

The

# *first*years

Ngā Tau Tuatahi

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and Toddler  
Education

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# The *first* years

Ngā Tau Tuatahi

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## Waiata / Song

Hutia Te Rito

Hutia te rito

Hutia te rito o te harakeke

Kei hea te kōmako e kō

Kī mai ki ahau

He aha te mea nui

He aha te mea nui o te ao

Māku e kī atu

He Tangata, He Tangata

He Tangata Hi

Pluck the Baby (of a flax bush)

Pluck the baby

Pluck the baby of the flaxbush

Where will the bellbird sing

You ask me

What is the greatest thing

What is the greatest thing in the  
world I will tell you

Tis People! Tis People

Tis People

Adapted by Rose Pere



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# Editorial:

## *Moving forward: A time for reflection, acknowledgement, and new beginnings*

By Louise Gorst



It is with great anticipation and excitement for the editors collective of *The First Years Ngā Tau Tuatahi* to deliver our treasured journal as a digital publication. This the first time the journal has been available in digital open access format since its first printed publication in 1999. The journal is now the responsibility of the early childhood team at the Faculty of Education and Social Work, with team members having contributed through specific roles to this issue. We are moving from two issues per year to one, freely available to all. I have been the lead editor for this issue and feel privileged to write this editorial for our first online issue.

Over the years as a leader, teacher, and now teacher educator at the University of Auckland, I have experienced many changes in early childhood education (ECE); new legislation, regulations, policies, and a revised edition of *Te Whāriki*. I have learned that those involved in ECE are flexible, reflective, and reflexive practitioners. However, nothing could have prepared us for the ongoing disruptions and challenges experienced as a result of the Covid pandemic. We have experienced life like none other before. In this editorial, I focus on what we have learned from the pandemic so far, and how we can move forward in our work while navigating different phases of the pandemic. Many things have changed, and we have adapted to innovative communication and interaction methods. We have had little choice but to become more resilient, patient, and adaptable in approaching our roles and responsibilities.

Engaging in discussions with colleagues and fellow teachers in ECE, it was evident that key common areas became a focus in teaching practice during the Covid pandemic: relation-

ships, belonging and well-being, and developing new knowledge and skills.

Establishing and maintaining relationships was significantly prioritised in day-to-day practice with children, families, and teaching teams. The principle of Relationships in *Te Whāriki*, our New Zealand early childhood curriculum, is a well-known concept and practice for ECE teachers. At times, centres unexpectedly closed due to lockdowns, and changes to level settings meant teachers needed to apply new rules. Teachers placed a high value and focus on the importance of working with children and their families. They also emphasised the significance of the Relationships principle that “children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 21).

Teachers adapted and found new ways to ensure they could continue carrying out their work while not always being able to interact with children and families face to face. In addition to this principle, the learning outcomes of the Belonging and Wellbeing strands of *Te Whāriki* enabled teachers to focus on and support children as they transitioned back and forth to centres, requiring extra support and care as they resettled after long periods of being at home. Teachers provided support by nurturing children’s emotional wellbeing and promoting their health through care and attention (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Throughout the pandemic, we have experienced and learned valuable knowledge and skills, such as resilience, patience, and adaptability. We have re-established priorities around infants and toddlers, and approached these in new ways. We can utilise what we have

learned to reflect on what is important to us as we work with infants and toddlers to support their wellbeing, learning, and development.

During the Covid pandemic, teachers, scholars, and researchers have continued their work on exploring and examining ways to teach and support infants and toddlers in ECE. A range of subjects continue to be developed and enhanced through research; posing new ideas, concepts, and theories to support infant and toddler education in ECE. As we move forward, we can now take the time to revisit our goals and foci, decide where we want to go, and listen to what our children and families are sharing with us. This is a valuable time to reset and rethink our priorities. I believe the articles we have in this issue offer a range of insightful and informative messages and points for consideration and reflection that are in keeping with the ways teachers and leaders have adapted and responded, and reconceptualised practices in recent times.

Our first article shares findings from a recent international study on group size and child-adult ratios, considering the voices of practitioners and parents from Hong Kong. Dr Carrey Siu and colleagues poses insightful considerations about whether smaller group size is better and for whom. Reading about the parents’ perspectives and values for their children to be part of a large group was fascinating. In contrast, the teachers struggled with large group sizes and high teacher-child ratios, saying they often felt confined to set daily routines and overworked. These differing perspectives on group size and ratios were revealed as potential frictions and highlighted the influence of cultural values and beliefs.

Next, Dr Kiri Gould draws on findings from her PhD research that explored how early childhood teachers construct their professional identities as teachers. Kiri's article focuses on the relational discourse and marginalisation of the types of care that count when teachers grapple with professional recognition alongside maternal care and nurture for infants and toddlers in early childhood education and care. Two significant challenges for teachers are identified, confronting the (in)visibility of care and how this contributes to an uneven status of teachers and the need to find ways to articulate the values that all forms of care are legitimate forms of professional knowledge and practice.

In our third article, Alice Chen provides an informative discussion about the understandings and enactment of leadership in infant and toddler settings. The four main ideas in this article are drawn from relatable and significant key findings from Alice's recent research on infant and toddler leadership in ECE. Alice acknowledges the ongoing complex nature of leadership in ECE, posing some interesting and valuable questions for reflection and further consideration on infant and toddler pedagogy, leadership, and leadership identity.

Following on, Dr Maria Cooper provides an interesting and informative window into the philosophical world of Froebel. Maria shares a summary of Friederich Froebel's life. This is followed by a reflection on her recent experience being part of a panel of eight international researchers who have applied Froebelian philosophy to their work and were invited to respond to the question, *Why does Froebel matter in the 21st century?* To conclude, Maria explains the intentions of the Froebel Trust in London and the legacy and work that continues to be carried out today.

Sharing findings from her recent master's study, Naail Satani raises significant ideas in theory and practice for teachers to consider in relation to how they support infants' and toddlers' autonomy. This research report is an important reminder of how autonomy is valued in the curriculum and is a topic that is gaining increased interest and awareness in ECE theory and research.

Naail discusses valuable points to consider in infant and toddler ECE settings.

Next, Pennie Brownlee shares her perspective of children's imagination in play in contrast to virtual reality (VR) technologies. Pennie brings an array of examples of children's play to the forefront. She connects the creative thinking and imagination a child's brain engages in during these processes and the importance of human connection in their interactions as they play. A selection of books and websites in the references list serve as useful follow-up resources to explore.

Emma Quigan then provides a reflective response to Dr Andi Salamon's webinar presentation at the University of Auckland's Early Childhood Seminar Series, *Reframing play and learning in infant pedagogy using the notion of "emotional capital practices"*. Emma draws on examples of her own experiences as a parent, initial teacher education student, teacher, and master's researcher to make authentic and relevant connections between emotional capital practices and communication for consideration in our interactions with infants and toddlers.

Our eighth piece, a contribution from the field involves a thought-provoking interview with ECE leaders Janet Malcolm and Dr Daniel Lovatt, carried out by faculty teacher, educator, Tamar Weisz-Koves. This interactive discussion identifies challenges, learning, and opportunities that evolved from the Covid pandemic. The underpinning value of whanaungatanga proved to be an important enactment of practice to support teachers, children, and their families as they navigated restrictions and disruptions.

The issue concludes with two book reviews. Amanda White's review of Bussey and Richardson's (2020) *Attuned Routine Experiences: An Early Learning Series Title* highlights the importance of children's perspectives and the teacher's role in care-based routine experiences. Dr Justine O'Hara-Gregan's review of Benson McMullen's (2022) *On Being and Well-Being in Infant/Toddler Care and Education: Life Stories from Baby Rooms* indicates the value of

reflection for those who care for and educate infants and toddlers. Both reviews highlight important attributes of care and wellbeing for infants and toddlers in ECE.

After reading these articles, I hope you will be inspired in your work and gain new knowledge and ideas to consider and reflect on in your practice with infants and toddlers. As noted, this issue shares a range of topics, from Froebel's historical influences, international perspectives of ECE settings, the importance of routines, play and imagination, the significance of and value of care, well-being, autonomy, and the influence of leadership and relationships.

What might you take from the contributions in this issue to reflect on and review, utilise in your practice, engage in discussion, undertake inquiry on, or ponder and research further?

I invite and encourage you to consider writing an article for our journal to share your knowledge, experiences, and expertise in the area of infant and toddler care and education in ECE.

Please see our website for details: [www.auckland.ac.nz/first-years](http://www.auckland.ac.nz/first-years)

#### Reference

Ministry of Education. Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga. (2017). *Te Whāriki/He whāriki matauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum*. <https://www.education.govt.nz/early-childhood/teaching-and-learning/te-whariki/>

# Deliberating on group sizes and child-adult ratios in infant-toddler care and education: Voices of practitioners and parents from Hong Kong

By Dr Tik-Sze Carrey Siu, Melissa Pearl Caldwell, Dr Sum Kwing Cheung, and Dr Him Cheung



*In terms of group sizes and child-to-adult ratios, is it universally accepted that the smaller the better? What are the perspectives and positions of ECCE practitioners and parents from Hong Kong, a cultural group influenced by both Chinese values and Western ideologies, on this?"*

## **The Smaller, the Better?**

To ensure a satisfactory level of safety and quality in care and education, there are mandatory requirements on group sizes and child-to-adult ratios in settings for infants and toddlers across countries. In early childhood care and education (ECCE), small group sizes and low child-adult ratios are desirable for various reasons. More individual attention can be given to each child in a smaller group. The interests and needs of individual children can be better respected and supported in a well-staffed setting. Children may be less stressed in a smaller group where the learning environment is typically less noisy and crowded. Hence, there is no shortage of campaigns calling for smaller group sizes and ratios for enhancing the quality of ECCE. Meanwhile, the group sizes and child-adult ratios in ECCE settings in some countries like Japan and China are notably higher, compared to those in Western (English) settings. This observation motivated the present study, which is reported in this article, aimed at exploring if there is a cultural dimension to the consideration of ideal structural features of quality ECCE.

In terms of group sizes and child-to-adult ratios, the research team questioned if the notion of the smaller the better is universally accepted? What are the perspectives and positions of ECCE practitioners and parents from Hong Kong, a cultural group influenced by both Chinese values and Western ideologies, on this?

## **Prior Evidence and Discussion on Group Sizes and Child-Adult Ratios**

It appears to be taken for granted that smaller group sizes and lower child-to-adult ratios are better for children's

development and learning. "Nevertheless, empirical evidence paints a trickier picture" (Bowne et al., 2017; NICHHD, 2001), resulting in sustained debate within the Hong Kong ECCE sector about whether ideal group sizes and ratios exist. It is well understood that large group sizes and high child-adult ratios are likely to induce environmental stress for children and limit individual attention to children from teachers, thus compromising responsive and sensitive teacher-child interaction (Dalli et al., 2011; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHHD], 2001). Consistent evidence also shows that teachers working with smaller groups and lower child-adult ratios could engage individual children more effectively, which enhances children's social competence and cognitive development (NICHHD, 2000).

In a meta-analysis of a comprehensive database of early childhood education programme evaluations, Bowne et al. (2017) found that very small (i.e., group size of 15 or less) and well-staffed classrooms (i.e., child-teacher ratio of 7.5:1 or less) conferred benefits for children's cognitive and academic learning. However, Bowne et al.'s (2017) meta-analytic results for children's socio-emotional outcomes were less conclusive. Indeed, there has been evidence that large sized groups are conducive to children's development of socioemotional skills and formation of peer relationships. Kim (2001) demonstrated that compared to those from smaller class sizes, preschoolers in classes of 40 increased their number of playmates across the semester; they also showed less withdrawn behaviour, and more complementary and reciprocal play with peers by the end of the semester. NICHHD (2001) reported corroborative findings that

larger groups appear to provide more playmate choices, models for prosocial behaviours, as well as richer learning activities for young children.

Researchers have attempted to reconcile the mixed findings on the group-size and ratio effects. For instance, Bowne et al. (2017) analysed a large database and identified thresholds under which group sizes and ratios matter for child development and learning. As previously mentioned, these included a group size of 15 children, and a child-to-adult ratio of 7.5:1. Beyond these thresholds, no notable improvements were found with reduced group sizes or child-adult ratios. Nearly 30 years prior to this, Slavin (1989) had made a point which might be relevant to explain the lack of clear advantage to slight reductions in group sizes and ratios. Slavin (1989) argued that teacher behaviour is critical to children's developmental and learning outcomes. Unfortunately, his observation aligned with others' (Cahen et al., 1988; Robinson & Wittebols, 1986) shared view that teachers' behaviour did not vary substantially with group sizes. More specifically, teachers did change their behaviour in smaller classes; however, the changes were too negligible to make a significant and meaningful impact on children's learning.

### **Ideal Group Sizes and Child-Adult Ratios Across Cultures**

The mixed findings could also be attributed to different educational or socialisation ideals across cultural contexts. Growing evidence suggests that people from diverse cultures hold different views on group sizes and child-adult ratios desirable for nurturing young children.

McMullen et al. (2005) conducted a cross-cultural study comparing pedagogical beliefs and practices of early childhood professionals working with 3- to 5-year-olds from the U.S., China, Taiwan, Korea, and Turkey. The results revealed that Confucian cultural contexts such as China are inclined to support large group sizes because larger groups appear to be more favourable for socialisation of collectivist values and submission to group interests. As reported in Tobin et al.'s (1987) earlier

cross-cultural work, early childhood professionals from Japan also favour larger groups, though for different reasons. Japanese teachers concur that large group sizes and high child-adult ratios are likely to result in a chaotic classroom environment. However, they view "chaos" positively and see it as offering important teaching moments to foster children's assimilation to the disorderly experience typical of the real world.

Furthermore, Hu et al. (2017) examined the relationships between structural qualities and classroom interaction quality in 180 Chinese preschool classrooms. The findings indicated 35 children as a ceiling threshold of group size beyond which classroom interaction quality started to deteriorate. Importantly, the authors found that for group sizes below 35, larger group sizes were associated with better classroom interaction quality in the Chinese preschools (Hu et al., 2017), a finding which may surprise advocates of smaller group sizes. These findings from non-Western contexts point to an important cultural dimension when we mull over group sizes and child-to-adult ratios argued as being optimal for child development and learning.

The studies reviewed above were mostly conducted in preschools or kindergartens. Indeed, there has been scant empirical attention on the effects of group size and child-to-adult ratio on 0- to 3-year-olds in nurseries or childcare centres. In caring for and educating infants and toddlers in group settings, it would appear common sense that very young children would be better off in smaller and better-staffed groups. But is that so, universally? Do ECCE practitioners and parents from non-Western cultures favour smaller group sizes and lower child-adult ratios in infant-toddler settings? These are the questions we addressed in this study.

### **The Study Aims**

The study addresses these questions in order to learn more regarding ideal group sizes and child-to-adult ratios for infants and toddlers in Hong Kong group settings, from the perspectives of ECCE professionals and parents. In particular, we examined whether these two most

significant figures in the lives of infants/toddlers hold similar or different views on the environment and practices favourable for their child's learning and development.

### **Infant-Toddler Care and Education Group Settings in Hong Kong**

Group-based infant and toddler care and education is not a predominant ECCE option in Hong Kong, although it is increasingly popularised and available. Group-based ECCE for 0- to 3-year-olds in Hong Kong is operated primarily through childcare centres and kindergarten-cum-childcare centres. These centres are further supported by other community-based centres that offer flexible childcare services and promote community participation and collaboration. These group settings are regulated by the Social Welfare Department of the Hong Kong government.

Currently, 13 childcare centres and 13 kindergarten-cum-childcare centres are subsidised by the Hong Kong government to offer non-profit full-day ECCE to children aged 0 to 3. The daily service hours of full-day centres are standardised from 8:00a.m. to 6:00p.m. on Mondays to Fridays, and 9:00a.m. to 1:00p.m. on Saturdays. Extended service hours are available to meet the needs of families. Additionally, 14 private childcare centres and 15 kindergartens-cum-childcare centres provide half-day ECCE for 0- to 3-year-olds in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Social Welfare Department, 2020).

In general, these centres play a supporting role when caregivers are unable to look after their young children due to work or other responsibilities. The centres provide a safe and motivating learning environment where programmes and activities facilitating the growth and development of infants and toddlers are offered (Hong Kong Social Welfare Department, 2020).

It should be noted that the availability of ECCE places for infants and toddlers in Hong Kong has long been inadequate. Based on survey results in 2015, the population of children aged 0 to 2 was 100,000, while the number of full-day ECCE places for this age group was

only 1,057 (Hong Kong Society for the Protection of Children, 2015). In other words, only about 1% of this age group had access to full-day ECCE in subsidised childcare centres. This figure deviated greatly from the mean of 35% for the same age in countries that are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (OECD, 2016). Until recently, the Social Welfare Department has been implementing its plans to increase by about 320 full-day ECCE places for children aged below 3 in various districts in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Social Welfare Department, 2020).

In Hong Kong, the minimum number of staff required in childcare centres and kindergarten-cum-childcare centres was first stipulated by the Social Welfare Department in 1976. The legal staff-to-child ratio for children under two years of age was 1:8 when the present study was conducted (Chan, 2019). Since the school year 2019-2020, the staff-to-child ratio has improved from 1:8 to 1:6 (Hong Kong Education Bureau & Social Welfare Department, 2021).

Compared with the ratios of Western countries, the ratio in Hong Kong is relatively high. For instance, at the time of writing, the staff-child ratio for children aged below 3 in England is 1:3; the ratio for children under age 2 in Australia is 1:4. In an interview and survey study with infant-toddler practitioners in Hong Kong, Chan (2019) revealed that their preferred staff-child ratio was 1:4 for children under 12 months, and 1:6 for children from 13 to 24 months.

In 1997, the Social Welfare Department mandated the implementation of the Child Care Service Ordinance that sets the criteria for ECCE services in Hong Kong. ECCE practitioners in childcare centres include childcare workers and childcare supervisors. Childcare workers are responsible for providing care and education to infants and toddlers, while childcare supervisors are mainly responsible for directing and evaluating the provision of infant-toddler programmes.

From 2007 onwards, childcare workers have been required to obtain a two-year higher diploma in early childhood

education as the minimum qualification requirement. Chan (2019) found that 54% of childcare workers completed a higher diploma in early childhood education, 17% held a bachelor's degree in education, and 8% obtained a certificate in child care. Moreover, over 60% of childcare workers have been employed in childcare centres for more than 15 years (Chan, 2019), suggesting that the practitioners in infant-toddler group settings in Hong Kong are rather experienced. However, the practitioners have expressed concerns over heavy workload, long working hours, and low salary, all contributing to a high staff turnover in the sector (Chan, 2019).

### The Study Approach and Context

This study adopted the video-elicited multivocal ethnographic design developed by Tobin and his colleagues (1989, 2009). Through displaying videotaped scenes of the everyday lives of one-year-olds in infant-toddler group settings from different cultures, this approach aimed to evoke conversation among participants in relation to cultural differences as well as commonalities in infant-toddler pedagogical practices. First, researchers from Hong Kong, New Zealand, England, and the United States videotaped "a day in the life of one-year-olds" in an infant-toddler group setting from their respective cultures. The raw footage from each culture was then edited to 15 minutes, capturing moments of daily routines such as mealtime, toilet time, playtime, sleep time, arrival and departure, pedagogical discussion among practitioners, and interactions and dialogues between practitioners and parents. During the screenings, the researchers showed all four 15-minute videos to groups of (i) ECCE practitioners working with infants and toddlers, and (ii) parents whose children were enrolled in an infant-toddler programme in group settings. The participating practitioners and parents were encouraged to take notes while viewing the videos.

Next, the researchers engaged their participants in focus-group discussions in which thoughts and feelings about the videos were exchanged. The discussions were guided by the following questions: "What do you notice about this

particular film?", "What stands out in each setting?", and "Is there anything that confused you, or made you feel uncomfortable?". Written notes from the participants were collected after the discussion because some of them felt more comfortable with expressing their views through writing. The focus-group conversations were transcribed from recordings afterwards. This article focuses on the dialogues among Hong Kong participants in relation to group sizes and child-to-adult ratios in infant-toddler settings.

The Hong Kong setting in the study is a kindergarten-cum-childcare centre located on the campus of a university in Hong Kong. It is a self-funding, non-profit-distributing ECCE centre operated by the affiliated university. The centre aims to provide early childhood care and education for children aged 1 to 6, to offer professional learning opportunities for early childhood teacher trainees, and to foster collaboration among family, school, and community. The one-year-old class adopts the SIME curriculum (Stimulation, Interaction, Motivation, and Experience), which aims to foster young children's holistic development through a stimulating environment filled with responsive interaction and motivating learning experiences (Zhang & Chan, 2019). The curriculum is implemented through a variety of indoor and outdoor learning activities. The centre is open Monday through Friday from 8:00a.m. to 6:00p.m., from mid-August to mid-July, except for public holidays. In general, all children in the one-year-old class attend for a full day for 7-8 hours.

There were two lead teachers and a teaching assistant in the toddler class, all of whom were native Cantonese-Chinese speakers. Both lead teachers held a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, while the teaching assistant held a higher diploma in early childhood education and was studying towards a bachelor's degree. An English-speaking teacher was also present in the toddler class, as were a few volunteer mothers who visited regularly for storytelling. The centre values family-school communication, with teachers and parents interacting frequently through parent meetings, diaries, phone calls,





At the time of study, the staff-child ratio in this toddler class was 3 adults to 14 children, which was lower than the stipulated staff-child ratio (i.e., 1:8) for children under age 2 in Hong Kong.

emails, and a smartphone app. The study protocol and consent forms were approved by Faculty Human Research Ethics Committee at Education University of Hong Kong. A fuller description of the study background and procedures can be found in Cooper et al. (2022).

## Voices of ECCE Practitioners and Parents from Hong Kong

### Infant-toddler ECCE Practitioners

We learnt from the focus-group discussion that most of the infant-toddler ECCE practitioners from Hong Kong were impressed by the low child-to-adult ratios and the practices that this enabled in the Western settings (New Zealand, England, the United States):

*I find the learning environments in the New Zealand and U.K. settings very peaceful, calm, and quiet compared to ours. The child to teacher ratio is so low. There are 2-3 teachers in each of the settings, caring for a few children only. But we have only 3 teachers, sometimes 2 teachers in the afternoon, taking care of 14 children. Their ratios are beyond compare.*

*I also think the Western learning environments are extremely peaceful. It has to do with the manpower in the settings. The rooms are all well-staffed. The Western practices are also more humanistic and child-centred. The teachers do everything based on the children's*

*individual needs and interests. Very humanistic indeed. That is exactly what we have learnt from our teacher training. Take napping as an example. As shown in the U.K. film, when a boy did not feel like sleeping, the teacher let him leave the bed and play out of the sleeping area. This is entirely different from our practice. All our children have to stay in bed during nap time. We do not have adequate staff to look after children who do not sleep and do something else.*

*I marvel that the British children could have their meals outdoor sitting on a mat! It is all about manpower and ratio again. We cannot have a janitor [support staff] to be with us all the time and look after toddlers' eating outdoors. This is possible when there are few children, so that teachers can take care of them all. But we need the help from janitors when there is a large group of children. Our janitors usually stay close to the kitchen for washing dishes and cleaning. And they need to finish their lunch by a certain time. Our schedule is tight. Every task is timed. Therefore, it is not quite possible to eat whenever and wherever we or the children want.*

*(Researcher) Do you think you would do these (e.g., taking children outdoor for meals, allowing children to play somewhere else during nap time) if the ratio could be improved?*

*Definitely! We did better these few days when there were a few*

*absentees. We had just 12 children. Our room became much more peaceful and quieter. We were elegant ladies in these four days!*

One practitioner specifically noted the negative consequences of large groups for children's psychological well-being:

*When placed in a large group rushing through a rigid schedule, children might feel uneasy, uptight, and become emotional because of the busyness of the 'school' life. When every activity or task needs to be done in haste, children's wellbeing and development is likely to be compromised.*

The practitioners also discussed the inadequate attention given to each individual child in large groups:

*I observe lots of independent learning by individual children in the U.S. setting. Such as silent reading on one's own, playing and exploring the sensory table alone or with a few other children. The individual needs and interests of the children are respected. In contrast, our activities are mostly planned and conducted in larger groups. All the children are engaged in the same activities or learning tasks together. We are always in a team. It is all about child-teacher ratio again.*

*A bit of cultural influence is at work here. The Hong Kong education system emphasises the teaching of rules, disciplines, manners, and norms. But the Western culture allows more freedom compared to ours. Of course, it is also related to our large child-teacher ratio. We do not have enough adults to cater for each individual child. Given our limited human resources, what we can do with such a large group is to engage all children in the same activities. We cannot afford to follow the individual interests of each of our 14 children.*

### Parents

Surprisingly, the views from Hong Kong parents on desirable group sizes and child-to-adult ratios in infant-toddler settings differed from the practitioners' views. Parents noticed the influence



of child-adult ratios on the learning environments:

*I think the British setting is a bit quiet. All the teachers and children are very calm and well-mannered. Perhaps it is because the ratio of children to teachers is very low.*

One parent concurred, but preferred larger groups with more teacher-child interaction:

*I agree with him. To me, the environment in the British setting is a bit too quiet. Not much interaction between the children and teachers. Perhaps too quiet for us.*

While a few parents claimed that a child-adult ratio of 3:1 is good, one father shared his position on group size and ratio, highlighting that “too much care” can be problematic:

*A group size of 20 is definitely too large. But I feel that a group of 6 children or less is too small. If the group size and ratio is too small, there would be too much care. That is teachers care for children too much. Take my daughter as an example. She is very independent for we do not have a domestic helper at home. Sometimes we have no time for her. She then takes good care of herself. Hence there are both pros and cons for having a low child-to-teacher ratio. When the room is very well-staffed with many adults, children tend to become dependent. When there is less care from adults, children would then learn to be tough and strong in caring for themselves.*

Another parent expressed her alternate views on the impact of group size on children’s development of social skills:

*To me, group size is a separate concern from child-to-teacher ratio. Having a ratio of 3:1 is nice. It is even better if we could have this ratio while also having a larger group size because children could have more peers for learning from one another. The learning atmosphere in a larger group is warmer. Just like the U.S. setting. The ratio is good, and the room is lively and joyful but not too chaotic. I would prefer a lower child-adult ratio but a larger group so that my child could meet more people, socialise, and get along well with other children. After all, that is the primary reason of enrolling her in a toddler class - to learn to live and work harmoniously with others in a group. My daughter is the only child in the family. I want her to have more friends early on, rather than being isolated at home and spoiled by her grandparents.*



The parents’ desire for a larger group size for nurturing children’s social development was reminiscent of a breakfast scene in the Hong Kong footage. This scene has been described in Cooper et al. (2022) and captures a parent’s perspective:

*Lydia was given her meal bag to start her breakfast at the meal table. Supported by Miss Ho, Lydia was learning to untie her meal bag, retrieve her towel and cutlery items, and place them tidily on the table for her first meal. Realising that Lydia was not wearing a bib, Miss Ho went and fetched one for her. Lydia looked around and found that Tiffany was not wearing a bib either. She asked Miss Ho if she could fetch one more bib for Tiffany. Lydia continued to look around to ensure that everyone in the group was well-prepared to start the breakfast (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 18).*

### Reconsidering Structural Qualities Through a Cultural Lens

This study revealed contrasting views on desirable group sizes and child-to-adult ratios in infant-toddler group settings from ECCE practitioners and parents in Hong Kong. The practitioners working in infant-toddler groups clearly preferred smaller group sizes and ratios, whereas parents would rather choose a larger group for their child. Despite their different positions on group sizes and ratios, cultural influence is evident in relation to both voices. The infant-toddler practitioners’ concern over maintaining a peaceful and orderly learning environment was a recurring



*A more experienced practitioner added that the practices in Hong Kong infant-toddler settings were also shaped by cultural values: This scene seems to illustrate the benefit of engaging in a large group from the parents' perspective—Lydia has developed an awareness of others in the group. She cared for others' needs and actively offered to help others. The Hong Kong parents preferred a larger-sized group for this creates more favourable circumstances for social learning.*

theme in our focus-group discussion. We argue that the Hong Kong practitioners' notions may be driven by traditional Confucian culture that an ideal society is one in which everyone knows his or her place in the social hierarchy and plays his or her part well, thus achieving social harmony (Rao et al., 2009; Rao & Sun, 2017). With this cultural ideal in mind, it is understandable that Hong Kong practitioners favour smaller group sizes and ratios as a smaller, well-staffed group is usually more manageable (Chan, 2019).

Interestingly, this study uncovered a unique perspective from parents from Hong Kong. The local parents seem to value a large peer group in infant-toddler settings, which is consistent with the observations from McMullen et al. (2005) and Kim (2001) in relation to ECE settings from Confucian-heritage cultures, and consider large-sized groups a fertile ground for children's social development. Apparently, Hong Kong parents are influenced by collectivist cultural values, hoping that their child will develop harmonious relationships with other members of the group

early in development. In a collectivist society, a good citizen is one who is generous, helpful, and attentive to the needs of others and the interests of the group (Yim et al., 2011). Parents in Hong Kong favoured large-group environments in infant-toddler settings to support their children's development as good citizens.

### Conclusion

The present study is important in bringing culture to the foreground when considering group sizes and child-to-adult ratios desirable for infants and toddlers in group settings. This study's multivocal findings also suggest different positions on group sizes and ratios from infant-toddler practitioners and parents, revealing potential friction in delivering and understanding quality care and education for very young children.

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# Contradictions in care: What kind of care counts in early childhood education and care?



By Dr Kiri Gould

(peer reviewed)

*Caring for young children, especially infants and toddlers, involves a high level of emotional regulation and is a complex relational and intellectual process (Taggart, 2016).*

Caring for infants and toddlers involves more body work (work on the body of others) than other age groups. Holding, soothing, dressing, and wiping children's bodies are daily realities for infant and toddler teachers (Peters et al., 2020). While there is little argument that teachers need to be caring, bringing attention to corporeal care practices in their work can be a source of tension because of the lack of professional recognition afforded to such activities. This article draws on a research project that explored how early childhood teachers in Aotearoa construct their professional identities. The findings illuminated inconsistent, contradictory, and political engagements with notions of care that impacted how teachers claimed care as a part of their professional identities. Care, particularly that related to children's bodies, was not well recognised as a legitimate form of professional knowledge. The undervaluing of care work materialised in teachers' relationships with each other and their status and work conditions. The findings suggest the status of early childhood teachers can be measured by their distance from children's bodies. How we conceptualise care matters for teachers' professional recognition and understanding of their work. Considering these findings, I argue the need for urgent sector dialogue about the nature, value, and status of all care work, including that relating to children's bodies.

## Discourses of Care in ECEC

Having a caring disposition is consistently identified by teachers and families as a crucial element of effective teaching practice (Brooker, 2016; Davis & Degotardi, 2015). However, the ways in which care influences teacher identities and understandings of professionalism

are complex. Different perspectives on care offer teachers diverse ways to understand themselves and their work; leading Barnes (2019) to assert that "care is both an opportunity and a danger in relation to work with young children" (p. 18). Tensions in how care is positioned in early childhood education and care (ECEC) are evidenced in a growing body of literature that critically examines care and calls for a transformation in how it is situated in early childhood practice (Langford, 2019). The previous edition of *The First Years Ngā Tau Tautahi* (Volume 23, Issue 2), for example, was a special edition focusing on issues of care. Literature has focused on the potential for care work to be gendered, essentialised, and exploitative (Ailwood, 2017; Andrew, 2015; Langford, 2006; Rosen, 2019) and has argued for the place of care in pedagogical activity (Noddings, 2013; Taggart, 2019), understandings of professionalism (Osgood, 2012), and in institutional decision making (Sevenhuijsen, 1998). Some key themes from the literature attending to issues of care in ECEC are outlined here because they provide important ways to understand and problematise the research findings reported later.

Maternal discourse construes women as instinctively and selflessly devoted to children's care and emotional wellbeing, connected to their biological capacity to give birth (DiQuinzo, 2005). The essentialising impact of maternal discourse in ECEC has been described by Langford (2006) as deeply embedded and "historically tenacious" (p. 120) and by Ailwood (2007) as "difficult and contradictory" (p. 162). The challenges of maternal discourse for the sector have been a long-standing focus of the literature (Ailwood, 2017; Langford et al., 2017; Moss, 2006; Rockel, 2009).

Scholars have mapped the ways in which teaching and mothering have been persistently linked to ECEC teaching work, including in foundational ECEC theories, perpetuating the image of the loving mother as the personification of the ideal ECEC teacher (Ailwood, 2017; Aslanian, 2015; Van Laere et al., 2014). While maternal discourse has offered women an avenue to create careers in care work, such as nursing and teaching, it also embeds essentialist notions of care that negate more complex understandings of care as skilled, intellectual, and affective.

Osgood (2012) sees the tension between care and professionalism that plagues ECEC as a gender issue rooted in the history and politics of the sector:

*As a highly gendered employment sector strongly associated with the realms of caring and nurturance, [ECEC] becomes understood as lacking in professionalism precisely because it is deemed hyper-feminine. (p. 120)*

Osgood (2012) and others suggest that understandings of care in ECEC need to be disconnected from maternal discourse and reconceptualised as integral to the complex work that ECEC teachers do. Central to this challenge is recognising how current understandings of professionalism may be conceptualised through traditional ideas that emphasise qualifications and specialist knowledge but overlook how relational and affective elements also contribute to what it means to be professional.

An important aspect to achieving a better recognition of care is to reveal and resist a neoliberal positioning of care and its relationship to education. Bartlett (2006) argues that care work can be treated with hostility under neoliberal systems that elevate individualism and position vulnerability and dependency as moral failings or phases to be moved through as quickly as possible. In ECEC, this manifests in the construction of a hierarchy between care and education that Van Laere et al. (2014) refer to as a mind/body dualism. Within this hierarchy, care is narrowly defined as primarily related to the body (as corporeal and emotional labour)

whilst understandings of education are established separately, as about the mind. Care is positioned as prerequisite and subordinate to education, with negative implications for the recognition of teachers for whom care work is a visible aspect of their day-to-day activities (Andrew, 2015; Fenech et al., 2010). In Aotearoa, the dichotomy between care and education was resolved at a structural level when all early childhood services moved to the auspices of the Department of Education in 1986. Internationally this was considered a progressive move—a significant step towards dismantling the two-tiered systems of kindergarten and childcare (Moss, 2006). However, as this research reveals, historical, political, and contextual nuances continue to implicate the role of care in teacher identities.

The challenges of conceptualising and counting care in teachers' work is an ongoing theme in the literature that calls for new understandings and spaces for care in teachers' work. In Aotearoa, Warren's (2021) work in exploring care from posthuman perspectives is an important contribution to this project. Feminist ethics of care are also frequently pointed to as a way forward. Feminist ethics of care, attending to the caring experiences of women and their contributions to the public realm, are constructed on notions of interdependence, and acknowledge that we are all, to different degrees, dependent of the attention and care of others. The work of Noddings (2013) has been influential to the call for a better valuing of care in the work of teachers. Noddings positions care as foundational to teachers' moral and ethical work and to understanding pedagogical activity for all stages of education. Noddings' proposal that the purpose of education is to produce "better people" elevates both political and relational engagements with care as underpinning teaching work. Her work has been picked up and developed by ECEC scholars (Langford & White, 2019; Taggart, 2016) who see the potential of ethics of care to reframe how we organise the institutional care of children and construct the work of teachers.

Taggart (2021) notes the resonances between messages in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) and feminist ethics of care. Indeed, *Te Whāriki* promotes understandings of practice and pedagogy grounded in notions of interdependence, reciprocity, wellbeing, and relationships. *Te Whāriki* is a significant discursive resource for teachers that may help them to contest the bifurcation of care and education and elevate the relational aspects of care as making meaningful contributions to children's wellbeing and learning. However, the findings outlined below trouble the idea that attention to *Te Whāriki* is enough to resolve issues of care in ECEC.

### Overview of the Research—Aim and Design.

The overall aim of the research was to explore how early childhood teachers understand and construct their professional identities in the current contexts of early childhood education and care (ECEC). In Aotearoa, the early childhood landscape is complex and characterised by the diversity of providers. Teachers work in a wide range of centres with diverse histories, philosophies, and organisational structures, serving different communities. Government attention to ECEC over the last three decades has brought high levels of regulation and accountability, rapid professionalisation, and wide-scale expansion. There is also growing recognition of issues with teacher wellbeing and work conditions that require urgent conversation and action. I wanted to understand how this complexity shapes teachers' work, relationships with others, and commitments and priorities. These ideas are encompassed in teacher identities and led to the overarching research question for the project: How do EC teachers understand and construct their identities?

The findings discussed here come from this more extensive research project that included policy analysis, focus groups with early childhood (EC) teachers, and individual interviews with EC centre leaders, managers, owners, and initial teacher educators. The article

draws on the findings from focus groups and interviews in which participant narratives touched on care themes. The focus groups were with qualified, practising early childhood teachers from across the sector, including kindergartens, community-based, and privately-owned EC centres. Two groups of four qualified teachers (n=8) participated in two focus groups each. The purpose of these was to provide an opportunity for teachers from different contexts to come together to talk about the experience of being an EC teacher in Aotearoa. Two small groups were chosen to allow for in-depth discussion between participants and for individual, shared, and conflicting accounts of being a teacher to emerge. The dynamics of multiple voices and perspectives in these conversations generated insights that would not have been accessible otherwise. For example, conversations between kindergarten teachers and teachers working with infants and toddlers generated discussion about the differing visibility of care work in different contexts and different feelings of professional recognition between teachers as a result.

The research also included semi-structured individual interviews with 13 centre leaders, managers, and owners from different types of EC services. Previous research has indicated that teachers' experiences in diverse types of services contribute to how they experience professionalism, but the influence of service type on teacher identity has not been well attended to in research from Aotearoa. Seeking the voices of those who have a significant influence on the organisational culture and arrangements of a centre was an attempt to address this and revealed differences in how this group of participants understood the place and value of care in ECEC. For example, positioning the care of infants and toddlers as something anyone with "good maternal instinct" can do allowed some centre owners to justify the employment of unqualified infant toddler teachers.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with five initial teacher educators. Initial teacher education

significantly influences how teachers understand their work and what it means to be professional. In addition, teacher educators are uniquely positioned to observe the sector while not being wholly immersed in it. In this research, teacher educators focused on the discourse and practices of *Te Whāriki*, leading them to elevate some care practices while ignoring others.

### **Identities, Discourse, and Critical Discourse Analysis**

The concept of discourse provided a theoretical framework for examining how ECEC teachers construct their identities. Gee (2018) defines identities as "a way of being in the world connected to special ways of doing and knowing" (p. 76). These special ways of doing and knowing are significantly influenced by discourse. Discourses are historically and contextually specific ways of talking about and representing the world—they reflect and create meaning (MacNaughton, 2005). There are multiple competing and sometimes contradictory discourses about ECEC, teachers, and teaching—providing many ways to be a teacher (Moss, 2006). Discourses are productive in that they contribute to shaping understandings, thoughts, values, ideas, and relationships that constitute teacher identities. They are also regulatory; framing how to think, feel, say, understand, and practise in order to be recognised as a teacher (Rogers, 2011). Gee (2018) argues that discourses are connected to identities and social goods, such as professional recognition. He suggests that identities and discourses are opposite sides of the same coin: "Identity is someone enacting a discourse, and discourse is a historical process and set way with words, deeds, and things that allow people to enact socially recognisable identities" (p. 132). Teachers negotiate their identities by taking up, resisting, or innovating a position in response to discourse and can construct dynamic, multiple, and even opposing identities (Gee, 2014). Identities are also established through processes of inclusion and exclusion, forming some ways of being, acting, and representing

teachers as the "norm" in opposition or contrast to others. The strategic navigation of discourses and identities was evident in this research through the ways in which care was (dis)counted as contributing to professionalism in participant narratives.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is concerned with exposing the critical effects of discourse and contributing to change (Locke, 2005). In CDA research, discourse is understood to be a major locus of ideology (Vaara, 2015) that contributes to social relations, including the ways in which social goods, such as professional recognition and status, are distributed (Gee, 2011). This research used CDA to "render the norms and hierarchies of discourses visible" (Chan & Ritchie, 2020, p. 225) to disrupt power relations and open multiple, and more inclusive, ways of being a teacher. In this article, I focus on the discourses of care evident in the participant narratives. I examine these for what they say and do in relation to being a teacher and constructing teacher identities. To do this, I analysed the focus group and interview transcripts drawing on Gee's (2014) concept of language-building tasks. According to Gee (2014), language is used to build meaning in the world, including identities, and he proposes seven building tasks that represent seven ways this occurs. Each building task has an associated critical question that provides a different entry point to examine how participants' narratives may work to privilege some understandings, practices, and identities, and to marginalise others. The seven building tasks and associated questions are represented in Table 1. Gee (2014) likens the use of these to "reverse engineering". Each tool was used to help "take apart" the narratives, examine their function and meaning making process carefully, and think about their effects on teacher identities.

(See Table 1)

**Table 1****Gee's (2014) seven building tools for CDA**

Significance Tool	How does this piece of language make certain things significant (or not) and in what ways?
Practices Tool	What practices or activities is this piece of language being used to enact? How are these practices normalised by social groups or institutions?
Identities Tool	What identity or identities is this piece of language being used to enact or seeking to enact for others?
Relationships Tool	What sort of relationship or relationships is this piece of language seeking to enact with others?
Politics Tool	What perspective on social goods is this piece of language communicating?
Connections Tool	How does this piece of language connect or disconnect things? How does it make one thing relevant or irrelevant to another?
Sign Systems and Knowledge Tool	How does this piece of language privilege or deprivilege specific ways of knowing and believing or claims to knowledge?

### Care and Teacher Identities

In this research, teachers' engagement with discourses of care was inconsistent and revealed the ongoing tensions involved in claiming care and being caring as important to understanding professionalism. Notions of empathy, compassion, kindness, care, and relationships were frequently called on across participant groups to describe the desirable attributes of teachers. Listening, being present, understanding, and building relationships were key teaching practices for teachers and teacher educators. Care was also mobilised as a concept to represent working with infants and toddlers as a natural ability that did not require any professional knowledge and expertise, and sometimes as an inconvenient prerequisite or disruption to learning. Participants demonstrated an awareness that representing their work in educational terms afforded them more status even when they desired a better valuing of their care practices. In addition, what counted as care in participants' talk was not unanimous. Participants frequently elevated the importance of relationships to good practice, bolstered by the relational discourses of *Te Whāriki*, but in ways that disconnected relational practices from understandings of care. Corporeal aspects of care, such as nappy changing, were marginalised, suggesting that

some care practices are more valued than others. These complexities in the positioning of care influence how teachers negotiate their identities in different ECEC contexts.

***"She shows a natural instinct for children—she is a mother herself" (Mary, centre manager)***

Maternal discourse featured in participant narratives in contradictory ways. When asked about their choice to be an early childhood teacher, participants frequently made positive connections between their work in ECEC and their identities as mothers. For many participants, motherhood provided their initial entrance into the sector. Georgia, for example, talked about helping at her daughter's preschool as being "the happiest time of my week", leading her to believe that "early childhood would be my place." It was clear that maternal discourse contributed to the career and employment opportunities for many of the women in this research, including some centre owners, whose interest in ECEC grew from their experiences of being a mother. Such pervasive narratives reinforce perceptions about the proximity of ECEC teaching work to mothering, and connect mothering experience with skills and dispositions needed to be a good teacher.

Maternal discourse also contributes to critical political issues, such as the value of a fully qualified sector. Maternal discourse was drawn on repeatedly in centre leader interviews in relation to infant and toddler teachers, and was used to create a space in which they could marginalise the value of professional qualifications:

*People think you need to be a qualified teacher [to work with infants and toddlers], and I disagree with that...I also have a lot of unqualified teachers who are absolutely awesome. Who don't have a piece of paper but have a fabulous attitude, have a natural ability with children. They are usually...mothers, some grandmothers amongst them as well. (Barb, centre owner)*

Tom (teacher) spoke about the professional insecurity caused by such attitudes, which he saw as pervasive in infant and toddler care, enabled by fluctuations in qualification requirements in the sector. Tom asked, "Was it [reducing qualification requirements] to keep it at the level where taking care of young children is [seen as] just taking care of kids? There is no value to it?" Further, Tom connects the undervaluing of care labour to the potential exploitation of the ECEC workforce, asking, "Has it been purposely like that to keep workers on low wages?"

The exploitative potential of undervaluing care was evident in participant narratives about the organisational arrangements and work conditions of some ECEC contexts. In these contexts, care work was viewed as an unskilled chore to be completed as efficiently as possible, and a potentially wasteful use of qualified teachers' time. Aadila described her work in one such centre as "caretaking, not caregiving", a phrase that evokes images of janitorial work. Her descriptions of her day reveal a routine dominated by the clock and repetitive, unfulfilling work tasks. For instance, she describes prescribed times for group nappy changing as:

*Just one after the other. Bring the child. Change. Back out. Bring the child. Like a factory...and also I was told...just use three wipes maximum, and I was questioned [about] why I was using more.*



It is not difficult to imagine how children experience routines that seem hostile to their dependence on adults for sensitive care. Unsurprisingly, Aadila did not last long in this context and went on to find a centre that “better valued my work”. Aadila’s experience sheds some light on issues with teacher turnover in the sector and suggests that more caring organisational arrangements should be part of the solution for teachers and children. The different narratives of Tom, Barb, and Aadila point to the possible consequences of undervaluing care labour in understandings of professional knowledge, which can make it difficult for teachers to defend their professionalism and to argue for better wages and work conditions (Andrew, 2015).

**“I have to change a nappy every now and then—but it’s not my core business” (Tom, teacher)**

Contextual nuances in how teachers negotiate the experience of care in their work emerged from the findings. The headline quote comes from Tom again, in the same conversation about care. He was frustrated with how attitudes towards care undermined his professional recognition, saying, “We have been working hard to professionalise the sector, to show that education does to happen”. Aligned to this frustration, Tom chose to work in kindergarten because “It’s about education and not changing nappies.” In various parts of his narrative, Tom resisted the undervaluing of care, rejected care as a part of his teaching identity, and reaffirmed a hierarchy between care and education. Such contradictory discursive manoeuvres demonstrate the interplay and tensions inherent as teachers negotiate care in their identities.

Ideas about care are still foregrounded in how the sector distinguishes kindergarten from other ECEC services. Kindergarten teachers in the research frequently described their work in predominantly educational terms. For example, Christie (teacher) identified “professional conversations about learning, researching, and implementing new ideas” as key practices that defined her work in kindergarten. The

privileging of educational discourse and the invisibility of care work in relation to kindergarten was recognised, resisted, and perpetuated by participants who were aware of how this contributed to the different status of teachers in the sector. Tom and Christie both demonstrate how care may be minimised in definitions of professionalism in the context of kindergarten. In another example, Josie (centre owner) discussed how children are taken out of her EC centre when they turn 3 to go to kindergarten. She mused:

*Do you [parents] not realise that my teachers are qualified the same as those [kindergarten] teachers, and we teach the same curriculum! The only thing I can think of is that down there [at kindergarten], they’re not providing care. They are not sleeping and feeding them, they’re not changing nappies...so parents have the impression that it’s just teaching, whereas we aren’t just teaching!*

When they compared themselves to kindergarten teachers, some participants were both resentful of the differences in status and disdainful of the care practices and routines that were highly visible in their own work; kindergarten teachers were “lucky they just get to focus on learning” (Marama, teacher). For some participants, claiming an educational focus was seen as a privilege rather than an issue related to the undervaluing of care. Others contested the invisibility and undervaluing of care in kindergarten, such as Aadila, who protested “kindergarten teachers don’t know that nappies are a wonderful time to connect” and called for a better valuing of care across all ECEC contexts.

**“Teaching is about relationships—it’s a very Te Whāriki informed thing” (Tui, teacher educator)**

*Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) is embedded with messages about the importance of relationships to children’s learning and wellbeing. It is the key document that unifies a diverse sector and is influential in shaping what counts as valuable knowledge and practice. The relational and bicultural discourses in *Te Whāriki* were prevalent across all participant groups. Relational pedagogy

as a discourse and practice is evident in quotes such as from Georgia (teacher) that “building trusting relationships” is a key prerequisite to learning, and from Tom that “whakawhanaungatanga” and “building trusting relationships with tamariki” is important to “building a pathway for their education.” Relational discourse was especially evident in the narratives of teacher educators, such as Tui in the headline quote and Joelene, who felt that *Te Whāriki* provided a “shared philosophical intent” for the sector underpinned by a valuing of relationships. These findings closely mirror Warren’s (2014) research that identified the prevalence of a discourse of relational professionalism in which teachers were “committed to and skilled in maintaining warm, trusting and positive relationships” (p. 130). It is evident that *Te Whāriki* provides a vital opportunity to reconceptualise care as central to teaching work by making visible the ways in which good teaching practice involves sensitive ethical judgements embedded in daily practices and encounters between people in ECEC settings (Langford & White, 2019).

Given the prevalence of relational discourse in the findings, why did bringing attention to care practices still present such tension? One explanation might lie in the sector’s journey to professionalisation, during which teachers have needed to be more articulate about professional knowledge and skills. *Te Whāriki* has been a critical resource to this challenge. However, in the turn to relational pedagogies, the corporeal aspects of care have become discursively excluded from what counts as valued ECEC practice. This may have been intentional, supported in policy but also in teacher education and by teachers themselves as a strategy to avoid perpetuating maternal discourse and the historically low status of caring for children. However, the privileging of relational discourse and the marginalisation of other forms of care practice have led to a situation in which some kinds of care count more than others when claiming professional recognition, with profound consequences for the experiences of teachers and the children for whom they care.

## Confronting the (in)Visibility of Care

Two key challenges arise from the findings about how teachers navigate care discourses in their own identities. The first is the importance of confronting how the (In)visibility of care contributes to the uneven status of teachers across contexts. The findings reported here confirm Hochschild's (2012) contention that when care consists of "dirty bodywork" it is afforded less value and likely to be undertaken in more exploitative work arrangements. Rosen (2019) advocates for the conceptualisation of care in teachers' work that encompasses multifaceted and contradictory sets of care practices "inclusive of those that are affective, fulfilling, messy, menial and repetitive (p. 87)". Confronting hierarchies in how the ECEC sector values care opens spaces to consider other difficult conversations in ECEC, such as who gets assigned to care work, the conditions in which care work takes place, and how it is accorded status and value. Failing to have these conversations across the sector risks privileging teachers whose work is less associated with care work, and contributes to the undervaluing and potential exploitation of teachers whose work is.

The second is to find ways to consistently articulate how all forms of care are legitimate forms of professional knowledge and practice relevant in all ECEC contexts, and integral to children's wellbeing and learning. New conceptualisations must reject neoliberal ideals of individualism in which a reliance on care is seen as an inconvenient burden (Sevenhuijsen, 1998) and take up the challenge of care ethicists by insisting that all teaching is a form of ethical responsiveness situated in caring relationships. This position requires acknowledgement of the varying degrees to which we are all dependent on one another (Barnes, 2019). The findings reported here demonstrate that there is still work to do to understand how different facets of care are embedded in relations of power and inequity, to untangle care from maternal discourse, and to conceptualise a pedagogy and ethics of care that is inclusive of the corporeal and seen as fundamental to all teaching work.

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# Leadership in infant-toddler settings: Understandings and enactment



By Alice Chen Jia

(peer reviewed)

*What does leadership mean to teachers in the context of early childhood education (ECE)? How do infant-toddler teachers enact leadership in their daily teaching practice? Are there any differences between teachers' understandings and enactment of leadership? To address these questions, this article draws on research conducted for my master's degree, which explored infant and toddler teachers' understandings and enactment of leadership in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ).*

In this article, leadership in ECE is viewed less as an activity carried out by a single leader and more as a collective process involving different staff members. I describe my findings and implications for practice, which may inspire both leaders with designated titles and teachers with no designated titles in ECE to reflect on their understandings and enactment of leadership.

Leadership plays a significant role in ECE as it navigates early childhood teachers and leaders towards achieving high-quality education and care for children (Waniganayake et al., 2017). In *Te Whāriki*, the sections titled "Considerations for leadership, organisation and practice" at the end of each strand encourage teachers to reflect on their leadership enactment to improve learning outcomes for children (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017). Leadership is also one factor the Educational Review Office (ERO) has used to evaluate the quality of early childhood provision, including in infant-toddler settings. For example, ERO (2015) revealed a positive association between leadership and the responsiveness of centres after evaluating 235 ECE services for infants and toddlers. More recently, ERO's (2020) indicators of quality framework, *Te Ara Poutama*, emphasises the importance of leadership and highlights how teachers should implement infant and toddler pedagogy to create responsive curriculum consistent with *Te Whāriki*.

Yet, leadership in ECE is still an under-researched area, though emerging internationally and locally in NZ (Thornton, 2019). There are very few studies located so far that focus on the leadership of teachers of children up to age three. Understanding infant and toddler teachers' understand-

ings and enactment of leadership is an important area to address since the learning and development needs of infants and toddlers require a higher-level leadership of teachers (Rockel, 2014). Specifically, infants and toddlers need more sensitive relationships with teachers since they are less independent, both physically and emotionally, than older children (Cataldo, 1982). Meanwhile, infants and toddlers demand a different communication style with teachers than older children because of their emerging language and communication skills (Dalli et al., 2011). However, there is a scarcity of literature on infant and toddler teachers' leadership; a situation that can inhibit how these ideas are realised in practice in ECE settings. Accordingly, there is a pressing need to explore how infant and toddler teachers understand and enact leadership in their everyday practice.

## The Approach to the Study

The study employed an interpretive and qualitative approach to explore infant and toddler teachers' understandings and enactment of leadership. This means that the study was grounded in people's various and lived experience in different social situations (O'Donoghue, 2007).

Five infant and toddler teachers across two different ECE centres in Auckland, NZ were involved in this research. There were four teachers without a positional role (Ruby, Sophie, Tori, and Amber) and one teacher was a positional leader, the supervisor of the under 2 room, (Mandy). Pseudonym names are used here for confidentiality. Ruby and Sophie came from Centre One. Tori, Amber, and Mandy were from Centre Two. Both ECE centres were converted

houses with over 30 years operational history as profitable organisations. These five participants had different working experience with infants and toddlers, which contributed to the rich data gathering on their understandings and enactment of leadership.

Semi-structured interviews were the main method used to collect data in this study. Participants shared views regarding their own and others' leadership in their 45-minute individual interview. All interviews took place after participants' work hours. Three interviews were conducted outside participants' centres and one in the centre after the participant had completed her work shift. One interview was conducted online via Zoom due to safety concerns due to the newly found COVID-19 community cases at the time. A two-day observation was carried out on teachers concurrently in each centre as a supplementary method to explore how infant and toddler teachers enacted leadership in their daily practice. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data collected from these interviews and observations. One feature of thematic analysis is that it acknowledges both inductive and deductive methods for theme development (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Concerning the current study, the inductive approach was used first to interpret interview data to develop themes. Subsequently, the themes were used deductively to investigate whether the observation data corresponded to or contrasted with the interview themes.

Ethical considerations were considered throughout, from choosing the research topic to the final stage of publication and future use. Participants acted on their own willingness to participate in the study and were informed that they had the right to withdraw at any stage of the research. The time and place for interviews were discussed with participants to ensure that they felt safe and relaxed during their interview. Interviews were audio-recorded based on participants' consent. Participants were also provided an opportunity to check their interview transcripts to verify the accuracy of their words. Pseudonyms were used for participants

and participating centres to ensure the confidentiality of participants' identities.

## FINDINGS

Five themes were generated from the data. These themes included leadership as an inclusive term in ECE, formal and informal teacher leadership enactment, teachers' varying scope of decision-making, a culture of learning fosters teacher leadership, and leadership leads to positive change. For the purposes of this article, the first four themes are described and discussed.

### Leadership as an Inclusive Term in ECE

Teachers understood leadership as an inclusive term involving the sharing and designating responsibilities, identifying colleagues' strengths, sharing knowledge, and achieving shared goals. For example, Tori believed everyone could be leaders based on individual strengths, not designated titles:

*Anybody can be a leader; you don't need to have a title to be the leader. Different people can be leaders in different situations, depending on their strengths.*

Ruby highlighted that teachers needed to have a shared goal or vision, rather than simply sharing job responsibilities, in order to work together towards the same direction:

*It [leadership] is like everyone knows the role they are playing. They can be quite firm on what they are trying to pursue. We need to look into the centre philosophy, like we have the same vision, same understanding of the philosophy. It's quite important, so that we know that we are going in the same direction.*

Mandy pointed out that understanding her colleagues' strengths, and even their ineffective practice, helped her to lead the team towards overall growth:

*If they (team mates) have some issues, because you know they sometimes are not communicative, they don't like to communicate, they keep things to themselves, which is not good for the team. So it's just to build the team*

*spirit among team members, also [it is] the skill one should have as being a leader.*

Teachers' different understandings of leadership highlighted the complex nature of leadership in their settings. Leadership was viewed, not as the sole responsibility of positional leaders, but as a shared responsibility of everyone involved in the education and care of infants and toddlers.

### Formal and Informal Teacher Leadership Enactment

All participating teachers enacted either formal or informal leadership in their daily practice. On the one hand, room supervisor Mandy was quite positive about having a designated leader role to support everyday practice:

*Yes. I am the supervisor and I have to perform leadership on the daily basis. I have to make rosters; I have to manage staff; I have to [delegate] the duties to my colleagues; I have to tell them or check with them whether the learning stories are doing on time, you know, all those stuff.*

On the other hand, informal leadership was practised by teachers with no designated titles. For example, Tori drew on her background knowledge of health and safety to lead improvements in the way milk bottles were sterilised in her room.

*They used to sterilise bottles in the dishwasher before. Now, all the bottles are actually sterilised in the steriliser... You know, I am, accidentally created all the bottles having lids, and every bottle is labelled, has a lid on... I lead the changes.*

Nonetheless, the level of leadership enactment seemed to vary amongst the participants. In particular, confidence, or lack thereof, was found to be a key contributor. Both newly qualified teachers, Ruby and Amber, expressed separately during their individual interviews that they did not have much confidence in taking on the leadership responsibilities in the room due to having little teaching experience. For example, Ruby said:

*I kind of enact leadership. Like I said,*

*it is something I need to work on because I don't feel quite confident about what I am doing. When Sophie [as the more experienced teacher] is not in the room, I am the only qualified teacher in the room, even though I am new, I still need to take the responsibility [because] I am the only one. I mean, when someone else is not at the scene, kind of force me to do that. It's not out of my willing because I am still not confident about that.*

Informal leadership activities also involved teachers supporting their own professional growth. All participating teachers described their initiative for daily self-reflection and ongoing learning. Ruby said:

*To myself, it is more about self-motivation. I have an interest and passion in this job, teaching in the ECE. That also makes me stay alert for new things or things related to the field. Reflection is happening everyday. At the end of the day, I would think about things that happen during the day that I feel like I need to focus on. How well did I deal with it? What other strategies or things I can do to make it better.*

Participating teachers also took advantage of formal learning opportunities provided by their respective centres, such as professional development (PD) and internal evaluation projects, to enrich their professional knowledge.

Additionally, teachers' informal leadership actions included knowledge sharing. The most common way of knowledge sharing was identified by participants as daily conversations. For example, Sophie mentioned that she always felt inspired by "day-to-day conversations" with colleagues:

*Through day-to-day conversations, you know. When you are on the floor with other teachers, you talk about something that happened in your previous work that you can draw some experiences from that... And that's how we communicate ideas around. For me, most of my "Aha" moments come from working with other teachers on floor, more spontaneous.*

Amber's response was akin to Sophie's idea of spontaneous and "day-to-day" knowledge exchange. Amber mentioned:

*We share experiences and knowledge when we experience, like in different situations. Sometimes I have one question over one thing, then I just ask around. And a lot of our staff will do that.*

However, based on my few observations, opportunities for teachers to exchange knowledge and experiences with one another through dialogue on a daily basis were scarce. Firstly, teachers' communication during the day when they were with children was often brief, casual, and mostly focused on sharing facts about children's daily routines. Secondly, teachers in both centres were usually on their own during children's free play time, due to the teacher-child ratio and physical layout of the centre, which meant little time to interact with colleagues. For example, Sophie was the only teacher in the room when only 4 children attended, meeting the Ministry of Education's (2008) minimum teacher-child ratio of 1 adult to 5 children under 2. Moreover, the physical distance between teachers impeded their regular interactions and communication. For instance, during one observation, Amber was upstairs in the outside area reading books with 3 children, while another teacher was outside downstairs interacting with children in the sandpit. The physical distance did not seem to allow teachers to share knowledge easily via conversations across the day.

In summary, teachers' descriptions reflected their enactment of leadership as being both formal and informal, but in different degrees. Their dispositions like motivation (Tori and Mandy), confidence, and their level of experience (e.g., Tori—over 10 years, Ruby and Amber—newly qualified teachers) were found to influence their leadership enactment. Notably, some practical challenges that might inhibit teachers' ability to enact informal leadership actions were highlighted. One challenge involved the inability to regularly exchange knowledge through interaction and communication, due to the operating adult to child ratio and

the physical distance between teachers given the physical layout of the centre.

### Teachers' Varying Scope of Decision-Making

Despite some teachers expressing they were able to lead change in their rooms, many decisions made by teachers were limited to curriculum and children's daily routines, rather than anything broader than this. For example, Ruby explained that her decisions were limited to children's daily routines, not anything else:

*Quite little stuff, something is quite small I would say, like when it is a good time to open out the sandpit, or when it is the good time to have children to tidy up and get ready for that time. It is quite like a daily routine thing.*

In terms of having limited decision-making power, Tori expressed her sadness, disappointment, and feelings of powerlessness regarding the enrolment of infants into the centre. She noted that she had not received management support despite raising this tension with them, and that she felt she had no agency as the power of decision-making was beyond her reach. She elucidated:

*If it was up to me, I will not be enrolling two under 1s every week. We need spaces and just give us some time to know them. But this is something that I have no control over. Yes, I have no agency with that. So yes, it annoyed me but I cannot do anything about it. I only have to accept it and move on.*

The decision-making capacity of teachers, vital for leadership enactment, was mostly limited to their teaching roles with infants and toddlers. There was an evident tension in the views between teachers with and without designated leader titles regarding making broader decisions.

### A Culture of Learning Fosters Teacher Leadership

Professional growth of teachers' leadership was influenced by the centre culture. Sophie shared several ways her centre manager used to encourage knowledge sharing among colleagues in Centre One. For example,

she mentioned that each teacher had an online learning folder where they stored their reflections on workshops. Teachers had access to everyone's folders, which enabled them to see what opportunities others were taking up:

*The culture of the centre is learning and engaging. A lot of discussion, PD, online learnings led by the centre... Or we also have a folder in the drive, it has all PD you have done. So everyone has a folder like that. You can go and see what everyone else is doing.*

During one observation, Sophie's manager shared an article on head injury with all teachers in the centre and asked them to sign it when they had completed reading it. Being asked to read articles seemed to equip teachers with useful knowledge to deal with situations independently, contributing to their leadership growth.

Tori, from Centre Two, expressed her regret for the insufficient learning resources in her centre, especially compared with her previous working centre:

*I loved working in that centre. As a member of that centre, I had access to all those academic online collections, articles and everything. It was a huge world of knowledge that was open. But now, we even don't have a little library here for teachers.*

In Centre Two, positional leaders' support for teachers' learning was not apparent. In one case, Mandy, who was working with Tori as the supervisor of the infant and toddler room, described how she had shared knowledge with her colleagues during professional learning situations:

*When I do the workshops and PD, I make sure I share that knowledge with my colleagues. So I just put one copy for my room and tell them, look, there are copies of the workshop, whoever is interested, you can go and have a read.*

There seemed to be no reported follow-up actions from positional leaders after sharing copies of the workshop. Rather, knowledge acquisition, as informal leadership actions, in this

case, therefore, depended on teachers' motivation alone.

## DISCUSSION

### Leadership: A Complex and Inclusive Concept

Infant and toddler teachers' multi-faceted understandings of leadership reflect its complex nature. This complex nature requires ECE teachers to view leadership as both an individual *and* a joint effort since cooperation, sharing, inclusion, and empowerment are foci of successful leadership (Rodd, 2013). Irrespective of their titles, teachers in this study believed they could take the lead based on contributing their individual strengths to teamwork and working in collaboration with others. This finding signals teachers' willingness to be seen as leaders, which has not always been the case in ECE (Cooper, 2014). It also indicates the need for positional leaders to give more consideration to teachers' engagement in collaborative forms of leadership alongside them (Waniganayake et al., 2017).

The complexity and inclusiveness of leadership in ECE open up wider venues for teachers to enact leadership. Teachers' motivation and confidence were found to be important influencing factors on teachers' enactment of leadership in this study. Teachers revealed that it was their motivation that kept them in continuous learning, in addition to supporting the learning of infants and toddlers, and their colleagues. Similarly, Hunzicker (2017) identified that motivation to support students' learning and colleagues' teaching and learning is what distinguishes teacher leaders from teachers. Hence, the significance of motivation in teachers' enactment of leadership extends to the context of ECE since Hunzicker's study was implemented in the school context.

Confidence was another influencing factor on the level of teachers' leadership enactment. This factor was reflected in the views of newly qualified teachers in the study. It is believed that novice teachers find it difficult to enact formal leadership effectively because of their lack of knowledge of leadership and support (Thornton, 2019). They often

need more time to understand their job responsibilities and expectations before accepting a formal leadership role (Waniganayake et al., 2017). This study suggests novice teachers need more time to improve their confidence and accumulate working experience to enact informal leadership at a higher level, let alone to take on a formal leadership role. Therefore, ECE teachers are encouraged to reflect on strengthening their confidence to take on leadership responsibilities in their working environment.

### Daily Dialogue: A Common way to Exchange Knowledge

Sharing knowledge in both formal and informal ways was highlighted by teachers as a crucial component of leadership. In particular, teachers considered daily dialogue as the most common method to share their knowledge and generate new ideas, in contrast to formal occasions like staff meetings. Knowledge sharing through relational dialogue, which constitutes meaningful conversations about initiatives and goals for transforming practice, is one way for infant and toddler teaching teams to enact leadership (Cooper, 2018). Dialogue and conversation are considered as leadership dialogue when mutual learning occurs and everyone's views on the topic are included (Drath, 2001).

However, according to the notion of leadership dialogue (Cooper, 2018; Drath, 2001), most dialogues among teachers when they were teaching during the observation were not leadership dialogues. Teachers' talk, such as: "Can you help change the child's nappy?" and "Please make [child] a bottle with 100ml milk" did not extend discussions, reflection, or inspire new learning. It is, however, possible that more substantive dialogues occurred at other times when I was not observing. There are two possible reasons that impeded these teachers from engaging in relational dialogue as they worked together. The first inhibitor relates to the teacher-child ratio. The minimum ratio for children under 2 years is 1 adult: 5 children according to the Ministry of Education's regulations, which ensures high-quality ECE through dedicated

adults' attention to infants and toddlers (MoE, 2008). When teachers were left alone in the room due to ratio requirements, it is understandable that they did not have opportunities to initiate conversations with other teachers or engage at a higher level in relational dialogue.

Another factor that hindered the occurrence of professional dialogues between teachers during their working day was the physical set up of the space and distance between teachers. It is important to note that the two participating centres in this study were converted houses that were repurposed as early childhood centres which can make it difficult for teachers to come together to engage in communication (Waniganayake et al., 2017). Accordingly, teachers may work in collaboration to adjust the inside and outside layout by moving furniture or setting group activities to make it physically easier for them to initiate dialogue without interfering with supervision of and engagement with children. Nonetheless, whether relational dialogue would be easier in purpose built ECE centres requires further exploration.

### **Teachers' Informal Leadership Relies on Support from Positional Leaders**

Positional leaders were found to play a crucial role in supporting the emergence of teachers' informal leadership. Creating a learning-focused atmosphere, which was evident in Centre One, promoted the enactment of teachers' leadership through developing pedagogical knowledge and exchanging knowledge with one another. This idea aligns with Denee and Thornton's (2018) finding that positional leaders in effective settings provide opportunities for teachers to enact leadership by creating a supportive culture that includes PD opportunities. Moreover, a collegial

learning environment is a necessity due to the collaborative nature of ECE settings because teachers often work in the same physical area and may interact with each other frequently through their practice (Thornton & Cherrington, 2019). Hence, positional leaders in ECE could reflect on how to provide platforms for teachers to engage in inquiry, learning and knowledge sharing to meet their learning needs and leadership development.

Positional leaders can also support teachers' leadership by affording teachers agency and involving them in decisions regarding centre-wide matters. The decision-making capacity of teachers is a crucial component of teacher leadership, which influences how teachers view themselves as leaders (Cooper, 2014). In this study, teachers were able to make decisions, but these were limited to children's care routines and resulted in a tension in views regarding infants' enrolment between teachers with and without designated titles. One possible reason for this tension was their different views and understanding regarding enrolment. The teacher's leadership idea regarding enrolling children was based on forming relationships with new children, which reflected the desire to "deliberately keep places vacant by staggering enrolments over a few weeks" (Waniganayake et al., 2017, p. 251). While her manager likely justified her enrolment decisions in relation to the centre's finances, which is common for leaders who are responsible for this aspect. However, it is important for positional leaders to find a solution that keeps the centre running while supporting teachers in settling children, especially infants and toddlers, in the long run (Waniganayake et al., 2017). This situation implies that more may need to be done by positional leaders in reality to effectively solve practice-related tensions with teacher colleagues.

### **Conclusion and Reflective Questions**

Leadership in ECE is complex and can be enacted in various ways by different people in different working environments. The complexity and versatility of leadership, therefore, can be seen as an opportunity, rather than a barrier, for teachers to enact leadership using different approaches to suit various contexts (Cooper, 2014). Only with positional leaders' support can teachers' leadership potential and practice grow and flourish.

#### **Reflective questions for teachers without designated titles:**

- Can my daily dialogue be seen as leadership dialogue? How can I create more opportunities to engage in leadership dialogue?
- What decisions can I make other than curriculum related decisions? What obstacles do I encounter in making wider decisions?

#### **Reflective questions for positional leaders:**

- Is my leadership effective? How do I seek teachers' suggestions and feedback regularly?
- How do I recognise and support teachers' emerging leadership?

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# “Why does Froebel matter in the 21st century?”: A response inspired by 1-year-olds in four countries



By Dr Maria Cooper

*Why does Froebel matter in the 21st century? This was the provocation a panel of eight international researchers, including myself, were invited to respond to, for a webinar organised by the Froebel Trust, London. Each speaker had previously contributed to a special issue of Global Education Review on “Finding Froebel: National and cross-national pedagogical paths in Froebelian early childhood education”.*

Since 2018, I have been involved in a cross-national research project exploring pedagogies of care with 1-year-olds from a Froebelian perspective in four countries: Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ), the USA, Hong Kong, and England. Although I was aware of Froebel, and his enduring legacy of kindergartens in NZ before the project, I admit I had not given the same level of thought to the potential relevance of his principled ideas to pedagogy with infants and toddlers. It was, therefore, a humbling experience to be sitting amongst other researchers inspired by Froebelian philosophy to share my newfound thoughts. I did not, however, enter the dialogue as an individual. The collective wisdom of our research team including Jean Rockel (NZ), Dr Mary Benson McMullen (USA), Dr Carrey Siu (Hong Kong) and Dr Sacha Powell (England), had influenced my developing understandings of Froebel’s philosophy of education over the last four years. Their thinking was very much woven into the ideas that I shared.

## Who was Friederich Froebel?

Friedrich Wilhelm August Froebel, the founder of kindergartens, was born 21 April 1782 in Germany as the youngest of six children. His mother died when he was just 10 months old. His father, a strict Lutheran pastor, remarried. His new wife was loving towards Froebel until the birth of her first child, at which point she rejected him. The rejection from his father and step-mother led Froebel to spend much of his time in the garden and attic. Then at age 10, he went to live with his uncle in the countryside, who was more loving than his father had been and had recently lost his own wife and son. This arrangement provided a warm and loving home for

Froebel, which contrasted with the unfortunate family life he had come from.

After five years living with his Uncle, Froebel had developed a deep love of nature and also enjoyed mathematics. He pursued an education in botany and maths, choosing to see these subjects as integrated rather than separate and unconnected. He later became a teacher and visited Pestalozzi’s training school in Switzerland. Froebel came to admire the work of Pestalozzi.

However, he realised his ideas about children were not the same. As Bruce (2021) explains: “Froebel focused on the potential that he saw in children, especially the young children. Pestalozzi, he felt, saw them as they were at the time, rather than seeing what they might become. [...]. This led him to see life (with education being a part of life) as a process of becoming, so that change was embedded in living” (p. 4). These experiences and insights formed the beginnings of Froebel’s philosophy of education.

**Note:** This brief historical overview is informed by Tina Bruce’s (2021) book *Friedrich Froebel: A critical introduction to key themes and debates*, which I highly recommend for a succinct, critical exploration of Froebel’s life and work.

## Why does Froebel Matter in the 21st Century

The two ideas of Froebel’s that I shared during the webinar focused on the period of infancy. They were inspired by what our research team had learned from the 1-year-olds in our international project:

First, at a time when infants were seen as innocent blank slates, Froebel's ideas about very young children were radical, daring, and transformational. Froebelian philosophy positions infants not as passive bystanders but as active, relational, and connected beings who can contribute to their own lives and the lives of others. This strengths-based image of the infant reveals Froebel's moral commitment to infancy and the first years, which suggested to us an honouring of "babyhood" in its own right.

This strengths-based image also aligns with the early childhood curriculum of NZ, *Te Whāriki*, and its Māori indigenous view that all children are born with *mana*, a sense of spiritual power and prestige. The teacher's role here is to nurture and protect this *mana* by prioritising each child's connections with people, places, and things *from birth* (Ministry of Education, 2017). Froebel's "following and guiding" teacher takes on a similar role in nurturing children's spirituality and connectedness in their lives from birth. We believe that infants can be more autonomous, agentic, and valued when the teachers they become connected with learn to slow down, reflect on and think with others about the significance of Froebelian philosophy for their localised pedagogies of care. This potential gain for infants is reason enough for why Froebel matters.

Second, Froebel's ideas underpin what it means to be human. Likely driven by his own unfortunate childhood experiences, Froebel's work encourages a closeness and reciprocity between adult and child. This idea needs to be enduring in this constantly changing world. A return to his ideas reminds us of what makes us human, our relationality—the idea that who we are and what we do is always in relation to another. So, in caring for the infant, Froebelian philosophy motivates us to care for and about them while looking out for and taking care of their relationships with others.

Moreover, Froebel's holistic view of the child as one part of a much bigger whole, reflective of unity, reminds us to pay attention to the child-in-context. Honouring the whole child in this way means recognising the social and cultural conditions in which children are immersed from birth. It also requires us to trust that with gentle guidance, even infants can garner the support they need from those around them. The 1-year-olds in our project showed us this developing competence in the outdoors, in the playroom, and even on the nappy change table. In essence, Froebelian philosophy prompts us to think about what binds us together as a human race and to never take our relationships for granted. These ideas, for us, are why Froebel matters.

### The Froebel Trust, London

The opportunity to share our international project's responses with 300+ webinar attendees came from the Froebel Trust, London. Led by Dr Sacha Powell, chief executive officer, and a dedicated team of trustees and committee members, the Froebel Trust is a grant-making charity that aims to ensure Froebel's philosophy of education is "recognised, understood, valued and practised across the early childhood sector for the benefit of young children" (Froebel Trust, 2022). The Trust funds research and practice development focused on early childhood education and care. It uses the outcomes of the projects to advance knowledge and understanding of Froebelian education and learning. The resources, growing webinar library, Froebelian principles, and other relevant information housed on their website reflect ways the Froebel Trust, researchers, and educators are working collectively to reclaim and revitalise Froebel's ideas for contemporary practice.

In NZ, we are fortunate to have the work of Froebelian scholars such as Professor Helen May, Dr Kerry Bethell, and others illuminate our kindergarten legacy. For

one example of this work, the sample chapter at [this NZCER link](#) explores the influence of Froebel's work on the growth of the kindergarten movement abroad and in New Zealand (May & Bethell, 2017). As a cross-national team, we hope to contribute new and exciting insights about ways Froebel's ideas can inspire education and care with infants and toddlers through a lens of pedagogy and culture.

For more information about the Froebel Trust, London and/or to access the webinar recording where these ideas were shared, see their webinar library under the Training and Resources tab at [www.froebel.org.uk/](http://www.froebel.org.uk/)

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# Fostering infants' and toddlers' autonomy: A research summary

by Naail Satani



**I decided to pursue my master's study in early childhood education (ECE) as I felt it was crucial to have a strong understanding of the field I work in, especially as it includes teaching the youngest of our citizens.**

I also felt it was important to have sound knowledge of the research literature to ensure the most meaningful outcomes for infants and toddlers. Some of the many questions that triggered this interest include, "What does autonomy mean when thinking about infants and toddlers? What does autonomy look like for infants and toddlers in an early childhood centre? What factors affect infants' and toddlers' expression of autonomy?" In this research summary, I outline my topic, approach, main findings, and make some suggestions for teachers to support the autonomy of infants and toddlers in their settings.

## **Te Whāriki, Autonomy, and its Importance**

*Te Whāriki* outlines the significance of children's autonomy within its core statement where children are viewed as, "competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 5). *Te Whāriki* encourages a strengths-based approach where children are seen as active participants in their learning experiences. It offers principles for kaiako (teachers) to use in providing children with opportunities for autonomous exploration as the child builds relationships with the "people, places and things" around them (p. 12; Smith, 2007, p. 5). Our ECE curriculum outlines that kaiako are actively providing opportuni-

ties for infants and toddlers to enhance their sense of authority and autonomy through various learning experiences during the day.

## **Understanding the Notion of Autonomy**

Many authors have defined autonomy within various contexts and considering a range of factors. For example, Green (2018) underlines spatial autonomy as, "a space where an individual seeks freedom and independence" (p. 67). Green adds that children start constructing and claiming their place as soon as they can do so, thus playing a crucial role in the children's spatial autonomy and their sense of discovery and self as they practise agency and independence. This independence is portrayed via manipulating and exploring objects as a young child, and progressing onto seeking out small spaces and hiding, thus giving the child freedom to investigate and create their sense of agency and individuality (Green, 2018).

Other studies emphasise the environmental influences on a young child's autonomy. This perspective emphasises the learner's active role in their developing comprehension as they make sense of the world around them. According to research, as children's autonomy and agency increases so does their active participation in their environment (Hechst, 2017; Shabazian & Li Soga, 2014). This fosters an autonomy supporting environment, which can empower children to speak, challenge, and think within their learning environment as their thoughts, reasoning, decision making, and problem-solving skills are enhanced and strengthened (Hechst, 2017; Norris & Horm, 2015).

Teachers can provide this environment to the children by offering opportuni-

ties for children to openly express their ideas, inquiries, and questions to reveal the meaning and origins of their ideas (Hechst; Norris & Horm).

Many things surprised me in the literature on infants' and toddlers' autonomy. One was how factors, such as the learning environment provided, sociocultural elements of learning and relationships, and policy guidance as frameworks all support infant-toddler autonomy. These factors are all highly intertwined, and highly dependent on each other, to ensure maximum opportunities are provided to infants and toddlers to foster their sense of autonomy.

## **My Research Approach**

Once I received my Ethics Application Approval from the University of Auckland (reference number: 2986), I invited participants. My approach to each centre was guided by ethical considerations including voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality. I approached potential centres one at a time. This meant I was able to accept a centre once their centre manager indicated a willingness to participate and could stop searching and contacting any others once I reached a minimum number of participants. My research project focused on four teacher participants from one centre, and their perspectives on infant-toddler autonomy. Data were collected from these participants through two different sources: online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, to create a deep understanding of the topic.

## **Challenges I Overcame in my Study**

Covid-19 restrictions affected my data gathering. The first interview was to be conducted in a quiet library foyer, however, the library was closed due to

the Covid-19 public space sharing restrictions, and we ended up going to the cafe nearby. It was a busy cafe, and therefore there were many disruptions. The other three interviews were conducted via Zoom Meetings due to restrictions in place to keep safe from the Covid-19 global pandemic. However, interviewing via this mode meant it was not possible to gauge an understanding of cues and non-verbal gestures delivered by the participants. These cues include tone and form of voice, gestures, and other body language and non-verbal signals. Verbal responses given by the participant during an interview are complemented by these cues, and therefore I would have been able to gain a more authentic and genuine understanding of their response if the interviews were held in person (Punch & Oancea, 2014).

### How the Teachers Supported Infants' and Toddlers' Autonomy

This research investigated four teachers' perspectives on fostering autonomy for infants and toddlers as capable and competent individuals, guided by two key research questions: 1 What are teachers' perspectives of infants' and toddlers' autonomy? and 2 How do teachers support autonomy for infants and toddlers?

During my analysis, I identified a number of main findings, all strongly related to Magda Gerber's Educaring Approach, practices (Hammond, 2020). These findings were: the significance of adequate time and space for infants and toddlers to foster their sense of autonomy, teaching strategies that underpin their practice, regulatory aspects of the teacher's role, and the importance of forming triadic relationships between the teachers, parents and children.

More specifically, the teachers highlighted the importance of having adequate space or time for infants and toddlers to develop their sense of autonomy through social experiences and adult and peer support. They also emphasised the need for infants and toddlers to establish trust and security during care moment practices and playtimes with adults.

Teachers also spoke about the teaching strategies that underpinned their practice

with infants and toddlers, revealing a significant emphasis on the concept of "power shift" from the teachers towards their infants and toddlers. The teachers suggested that this would keep infants and toddlers interested and engaged in their play because they have a voice and the ability to practise actions independently. There was also a great emphasis on the teachers being attuned, attentive and responsive, which they believed was important for the infants' and toddlers' sense of autonomy as responsive teachers are aware of the infants' and toddlers' interests and strengths, thus strengthening the relationship between the teacher and child.

The teachers' comments about the regulatory aspects of their role highlight that desiring teacher: child ratios better than the minimum level is a complexity the teachers face on a daily basis. Within this, the teachers viewed the infants' and toddlers' care routines as moments to engage in one-to-one interaction with each child, to create a strong relationship and encourage self-settling techniques to foster independence. This relationship can support a positive connection between the infant and toddler and the teacher, which in turn creates a strong sense of trust and thus encourages the child to autonomously participate in their learning space with others around them.

Lastly, teachers' comments indicate that triadic relationships involving infants and toddlers, families, and teachers were a crucial factor underlying their autonomy-fostering practices with infants and toddlers. This triadic relationship enabled teachers to understand the infants' and toddlers in their learning space and build a trusting relationship with them, which would ensure they feel trusted and valued, thus contributing to their growing sense of autonomy and independence.

### Implications for Teachers Supporting Infant-Toddler Autonomy

Based on my study, to understand and support autonomy, teachers who view children from both a learning and strengths-based lens will respect and acknowledge a child's agency in their learning environment.

A positive environment that supports autonomy is where teachers can provide opportunities to infants and toddlers to be active decision-makers throughout the day. Teachers can create opportunities for autonomy by making suggestions and offering choices during care moments, and also engaging children in active decision making through free movement and independent exploration. The latter can be supported by their teachers as and when needed and decision-making around whom they interact with.

### Acknowledgements

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# Children's play and virtual reality (opinion piece)

By Pennie Brownlee



Children actively construct their "virtual reality" in the real world by "transposing" sensory-images (from within their brains) onto environmental features and the loose parts they have available to them.

*reality: noun*

1. *the state of things as they actually exist, as opposed to an idealistic or notional idea of them.*
2. *the state or quality of having existence or substance.*

*(Oxford Dictionary, n.d.)*

*virtual: adjective*

1. *almost or nearly as described, but not completely or according to strict definition.*
2. *not physically existing as such but made by software to appear to do so.*

*(Oxford Dictionary, n.d.)*

## In the Olden Days

When I was a child I had never heard of the term "virtual reality". Back then virtual reality wasn't "a thing", those two words hadn't been married together for common usage even though the first flight simulator was operational in 1929.

## The Digital Revolution

Virtual reality as a "thing" proliferated in the second half of the twentieth century in association with the exponential developments in the computing technology sector. When we think of virtual reality (VR), many of us think of gaming where players "play" in an immersive life-like simulated world. While this sector of VR is set to expand as the demand for "real-life like" entertainment increases, VR is currently employed in areas as diverse as psychology, medicine, education and manufacturing (Panjwani, 2017).

## You Can't Unsee Anything

Margaret Fuller (1844, as cited in Popova, 2017, para. 1) reminds us, "The mind is not a highway but a temple. The door should not be carelessly left open." Never having played VR games myself, I can't say first hand what could possibly enter through the temple door into the mind of the player. Instead, I have to rely on the experience of others. Canadian law professor, author and filmmaker Joel Bakan (2011) opens his book *Childhood Under Siege: How Big Business Targets Children* with an episode out of *Grand Theft Auto*. The scene depicted would not have slipped through the temple door of the majority of young men in any society in any previous age. Robbing, maiming, murdering, raping, torturing people in real life are all abhorrent acts of violence that fall outside of healthy

human behaviour, yet in many VR games these acts are often rewarded by advancing the player to the next level.

Do you see a bit of a problem here? A flight simulator successfully teaches behavioural responses in the trainee; could it be that immersive murder/rape/torture scenes influence the player's behaviour? While there will be people who will answer emphatically not, I myself would ask marketing experts for their opinions. If advertising didn't influence people's behaviour do you think corporations would spend so lavishly on advertising? For example, in 2020 Amazon generated \$22 billion dollars of advertising revenue in the 12 months up until May 2021 (Graham, 2021), while Google earned \$146.92 billion in advertising revenue (Johnson, 2021). The whole premise of marketing is how to get through the temple door and influence people's worldview and behaviour (Barbaro et al., 2008).

### Back to VR Immersive Technology

What we do know is that the "choreographed" scenes influence the player's physiology. In the initial design process, many (if not most) game designers intentionally script events in order to cause physiological reactions in the player (Alter, 2017). These spikes in brain activity and the resultant dopamine release are the cause of behavioural addiction. Gaming addiction is not addiction to an external substance, but to the almost identical hormonal responses by the brain that are triggered by the "action" in the game (Kardaras, 2017). Recreation for pleasure is one thing, but addiction (Aiken, 2016)?

### Fake Views

By definition, virtual reality is artificial, substitute, imitation, fake, mock, simulated, at least it is in the incarnations we have been discussing. Furthermore, every part of the VR is someone else's creation, that is, you get to play in the world they have already created. While there are choices within that created world which the gamer can make, they are still confined within the echo chamber of someone else's created world.



*Tyres, sawhorses, planks and a bread crate are turned into a physical representation of images from the child's experience. Within this imagined world, children relive and rework experiences, as well as rehearse and create new experiences. It is this agency that unfolds their multiple intelligences.*

But what if there were an incarnation of VR that was pleasurable, which triggered almost identical responses in the brain, but without the withdrawal symptoms associated with gaming addiction? It turns out there is, and it is a genetically encoded function of human brain "hardware". It is the original VR and, as far as anthropologists can ascertain, it is as old as human culture itself. Indeed, culture could never have arisen without it. It is central to all human achievement, individual and collective, for better or for worse. We call it imaginative play and it is the inspiration and prototype of all VR technology.

### Play and the Brain

The human child is born when their brain is a quarter of its adult size. As you might expect, a complex evolutionary brain structure that is only 25% of its eventual size cannot run all of the functions of the mature brain. It takes time (and nurture) to grow the organic "hardware" and "operating system" required to run human "software potentials" such as multiple intelligences and the skills of executive function. By the end of the child's third year the brain has grown to between 85% and 90% of its adult size. This incredible rate of growth and development in the infant brain underpins the maxim, "the first

three years are the most important". Biologically dictated shifts at 2 years, 6-7 years, and 10-11 years usher in three additional levels of consciousness, three different electromagnetic frequencies (Lipton, 2002). Each shift alters and extends the way in which the child is able to experience and interact in the world (Brown et al., 2009).

The simple act of drinking illustrates the progression as the child's brain is able to handle more complexity of function. The baby practises the suckling-swallowing function in the womb over and over in readiness for the great separation that is birth. Once born, the baby's survival depends on their ability to suckle and swallow. It won't be too many months into their first year when drinking from a glass or a kitchen cup is introduced to the child. At first the adult holds the glass and tips it judiciously while the child sips and swallows. This is a different skill from the suckling-swallowing skill she perfected in the womb and it will require all or her attention until she masters it. Before long the child will learn to hold the glass for herself, with both hands, while she drinks. This new drinking behaviour is practised over and over until it has been integrated into her subconscious as a habit. Once a behaviour becomes habit, there is attention to spare (Pearce, 1992). Remember the intense concen-

tration you needed while learning to drive? Now that driving is a learned habit, you can drive with attention to spare. Likewise, once the child has mastered drinking from a cup they have attention to spare and it isn't long before they accomplish a "Milestone of the Mind", they pretend to drink. There is nothing in the glass and they know it. This great mind leap is the beginning of make believe.

By the baby's second birthday the child's brain will have grown to 75% of its adult size. Up until now it has operated using delta brainwaves (1-4 Hz), the long slow frequency band of the subconscious mind. Now theta, the brain's second subconscious frequency comes on stream. The addition of theta (4-8 Hz) alters everything for the child; theta is the frequency of intuition, daydreaming and the great human gifts of creativity and imagination. Imagination is the vehicle for transformation, and once the child gets the hang of imagining, anything is possible. In the child's mind, imagination can turn an ordinary kitchen cup into a jewel-encrusted golden goblet or a Viking drinking horn in the blink of an eye.

### Leaves and Sticks

We take it for granted that children "turn" leaves into plates and sticks into cutlery because most of us did it when we were children. It's a feat of imagination, an act of creative magic, and it is normal children's play. When a child needs a plate to advance her mealtime play, she picks a leaf, gathers two sticks and sets the table in her kitchen under the feijoa bush. Together with Teddy and dolls, she plays in this virtual reality that she has spun out of her imagination. When the child's young friend wants to play too, he can only enter by agreeing that the smoothed dirt is the table, the leaves are plates, the sticks are knives and forks, and the acorns are baked beans. Now two children are living and playing in a shared virtual reality constructed through their imagination, by their brains, and projected into the real world (Brownlee et al., 2016). But it gets better.

Not only are two children playing in a reality of their own shared imagining,



*A child, building a virtual reality out of their imagination into the three dimensional world, requires loose parts. Loose parts are the props that hold the imagined world together in exactly the same way as stage props do in a theatre production.*

they can try out roles inside of that reality: Mum, Dad, Baby, Pippi Longstocking, Mama Bear, Max, Elsa ... take your pick ... and the children will pick a role that has made an impression on their psyche. That's a feature of human consciousness, anything that makes an impression seeks expression (Brownlee, 2015). It is that expression that is the healing power of play. These children, playing within a reality of their own construction, in a role of their own choosing, can play out the internal energies in their being that are seeking equilibrium and completion (Jenkinson, 2001). Thousands of years before there were trained play therapists, children played and soothed their fears, healed their hurts, sorted their misunderstandings, and eased their suffering.

### And it gets Better Still

When children play together it takes a lot of brain grunt to turn an ordinary everyday environment into a pirate ship for example. Each child takes sensory images from their own brain and superimposes them onto the earth mound that is the pirate ship. Everyone agrees that the mound is now a ship, and they decide whether or not their ship is at anchor or sailing the high seas. Each child chooses a role, or is assigned

one. This involves a shipload of skill if more than one person wants to be the captain. The would-be captains and crew get to hone their communication-negotiation skills before the play can proceed. This working out of rules and roles can be messy, (politics is messy), yet this group-play is an apprenticeship. The skills learned and rehearsed here are the skills required to take an active part in society: working out how to work with others, practising cooperation, and cultivating collaboration. Unless a hapless pirate is about to be "fed to the crocodile", our role is to allow the players time and space to work things out for themselves.

### Superheroes

Protagonists in their own story, the pirates have created their own shared-reality within which to play because it meets their needs for where they are at in their physical, emotional, relational, intellectual, social, and creative unfolding. They decide the plot, the pace, and the action, all of which is the ultimate brain workout. Imagining a reality in your brain, and bringing it into the real three-dimensional world—this is creation expressing itself into the real world. If we parents and teachers do not understand the profound elegance play has in unfolding the child's multiple intelligences and talents, we might not be as vigilant against its theft as we ought to be.

### Grand Theft Imagination

If you are on the lookout for theft, be suspicious of the things that take away the need of the child to make sensory images in their own brain. For example, when I say "tree", your brain responds by calling up an image of a tree. Your brain has to do the work. But when I say "tsin", although you have a whole bunch of "tree connections" in your brain, the Navajo Indian word for tree is not connected with any of them so your brain cannot respond. There is nothing for your brain to do. There isn't any image processing for your brain to do when you are watching a screen either. When the voice on the screen says, "the blackbird perched on the railing" (stimulus), the screen shows you the blackbird perched on





*A child, building a virtual reality out of their imagination into the three dimensional world, requires loose parts. Loose parts are the props that hold the imagined world together in exactly the same way as stage props do in a theatre production.*

the railing (response). The stimulus supplies its own response. We take this stimulus-response function for granted but it is a learned process that not only builds brains, the neural connections it weaves will serve as the foundations for abstract higher learning later on.

Researchers tell us children are spending fewer and fewer hours in real world play, and more and more hours in screen world consumption (Brown, et al. 2009). Screen hours steal play hours precisely because there is nothing for the child to do when watching a screen. It's enjoyable sitting and observing someone else's creation without having to do anything, it's easy. It's entertainment and anthropologists believe that entertainment is likely as old as human culture, certainly it is as old as the story around the fire. The difference with the story around the fire though is that it required massive brain grunt. Following the story required the audience to make non-stop images in response to the storyteller's words. The storyteller's words are the script, and the listener turns the script into visuals and sensory sensations within their being. Stimulus and response, it's a feat of imagination, a magical act.

### Play is Human Nature

If imaginative play is the original virtual reality and the seedbed of all human creativity, what does the VR created by humans offer the organic "nature-built" human child? Equipped with 21+ senses (Durie, 2005), the human child is a super-sensory learning specialist. With a sensory brain-system resulting from eons of research and development, the child is designed for living in a super sensory world as a member of a social species. The human child's first great developmental need then is human connection, beginning with the attachment at birth. Emotional and physical nurture, with face-to-face communication, these are the glue of social connection.

If we want to predict how a child will turn out as an adult, Dr John Gottman's research (2009) indicates we look at how the child is socially, how well the child gets along with other children. Playing with friends in their "pirate ship" ticks the box. It offers opportunities for learning to get along with others in a way that playing Minecraft with "friends" cannot because VR lacks the supersensory data the brain requires to build complex gestalts required for social connection.

The second great developmental need is to play in the world. Playing, moving, running, jumping, exploring, these are co-creative activities. They build the child's body and brain, and they create the child's relationships with the earth, the elements, the creatures and plants. These relationships are the foundation for the child's sense of belonging and place, their mana whenua, their turangawaewae. Even though Minecraft advertising calls the program "the most significant sandbox you'll ever set foot in" (Vareide, 2011), it is not sand, nor a sandbox. A child who bonds into a wholly imaginary world, instead of their own imaginary world that is grounded in the real world, is akin to one of Peter Pan's lost boys in Neverland.

### Back to the Beginning

It is the nature of the child to play. Eons of play by millions of ancestors evolved us into the modern humans we are today. Every child unfolds the genetically encoded Play-in-the-DNA story when they play. Their sophisticated brain is relying on play-in-the-real-world in order to unfold their multiple intelligences. Critically, this evolutionary story is being accidentally excised from children's lives by the easier option, entertainment. Play isn't an optional extra, not if we want to raise happy intelligent children who get along with others. You and I know how to turn leaves into plates, now let's turn our imagination to creating ways which ensure our children have more opportunities to engage in their own imaginative play, in their own good time. In essence, we would be setting up nature reserves for children simply because it is the nature of the child to play in this extraordinary three-dimensional world. Increasing time and space for spontaneous unstructured play in children's lives would be a superhuman feat of imagination.



Anyone for baked beans and chips?

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# Reframing play and learning in infant pedagogy using the notion of “emotional capital practices”: A response to Dr Andi Salamon’s presentation

By Emma Quigan



*I watched Andi Salamon’s presentation: Reframing play and learning in infant pedagogy using the notion of ‘emotional capital practices’ at the University of Auckland’s Early Childhood Seminar Series with interest.*



Exploring the unique capabilities of infants and toddlers has been a common thread throughout my career. I’d say it started over a decade ago when I took my first job as a speech-language therapist (SLT). I couldn’t help but notice many of the infants and children I met in early childhood settings weren’t necessarily adhering to the developmental paths we were taught about at university. I saw 10-month-olds holding a shoe to their ear as though it was a phone, but our textbooks told me this level of symbolic play is months, if not a year away (Paul et al., 2003). At the time I rationalised with myself, and to others around me, that these children were simply imitating something they had seen. I argued that they weren’t really pretending. I confidently explained however that it was a good sign – it’s the beginning of communication with intention and we should reinforce what they are doing to bring meaning to their actions, gestures and ultimately vocalisations (Owens, 2016).

Today, I question why I felt the need to diminish these children’s skills. It cheapened the interaction into something transactional, imbued with power and control. At the time though, I didn’t see my interpretation as problematic. I was taught a Piagetian conceptualisation of infancy and toddlerhood and made sense of my observations through a lens of developmental progressions. I accepted that this marked the beginning of life with a phase of meaningless interactions with the environment, and through the right conditions and repeated exposure comes communication. According to the worldview our SLT education was entrenched in, the infant arrives in this world unknowing and reactive. The SLT had a key role to teach children to “intentionally” communicate. We

“knew” that these embodied actions and vocalisations were less sophisticated than a lot of parents seemed to believe. When parents talked about first words, we filtered those observations through a criteria—was the word or gesture used consistently? In context? If we established that these sounds and gestures weren’t “real”, we would talk about the teachable opportunities and the importance of providing repeated temptations and opportunities for the infant or child to use the word or symbol with meaning (Kuhl, 2004).

We have certainly made progress in the field of SLT over the past decade or so. For one, we don’t contradict observations made by whānau and don’t see ourselves as experts in anyone’s life. The concept of play is seen as integral to how infants, toddlers and children learn throughout the profession. However the need to categorise and label communicative behaviours and benchmark against the norms of their peers remains pervasive.

Salamon et al. (2017) proposed a more reciprocal understanding of how infants engage in their environment, describing it as sophisticated and purposeful. She talked about a 10-month-old in her research engaging in purposeful communication by giving an exaggerated smile, cocking her head and pretending to blink, sneeze, and laugh. Salamon argued that babies constantly draw on cognitive, social, and emotional understandings which have accumulated since birth (note: the emphasis on accumulation rather than categorisation). Developmental theories of the early years explain childhood as a sequence of progressions that children tend to travel through. There may be differences in timeframes, but the trajectory remains largely the same (Paul, 2016). Salamon got me

thinking about the cultural nature of these milestones we tend to observe in early childhood. Do we notice what the hegemonic discourse has primed us to notice and hence categorise? What are we not noticing?

Reframing the embodied actions of infants encourages us to shift our perceptions and view them as active participants in a conversation. Not a vessel to be filled with words and skills, but a person with thoughts and an ability to communicate some of those thoughts. Much of what we were taught about the developmental progressions of language and communication development could be seen quite differently when we think about respect. The SLT's keenness to teach communication skills and word use comes from a place of wanting to help set infants up with the ability to thrive. Listening to Salamon speak about her research I noted the respect she showed towards the infants she works with, in fact she used the word respect a lot. Is entering an interaction with infants and toddlers with the mindset of analysing and teaching missing the point of communication? The SLT in me argues that it's our role to support people who struggle with their communication, and that will involve teaching and strategies to some degree. The scholar in me rebuts and asks "how can you teach someone who you don't really know?" Approaching play and interaction with unexamined power is benevolent imperialism.

The concept of power was evoked in Salamon's reframing of play by drawing on the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Salamon described symbolic capital as a type of budget of different kinds of power that people accumulate over time, which has the potential capacity to produce profits for the actors involved. The sophisticated emotional communicative skills that infants and toddlers possess and continue to accumulate can be conceptualised as a form of power and Salamon called this "emotional capital". Thinking about the amazing capabilities that the youngest people in our lives possess makes us approach interactions with them with respect.

My 12-month-old daughter is having a terrible time with the eruption of her molar, so we often give her ice sticks to bite down on. The other day after biting it for a moment she approached me and passed me the ice stick. I told her that it was for her to help her teeth, but thanked her for the offer. She shook her head and passed it to me again, this time pointing to my teeth—urging me to have a hoon. We both laughed and I took a bite of the stick. I like that Andi would reframe an interaction like this to recognise the power and emotional capabilities that Mabel was about to demonstrate. Would I call it 'emotional capital'? Probably not. I like to think of it as her demonstrating manaakitanga, the ability to extend aroha, perhaps she imagined that my teeth were sore too! She was also showing tikanga, understanding the value of sharing.

I try to imagine how the whānau I worked with for my master's thesis would respond to a term about their children's abilities entrenched with economic analogies. I haven't had the opportunity to ask them, but when I look back to the dreams they shared for the children, it was entrenched in Māori values. One of my co-researchers, Charlotte shared: "I was reading about what people said about Māori before colonisation, and it's just like what we are trying to do now. Babies were included in everything and nothing was said or done to diminish their mana. That's the future I want for my mokos" (Quigan, 2020, p. 135). 'Emotional Capital' has the potential to reframe how we perceive infancy and toddlerhood in both homes and early childhood settings. We also need to have tools that can help us reframe how we see the world as well as children's learning.

This response relates to a webinar from the Early Childhood Seminar Series on Monday the 9th of May 2022. You can access the recording of the webinar on: <https://youtu.be/KrZlxy0Akas>

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## Glossary of Māori words

Aroha	Love
Manaakitanga	Process of showing hospitality, kindness, and support
Moko	Mokopuna, grandchildren, or great nephew/niece
Tikanga	The correct procedures, customs, and protocols
Whānau	Family

# The First Years Journal interview series: Whanaungatanga during the Covid pandemic: Reflections on challenges, learning, and opportunities.

By Tamar Weisz-Koves, Janet Malcolm, and Dr Daniel Lovatt



*The following is a reflective discussion between two teachers, Daniel Lovatt and Janet Malcolm, and a teacher educator from the University of Auckland, Tamar Weisz-Koves.*

The discussion takes place within the context of the infants and toddlers' room at Aro Arataki, an urban early childhood centre that provides care and education for children whose parents are predominantly medical staff at the Green Lane Hospital and were required to work during lockdowns. Discussion focuses on how kaiako (early childhood teachers) in the centre have been working in new ways during the Covid Pandemic to build and maintain close relationships and communication with infants, toddlers, whānau (family), and student teachers, both during and post lockdowns. The challenges experienced, along with opportunities for learning and enriching centre practice, are highlighted.

## Whanaungatanga

In the following discussion, the Māori value of whanaungatanga is used to highlight the importance of relationships, and close connections that are strengthened through shared rights and responsibilities, experience, and working together (Moorfield, 2003-2022). Traditionally associated with Māori kinship groupings—whānau (family, including extended family), hapū (subtribes/clusters of whānau), and iwi (tribes)—whanaungatanga can be extended to other types of close relationships (Moorfield) as “an expression of belonging” (Rameka, 2018, p. 376) for both Māori and non-Māori in contemporary contexts.

Discussion begins with consideration of what whanaungatanga means to kaiako within the context of the Aro Arataki Children's Centre—a centre which caters for Māori and non-Māori children and whānau—before focusing on how the team has been working in new ways during the Covid pandemic to build and maintain close relationships and communication with children and adults.

## Reflective Discussion

**Tamar:** The Covid context has clearly posed many challenges for teachers to be able to engage in whanaungatanga with infants, toddlers, and their whānau. I'm keen to hear about ways you were able to respond to these challenges and effectively build and maintain relationships and communication with infants, toddlers, whānau, and student teachers both during and post Covid lockdowns, and the learning that you've gained in the process.

**Daniel:** The questions you sent us prior to this discussion prompted us to think a lot about what the complex Māori concept of whanaungatanga means for us. It prompted some good conversations between Janet and me and the whole team. It started us thinking more deeply because we didn't want to just come up with superficial answers.

**Janet:** Whanaungatanga is first and foremost about relationships, not just with parents, but with children and

each other and with our community. It's about working together in a collective and collaborative way. I've also been thinking about it being about openness and acceptance of each other—that we all matter, we all have responsibilities, and we all have rights, including our youngest members.

**Tamar:** So how was whanaungatanga impacted by Covid? We had these long lockdowns, and then when centres were able to open there were lots of restrictions. How did you work through these restrictions?

**Daniel:** When the centre first re-opened, we formed two bubbles (groups in which the children and adults only interacted with others in the same group) that brought together infants and toddlers with their older siblings. We were trying to focus on connections between the younger and older children which is different to the three distinct age-groups we usually have. That was quite a challenge because at one stage we ended up with one older child with a whole lot of toddlers. But it was about doing the best that we could under new and challenging circumstances.

In terms of restrictions during lockdowns and periods of high alert, the need to keep families separate and not make parents wait for their turn to enter the room definitely posed significant challenges to maintaining deep connections. For a significant amount of time parents would drop

the child at the door, there would be a quick “Hello and goodbye” and the child would be handed over and that was the extent of the interaction. In those circumstances as well both parties wore masks so facial expressions were inhibited. Something else that impacted was not just verbal communication but the whole no touching, no patting on the shoulder or anything like that. I found that really hard.

**Janet:** It was challenging. We had to keep the bubbles separate with the same kaiako working together. We wanted to limit who we came into contact with by having part-time kaiako and those who were high risk working from home. Part-time staff were on call if one of us became sick, but we were fortunate not to need them.

**Tamar:** How did it work with new infants and toddlers starting during this time? What did you do differently to support those children and whānau?

**Janet:** We stopped having new children come in during lockdown, so it was quite some time before we had new children start.

**Daniel:** That was because the move into the centre is a big deal. It’s a warm, rich experience where mum and dad and/or extended whānau come in with their child for multiple visits and the process is staggered. First parents are there then they might leave the room for a time. Of course, we couldn’t do anything like that, and we weren’t prepared to say, “Bring your child, give them to us, a stranger who will love and care for them, but is nevertheless a stranger”.

**Janet:** Once we came out of Level Three Covid restrictions (the highest level outside of lockdown), we had new parents come into the room, but the drop offs for other children still happened at the door to try and minimise risk, especially being in the hospital environment. We had new parents and their children, but they were the only ones coming into the building and staying. In relation to wearing masks, children would sometimes pull down their parents’ and teachers’ masks which was challenging.

**Daniel:** When we could, kaiako made a philosophical decision not to wear

masks, especially after vaccinations were possible.

I remember during one of the lockdowns, you (Janet) did a Zoom meeting for parents and children.

**Janet:** Yes, we checked with parents to find out what times worked for them and us. We did a mat time with the iPad. The children that were watching from home could see those participating and they were fascinated. There was a lot of looking at one another, passing the iPad around, and singing. The singing was successful but story reading not so much because the children were more interested in looking at one another.

**Tamar:** So, it was a nice way for them to see their friends.

**Janet:** I think it was nice for parents too. They appreciated it.

**Tamar:** In what other ways were digital technologies helpful?

**Janet:** We sent out a lot of photos and stories of children who were in the centre to everyone, including those who were still at home. During lockdowns we also made some fun videos. These were recorded and uploaded to Storypark (an online documentation platform) for parents to revisit with their children. We also connected with parents via Zoom—this was hit and miss; sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn’t.

**Daniel:** For me it stood out that Janet didn’t just say at 10 o’clock we’re going to do this. You tried to accommodate families’ circumstances, so it wasn’t just about us.

**Janet:** We also included ideas for things parents could do with their children.

**Daniel:** However, there was not as much engagement from parents as I expected. I think they were just managing the best that they could with the circumstances and their children and all the things that Covid lockdowns involved. We were almost like an add-on that could be accessed to help and support when they needed it.

**Janet:** It was tough for some parents. Especially when both parents worked at the hospital during lockdowns. Unless they had whānau support it was really tricky for them.

**Daniel:** Pretty much all our parents were in that position.

**Tamar:** It sounds like maybe parent uptake wasn’t as much as you thought it would be due to their circumstances, but you still provided resources for children and families to access when they could.

**Daniel:** Yes, during lockdowns we were still paid, so we were still teaching. We tried to make as much use of time as possible. Ellie (the Centre Manager) always put forward the idea that we should look at the positives the Covid restrictions provided. It’s so easy to focus on the negatives and what we can’t do, but Covid lockdowns also gave us opportunities to do different things. For example, having lower numbers of children and high ratios and kaiako at home meant that we were able to focus on policy and procedure reviews. As a team, we spent quite a bit of time looking at *Te Whāriki*—the New Zealand early childhood curriculum document (Ministry of Education, 2017)—in relation to our practice. As kaiako we’re often time-poor. One of the positives of Covid is that in some ways we became time-rich.

**Janet:** Especially during lockdowns. It was really helpful for our team to work on our inquiry (investigation into and reflection on aspects of teachers’ and centre practice). It was good to have that time to talk and think about what we wanted to do, what we could improve.

**Tamar:** That’s a really nice way of looking at it; that you were able to use that time to enrich your work as a team.

**Janet:** Thinking about that notion of whanaungatanga, I think it did make us (the teaching team) connect more. During lockdown we looked at a number of things to inquire about and zoom in on. One area we looked at was our loose parts play and schema. We really focused on that over the lockdown and the months following and recently presented our findings of that ongoing inquiry to the parents through a video presentation.

**Daniel:** Do you (Janet) think it helped the quieter kaiako have their voices heard more too?

**Janet:** I'm sure it has had an impact. We had more time to communicate with one another via Zoom and when we were back in the centre, because there weren't as many children as usual, we had more time to engage in professional discussions and set up provocations.

**Tamar:** What about your work with student teachers? From a university perspective, we were very thankful to those centres who continued to host student teachers throughout the changing alert levels because it meant that our programmes could continue, and students could have practicum experiences. How did you adapt to accommodate student teachers in the centre?

**Janet:** We had three student teachers over this time: two attended the centre, one attended online. There were some challenges, but it was a really interesting process to go through. I learned a lot. One thing of note was that these students had already experienced practicum previously, so they knew what was expected and what was involved. It would have been very difficult if that hadn't been the case.

**Tamar:** What sort of things did you do when you were working with the student teacher online, how did you work together?

**Daniel:** You (Janet) were very thoughtful about how to make practicum as meaningful as possible rather than just going through the motions of "getting through it" and "ticking the boxes". You were really thoughtful about that engagement.

**Janet:** When you don't have a visiting lecturer come in and observe student teachers, you feel a bigger responsibility. In that sense, you feel like you have to make sure that they are meeting all of the learning outcomes rather than relying on the visiting lecturer's observation.

I think the most important thing to start with is the relationship. So, even if you're not meeting with them in person, you have to build that relationship, you have to have that connectedness, that whanaungatanga, which is about shared experiences, sharing stories, and finding out what we've got in common. Hearing

about their previous experiences and what their strengths are—really getting to know the person and building those relationships.

We started this relationship by email, sharing information about the centre, the student teacher handbook, and some policies. I suggested that she look online and read information available through the website. During our first Zoom meeting, we talked about her own experiences as a child and what her previous practicums were like. She shared her understanding of infant and toddler pedagogy, what had been covered in class, and what she had read. I shared a little of my history in early childhood and talked about what we do here at Aro Arataki.

**Tamar:** It seems to me that digital technologies really came into their own during this time because how would you have been able to do those things otherwise? What about the student teacher's relationships with infants and toddlers—what opportunities did she have to engage with them?

**Janet:** That was a lot trickier obviously, especially for the student teacher that was all online. There were a few things. Firstly, the university set up some videos of children to watch and student teachers were asked to reflect on how they would respond. I gave feedback and shared scenarios and talked about our children. I sent stories from Storypark so they could get to know the children. Then I tried a Zoom meeting with the student and the children. It wasn't as successful as I had hoped for interacting with the children, but it was a nice opportunity for the student to meet teachers and have a look around our centre. The student then came and visited the centre from the fence line. We've got a lot of large windows and big French doors so she could see what was going on. It was a nice day, and the children were outside, so I was able to talk with her and the children came over and said hello.

**Tamar:** That's a really different way of working but both parties were able to make it work.

**Janet:** I could see her body language and see how she was interacting with children at the fence line. However,

because this interaction was limited, it was really important to keep sharing scenarios and talking in addition to her visit. One of the areas the student was focusing on from her previous practicum was to work on her relationships with parents. I organised for her to interview a parent who was also a teacher. That worked really well.

**Daniel:** This required a lot of thought from you (Janet). A lot of what I think was impacted was the daily interactions and discussions that usually take place in the moment. Instead of that, you had to find ways to have similar conversations via Zoom or email. It was a considerable amount of work that you did.

**Janet:** It was interesting because we'd have these Zoom meetings that were organised for about an hour. We never stuck to an hour, these always ended up being 1.5-2 hours, but it was just so interesting for me as well as the student. It was fascinating to hear what she'd do in relation to the scenarios provided by the university—she was a fantastic student.

Another thing that helped, was once part-time teachers and others who were working from home returned to the centre when we came out of Alert Level Three, we were all given one day off a week. During practicum, I was able to use this day to spend more time with students. I am very grateful to the centre for this time off. This certainly made it easier to meet with the student and have time to email feedback and recommendations.

**Tamar:** That was a big commitment on your part. The fact that you were having conversations that were an hour to an hour and a half long tells me that there must have been a lot going on in those conversations to sustain them for that amount of time.

**Janet:** Yes, we would talk about things like free movement. And then I would follow up our discussion with some relevant articles and YouTube videos. The student was so passionate and wanted to know more and she was doing extra work herself which made a huge difference. The student also attended a staff meeting held on Zoom.

**Daniel:** And possibly, because of lockdown, she (the student teacher) might have had more time to focus on practicum.

**Tamar:** During the first lockdown, the university assigned student teachers work to do online that related generally to practicum and the practicum learning outcomes. As lockdowns continued, we decided to try allocating students an associate teacher in a centre to work with online. It quickly became apparent that this made for a much richer learning experience. Even though we still gave student teachers tasks to do online, the fact that they were able to talk about them with you, and you could share real stories about what that means in your context, made for a richer experience. The practicum team was pleasantly surprised by the depth of students' engagement and their thinking and growth during online practicums even though initially we had been concerned that Covid would be a big barrier. Thankfully, through centres having student teachers and being willing to use digital technologies, we were able to make it work in unexpected ways.

**Janet:** I value talking, so I think it's important that we were able to share our understanding as it helps us reflect on our practice. The more that we talk about something, the more it helps us to make sense of it... to go deeper. It makes us question what we do and why we do it. Also, the student teacher had study resources that she shared with us. It's helpful for us to stay current with relevant literature and strategies.

**Tamar:** What things have you learnt from the Covid context that you'll continue to implement or work with even when we're back to more of a sense of "normality"?

**Daniel:** One of the things we've been talking about as a centre, is how we can keep going with some of the things during Covid which were positives. Things like being able to focus on *Te Whāriki* and having time for those great conversations—these happened much more often than a monthly staff meeting. How can we try to hold on to the "un-busyness" and rich sense of time? We don't have the answers to

that now, but we are aware of trying to hold on to that in some way to improve what we do.

**Janet:** I agree—there's momentum. Because of Covid we've had that momentum and there's still that buzz. We're still talking about things, like our inquiry which started off in lockdown. We're still excited about that and asking questions. And having shared it with the parents, now they're coming back to us and asking us questions. We're excited about that.

**Daniel:** Janet and her team did a 30-minute presentation about their inquiry into loose parts play and schema live to parents via Zoom and made the recording available on Storypark. That's continued. It's been really exciting and there's been a real buzz from that. Now we're thinking about how we can keep it going.

**Janet:** Something else we've been thinking about is how we can have teacher release time. It's hard to take release time when working with infants and toddlers as we put the children first and can't go on release time if the children are unsettled. Having more time to reflect on our practice due to Covid, we've realised that the beginning of the day is much quieter. During these times kaiako are not missed as much because not all the children are in. During release time, kaiako can take time to think about their inquiry and write reflections and learning stories. Often, when they return to the group, they're excited about what they've done which generates meaningful discussions. It also means that as a group we're all present which we wouldn't have if someone was on teacher release during the day. It's working well for us. That may change again if children start coming in earlier, but I think it's about being flexible and doing what works.

**Tamar:** That seems to be a lesson from Covid; making things work and making the best of challenging situations. And within that there is an unexpected richness in what you've shared that's coming through in multiple ways.

**Daniel:** That momentum has come about because of Covid. It's definitely been transformative and there's an

excitement...there's a lot more to learn.

## Summary

The Covid pandemic has posed both challenges and possibilities for early childhood teachers in relation to building and maintaining relationships and communicating with infants, toddlers, whānau, student teachers, and each other. To problem solve and be effective, kaiako have needed to adapt to change and work in new ways. Digital technologies, such as Zoom and online platforms for sharing information, resources, and documentation have made it possible for kaiako to continue their work and engage in whanaungatanga in innovative ways (Deo & Vincent-Snow, 2022; Thynne et al., 2022). This has been a work-in-progress as kaiako try new approaches and technologies and reflect on what works well. Amidst the many challenges, restrictions, and changes in alert levels, kaiako at Aro Arataki experienced unexpected positives both during and after lockdowns through increased time for inquiry and reflection. This has raised questions and generated excitement about how the team might continue this valuable work in unhurried ways, both amidst and beyond the Covid pandemic.

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# “Attuned routine experiences”: An early learning series title

By Katherine Bussey and Michelle Richardson

Book review by Amanda White



*This book may be small at only 17cm high and 24 pages long, but it is packed with practical ideas for teachers about everyday routine interactions with infants and toddlers and organised into easily accessible sections.*



As part of a series of booklets published by **Early Childhood Australia** (formerly the Australian Early Childhood Association), *Attuned Routine Experiences* has links with the National Quality Standards and *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2009). Its content, however, is also relevant for teachers of infants and toddlers outside of the Australian context, including Aotearoa New Zealand. *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, [MOE], 2017) encourages teachers to focus on the quality of their care practices with infants and toddlers.

*Attuned Routine Experiences* highlights the importance of everyday, routine experiences as critical moments for providing opportunities for young children to learn and build connections with others. Routine experiences, including sleep, mealtimes and feeding, and nappy changing, are estimated to comprise around 80% of a child's day in early childhood settings (p. 3), making

them important times for one-on-one attention and intimacy between children and their teachers. During daily routines, infants and toddlers years rely on adults to support their basic needs. This resource offers practical recommendations to early childhood teachers for nurturing and enhancing toddlers' experiences during routine interactions, recognising the holistic and dynamic nature of children's learning within caring, sensitive relationships.

Authors Katherine Bussey and Michelle Richardson conceptualise routine experiences as critical opportunities for teachers to support children's learning. As infant-toddler specialists who share a background in Pikler and Gerber's Educaring (Resources for Educarers [RIE]) approaches, they position infants and toddlers as active learners who contribute to their learning experiences within respectful and responsive relationships with their teachers. Throughout each section, respect for the child shines through as a foundation for establishing and maintaining

attuned routines in ECE settings. The authors encourage teachers to reflect on children's perspectives each time they engage in routine interactions, emphasising the "need to regularly reflect on whether they themselves would like to be engaged in this routine and what their response to it would be if they were the child" (p. 9).

In the first part of the booklet, Bussey and Richardson introduce attuned routine experiences by explaining what they are and why they are important. In the second part, the authors focus on what attuned routine experiences look like in practice, focusing on the following routines: mealtimes and feeding, nappy change and toilet learning, dressing, sleep, and rest. In each of these areas, the authors highlight how teachers might create opportunities for children's learning, along with practical ideas for facilitating social interactions and learning. Mealtimes, for example, provide opportunities for individuals and groups of children to develop social connection and learn about concepts. For example, children might learn about social skills, nutrition, and concepts of numeracy and literacy as they help to count out cups while setting the table. Reflective questions are embedded in sections across the booklet, prompting teachers to pause and consider how the information relates to their practice, e.g. "What does consistency in mealtimes and bottle feeding look like to you? Which aspects of mealtimes are working well for you and which ones are not?" (p. 14).

The importance of connecting with families is mentioned throughout the booklet and briefly addressed in a page on "Supporting families in enhancing family routines at home" (p. 19). The authors talk about the role of teachers in helping families to understand the importance of routines as time for parents to be fully attentive, to foster language, and to spend quality time with their children. In addition to teachers supporting parents, a welcome addition might have been to highlight ways that teachers might also learn from families about their routines, with consideration given to ways that home cultures might shape children's routine experiences. Overall, the notion

of partnership between teachers and parents is emphasised and validated.

Recommendations for teachers are clear and practical throughout the resource. Teachers are encouraged to reflect and plan, as a team, how they work together to ensure that toddlers are engaging with teachers they know and trust during everyday routines. Teachers are reminded to consider children's perspectives at all times, and to consider the importance of attuned, calm, and connected routines to maximise learning. The authors also highlight the importance of creating personalised routines to help teachers recognise each child's current stage of learning and development. Prioritising intimate and focused one-on-one time with individual children is key to slowing down, engaging, and noticing one another. Finding times to engage with individual children ensures that their cues and signals are acknowledged, understood, and responded to within attuned routine interactions.

*Attuned Routine Experiences* is a practical resource to support teaching teams wanting to rethink, establish, and create routine experiences with infants and toddlers. Children's perspectives are centred and validated throughout. This is a useful resource for busy teachers to find useful tips and is an ideal starting point for teaching teams keen to reflect and plan on strengthening opportunities for learning during everyday moments of meaning in their unique settings.

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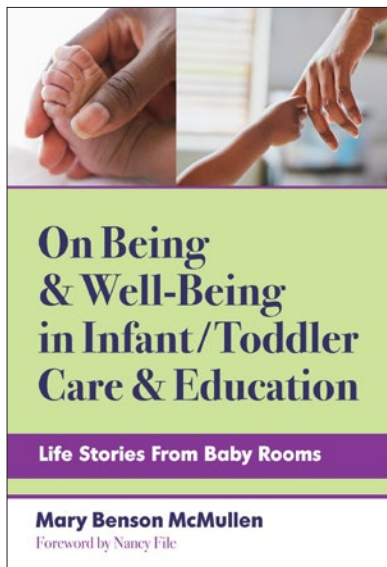
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# On being and well-being in infant/ toddler care and education: Life stories from baby rooms

by Mary Benson McMullen



Book review by Dr Justine O'Hara Gregan



*“It is through our own  
and others’ stories that  
we make sense of the  
world around us and  
our place within it,  
and that we share that  
understanding with  
others”*

The idea that we make sense of the world and our place in it through the sharing of stories is central to Mary Benson McMullen’s book of curated life stories from baby rooms in American early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings. The stories and accompanying discussions in this book are engaging, informative, and provocative. The reader is invited to reflect deeply on their own understandings and ways of being with, and supporting the wellbeing of, very young children. The author also invites readers to consider how the ECCE context influences the wellbeing of “care teachers”, and how this shapes the care teachers provide to children and their families. This book is also a call to action, and for the reader to care, or care more profoundly about, what happens in infant and toddler ECCE settings. Although the stories in this book take place in an American context, the themes explored resonate strongly with the principles and strands of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education- [MoE], 2017), the New Zealand early childhood (EC) curriculum and thus have relevance for the New Zealand ECCE context.

Mary Benson McMullen, PhD, is a professor of early childhood education at Indiana University. Prior to engaging in research and teacher education, she worked as a care teacher of infants, toddlers, and young children, and then as an early childhood programme director. Her research interests include: factors influencing quality care and education for infants and toddlers; the growth, development, learning, and well-being of children from birth to age 5; pedagogies of care; and factors that influence and ensure the well-being of the adults who work with young children and families. These varied interests and their intersections are

evident throughout the discussion of the life stories in each chapter of *On Being and Well-Being in Infant/Toddler Care and Education: Life Stories from Baby Rooms*.

The book is divided into six chapters. The first chapter provides an overview of the structure of the book and an explanation of the core concepts and terms used. This provides a useful framework for understanding how each of the middle four chapters, which focus on the curated life stories and subsequent “big idea” discussion and opportunities for reflection, unfold. The final chapter summarises the key ideas explored and offers a further provocation to the reader regarding their own future actions to care for, about, and with those whose lives are intertwined in infant and toddler ECCE contexts.

In Chapter 1, the author outlines the interconnections between the wellbeing of babies and their care teachers. “Care teacher” is a term the author uses to reclaim and elevate the critical aspect of care in EC teachers’ professional role and the relational aspects of caring. The author also provides a rationale for the use of curated life stories through a “goodness perspective” which recognises that the adults depicted in the stories were well-intentioned and doing what they believed to be best regardless of whether the author and reader agree with their philosophy and pedagogy. The reader is encouraged to take an open-minded stance in response to the stories and to use them as opportunities for reflection rather than judgment. Using a wellbeing lens (with the author defining wellbeing as how holistically “well” an individual is and feels) provides a connecting thread between the following four chapters which

focus on senses of wellbeing: Comfort and Security; Belonging, Respect, and Communication; Engagement and Contribution; Efficacy and Agency. The conclusion of Chapter 1 is an introduction to the four baby rooms which were the sources of the curated life stories shared. To give a sense of physical and emotional environments of each of the baby rooms the author identifies each of the rooms using the metaphors of a meditation garden (peaceful and respectful), wildflower meadow (joyful and spontaneous), botanical garden (intentional and well managed), and a laboratory greenhouse (rigorous and controlled). The reader is encouraged to consider the cognitive and emotional experiences of the staff, children, and families in each setting, how the environment may have contributed to the behaviours or outcomes described in the stories, and any similarities or differences to the ECCE settings the reader is familiar with.

Chapter 2 begins with an overview of senses of comfort and security and how these contribute to wellbeing for infants, toddlers, and their care teachers. A sense of comfort is identified as occurring when an individual is relaxed and at ease physically and emotionally, and a sense of security being experienced when one is free of worry, believes their health and safety are protected, and finds things to be stable and predictable. Three life stories are shared in this chapter—one each from the meditation garden, laboratory greenhouse, and the botanical garden baby rooms. Each story highlights how senses of comfort and security can be supported (or not) by the presence (or absence) of: family-centered, whole-family care; sensitive responsiveness; and key person care.

Chapter 3 focuses on positive and trusting relationships and how these provide opportunities for the lived experiences of belonging, respect, and communication which are needed for well-being to flourish. Drawing on the Reggio Emilia concept of the hundred languages that can be used for communication and children's right to be heard and understood, the author shares a life story that is a composite of observations from the meditation

garden, wildflower meadow, and botanical garden. This story highlights the importance of intimacy, joy, and consistency in relationships in ECCE infant and toddler spaces to support a sense of belonging. A second life story from the botanical garden baby room draws attention to the temperaments of both care teachers and children, and the "goodness of fit" between these and environmental provisions to support children's wellbeing through a sense of belonging and respect. The final life story which took place in the laboratory greenhouse baby room is powerful. In this story, the focus is on how babies learn by observing those around them, and from the (often unintended) messages they receive from their care teachers and the environment. The failure of the teacher in this story to respond to a real crying baby while instructing a toddler in how to care for his doll baby may well leave readers reeling in trying to rationalise the learning that was occurring for both children regarding their sense of belonging and experiences of respect.

The life stories, discussion, and reflective questions in Chapter 4 centre on the wellbeing senses of engagement and contribution of children and their care teachers. The author invites the reader to consider how senses of engagement and contribution can be achieved through productive and interesting work, play, and learning, and being able to do things for the benefit of others. When considered together, engagement and contribution involve both structure (policies, resources, and infrastructure) and process (relational and interpersonal) aspects of care. The life stories in this chapter highlight how very young children can care for others and how empowering this can be for them, as well as providing examples of how adults can also disrupt children's engagement and contribution (both consciously and unconsciously) and the implications of this for children's play and learning.

Chapter 5 focuses on the well-being senses of efficacy ("I am capable of doing things well") and agency ("I am in control and can take action"). The first life story shared in this chapter illustrates how adults can scaffold

children's learning in ways that are unique to the needs of individual children. The author highlights that effective scaffolding requires following the child's lead and supporting the child to have success, as the child defines it, in their chosen endeavours. This means that care teachers need to be knowledgeable, mindful, and sensitively responsive to the children they care for. In a similar fashion, care teachers can also empower each other and families in having a sense of efficacy and agency through taking a democratic and relational approach. The ideas shared in this chapter have a strong resonance with the principles of relationships, family and community, and empowerment in *Te Whāriki*, and the life stories illustrate what these look like as lived experiences.

This book will have relevance to those who care for and educate infants and toddlers. There will be resonance with many of the life stories the author shares, and where the stories vary from the reader's lived experience, there are opportunities to reflect on these more deeply. *On Being and Well-Being in Infant/Toddler Care and Education: Life Stories from Baby Rooms* highlights how the wellbeing of children, families, and care teachers are entangled, and articulates the richness, complexity, and importance of the work that care teachers do in supporting our youngest citizens.

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The  
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