 2025), which discussed ways in which Froebelian principles were implemented in terms of cultural differences.

The industrial revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries further endorsed aspects of childhood, leading to the need for child welfare and protection. Ideas of childhood began to emerge, typified by the idea that childhood is a critical developmental period that needs

> **Research indicates that brain development in the first three years is unique to each child, and involves intense synaptic growth, integration, emotional regulation and the formation of secure or insecure attachment patterns (Siegel, 2020). Teachers require specialised approaches to interpreting cues, co-regulating emotions, support for security, and understanding of stress and overstimulation (which occur in busy centres).”**

special attention and care. For example, there are specific rights and protections now included in agreements such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The concept of childhood moved away from simply a utilitarian view to one that incorporates emotional, psychological, and developmental aspects, inspired by broader thinking.

Maria Montessori's work in the 20th century (Montessori, 1912) also changed views regarding very young children. She believed that children are curious and capable of directing their own learning, and learn best in a well-prepared rather than teacher-directed environment. Her valuable focus on child behaviour showed that rather than a rebuke or punishment, she advocated observation and ascertaining what behaviours were being communicated. The prescribed image of the child and attitudes towards children and care shifted again.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was a practice of attempting to force very young children to achieve academic milestones that were more appropriate for children at a different level of maturity. Referred to as “hothousing” (Sigel, 1987, p. 211), this was a discourse that placed unrealistic emphasis on academic skills and structured learning environments.

The Impact of Social-Cultural and Political Change in the New Century

Contemporary ideas on learning and teaching have focused on the provision of flexibility in resources for learning in the first years and recognise individual interests and capabilities, addressing cultural perspectives, rather than prescribed ideas. Today's curriculum guidelines in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) expand Froebel's ideas on the value of play and the significance of exposure to natural outdoor environments (Cooper & Rockel, 2023).

The importance of play and relationships resonates as key in terms of reciprocity and responsiveness – the result of many studies in line with *Te Whāriki*, which also interweave values contained in Indigenous views of learning such as holistic development; learning through experience; connections to culture and land; respect and non-interference; and spiritual connections (Lancy, 2017). These values are reflected in Aotearoa New Zealand's first bicultural early childhood education curriculum document *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), for example, revealed in the principles of Empowerment/Whakamana; Holistic development/Kotahitanga; Family and Community/Whanau tangata; and Relationships/Nga Hononga. *Te Whāriki* is a dual document with two pathways, “one bicultural, derived from a synthesis of traditional Māori thinking and sociocultural theorising, and one indigenous, each with its own pedagogy” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 69). This document has its foundation in Te Tiriti o Waitangi, where early childhood education has an important role to play in providing culturally responsive environments, giving children “the opportunity to develop knowledge and understanding of the cultural heritages of both partners to te Tiriti o Waitangi” (p. 69).

Impact of Regulation and Policy

The etymology of age-group descriptors has also had some interesting effects in relation to infants and toddlers. The word infant has the Latin origin of ‘infans - not speaking’ (Aries, 1962). Despite not speaking, they are great communicators – perhaps it's just hard for us to learn their language. Does this insufficiency of language impact on the image that we hold of the child? Do we assume that the infant is not learning because of a lack of speech? Does this impression influence the inadequate funding priority of infant care and education in policy decisions in such areas as ratios, qualifications, and group size? Perhaps this factor also impacts on the amount and type of specialised infant-toddler care and education content in ITE programmes, being considered less important for infant-toddler care and education?

The word toddler comes from the English verb to toddle, meaning: “to walk unsteadily, with short, wobbly steps” (Oxford dictionary). The modern use of ‘toddler’ was also shaped by the retail clothing industry in the U.S. in the mid 20th century. Clothing manufacturers needed standardised size categories and the term spread internationally through consumer goods (Cook, 2004). In early childhood education, perhaps we should refer to toddlers more positively as explorers due to our awareness of their investigative capabilities, rather than as a commodity.

These interpretations can lead to defining very young children

in a negative light, focusing on what they cannot do, negating a view of a child as rich in resources, as discussed in the literature from Reggio Emilia (Gandini & Edwards, 2001). This is opposed to celebrating what a young child can do, as advocated by Magda Gerber (2002). The ideas from Reggio introduced a provocation for teachers to consider the notion of the image of the child. A negative interpretation may lead to the view of infants as immature and therefore not requiring education funding policy to the same level as older children, who may be viewed as more sophisticated learners. Even the common use of the descriptor 'under-twos', which is based on centre licensing requirements, may indicate a lesser position in status and may become just a label of immaturity. The phrase more commonly used internationally of 'children up to three years', appears more explicit. Despite an increase in research in relation to early learning and teaching in the first years, this leads to the question, where is the consequent increase in time given to this area in ITE?

As Araújo et al. (2023) state:

> Many researchers and professionals have asked why, despite these assertions of values and rights and the advocacy that has accompanied them, and despite the distinct bodies of evidence from disciplines as far apart as neuroscience and psychoanalytic research that converge on the crucial nature of early experience and its lifelong impact, provision for these youngest citizens remains low status and underfunded. (p. 446)

Contemporary research illustrates the importance of specialised pedagogy for 2-year-olds. An example that explores issues with the age group is from Lancy (2017), who challenges toddler stereotypes, stating that such popularist discourses as 'the terrible twos' are not universal. He states that in Western cultures, it is often assumed that toddlers are naturally defiant, but he shows that in many societies, toddlers rarely tantrum and that emotional outbursts are interpreted differently. He emphasises that adults then respond in ways that prevent escalation, outlining the ways in which the interpretation of behaviour differs. He offers the example of very young children in many cultures being seen as competent helpers who help with siblings and are given responsibility for small tasks.

A New Discourse

The integration of care with education saw a significant shift in discourse in Aotearoa New Zealand to "early childhood education and care" services (rather than the descriptor "childcare" as set apart from "education"). The concept of education for the very youngest opened up a different perspective with a curriculum that led to the need for a professional workforce of teachers as opposed to caregivers.

This placement of the word education first in the phrase has put emphasis on education and left care in a lesser position. Recent use of a discourse of care and education has highlighted the importance of care. Though formal Ministry of Education documentation still uses "education and care", the *Te Whāriki* resources, developed to support a pedagogical argument, indicate care moments are





Images: Opportunities to investigate and gain a sense of control. Do these images reveal an 'investigator', or is the child viewed as 'just playing'?



Feeding the animals, a task toddlers enjoy

learning opportunities and use the phrase "care and education." This shift is a meaningful pedagogical direction and shows how discourse can help enhance a more professional status in terms of a qualification in ITE.

As stated by Araújo et al. (2023), the editors of a special issue of Early Years on preparing and supporting professionals working with infants and toddlers:

> Forming relationships with babies and toddlers is emotionally and professionally complex. This work is often positioned as simple 'care' work, where specific preparation (critically informed by explicit reference to cultural values and research evidence) is not needed, in contrast with more important 'education' work, where professional training and preparation is needed. (p. 447)

Redman et al. (2022) argue that care needs to be understood from a theoretical basis within a pedagogical paradigm and understood as underpinning all aspects of the care and education of infants and toddlers. The inclusion of care with learning has also been discussed within the concept of pedagogy of care as curriculum (Bussey & Hill, 2017). Yet, despite the support for such arguments, there is a need to question whether care receives the attention it requires in ITE.

The New Era of Teachers, Not Caregivers

Working as a team member within a professional distributed leadership team in care and education services has also created an additional challenge for teachers, yet it is an essential part of managing the current working conditions with large groups of very young children who require close relationships in the nurturing of their wellbeing (Cooper, 2019). In order to fulfil a professional role, this entails teamwork when observing the opportunities to give back-up when a teacher may be focusing and interacting closely with a particular child who needs immediate support. Support within the teaching team is also required for a teacher's time with family members.

Changes and discourse shifts have come a long way from a society perceiving the young child as a small adult dependent on instruction. Today, teachers are addressing the scientific proposal regarding the first 1000 days as a time when around 80% of a child's brain develops, laying foundations for emotional regulation, learning, relationships, wellbeing, and developing identity (World Health, UNICEF & World Bank, 2018). This significant research requires teachers to take into account socio-cultural influences, which are important pedagogically and politically. This is illustrated by Cooper et al. (2025) in an investigation of pedagogies in the four cultural settings of the U.S.A., U.K., Hong Kong, and New Zealand, who found that pedagogies of care with one-year-olds are enacted in culturally specific ways despite political differences: "Our collective reflections and multilayered dialogue have led us to acknowledge meaningful pedagogy with very young children as a culturally specific phenomenon" (p. 21).

These understandings indicate the need for reflection on how pedagogy interprets local community beliefs and values rather than a standardisation of pedagogy - along with the professional preparation and support for such practices (Araújo et al., 2023). Ritchie (2008) argues that Te Tiriti o Waitangi-based early childhood education, as required for *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), encourages educators to actively embed Māori language, culture, relationships, and perspectives into their teaching practice, and that ITE plays a crucial role in preparing teachers for this responsibility. This process is vitally important to support teachers in their leadership responsibilities in the community.

Specialisation of Pedagogy for the First Years

An historical overview of early childhood ITE in Aotearoa New Zealand, regarding the development of qualifications (Rockel, 2026, forthcoming), reveals the significant advancement from an apprenticeship training model for childcare to the political integration of infants and toddlers in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017). This curriculum focus puts the spotlight on pedagogy for a professional teacher rather than simply a task-oriented service. *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) signals the broad overlapping age ranges for infants birth to 18 months, and toddlers 1 to 3 years. In the past, it would have been unthinkable to have a teaching qualification for this age group!

Research indicates that brain development in the first three years is unique to each child, and involves intense synaptic growth, integration, emotional regulation and the formation of secure or insecure attachment patterns (Siegel, 2020). Teachers require specialised approaches to interpreting cues, co-regulating emotions, support for security, and understanding of stress and overstimulation (which occur in busy centres).

The specialised course material in ITE should reflect the fundamental difference in pedagogical strategies for infants and toddlers as compared to pedagogy with older children. These differences are related to attuned relationships, sensory exploration, movement and bodily experiences, non-verbal communication, and respectful care routines with different expectations of agency and



What can we learn by observing the wonder of our youngest explorer?

participation and environmental design. At the heart of the issue is that infants and toddlers are not just 'younger children' – their learning, development, rights and daily needs are fundamentally different from those of 3- to 5-year-olds. Several research articles on preparing and supporting professionals working with infants and toddlers in Early Years, indicate: "...work with this age group needs conceptualising (and reconceptualising) and cannot rely on watered down pedagogies developed for work with older children" (Araújo et al., 2023, p. 451). Inserting infant-toddler content into general early childhood courses does not prepare teachers to work with the youngest children in ways that acknowledge their capabilities and desires.

Penman and Redder (2023) also acknowledge concerns that infant-toddler specific content in degree programmes is often minimal and not preparing teachers to be competent and confident with this age group. The authors cite an online survey of pre-service teachers by Garvis and Pendergast (2015) investigating their perceptions of working with infants and toddlers. Their programme had integrated infant and toddler content throughout courses in a birth to 8 specialisation within the Bachelor of Education (Primary) in the Australian state of Queensland. They found that the participants had only partial knowledge of children birth to 3 years after completion of their degree.

It is of concern to the author that insufficient specialised course material may occur in ITE programmes. *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 14) states, "Providing for the care and education of infants requires specialised knowledge and practice." How will this occur if there is limited guidance with a specialised focus? This specific focus is evident in teacher education when new research and pedagogical knowledge are drawn upon, and student teachers are provided with lecturer expertise, rather than spread thinly in a range of courses that may overshadow the specialist nature of initial learning and pedagogy in the first years. Mentoring is described by Shin and Recchia (2023) as having a transformative effect on student teachers' learning through critical reflection. They state, "Infant practicum student teachers have been shown to experience a pedagogical shift with the guidance and support of experienced mentors" (p. 628).

The focus on specialisation was emphasised in a popular webinar given by Dalli and Aspden (in Hargraves, 2021) on the nature of a specialisation of infant-toddler pedagogy. Hargraves summed up the presentation with the point that poor practice for infants and toddlers has potential for harm and that teachers should advocate for specialised practice and the required policy infrastructure. Specialist mentoring is also important through a dedicated practicum with children up to 2 years and with knowledgeable and qualified teachers who can provide direction.

In summary, children and teachers will continue to be shaped by historical, social, and political changes. There will be future challenges on the horizon from such technologies as AI (Artificial Intelligence). Children and teachers will be shaped by the experiences this brings, or perhaps new insights of young children will dictate differences in approach for the first 1000 days of life and lead to further pedagogical shifts in thinking. Awareness of these shifts and the impact they have on young children must continue to be at the forefront of practice.

Conclusion

It is important to constantly stand back and reassess the progress being made in research and practice in relation to children up to 3 years, reflecting on a changing pedagogy in relation to our understandings of the very young child that inform our interactions and support. Though the care and educational experiences for children up to 2 years are often undertaken in the smallest space, with the busiest ratios, few or no qualified teachers, and often regarded as the Cinderella of the whole education sector, they are nevertheless the most important preparation for a life-long journey of living and learning.

It is equally important that children have the best teachers with the very best teacher qualification as endorsed by Langley (2000, as cited in Kelly, 2001). Will teachers see the very young child as innocent, rather than competent, and as vulnerable rather than innovative, playful and capable? This is where ITE providers can assist student teachers with pedagogy for the first three years and provide leadership for the profession. This process can best occur through specialised programme content related to children in their first years.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to my grand-daughter Emma Rockel for photos of my great-grandson, Ollie Rockel.

I would like to pay tribute to the 30 successful years of Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki*. The inclusion of infants and toddlers in this curriculum has enhanced an awareness of the significance of early learning opportunities in teacher education and ECE centre programmes and practices. A great achievement for teachers and families.

References

Araújo, S. B., Elfer, P., & Quiñones, G. (2023). Editorial: Preparing and supporting professionals working with infants and toddlers. *Early Years, 43*(3), 443-454. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2023.2240668

Ariès, P. (1962). *Centuries of childhood: A social history of family life* (R. Baldick, Trans.). Vintage Books. (Original work published 1960).

Bussey, K. & Hill, D. (2017). Care as curriculum: Investigating teachers' views on the learning in care. *Early Child Development and Care, 187*(1), 128-137. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2016.1152963

Carroll, L. (1865). *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*. Macmillan.

Cook, D. T. (2004). *The commodification of childhood: The children's clothing industry and the rise of the child consumer*. Duke University Press.

Cooper, M. (2019). Challenging notions of leadership in infant-toddler settings: My personal and professional journey. *The First Years: Ngā Tau Tuatahi. New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education, 21*(2), 13-20.

Cooper, M. & Rockel, J. (2023). Pedagogies of care with 1-year-olds: A contemporary Froebelian lens in New Zealand. In T. Bruce, Y. Nishida, S. Powell, H. Wasmuth & J. Whinnett (Eds.), *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Friedrich Froebel* (pp. 288-295). Bloomsbury Publishing.

Cooper, M., Siu, C., T-S, McMullen, M., Rockel, J. & Powell, S. (2025). *Pedagogies of care with one-year-olds. Exploring Froebelian connections in four countries.* Bloomsbury Publishing.

Gandini, L., & Edwards, C. (2001). *Bambini: The Italian approach to infant/toddler care*. Teachers College Press.

Garvis, S., & Pendergast, D. (2015). What do early childhood teacher graduands say about working with infants and toddlers?: An exploratory investigation of perceptions. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood 40*(4), 104-111.

Gerber, M. (2002). *Dear parent: Caring for infants with respect* (2nd ed.). Resources for Infant Educarers (RIE).

Hargraves, V. (2021, June 17). *Specialised practices for infants and toddlers.* The Education Hub. https://theeducationhub.org.nz/specialised-practices-for-infants-and-toddlers/

Higgins, R., & Meredith, P. (n.d.). *Te mana o te tamaiti: Māori perspectives on children and child rearing*. Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust.

Kelly, J. (2001). Under twos wear very big shoes. *The First Years: Ngā Tau Tuatahi. New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education, 3*(1), 8-12.

Lancy, D. (2017). *Raising children: Surprising insights from other cultures*. University Press.

Ministry of Education. Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga. (2017). *Te Whāriki: He whāriki matauranga mo ̄ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum.* https://tewhariki.tahurangi.education.govt.nz/te-wh-riki-early-childhood-curriculum-document/5637184332.p

Montessori, M. (1912). *The Montessori method.* Frederick A. Stokes Company.

Oxford University Press. (n.d.). *Infant*. In *Oxford English Dictionary*. Retrieved March 5, 2026, from https://www.oed.com

Penman, R. F., & Redder, B. (2023). Strengthening infant and toddler pedagogy through an online specialised postgraduate qualification: Building on initial teacher education and teaching experience. *Early Years, 43*(3), 484-498. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2023.2230379

Redman, T., Harrison, L. J., & Djonov, E. (2022). Education versus care for infants and toddlers: The Australian early childhood challenge. *Early Child Development and Care*, *192*(13), 2118-2127. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2021.1990904

Ritchie, J. (2008). *Enacting Tiriti-based practice in early childhood education in Aotearoa*. Paper presented at the Biennial National Conference of the Teacher Education Forum of Aotearoa New Zealand, Hamilton, New Zealand.

Rockel, J. (2026, forthcoming). The inclusion of infants and toddlers in initial teacher education in Aotearoa New Zealand: A story of advocating for the very best teachers. In A. Gibbons, S. Stover, & D. Hill (Eds.), *Kia tika ai te hoe i te waka nei: Steering the waka of early childhood teacher education through choppy seas.* NZCER Press.

Shin, M., & Recchia, S. (2023). Nurturing the nurturer: Enacting transformative infant-toddler teacher preparation through reflective practice. *Early Years, 43*(3), 626-640. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2023.2209293

Siegel, D. J. (2020). *The developing mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.

Sigel, I. E. (1987). "Does hothousing rob children of their childhood?" *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 2*(3), 211-225. https://doi.org/10.1016/0885-2006(87)90031-7

United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. United Nations.

Woods, M. (2005). Introduction to Early Childhood Studies. In J. Taylor & M. Woods (Eds.), *Early childhood studies: An holistic introduction* (2nd ed., pp. viii, ix). Hodder Arnold.

World Health Organisation, UNICEF, & World Bank. (2018). *Nurturing care for early childhood development: A framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential*. World Health Organisation.

RESEARCH SUMMARY - PEER REVIEWED

Education and Care Without Recognition: Teaching Assistants, the Forgotten Half of Chile's ECE Workforce

Felipe Godoy



In Chile, teaching assistants outnumber early childhood education (ECE) teachers yet remain largely excluded from the policies that define quality and professionalism. Drawing on Dahlberg and Moss's critical ECE policy approach and Tronto's ethics of care framework, this study examines how assistants, teachers and directors understand assistants' pedagogical role. Based on focus groups and interviews with 22 participants across two Chilean public ECE centres, analysed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis, the findings show that assistants construct a discourse of caring pedagogy, foregrounding vocation, attentiveness and integrated care-and-teaching practices, while directors and teachers favour a discourse of technical practice centred on curricular knowledge and standards. Rather than opposites, these discourses coexist in tension, each containing traces of the other. The study argues that Chilean ECE policy must recognise assistants as central actors and reconceive care as a shared, rather than individualised and devalued, responsibility.

The Problem: The Exclusion of Teaching Assistants from Research and Educational Policy

I would like to begin by sharing two things about the early childhood education (ECE) system in Chile, the country I come from. The first is that Chile has a long tradition of professionalising its early childhood teaching workforce, and a strong policy commitment: by law, free access must be guaranteed to the most vulnerable 60% of children aged 0 to 4 (a goal that is largely, though not completely, achieved in practice). Despite the many challenges you would expect in a middle-income country with high levels of inequality, Chile has managed to become a regional leader in Latin America when it comes to coverage, institutional strength, and teacher professionalisation. In fact, these strengths let it stand out even against some high-income countries, many of which still struggle to offer free access to vulnerable children or to provide their educators with specialised, professional training.

The second thing I would like to share is more personal, and closer to what first drew me to this research. If you were ever lucky enough to visit a public *jardín infantil* or *sala cuna* (early learning centre or baby rooms that serve children from 84 days of life until 4 years old) in Chile, one of the first things you would notice is how the children are cared for by teams of educators with roles that are sharply divided by status, salary, and training, yet, at the same time, oddly blurred when it comes to who actually does what. You would probably notice it in the aprons first: a small group — the lead educators — wear green, while the *técnicas de educación parvularia*, known internationally as Early Childhood Teaching Assistants, wear blue. And here is the puzzle that has stayed with me: despite how central they are to children's everyday experience, in almost fifteen years as a researcher — including time spent helping to establish Chile's Undersecretariat for Early Childhood Education — I had never once come across a public policy, or almost no study, dedicated to strengthening their role.

This is precisely what motivated the study I want to share with you. Teaching in Chilean ECE classrooms is very much a team effort: teachers, mostly university-educated, work alongside assistants, whose training is typically shorter and delivered through secondary or tertiary-level vocational programmes. What is striking is how much weight this team effort places on assistants. Chile assigns them a proportionally larger role than most Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (OECD, 2022), and current regulations require more assistants than teachers in every classroom serving children under four. In fact, for every teacher working with children aged 0 to 4, there are, on average, approximately 3.4 assistants (Subsecretaría de Educación Parvularia, 2025). In practice, this means that young children are likely to spend most of their time with assistants rather than teachers, particularly infants and toddlers.

Yet this study shows that such a central role is not matched by recognition. Assistants earn considerably less than teachers, and when I examined the policy instruments that shape ECE practice in Chile—including the Curricular Framework and the Good Teaching Framework—I found that neither these nor the standards and evaluation tools derived from them meaningfully address teaching assistants. Quite the contrary: these instruments were built almost exclusively around the figure of the university-trained teacher. This is the starting point of my research: teaching assistants are a relegated actor within the Chilean ECE system, largely excluded from the policies that define quality and professionalism, despite being critical to how the system actually functions.

This exclusion is problematic to the extent that assistants play an important pedagogical role in Chilean early childhood classrooms. Far from the stereotype of being responsible for merely custodial or lesser-status care tasks, recent studies—to which the thesis itself contributes—show that assistants carry out pedagogical work both in direct contact with children and "behind the scenes." In Chile, studies show that assistants carry out pedagogical activities with children on a daily basis and participate actively in planning and evaluation processes (Viviani & Rodríguez, 2020). In this scenario, it is not only their exclusion from pedagogical policy that is problematic, but also the substantial gap that exists with lead teachers in terms of salary and training. If they do work similar to that of lead teachers, to what extent is it justified that they earn so much less, and receive training that, while specialised, is of considerably less professional depth?

Conceptual Approach: ECE as a Technical or Ethical Practice

To make sense of this contradiction, we needed conceptual tools that could question, rather than take for granted, what counts as "good" ECE work. We drew on two bodies of theory. The first is the critical approach to ECE policy developed by Dahlberg and Moss (2004), who argue that mainstream policy tends to treat ECE as a technical practice, a matter of standards, competencies and measurable quality, governed by what they call a "language of quality" (Dahlberg et al., 2007, p. viii). Against this, they propose understanding ECE also as an ethical and political practice, attentive to context, uncertainty and relationships. The second body of theory is ethics of care, particularly the work of Tronto (1993) and Langford et al. (2017), which contests the assumption that care and education are separate activities, with care cast as the lesser, naturally feminine one. Read together, these two lenses let us ask a single underlying question throughout the thesis: are the practices, knowledge and dispositions of teaching assistants read through a discourse of technical practice, a discourse of caring pedagogy, or some entanglement of both?

How Did We Collect and Analyse the Data?

To answer this, we conducted a qualitative study in two public, municipally run ECE centres that serve children aged 0 to 4 years old in an urban suburb of Santiago. These centres serve the most socioeconomically vulnerable 60% of Chilean families and are also the most common type of public ECE provision in the country for this age group. Across both centres, 22 people took part: 16 teaching assistants, four teachers and both centre directors. Data was produced through two focus groups with the assistants and 10 individual interviews with assistants, teachers, and directors, conducted remotely due to COVID-19 restrictions. We analysed this material through Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), coding the data moving through three recursive stages, familiarisation, initial coding and theme generation, informed throughout by critical approaches to ECE professionalism, and the sensitising concepts of knowledge, practices and dispositions, and by the caring–technical distinction described above.

What Did We Find? Caring and Pedagogical Dispositions, Practices and Knowledge

In terms of dispositions, assistants strongly valued their practical vocation, being physically present with children, "living the process with them", as one assistant put it, rather than the more administrative role they perceive lead teachers fulfil. They also emphasised attentiveness and sensitivity to children's needs, and an affective disposition built around love and joyful interaction. These are dispositions typically foregrounded by an ethics of care. A secondary discourse, more prominent among directors and teachers than among the assistants themselves, valued a disposition to improve and reflect critically on practice, echoing a more technical, standards-driven notion of professionalism.

In terms of practices, assistants described extensive physical and emotional caring work, feeding, changing, comforting, but also, crucially, leading pedagogical activities and increasingly taking part in planning, a task historically reserved for teachers.

> *Yes, because, among all the things we are educating, we are teaching the care as well, teaching to feed themselves, teaching them to eat by themselves, to go to the toilet, to be independent. But that's why I'm telling you, me, us, we educate and at the same time we take care of the child's wellbeing, because we provide them with the basic needs that they have during the time they are in the kindergarten. But for the rest (of the people) outside, we are the caregivers. (Agustina, teaching assistant, middle-high level (3-4-year-olds))*

> *It's not only doing the (learning) experience, I mean, you have to do the greeting, you have to say 'today we're going to work in I don't know what, and we're going to work the mathematical thinking and the activity is this'. And, after that, you have to do the closure, of course, all the development of the activity, it's not just saying 'ok here is the activity of the butterfly'.* (Viviana, teaching assistant, sala cuna menor (0-1-year-olds))

Many assistants narrated their physical care work through a maternal metaphor, describing themselves as the children's "second mothers." This is a way of claiming legitimacy for caring work that has been contested, since this metaphor frames ECE work as an exclusively feminine and unprofessional work (Osgood, 2006). Directors and teachers, for their part, tended to hold a more ambivalent, at times pejorative, view of physical care as merely custodial, while simultaneously insisting that assistants' work should be recognised as more than only physical care, that it should count as pedagogical too.

> *All in all, is about caring (for) them like our own children, because we are all day with them, we become their second mothers.* (Ada, teaching assistant, middle level (2-4-year-olds))

In terms of knowledge, assistants placed enormous importance on knowing the Curricular Framework, which some called "the bible" of their practice, seeing mastery of its language as their route into legitimate pedagogical work. However, they were notably reluctant to claim a broader, more theoretical pedagogical knowledge, the kind of abstract understanding of learning goals and curricular structure that teachers and directors expected of them and which, according to teaching assistants, is a lead teacher's responsibility. Teachers and directors, in turn, foregrounded exactly this pedagogical knowledge as the main thing assistants were missing, treating it as central to genuine professional status. Interestingly, almost none of the participants spoke about a third, more situated form of knowledge, close to what is called phronesis, or practical wisdom (Campbell-Barr, 2019): the capacity to judge the right

course of action in a concrete situation with a particular child. This is arguably the type of knowledge that best fits assistants' role, but it is near-absent from everyone's accounts.

> *They (the teachers) have to look beyond than us, because they have supposedly studied more than us, they have (received) other...teaching, so, I don't know, maybe they see beyond than us in some aspects of the child, of how he works, of how he looks like, whether he progresses or not.* (Josefina, teaching assistant, middle-low level (2-3-year-olds))

> *They have to seek...include other things that we don't really manage, related to pedagogical knowledge, words that only they master because they went to college.* (Nelly, teaching assistant, middle-low level (2-3-year-olds))

Taken together, these findings show a clear pattern. Teaching assistants produce a discourse of caring pedagogy to describe their own role, prioritising attentiveness, vocation, affect, and integrated caring practices, although marginally nuanced by elements of technical practice such as curricular knowledge and planning involvement. Directors and teachers, in contrast, tend to produce a discourse of technical practice, judging the assistants' role primarily against standards of pedagogical knowledge and continuous improvement, while still marginally recognising elements of caring pedagogy, especially among directors. The two discourses are not simple opposites: each contains traces of the other, and they remain in constant dialogue, but their centre of gravity differs sharply depending on who is speaking.

What does this pattern mean for how we think about care and education? Our argument is that the assistants' own discourse quietly contests the dualist view that treats care and education as separate, opposed activities, one merely welfarist, the other properly pedagogical. For instance, when assistants describe teaching hygiene routines, especially with infants and toddlers, they describe caring for children's bodies and teaching them autonomy within the very same act. In this sense, the assistants position themselves as both carers and pedagogues, resisting the traditional division of labour in which they care and teachers educate. At the same time, this is not simply a story of care displacing technique: assistants also value curricular knowledge and their growing role in planning, showing that embracing an ethics of care does not mean rejecting technical competence, only refusing to let it be the sole measure of good practice. Directors and teachers, meanwhile, tend to hold onto the dualism more tightly, distinguishing care from education even while acknowledging, in the same breath, that care matters. This divergence echoes each group's position within Chilean ECE policy: teachers and directors are the direct targets of a policy architecture built on a language of quality, while assistants, largely excluded from that same architecture, have had more room to develop an alternative, caring-pedagogy account of their own value.

Chilean ECE policy needs to take assistant teachers seriously, not as an afterthought to teacher-centred instruments, but as central actors whose working conditions, training and professional identity deserve deliberate attention. This means setting clearer, shared expectations about what assistants' work involves, but also, and just as important, reconceiving care itself as a collective responsibility, distributed across teachers, assistants, families and the State, rather than something individualised and quietly delegated to the lowest-

> **"If you were ever lucky enough to visit a public jardín infantil or sala cuna... in Chile, one of the first things you would notice is how the children are cared for by teams of educators with roles that are sharply divided by status, salary, and training, yet, at the same time, oddly blurred when it comes to who actually does what. You would probably notice it in the aprons first: a small group — the lead educators — wear green, while the técnicas de educación parvularia, known internationally as Early Childhood Teaching Assistants, wear blue."**

paid member of the team. Moreover, beyond the Chilean context, ECE systems globally need to broaden their gaze, promoting and reinforcing the professionalisation of pedagogical teams from a systemic perspective—one that does not focus solely on lead teachers, but also on other actors who are directly or indirectly involved in pedagogical work. In Chile, these are the teaching assistants; in other contexts, the actors overlooked by the system may be different (Urban et al., 2012). What is clear is that in ECE, responsibility for pedagogical work and children's learning does not rest solely with lead teachers.

Finally, it is also crucial to vindicate care as a relevant social function of the educational system in its entirety (Langford et al., 2017), but particularly within ECE. It is not tenable to deny the importance of care within ECE since, as Langford and Richardson (2020) argue, "when we do not give particular relevancy to care in ECE, we deny the chronic exploitation of early childhood educators whose work is grounded in care" (p. 34). Hence, maintaining the stereotype of teaching assistants as merely custodial carers, when they are not, works as an excuse for exploitation, perpetuating a precarised workforce in a middle-income country (like Chile) that needs "second-class educators" to afford reasonable adult-to-children ratios at a lower cost. Their caring work, as findings have shown, is also pedagogical.

As the title of my thesis is meant to provoke, this is not, in the end, a story of care or education. It is, and should be recognised as, a matter of care and education.

Current and Future Directions

Building on this study, we have developed new lines of analysis of the assistants' role in collaborative work with other researchers. First, we are currently applying for public funding to study the relevance of assistants' technical-professional training, in order to understand the extent to which this training aligns with the requirements of the education system, the labour market, local contexts, and students' career trajectories. Additionally, in 2025, I obtained funding to analyse the differences between the pedagogical work of assistants and lead teachers, using a representative data sample from the OECD's TALIS Starting Strong survey. Finally, another researcher on our team obtained funding to study the professional teaching identity of assistants within a context of hierarchical working relationships with lead teachers. All of these new developments will help keep the role of assistants in the Chilean ECE system on the agenda, allowing for an increasingly fine-grained delineation of that role.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the AGENCIA NACIONAL DE INVESTIGACION Y DESARROLLO, grant number [ANID PIA CIE160007].

References

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. *Qualitative Psychology, 9*, 3-26. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000196

Campbell-Barr, V. (2019). Professional knowledges for early childhood education and care. *Journal of Childhood Studies, 44*(1), 134-146. https://doi.org/10.18357/jcs.v44i1.18786

Dahlberg, G., & Moss, P. (2004). *Ethics and politics in early childhood education*. Routledge.

Dahlberg, G., Moss, P., & Pence, A. (2007). *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care: Languages of evaluation.* Routledge.

Langford, R., & Richardson, B. (2020). Ethics of care in practice: An observational study of interactions and power relations between children and educators in urban Ontario early childhood settings. *Journal of Childhood Studies, 45*(1), 33-47. https://doi.org/10.18357/jcs00019398

Langford, R., Richardson, B., Albanese, P., Bezanson, K., Prentice, S., & White, J. (2017). Caring about care: Reasserting care as integral to early childhood education and care practice, politics and policies in Canada. *Global Studies of Childhood, 7*(4), 311-322. https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610617747978

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2022). *Education at a glance 2022: OECD Indicators*. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/3197152b-en

Osgood, J. (2006). Deconstructing professionalism in early childhood education: Resisting the regulatory gaze. *Contemporary issues in early childhood, 7*(1), 5-14. https://doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2006.7.1.5

Subsecretaría de Educación Parvularia. (2025). Informe de caracterización de la Educación Parvularia 2024. https://parvularia.mineduc.cl/recursos/informe-de-caracterizacion-de-la-educacion-parvularia-2024/

Tronto, J. C. (1993). *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care.* Psychology Press.

Urban, M., Vandenbroeck, M., Van Laere, K., Lazzari, A., & Peeters, J. (2012). Towards competent systems in early childhood education and care. Implications for policy and practice. *European Journal of Education, 47*(4), 508-526. https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12010

Viviani, M., & Rodríguez, J.P. (2020). Análisis de los roles y responsabilidades de las técnicos en educación parvularia en el nivel sala cuna: una contribución a su formación inicial. *Calidad en la Educación, 53*, 9-41. https://doi.org/10.31619/caledu.n53.761

RESEARCH SUMMARY - PEER REVIEWED

A Relational Reading of Subjectification: Everyday Care and the Professional Standing of Infant and Toddler Educators

Yan Peng



In the infant and toddler years, much of an educator's day is spent feeding, changing, settling, and holding. This relational work is easily read as routine, and the educator as someone who simply attends to bodily needs. This research summary takes a relational reading of Biesta's notion of subjectification to consider what is at stake for educators themselves in these moments. Drawing on Biesta's account of subjectification, Levinas' asymmetric ethics, and Trevarthen's developmental intersubjectivity, it suggests that when an educator reads an infant's gesture as meaningful and answers it with judgment rather than simply moving through the routine, they are practising as a professional in their own right. Whether they can practise this way is shaped by the conditions of their work, including the accountability arrangements of the sector, and the emotional rights of the youngest children are bound up with those conditions.

Introduction

As a researcher with a background in teaching, I have become interested in a kind of educator work that happens quietly, in the smallest moments of care, and is rarely named. When an educator pauses to read an infant's shift in gaze, waits for a toddler to answer in their own way, or adjusts their pace to match a child's, something is happening that is easy to overlook. We tend to see what the child receives. We less often see what the educator is doing: exercising judgement, responding ethically, and acting as a professional in their own right. This research summary is an attempt to make that work visible.

This research summary develops one theoretical strand of my current doctoral research at the University of Canterbury, which examines how infant and toddler educators come to understand themselves as professionals in Aotearoa New Zealand and in mainland China. The wider study asks how policy, regulation, and the everyday conditions of a room shape that process.

Infant and toddler pedagogies have long emphasised relational practice, emotional attunement, and responsive care (Dalli et al., 2011). Here, I use "infants and toddlers" to refer to children up to three years of age, and "the educator" for the teacher, kaiako, or practitioner who works with them. What is less often discussed is how these everyday practices position the educator, whether as a skilled professional who judges and responds or as a worker carrying out routines. This question matters for what I call here children's emotional rights, meaning their entitlement to be noticed, taken seriously, and answered within the relational life of the setting. Infants and toddlers make their views known through gaze, gesture, movement, and voice rather than through submissions or meetings. Their right to have their views taken seriously, in keeping with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), is realised through the relational work of the educators who care for them. Educators' professional standing and children's emotional rights are therefore closely connected.

I take a relational reading of Biesta's (2009) notion of subjectification to consider how the professional standing of the infant and toddler educator is enacted in everyday relational practice, and how the conditions of that practice can support, constrain, or redirect it. I first outline this reading and its theoretical foundations. I then offer an illustrative relational moment, before considering what it suggests for interdependent educator practice and children's emotional rights. I close with a brief comparative reflection on how differing policy conditions shape this work.

A Relational Reading of Subjectification

To see what this reading offers, it helps to begin with Biesta's (2009) account of the purposes of education. Biesta suggests that education works towards three intertwined purposes: qualification, the acquisition of knowledge and skills; socialisation, the ways in which we become part of existing traditions and ways of being; and subjectification, the process through which a person comes to exist as a subject who can act and take responsibility in their own right. It is this third purpose that I want to draw forward. Biesta develops subjectification mainly to describe the becoming of the learner. Here, I turn it towards the educator and ask how infant and toddler educators come to act, and to be recognised, as professionals through their relational work.

This question has a particular urgency in the infant and toddler years. Because so much of the work involves the body and routines, it is easily mistaken for low-skilled care, and the educator for someone who simply meets physical needs. This is not only

> **We often picture the emotional work of infant and toddler care as flowing in one direction, from a capable adult to a dependent child. Yet what allows an educator to practise as a judging, responsive professional, rather than as a hurried deliverer of routines, is a web of interdependence that reaches well beyond the pair. Colleagues, staffing, room rhythms, and leadership can make such practice possible or unsustainable."**

about how others see the work. Accountability and regulatory arrangements shape what educators are expected to notice, record, and justify. Such arrangements do real work in supporting safety, coordination, and public trust. They can also narrow the time and the authority available for the unhurried attention that relational practice asks for. A relational reading of subjectification asks how educators hold their professional judgement within these arrangements, rather than treating procedure and relationship as simple opposites.

Three theoretical resources help to clarify this. The first is Levinas' account of ethics as asymmetric (Levinas, 1979). For Levinas, the ethical relation does not begin with reciprocity or exchange, but with a response to the other that comes first, before anything is given in return. In infant and toddler care, the educator answers a child whose communication is largely embodied, and carries an asymmetrical responsibility for interpreting it and responding to it. Cheeseman (2017), drawing on Levinas, describes this as response-ableness, a stance in which the educator remains open and answerable to the infant's invitations rather than acting only on institutional demands. It is in this answerability, held onto even where the institution presses in another direction, that professional standing is enacted rather than merely assigned.

The second resource is Trevarthen's work on developmental intersubjectivity (Trevarthen & Delafield-Butt, 2013), which suggests that infants are oriented towards shared meaning and emotional connection from the earliest weeks of life. It supports treating infants as active participants in embodied meaning-making, without implying that any single cue carries one transparent meaning. This is why the educator's interpretation carries weight. Such cues are part of an unfolding bid for connection, and reading them well is skilled work.

The third resource concerns how human agency is understood. Following Biesta (2009), I draw on the idea of agency as a relational and temporal achievement, oriented at once towards past habits, present demands, and future possibilities, rather than as a property a person simply possesses[1]. Understood this way, the educator's professional agency is not a fixed skill but something they enact, moment by moment, in how they take up the demands of their setting in relation to the child in front of them.

Taken together, these resources suggest that the relational work of infant and toddler care is also the work through which educators act as professionals. Whether a given moment becomes that is not guaranteed. It depends on the educator's knowledge and commitments, and on the relational and material conditions that make unhurried judgement possible.

An Illustrative Relational Moment

Because this is a conceptual reading of subjectification rather than a report of empirical findings, the following moment is offered as an illustration. It is a composite, drawn from the kinds of everyday interactions familiar to those who work with infants and toddlers, and is intended to show what this reading might look like in practice rather than to present data.

> *Theo (16 months) is sitting on the floor, turning a wooden spoon over in his hands. He looks up at his educator, Emma, holds the spoon out towards her, and says, "da." Emma turns towards him and opens her hand. She waits. Theo looks at her hand, then at her face, and places the spoon on her palm. "Thank you. You gave it to me," Emma says, and holds the spoon where he can still see it. Theo reaches for it. "Oh, you want it back?" She gives it to him. He takes it, then holds it out again, this time smiling. Emma reaches to receive it, but Theo pauses. He has noticed the spoon's handle, and turns it slowly, watching the light move along it. Emma waits with him. "You're looking at that," she says quietly. Theo looks up at her, then offers the spoon once more.*

It would be easy to describe this as a simple care interaction, the kind of thing that fills an infant and toddler educator's day and is rarely thought of as skilled. Looked at more closely, it is full of professional judgement. Emma's decision to wait rather than take the spoon, her reading of Theo's "da" as an offer rather than a demand, and her choice to follow his attention to the handle rather

than redirect him towards the original game are not procedures she is carrying out. They are judgments she is making, in the moment, on the basis of what she knows about this particular child and what she sees him doing now.

In Levinas' (1979) terms, Emma is answering an address. Theo's sound and gesture reach her as a bid for connection, and in responding, she acts as someone answerable to him rather than as a technician working through a task. The intersubjective ground that Trevarthen and Delafield-Butt (2013) describe helps us understand this as an address rather than merely a behaviour to be managed. Her standing as a professional who judges and responds, rather than one who simply complies, is at work in exactly this moment.

This is the heart of the reading I am proposing. The moment is not only significant for Theo, though it is significant for him. It is also the moment in which Emma practises as a professional rather than as a technician. Whether she can is not guaranteed. Had she been rushed, closely directed, or pressed by the pace her setting expects of her, the same moment could easily have collapsed into a routine, with the spoon taken, the game ended, and Theo moved on. What allows it to be more than that is not only Emma's skill but the conditions that let her bring it to bear.

Interdependent Practice and Children's Emotional Rights

If the educator's professional standing is enacted in relational work, then the conditions of that work matter a great deal. This is where a relational reading of subjectification connects to the theme of interdependent educator practice. We often picture the emotional work of infant and toddler care as flowing in one direction, from a capable adult to a dependent child. Yet what allows an educator to practise as a judging, responsive professional, rather than as a hurried deliverer of routines, is a web of interdependence that reaches well beyond the pair. Colleagues, staffing, room rhythms, and leadership can make such practice possible or unsustainable.

Delaune and Quiñones (2025) describe the wellbeing of infants and toddlers as interdependent with the wellbeing of their educators, with feelings of ease or strain moving between people in a shared space. An educator who is rushed, depleted, or anxious cannot easily exercise the unhurried judgment that the moment with Theo required. Emma's capacity to wait, to read, and to follow depends on her not being pulled in several directions at once, which in turn depends on her colleagues, her ratios, and the rhythms of her room. In this sense, whether an educator can practise as a professional is not only a matter of individual disposition but of the relational and material conditions in which they work. Manning-Morton's (2025) attention to touch and attunement, and the ways that stress as well as warmth pass between educator and child, points to the same interdependence.

This has direct implications for children's emotional rights. Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) recognises infants and toddlers as competent and confident learners and communicators, and its Ngā Hononga (Relationships) principle places responsive and reciprocal relationships at the heart of learning. A child's right to be heard depends on educators having the time, authority, and support to listen and respond. When educators are treated mainly as deliverers of routine, there is less space for the responsive relationships through which children's rights are realised in practice. Recognising and supporting educators as professionals, therefore, matters directly for children's emotional rights.

> **"The youngest children in our education settings cannot argue for their own emotional rights. They make themselves known through gaze, gesture, movement, and voice, and what they offer can be answered, misread, deferred, or missed altogether. Their rights are realised, or left unrealised, in the texture of their everyday relationships..."**

This is why the familiar sector argument about conditions is not separate from emotional rights, but among their foundations. The wider sector has long identified ratios, group size, and qualified, stable staffing as central to quality for infants and toddlers (Christie, 2025; Dalli et al., 2011). These are not only conditions for good care. They are conditions under which educators can sustain this kind of professional practice. Where staffing, time, or the demands of accountability leave little room and little recognition for relational work, what suffers is not only the quality of care but the educator's capacity to act as the kind of professional through whom children's emotional rights are met.

For educators, this points towards a few practical commitments. The first is the value of slowing down where the moment allows it. As the encounter with Theo suggests, it is often in the pause, the decision to wait rather than to act, that professional judgement becomes

visible within the routine. The second is following rather than leading. Treating an infant's initiation as meaningful participation to be answered, rather than as a behaviour to be managed, is itself a professional and ethical stance. The third is the importance of the team. Because the capacity to be present with one child depends on colleagues holding the wider rhythms of the room, relational practice is a collective accomplishment, sustained by educators who support one another and by leaders who protect the conditions this work requires.

None of these commitments is new to infant and toddler educators, who enact them daily, sometimes within and sometimes against the grain of institutional demands. What a relational reading of subjectification offers is a way of naming why they matter so deeply. They are not only ways of making children feel cared for. They show professional judgement in action and help honour the emotional rights of the youngest children.

Concluding Reflection

The youngest children in our education settings cannot argue for their own emotional rights. They make themselves known through gaze, gesture, movement, and voice, and what they offer can be answered, misread, deferred, or missed altogether. Their rights are realised, or left unrealised, in the texture of their everyday relationships, and so they depend on the educators who sustain those relationships being able to practise as more than deliverers of routine.

Reading subjectification relationally invites us to see the ordinary work of infant and toddler care as the place where the educator's judgement, ethics, and identity come into play, and as a place that policy and organisational conditions can protect, narrow, or redirect. When an educator notices an infant's bid, interprets it, and answers in a way that stays answerable to that child, they are not simply completing a task. They are practising as a professional, and it is through such practice that a child's right to be heard becomes something lived. I have come to think of this as relational subjectification. It is demanding, skilled work, sustained not by individual educators alone but by teams, leaders, and policy conditions that protect the time and the relationships it requires. My wider doctoral study explores how these conditions take different forms in Aotearoa New Zealand and in mainland China.

As this issue of the journal affirms in many voices, infants and toddlers arrive already connected and whole. Our task is to meet them there and to ensure that those who do so each day are resourced for the significance of what they offer.

[1]This relational and temporal account of agency, oriented towards past, present, and future, originates with Emirbayer and Mische (1998). I draw on it here as it is taken up within Biesta's work, rather than as a framework in its own right.

References

Biesta, G. (2009). Good education in an age of measurement: On the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability, 21*(1), 33-46. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-008-9064-9

Cheeseman, S. (2017). Narratives of infants' encounters with curriculum: Beyond the curriculum of care. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 18*(1), 55-66. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949117692243

Christie, T. (2025). Speaking up for tiny humans. *The First Years: Ngā Tau Tuatahi. New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education, 27*(1), 38–40. https://www.auckland.ac.nz/assets/arts/our-research/documents/First-Years-Journal-2025%20Volume%2027%20Issue%201.pdf

Dalli, C., White, E. J., Rockel, J., Duhn, I., Buchanan, E., Davidson, S., Ganly, S., Kus, L., & Wang, B. (2011). *Quality early childhood education for under-two-year-olds: What should it look like? A literature review*. Ministry of Education. https://thehub.sia.govt.nz/assets/documents/41442_QualityECE_Web-22032011_0.pdf

Delaune, A., & Quiñones, G. (2025). Wellbeing for infants and toddlers in the context of early childhood education. *The First Years: Ngā Tau Tuatahi. New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education, 27*(1), 47-49. https://www.auckland.ac.nz/assets/arts/our-research/documents/First-Years-Journal-2025%20Volume%2027%20Issue%201.pdf

Emirbayer, M., & Mische, A. (1998). What is agency? *American Journal of Sociology, 103*(4), 962-1023. https://doi.org/10.1086/231294

Levinas, E. (1979). *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority* (A. Lingis, Trans.). Martinus Nijhoff.

Manning-Morton, J. (2025). Respect for babies and toddlers as autonomous people and agentic learners: The pedagogical wisdom of Emmi Pikler and Elinor Goldschmied. In G. Quiñones & A. Delaune (Eds.), *Wellbeing for infants and toddlers in education and care: International perspectives* (pp. 103-117). Springer Nature Switzerland. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-89376-6_7

Ministry of Education. Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga. (2017). *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum*. https://tewhariki.tahurangi.education.govt.nz/te-whariki-online/our-curriculum/te-wh-riki/te-wh-riki-early-childhood-curriculum-document/5637184332.p

Trevarthen, C., & Delafield-Butt, J. (2013). Biology of shared experience and language development: Regulations for the intersubjective life of narratives. In M. Legerstee, D. W. Haley, & M. H. Bornstein (Eds.), *The infant mind: Origins of the social brain* (pp. 167-199). Guilford Press.

United Nations. (1989, November 20). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/crc.pdf

An Interview with Leader Tabbi Taylor-Harris

Andrea Delaune



Tabbi Taylor-Harris has been an early childhood educator and infant and toddler teacher for many years, undertaking roles as Curriculum Leader and Toddler Room Leader. This interview draws from Tabbi's extensive experience working with infants and toddlers to query her thoughts and practice-based views on infants' and toddlers' wellbeing, emotional rights, and the future of infant and toddler teaching in Aotearoa New Zealand.

What do you think interdependent practice for infant wellbeing looks like in infant and toddler settings?

Interdependence is a strong concept for Tabbi in making sense of the dynamic flows of wellbeing within an early childhood context, because in Tabbi's experience, wellbeing is something generated between individuals, rather than enacted and taught by one individual to another. She states, "Interdependence for me is really, really important, because supporting wellbeing is not something we are doing to the children. Do you know what I mean? We're working alongside them to support them." Tabbi continues by saying, "Interdependence is about recognising that wellbeing doesn't just sit with the child or the teacher on their own. We influence each other." She continues by stating more declaratively, "I don't think you can



deliver wellbeing... because it's like an inner emotion as well, you know. So yeah, I think it definitely comes through emotion and connection."

In this way, for Tabbi, wellbeing is relationally constituted, which lends to its interdependent nature. Wellbeing is "grounded in relationships." So, while wellbeing is an "inner emotion", it is interdependent in its nature because it involves multiple individuals interacting with each other to bring it into being within the infants' and toddlers' experience of life. As Tabbi states, wellbeing is "for everybody and everyone involved. It's not just the teacher, it's the teacher with teachers. It's the parents and the teachers. It's the teachers and the children and the children and their teachers."

Interdependent wellbeing in the infant and toddler context is further enhanced by mutual connections that are enacted "authentically and meaningfully", specifically when they are respectful of the agency and modes of communication of everyone involved. Tabbi asserts that responsivity means not just responding to others, but recognising that there may be different ways of expression when wellbeing is felt, or being sought. This means teachers need attuned attentiveness, so that the teacher is able to attend to anticipated forms of expression, as well as make space for unanticipated emotional expressions. She states, "With infants and toddlers, I need to be really responsive to their cues... it's actually understanding cues and being able to respond to those cues in meaningful ways." However, recognising and responding to cues also involves recognition of the interdependent nature of wellbeing, for as Tabbi articulates below, some teachers may see infants' and toddlers' cues differently to oneself, and all ways of seeing are important in order to create a larger collective picture of wellbeing for the infant/toddler. She states:

> *I think that's really, really important... reflecting on practise together and how they [kaiako] can support each other as well as the tamariki. And because some children actually interact with teachers differently, you know, like we [adults] do with people. So, some teachers might have that more special, a more secure bond with the child to be able to support their wellbeing even, you know what I mean? So they'll be able to work with you or you work with them to learn their cues as well and how you can adapt your practice.*

> **Interdependence for me is really, really important, because supporting wellbeing is not something we are doing to the children... We're working alongside them to support them."**

However, these ways of seeing wellbeing are not only within the fellow teaching team. Whānau (family) play a critical role in making sense of wellbeing for infants and toddlers. Tabbi states "We obviously work really closely with the whānau because obviously if a child has had a bit of a bad night, you know, you want to find out the reasons why... because how you communicate and support that child's wellbeing will differ between the days." Likewise, peer relationships are part of the interdependence of wellbeing, because "they learn so much from each other." In this way, the teacher supports the interdependence of wellbeing by fostering these "co-relationships, co-creative relationships between the children."

How do kaiako uphold infants' and toddlers' emotional rights in everyday practice?

For Tabbi, infants' and toddlers' emotional rights need to be understood as part of a larger sense of "rights" more broadly. She states, "We've got to understand and recognise that children are *people* with rights. They're *people* you know. They're not just something we talk to or teach to, you know? They're people, and we have to understand that and respect that." Continuing with this firm assertion of the equal personhood of the infant and/or toddler, Tabbi asserts that emotional rights are related to the infant or toddler's experiences of security and safety within the early childhood setting, because these feelings elicit trust, stating:

> *From my perspective... and I will often talk to parents about this... our most important thing is for a child to feel safe and secure, in their place, you know, and to trust that the people around them are safe... and through that... sense of safety and security comes that trust. And through the trust, then they can kind of develop that this is a place where I can learn and explore, you know, I feel safe here. This is my place. I know that I am going to be seen and I'm going to be heard. And those people over there are going to care for me, and they're going to nurture me through love, education and all the rest of that lovely, yummy stuff. So you've got to be sensitive to that.*

Tabbi also asserts that unfiltered emotional expressions are part of the emotional rights of the infant and toddler within the early childhood setting, stating, "they have the right to express whatever they want, to be honest." And in enabling this open expression, kaiako have the ability to support infants and toddlers to recognise these emotions, and to do more than learn to name them. She states,

> *I think if you don't acknowledge emotions, then how are we going to learn what kind of emotions we're feeling? I've come to learn and recognise that naming emotions, yes, that's good...but it's actually being able to express those emotions as well, to physically see them, you know, and talk about them through meaningful conversations, through experiences. It's not just, 'Yes, I understand you're feeling frustrated'. But how do they know what frustration feels like? Or how do they know what frustration looks like? Do they know what it looks like in somebody else? And it's actually digging deeper than just naming the emotion for the child.*

But to do this, Tabbi recognises that kaiako need to deeply consider their own beliefs and values about emotions and how they relate to infants' and toddlers' emotional rights within the early childhood context. She states, "I think sometimes people, teachers especially, come with their own kind of ideas and biases of what children should and shouldn't do. And that might be from their background, that might be how they've been brought up." Yet for Tabbi, these preconceived perceptions of appropriate emotional expression need to be deeply reconsidered in order to make space for infants and toddlers to express their emotions freely (as part of their emotional rights). To do so is to Tabbi, to ensure the child is not being treated as someone that "you need to do things to" to make their emotional expressions "fit" the teacher's norms.

What key thinkers or philosophies influence your views about interdependent wellbeing and emotional rights?

Tabbi is clear to articulate that there is no one philosophy or theorist that influences her thinking specifically. Rather, she draws from multiple intersecting theories and ideas to inform her perspectives, in combination with what she has learned and experienced within her own extensive practice with infants and toddlers and alongside other teachers. She states,

> *I don't, I couldn't actually specifically say one philosophy for me. I'm not drawn specifically to one. I think it's a collective and I think it's also to do with papers, papers I've read, research that I've actually done through work. It's to do with I've it's things that it's like professional developments I've gone on... and going, why do I think this? Is there a reason why? Why am I doing this? How could I have done that differently? So it's constant, that constant question and evolving, you know, and actually I'm also inspired by other teachers when I see them in practice.*

For Tabbi, constant inquiry, reflection, and continual growth within her practice to respond to the individual infants and toddlers she works with is what guides her into investigating new ideas and theories that can help her within her practice. But it is not only

seeking out external ideas, but working alongside others within the early childhood setting to inquire about their ideas, thoughts, and theorists that inform and influence their own practices, so that can expand Tabbi's own knowledge base for her practice. She states, "I learned through just asking other teachers, and they kind of will express what they have learned... and [this leads to] questioning myself more."

When considering theoretical positions that are informing her work, she is clear that while she would keep interrogating her understandings by being extended by others who are influenced by RIE (Resources for Infant Educarers), Pikler, and Magda Gerber, for Tabbi Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory is highly influential in her ways of seeing how connections and relationships matter in her work with infants and toddlers. After stating how she is influenced by others' love for RIE, she states,

> *But I also love, you know, Bronfenbrenner. I strongly believe that that kind of philosophy... I can't say it's 'true' because it's a philosophy, but I can see it. I can see it in action, you know, and I can visually see it in action all the time, especially when working with children from overseas, you know, working in an environment where English is an additional language. And through that, I've also been able to adapt my practice by asking parents, how they how their child has it have experienced education in their countries. So I've been able to adapt and work my practise to help and support the parents and family as well as the child in their new environment.*

What is the biggest challenge facing the work of kaiako to support the wellbeing and emotional rights of infants and toddlers in early childhood settings?

Although this question was situated as potentially "tricky" for Tabbi, there is no question or hesitation in her response, which is unequivocally, "I think you really need to be a specialised teacher to work with infants and toddlers." She argues that working with infants and toddlers needs to be something that the teacher comes to with a passion for, and that it's not a skill that simply everyone can master due to the levels of dedication and passion that you need in order to effectively give infants and toddlers the level of care and affection they deserve within their teaching. She argues that the perception of working with infants and toddlers can sometimes detract from the high levels of expertise in being an infant and toddler specialist teacher, because she hears comments within the teaching and broader community that working with infants is "not teaching." Tabbi argues that this makes her "incredibly sad, but then it also makes me incredibly hopeful because there's so much for them [those that state this] to learn."

Tabbi extends her assertion about the specialisation of working with infants and toddlers to articulate that this should be a long-term commitment for the kaiako who makes this choice. She states, "I don't think you can do it working with them for a year or two. I think it takes time and effort and dedication and passion." For Tabbi, this prolonged engagement will support deeper and more meaningful understandings of the specific emotional rights and nature of interdependent wellbeing between infants and toddlers and others, as it means the specialist teacher will have not only extensive practice, but be inquiring and reading in this specialised area as part of their own professional growth, leading to deeper and more integrated knowledge that can inform practice.

Beyond specialisation, Tabbi argues that the current state of early childhood education governance in Aotearoa New Zealand is a challenge to supporting infant and toddler wellbeing and emotional rights. Specifically, ratios and staff resourcing in early childhood education limit what kaiako can do and access, to be able to extend their knowledge and abilities to respond consistently to infants and toddlers in the way they deserve to be responded to. She argues that a specific challenge for toddler wellbeing and emotional rights is the ratio age separation that occurs when a toddler turns two. She argues that in settings where this age threshold results in a transition to a higher ratio may not result in the emotional responsivity toddlers need in relation to their emotional rights of expression and specific interdependent wellbeing needs. She states that toddlers,

> *... need that security and that emotional stability, you know, because their emotions, their social emotional competence is developing at a rapid rate... And so when you have those higher ratios in those larger ratio areas and teachers that are a little bit frazzled, you know, then they're not getting that education and love and care that we should be providing... If you're feeling anxious and you're holding a child, the child feels anxious because, you know, it radiates onto the child... it really comes down to the teachers themselves and how they feel and their emotional wellbeing. If you are, if you have got children crying, which let's be honest, that's how a lot of our infants and toddlers communicate, and you don't know how to handle it, and you're getting stressed, and you might not have somebody to actually come over and support you in that moment... I think through smaller ratios, you support each other as a team...if we're calmer, our brain is calmer, our body is calmer, the children are calmer, the space is calmer.*

For Tabbi, ratios are about those interdependent aspects of wellbeing that support infants' and toddlers' emotional rights, and in doing so, asserts that neither is separate from the other. Rather, they are interconnected concepts - where interdependent wellbeing can influence the enactment of supporting infants' and toddlers' emotional rights. She states that better ratios

> *... provide those the opportunities to do more, to learn more, you know, to interact more and have those really important moments that we can cherish. Instead of making teaching into a job with routine that we have to do, it brings it, it makes it into a place of safety and security for the tamariki as well as the kaiako, you know, so it's a space together.*

What gives you hope for the future of infant and toddler education to support lifelong flourishing?

Given the levels of the challenges articulated within the previous question, Tabbi is again honest with her response, identifying that "a lot of hope been taken away through the years because times have changed and centres have changed", but she maintains that the hope for the future lies within the kaiako that add life to the early childhood profession, as long as we keep supporting "teachers that are passionate." She expands further, saying, "It's such an important role being an early childhood teacher, you know, educator. So I think [when] people that come out with that want to learn more and understand, that gives me hope, you know."

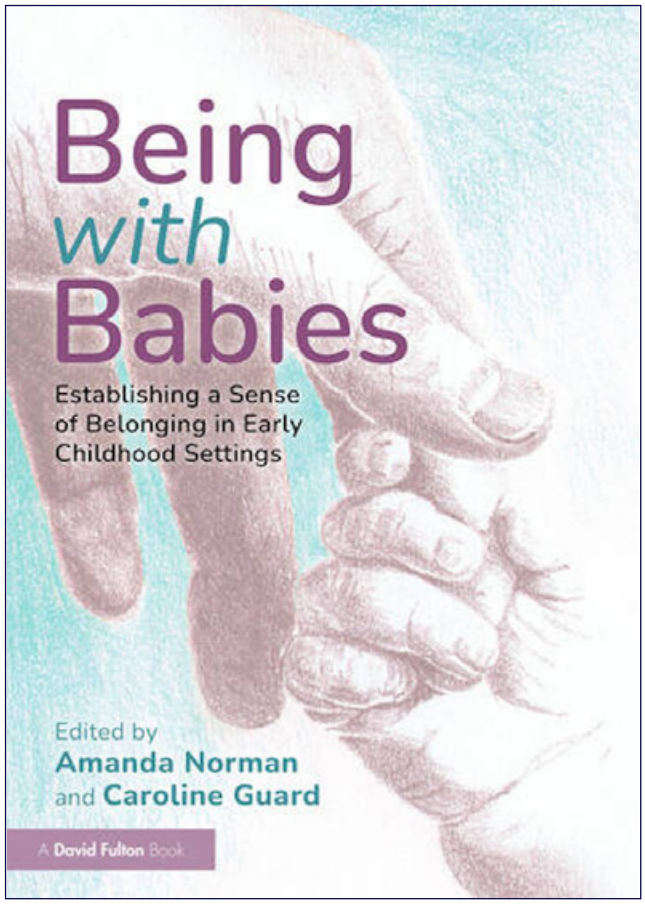
EDITORIAL REVIEW

Being with Babies: Establishing a Sense of Belonging in Early Childhood Settings

Amanda Norman and Caroline Guard







Being with Babies: Establishing a Sense of Belonging in Early Childhood Settings, edited by Amanda Norman and Caroline Guard, offers a timely and significant contribution to international early childhood scholarship about how babies are cared for through a sense of belonging in early years settings. Addressing the shift from "working with" to "being with", this text foregrounds the complexities in relational conceptualisations that professionals hold about being with babies across diverse care contexts. As co-editors, we have had the privilege of connecting and collaborating with experts in the field, making sense of relationships between themselves, babies, and their families, both from research and practice perspectives.

As an edited book, the thread connecting each chapter relates to promoting healthy interdependence and a sense of belonging when babies are cared for beyond the parenting relationship. The involvement of mutual support, balanced, and reciprocal relationships between professionals and babies in their care is therefore explored. Acknowledging a baby's emotional rights is to consider them as active participants in relationships rather than passive recipients. Whilst this is not a new concept, the edited book draws on emerging theory and highlights the complex relationships between babies and adults by offering a case study within each paper. Key learning about being with babies is also presented, with provocations for new thinking and understandings about relationships in early years communities, whilst also critiquing how a sense of belonging and emotional rights could be achieved.

Importantly, the book extends beyond a single national perspective. Drawing on contributions from a range of international authors working across varied socio-cultural and policy landscapes, multiple lenses about how babies are understood, supported, and included are made central within each chapter. The orientation of numerous perspectives recognises the relevance for an international understanding of early years settings when caring for babies, which should be both contextually grounded and broadly transferable across differing early childhood frameworks and professions. This is evidenced across chapters, including Cummins' (2026) exploration towards the Montessori Nido environment, Skehill's (2026) reflection of practices in Ireland, McTaggart's (2026) work as an educational psychologist in the Scottish Highlands, and Penman's (2026) work on contextualising baby care in Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand.

Conceptual Framing: From "Working With" to "Being With"

By positioning the baby at the heart of care, a sense of belonging and emotional rights are considered within an ethical framework of care. Boardman (2026) introduces how ethics and integrity are important when considering how and why we develop professional caring relationships with babies. The early relationships we build with babies and the responsive connections we make with their families are incredibly important. These foundations support babies' holistic learning and development and, in turn, shape their relationships with other trusted adults, thus influencing emotional interactions. As Brace (2026), Norman (2026), and Boardman (2026) explore, belonging is a compelling concept in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC), yet it is often framed ambiguously, particularly as belonging is highly subjective, adding to the confusion.

Thinking about ethical care and developing a sense of belonging is to reference towards the principles and values that underpin and guide social interactions and emotional relationships. The ethics of belonging, therefore, includes thoughts and actions based on respect, empathy, inclusivity, fairness, and justice. These ethical principles influence the decisions made about how interactions with babies and their families are sustained and speak to babies' emotional rights, which can, on occasion, also present tensions and fragility in regulated and formal care spaces. For example, balancing autonomy and emotional rights, with safety for mobile babies and respecting autonomy with compassionate care within pre-set and group care routines. Deleuze and Guattari (1988) refer to the tensions as being smooth and striated spaces. The striated spaces could refer to working within the confines of conflicting routines, outcomes, policies, and compliance, where ethical care can potentially get lost within these dilemmas (Guard, 2023), whereas the smooth spaces relate to the way ethical care is approached and the positioning of the baby being at the core within everyday care and play routines. The shifting of adults between smooth and striated spaces is fluid throughout the care of babies, rather than an either-or approach (Norman, 2024). The significance of this fluidity is within the development and sustenance of attuned relationships that occur between and when being with practitioners, babies and families (Boardman, 2026; Elfer et al., 2018).

Guard and Norman (2026) therefore challenge the phrase "working with babies," arguing that it does not reflect the slower, emotional and physical presence needed to be responsive to the ebb and flow of babies' needs. Moreover, it risks reinforcing hierarchical adult-child dynamics and depersonalised care practices (Alderson, 2016; Noddings, 2013). In its place, proposing "being with" is a more relational, ethical, and pedagogically nuanced concept. This chimes with McCallum-Faraday's (2026) notions on creating pedagogical spaces for professional reflection as a way of individually and collectively developing ethical and pedagogical understandings about being with babies that can be discussed and navigated within everyday professional care relationships.

This reframing holds particular resonance across international contexts where the early childhood sector and profession are variably shaped by differing professional identities, policy expectations, and cultural values (Archer, 2022; Osgood, 2010). In the Pikler approach (Manning-Morton & Tapping, 2026), there is a recognition and promotion of attuned care and child-led development. This is further extended and evidenced by Mann and Walsh's (2026) understanding and practice when contextualised within home-based care, alongside Stafford's (2026) recognition of nurturing care and the role of the key person as a play partner in nursery. By adopting a loving pedagogy (Grimmer, 2026) and widening the professional lens to other professionals beyond the ECEC practice setting, including Guard et al.'s (2026) case study as a physiotherapist within a Froebel lens, and Sturman-Coombs' role as a social worker, there is a focus on attachment, bonding and relationships in the making sense of *being with* babies as an ongoing discourse for professionals. The professional recognises the diversity of international early childhood workforces, while simultaneously identifying shared relational principles that transcend national boundaries. Ultimately, as McTaggart (2026) highlights in his seminal work on trauma-informed care, regardless of the context, it is the rich interactions and dialogue, and the construct of mind-mindedness (Meins et al., 2013) that evokes successful relationships in being with babies.

As McTaggart (2026) discusses, these ideas extend the discourses on attachment. By continuing research into attachment, attention turned to exploring exactly how positive relationships were established and why they have the impacts that they do. Mind-mindedness was therefore considered both a way of thinking about babies and children and a way of practising. It is based on the recognition, as the name implies, that even young babies have minds in the sense that they have feelings, intentions, interests, and even some form of thoughts. Therefore, adults who are being mind-minded with children are "tuning in" to them and providing a commentary on what they are doing, almost as if they are speaking the baby's thoughts for them. Guard (2026) concurs with this assertion by focusing on patterns of communication in infancy that bring the voice of babies to life in early childhood settings, through observations. Additionally, Grimmer's (2026) and Norman's (2026) chapters on advocacy for a loving pedagogy and evaluation of therapeutic play serve to address the complexities and nuanced interactions, and experiences and understandings about babies, and their emotional interactions as they develop. By critically reflecting on navigating being with babies, there is a central assertion not to "hurry" the relationships, aligning with the growing international interest in slow pedagogies (Clark, 2023), which advocate for unhurried, attentive practices (Quiñones, 2025).

This edited book is theoretically anchored in the contributions of the late Colwyn Trevarthen, whose research has significantly influenced global understandings about infancy and development. His conceptualisation of babies is understood as being coherent, intentional, and socially motivated individuals (Trevarthen, 2011). He also draws attention to babies as active individuals, listened to and communicated with, through an *ethics in practice* (Broadman, 2026; Ellis, 2007), and how flourishing relationships occur through agency of voice and attuned relationships (Pirie, 2026). Guard (2026) introduces the infant Francis as a case study of how observations can be engaged with as a reflective tool in meeting his needs during a snack time. Further examples of *ethics in practice* (Ellis, 2007) are evident in chapter by Norman and Morgan (2026) through their considerations of parent partnerships, including how fathers are increasingly included when their baby attends nursery settings, as well as the challenges in ensuring that families belong in the community their baby is part of. The developing triad relationships, the baby, the professional, and the family, are considered by Brace

(2026) in the ways we can build rapport and develop and secure relationships as families transition into early childhood settings. This is further enriched through engagement with international research in developmental neuroscience and infant studies, highlighting universal processes such as early brain development, attachment formation, and "serve and return" interactions (Center on the Developing Child, 2026). While these biological processes are broadly shared, their expression within culturally and contextually specific caregiving practices are unique to the context in which the baby is placed. By bridging global scientific knowledge with localised pedagogical interpretation, this enables a reflection on how universal developmental principles are enacted within cultural and institutional contexts.

Belonging as a Pedagogical Imperative

Belonging is therefore considered a central and unifying concept that is dynamic, relational, and culturally situated. While the concept is embedded across international curricula as a way of understanding and defining quality early childhood pedagogy, it has little visibility on a political scale, and is typically understood in the context of self, others, and relationships (Norman & Guard, 2026). The edited book reiterates Trevarthen's (2004) belief that belonging carries the "imprint" of others formed from the affiliation we hold within communities. The Center on the Developing Child (2026) suggests that belonging goes further than feeling part of a community and sits within a space of "mattering" to others and feeling you can have an impact on others. This provides a particularly powerful cross-cultural framework, highlighting the universal importance of babies feeling valued and recognised, while also allowing for diverse interpretations of how this is achieved in practice.

The book is organised in thematic sections to connect authors' contributions and thread together insights from across international contexts:

- *The Awe and Wonder of Babies and Quality Care*
  This section challenges the dominant developmental narratives and foregrounds babies' agency, encouraging practitioners to reconsider how they interpret milestones and nuanced communicative practices through an ethical lens.
- *The Community of Relationships*
  This section explores relational being with babies and families, including trauma-informed approaches and culturally responsive practice, the issues of growing international importance in increasingly diverse societies.
- *Pedagogical Environmental Spaces*
  By focusing on internationally recognised pedagogical traditions, including Pikler and Montessori, this section makes links between philosophy and practice to deepen how belonging can be understood in contemporary practices.
- *Routines and Rituals*
  This section examines everyday practices such as settling-in, sleep, and outdoor experiences, highlighting how culturally embedded routines can either support or hinder babies' sense of belonging.

Through the consistent inclusion of case studies, reflective questions, and further reading, the text enhances the value for professional development, demonstrating how educational philosophies about conceptual belonging can be both complementary and distinct in their approach. The case studies and questions also serve for the reader to pause and consider their own practice and subjective, personal experiences. By recognising the interdependence and emotional rights of the babies who are cared for in early years settings, there is space to reposition babies as central participants in educational and care settings. The edited book, therefore, culminates in emphasising relational pedagogies, ethical approaches, and the lived experiences of babies, whilst simultaneously challenging the dominant, outcomes-driven models that are prevalent across many national systems. By bringing together a community of voices from different professional, cultural, and policy contexts, a facilitation of meaningful exchange of ideas and practices emerges and is achieved. This in turn provides alternative perspectives, fostering an internationally informed understanding of early childhood care and early years settings.

Conclusion

In a global climate where early childhood systems are increasingly shaped by policy pressures and standardisation, Being with Babies provides a timely and necessary counterpoint. Its emphasis on presence, attentiveness, and belonging resonates across cultural and national boundaries, making it a highly relevant and influential contribution to contemporary early childhood education.

References

Alderson, P. (2016). *The politics of childhoods real and imagined: Volume 2, Practical application of realism and childhood studies*. Routledge.

Archer, N. (2022). 'I have this subversive curriculum underneath': Narratives of micro resistance in early childhood education. *Journal of Early Childhood Research, 20*(3), 431-445. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X211059907

Boardman, K. (2026). Ethics of education and care. In A. Norman & C. Guard (Eds.), *Being with babies: Establishing a sense of belonging in early childhood settings* (pp. 15-31). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003544302

Brace, D. (2026). Exploring relationships within formal day care. In A. Norman & C. Guard (Eds.), *Being with babies: Establishing a sense of belonging in early childhood settings* (pp. 223-239). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003544302

Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University. (2026). *Serve and return.* https://developingchild.harvard.edu/key-concept/serve-and-return/

Clark, A. (2023). *Slow knowledge and the unhurried child: Time for slow pedagogies in early childhood education.* Routledge.

Cummins, S. (2026). Exploring the Montessori Nido environment. In A. Norman & C. Guard (Eds.), *Being with babies: Establishing a sense of belonging in early childhood settings* (pp. 149-159). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003544302

Deleuze, G., &Guattari, F. (1988). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia,* (B. Massumi, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press.

Elfer, P., Greenfield, S., Robson, S., Wilson, D., & Zachariou, A. (2018). Love, satisfaction and exhaustion in the nursery: Methodological issues in evaluating the impact of Work Discussion groups in the nursery. *Early Child Development and Care*, *188*(7), 892-904. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2018.1446431

Ellis, C. (2007). Telling secrets, revealing lives: Relational ethics in research with intimate others. *Qualitative Inquiry, 13*(1), 3-29. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800406294947

Grimmer, T. (2026). Professional loving relationships with babies. In A. Norman & C. Guard (Eds.), *Being with babies: Establishing a sense of belonging in early childhood settings* (pp. 92-107). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003544302

Guard, C. (2023). 'It's the little bits that you have enabled me to see': Reconceptualising the voices of babies using the video interaction dialogue model with early years educators. *Early Years*, *43*(3), 606-625. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2023.2190498

Guard, C., & Norman, A. (2026). Introduction. In A. Norman & C. Guard (Eds.), *Being with babies: Establishing a sense of belonging in early childhood settings* (pp. 1-11). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003544302

Guard, C., Norman, A., & Brazier, S. (2026). Being with babies in a Froebelian way. In A. Norman & C. Guard (Eds.), *Being with babies: Establishing a sense of belonging in early childhood settings* (pp. 181-193). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003544302

Mann, N., & Walsh, C. (2026). Babies, voice and pedagogy in home-based childcare. In A. Norman & C. Guard (Eds.), *Being with babies: Establishing a sense of belonging in early childhood settings* (pp. 279-294). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003544302

Manning-Morton, J., & Tapping, R. (2026). Freedom to play, freedom to move, freedom to be me. In A. Norman & C. Guard (Eds.), *Being with babies: Establishing a sense of belonging in early childhood settings* (pp. 160-180). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003544302

McCallum-Faraday, R. (2026). Creating pedagogical spaces for professional reflection. In A. Norman & C. Guard (Eds.), *Being with babies: Establishing a sense of belonging in early childhood settings* (pp. 204-219). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003544302

McTaggart, J. (2026). Relationships, resilience and recovery. In A. Norman & C. Guard (Eds.), *Being with babies: Establishing a sense of belonging in early childhood settings* (pp. 73-91). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003544302

Meins, E., Centifanti, L. C. M., Fernyhough, C., & Fishburn, S. (2013). Maternal mind-mindedness and children's behavioral difficulties: Mitigating the impact of low socioeconomic status. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 41, 543-553. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-012-9699-3

Norman, A. (2026). Creating attachments and attunement through symbolic gesturing. In A. Norman & C. Guard (Eds.), *Being with babies: Establishing a sense of belonging in early childhood settings* (pp. 59-69). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003544302

Norman, A., & Morgan, L. (2026). Being with babies: Connecting with parents and families through a person-centred approach. In A. Norman & C. Guard (Eds.), *Being with babies: Establishing a sense of belonging in early childhood settings* (pp.122-136). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003544302

Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring. A relational approach to ethics and moral education* 2e. University of California Press.

Norman, A. (2024). *Transitional objects in early childhood: The value of transitional objects in the early years*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003296669

Osgood, J. (2010). Reconstructing professionalism in ECEC: The case for the 'critically reflective emotional professional.' *Early Years*, *30*(2), 119-133. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2010.490905

Penman, R. (2026). Mana Whenua | Belonging. In A. Norman & C. Guard (Eds.), *Being with babies: Establishing a sense of belonging in early childhood settings* (pp. 194-203). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003544302

Pirie, R. (2026). Flourishing relationships and agency of voice (power). In A. Norman & C. Guard (Eds.), *Being with babies: Establishing a sense of belonging in early childhood settings* (pp. 108-121). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003544302

Quiñones, G., & Delaune, A. (2025). Exploring infant-toddler's wellbeing: Being-with the flow of time and space. In G. Quiñones & Delaune, A. (Eds.) *Wellbeing for infants and toddlers in education and care: International perspectives.* Springer Nature Switzerland. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-89376-6_11

Skehill, S. (2026). 'We're moving out!'. In A. Norman & C. Guard (Eds.), *Being with babies: Establishing a sense of belonging in early childhood settings* (pp. 264-278). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003544302

Stafford, L. (2026). Creating pedagogical spaces for sensory and sustainable play. In A. Norman & C. Guard (Eds.), *Being with babies: Establishing a sense of belonging in early childhood settings* (pp. 223-239). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003544302

Sturman-Coombs, R. (2026). Being with babies: A social work perspective. In A. Norman & C. Guard (Eds.), *Being with babies: Establishing a sense of belonging in early childhood settings* (pp. 137-146). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003544302

Trevarthen, C. (1979). Communication and cooperation in early infancy. A description of primary intersubjectivity. In M. Bullowa (Ed.), *Before speech: The beginning of human communication* (pp. 321-37). Cambridge University Press.

Trevarthen, C. (2002). Emerging cognitive abilities in early infancy. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 43*, 545-547. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0021-9630.2002.0044f.x

Trevarthen C. (2004). Learning about ourselves, from children: Why a growing human brain needs interesting companions. *Research and Clinical Centre for Child Development, Annual Report 2002-2003, 26*, 9-44.

Trevarthen, C. (2011). 'What is it like to be a person who knows nothing? Defining the active intersubjective mind of a newborn human being'. *Infant and Child Development, 20*(1), 119-135. https://doi.org/10.1002/icd.689

List of Contributors



Melanie Audier is a registered ECE teacher and PhD candidate at Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha | University of Canterbury. Her current research focus is exploring teachers' experiences of mentalisation in their interactions with infants. Further research interests include infant pedagogy, developmental psychology, teacher education, and social and emotional education.



Roberta Carvalho is a Senior Professional Practice Fellow at Te Kura Ākau Taitoka | University of Otago, College of Education. She is an early childhood kaiako who now teaches in the ITE programmes. Roberta's research interests are in professional learning and culturally responsive practices in the ECE context.



Maria Cooper is an Associate Professor of early childhood education at Waipapapa Taumata Rau | 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 certificated teacher, and an experienced mentor.



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.



Sonya Gaches is a Pūkeka Matua Senior Lecturer of Education at Te Kura Ākau Taitoka | University of Otago, College of Education. She spent over 25 years as an early childhood educator in the United States. Sonya's research interests include teaching/learning experiences in the early childhood education community, children's rights, and how these interact with policies and practice, locally and in international contexts.



Michael Gaffney has been at Te Kura Ākau Taitoka | University of Otago for 10 years teaching in the early childhood initial teacher education programme. His research interests have focused on children's rights and inclusion within early childhood settings, especially in relation to disability.



Caroline Guard is an academic and consultant who most recently worked at the Department for Social Policy and Intervention, University of Oxford, England. She now works for Thrive at Five, a charity in England. Caroline's research focuses 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.



Felipe Godoy is a Sociologist, with a Masters in Public Policy, and a PhD in Education. He is currently an Associate Researcher at the Center for Advanced Studies on Educational Justice from the Pontificia Universidad Católica of Chile. His work focuses on early childhood education policy, including teacher professionalism, quality, and system funding.



Alexandra C. Gunn (Alex) is a Professor of Education at Te Kura Ākau Taitoka | University of Otago, College of Education. An early childhood teacher by profession, Alex now teaches, conducts research, and supports policy and practice development in a range of early childhood topics.



Saba Javed is a doctoral researcher in Education at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand. Her research focuses on emotional labour and wellbeing among early childhood teachers. She has extensive experience in educational research, teaching, qualitative and quantitative data analysis, and academic writing, with publications addressing wellbeing, emotions, identity, and educational practice.



Amanda Norman is Senior Lecturer at the University of Winchester. From her practice experience and teaching for many years, her research focuses on infant care and play pedagogies. She has authored several books, including Transitional Objects in Early Childhood and The Baby Room, which explores person-centred care and well-being.



Gillian O'Connor is an Assistant Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Monash University, Australia. Her research focuses on early childhood education and care, particularly play and affective pedagogies. She has extensive experience in child development and wellbeing, having worked as a Specialist Child and Family Health Nurse and later as a primary school teacher. She completed her doctoral studies in early childhood education, and her professional experience continues to inform her teaching and research.



Justine O'Hara-Gregan is a Senior Lecturer at Waipapa Taumata Rau | 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.



Yan Peng is a PhD candidate in the School of Social and Cultural Studies in Education | Te Kura Mātai Ahurea Ako at the University of Canterbury. Her research interests include infant and toddler education, educator professional identity, relational pedagogy, and comparative early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand and mainland China.



Gloria Quiñones 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 is an honorary academic at Waipapa Taumata Rau | University of Auckland. Jean has developed infant toddler specialisations within early childhood initial teacher qualifications. Her recent participation in an international research project examined pedagogies of care with one-year-olds in the USA, UK, Hong Kong and Aotearoa New Zealand.



Tabitha Taylor-Harris is an early childhood educator and Visiting Lecturer at Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha | University of Canterbury. With over 16 years' experience in early childhood education, her research interests centre on toddler pedagogy, relationality, and leadership. Her work examines the intersections between relational pedagogy, quality leadership, and the conditions that support meaningful and joyful learning in ECE.

Make an impact where it matters most, the early years

Studying Early Childhood at Waipapa Taumata Rau, University of Auckland

Early childhood knowledge plays a critical role in supporting the vital early years of a child's learning and exploration of the world. By studying early childhood with us, you will have the opportunity to be taught by staff who are recognised for their expert knowledge and extensive practical and research experience.

Study options

Interested in children and childhood? This foundational programme is for you

Bachelor of Early Childhood Studies

- 3 years full-time
- 360-points
- City Campus only
- Placements in ECE centres

The Bachelor of Early Childhood Studies encompasses a broad study of early childhood and social contexts from birth to eight years of age*. Courses cover te ao Māori perspectives, diversity and inclusion, human development, educational psychology and professional communication practice, while practical placements each year in a variety of educational settings will allow you to explore areas of interest as you refine and develop relevant professional skills.

**If you decide to pursue a teaching career in New Zealand, you can follow with a one-year Graduate Diploma in Teaching (Early Childhood Education) or Master of Teaching and Learning (Early Childhood).*

Already have a degree and interested in becoming a qualified ECE teacher?

Graduate Diploma in Teaching (Early Childhood Education)

- 1 year full-time, 2 years part-time
- 150-points
- Online only
- Practicum placements in ECE centres

This online programme is designed for people who already have a degree and want to become a qualified early childhood teacher in Aotearoa New Zealand. Delivered online, this programme provides flexibility and accessibility for students who may be balancing study with employment, family, or other commitments. Practicum placements in three different early childhood centres are a core component (total of 17 weeks) of this programme. After completing this programme you will be eligible to apply for provisional certification as a practising early childhood teacher with the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Have a degree and want to teach in the ECE sector? Become an ECE teacher with a sought-after masters qualification

Master of Teaching and Learning (Early Childhood)

- 1 year full-time, 2 years part-time
- 180-points
- City campus only
- Practicum placements in ECE centres

This campus-based programme provides students with an in-person university learning experience. The Masters programme is at postgraduate level and designed for people who already have a degree and want to become a qualified early childhood teacher in Aotearoa New Zealand while gaining a master's qualification. Practicum placements in early childhood centres are a core component of this programme. Students will attend placements in three different ECE centres during the programme of study (total of 17 weeks).

Become a qualified early childhood teacher and progress into an in-demand and rewarding career.

Already an ECE teacher and interested in further learning or a pathway to research?

Master of Education (Early Childhood)

- 18 months full-time, part-time varies
- 180-point, research and taught options
- City campus and online

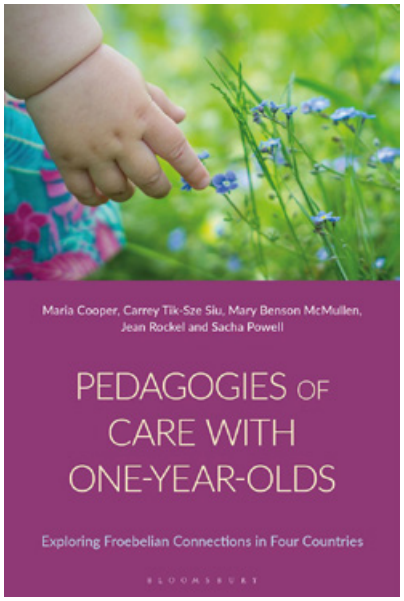
Deepen your understanding of education and professional practice. Whether you're a teacher, tutor, researcher, social worker, policymaker, or a play and curriculum expert, our Master of Education (Early Childhood) programme is tailored to suit your aspirations.

The programme is designed to empower students with advanced, multidisciplinary, and up-to-date knowledge of early childhood, fostering the development of innovative and research-informed expertise.

For more information: auckland.ac.nz/ece

Have a question about study options, email us earlychildhoodprogrammes@auckland.ac.nz

Waipapa Taumata Rau University of Auckland



Pedagogies of Care with One-Year-Olds

Exploring Froebelian Connections in Four Countries

Maria Cooper, Carrey Tik-Sze Siu, Mary Benson McMullen, Jean Rockel & Sacha Powell

"The 'Froebelian explorers' in this book discuss together the 'pedagogies of care for oneyearolds' pondering the differences in the sameness of Froebelian practices in four countries. Their invitation to readers to 'listen in' offers the enriching opportunity to join a group of highly respected Froebelian scholars as they, together with groups of practitioners and families, strive to develop the best for very young children." *Tina Bruce CBE, Honorary Professor of Early Childhood Studies, University of Roehampton, UK*

20% off with this flyer!

Paperback | 216 pp | October 2026 | 9781350367401 | ~~$59.99~~ $47.99

This book applies the principles of Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) to infant-toddler care and education today in England, the USA, New Zealand, and Hong Kong.

The book contributes to critical debates on the application of Froebelian principles, including unity and connectedness, play, nature, and creativity, and makes recommendations for practice in infant-toddler education and care settings in diverse cultural contexts. The authors present new research from ethnographic studies carried out in the four countries which investigate pedagogies of care with one-year-olds in infant-toddler settings. To avoid perpetuating a universal approach, the book presents multiple perspectives based on the diverse cultures across the four countries. Throughout the book, connections are made between Froebelian principles, infant-toddler pedagogy, and early learning.

Maria Cooper is Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education at Waipapa Taumata Rau - University of Auckland, New Zealand.

Carrey Tik-Sze Siu is Senior Lecturer at University of Canterbury, New Zealand. She was Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education at The Education University of Hong Kong when she worked on the project.

Mary Benson McMullen is Professor Emerita, Early Childhood Education, Indiana University, USA.

Jean Rockel QSM is Honorary Academic at Waipapa Taumata Rau - University of Auckland, New Zealand.

Sacha Powell is Chief Executive Officer of The Froebel Trust, UK.

***Use the following discount codes to save 20% on bloomsbury.com/9781350367401.**

UK, Europe, Middle East, Africa, Asia, South and Central America: **GLR BD8**
USA: **GLR BD8**
Canada: **GLR BD8**
Australia and New Zealand: **GLR BD8**

Why not join our mailing list?
Be the first to hear about new products in your area of interest as well as offers and exclusive discounts
Visit https://www.bloomsbury.com/newsletter/

Available to individuals only | Price and availability subject to change | Discount code only valid for books available on Bloomsbury.com



Waipapa
Taumata Rau
University of Auckland

The firstyears
Ngā Tau Tuatahi

New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education
Faculty of Arts and Education
University of Auckland