

Disrupting the paradigm: “Children need to learn how to learn”

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<https://doi.org/10.18296/cm.0045>

Abstract

The views that early childhood teachers have of children and childhood are informed by the rhetoric and theories of early childhood, their cultures, life stories, philosophies, and ongoing practices as teachers. In Aotearoa New Zealand, *Te Whāriki*, the legislated national curriculum for early childhood education, further guides early childhood teachers' practice and frames teachers' image of the young child. This article confronts and critiques a short phrase that is an addition to the revised *Te Whāriki* curriculum document, specifically the phrase that children “need to learn how to learn”. This phrase implies that young children do not know how to learn. The implication in this utterance belies the intense drive that children have to learn, to play, to explore, and to understand as they grow in strength in their sense of self within their whānau and communities. We care about the image that this presents to student teachers, to teachers. We challenge whether the notion that children need to learn how to learn is the image that early childhood teachers hold, or want to hold, of children. We argue that this phrase and image of the child as needing to learn how to learn is a loose thread in the whāriki that potentially undermines and is counter to the more dominant concept within *Te Whāriki* of the competent child.

Introduction

For early childhood teachers/kaiako, the image of the child is formed through their life stories, cultures, contexts, and the literature, theories, and rhetoric of early childhood. This image impacts their philosophies and practices as early childhood teachers. Further to this, the general idea of a curriculum is that it should reflect the image of the learner and the aspirations that align with that image. An addition to the revised version of *Te Whāriki*—the early childhood curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand—raises questions for us

as teacher educators about the image of children as learners and potential inconsistencies within the curriculum.

In offering a commentary on this phrase in *Te Whāriki*, we write from the perspective of teacher educators who have many years’ past experience as early childhood teachers. Through our engagement with student teachers we strive to support their reflexive practice and knowledge on the work of early childhood care and education, and, through their work and practice, to draw extensively on the words in *Te Whāriki*. The commentary is therefore grounded in our experiences as teacher educators and in the scholarship of early childhood education. We draw particularly on scholarship relating to play and learning and the image of the child, as well as considering the idea that how teachers conceptualise young children and their image of them as learners will colour their ways of being with them (Malaguzzi, 1993; Whitaker, 2020). To explore the challenge of the child as learner we apply a critical lens: we question the statement and its position in early childhood education. We start by addressing the phrase within the framework of *Te Whāriki* and go on to address ideas about the image of the learner, play and learning, and learner identity.

Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017a), as our celebrated (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 2), legislated national early childhood curriculum, holds mana and exerts direct and indirect influence on curriculum and pedagogy in early childhood education. This curriculum has the strengths of both tangata whenua and tauīwi who have contributed their knowledges and their aspirations for early childhood education. The advancement of this curriculum was through a process of consultation and collaboration that involved the early childhood education teaching community in Aotearoa New Zealand.

That most recent edition of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017a) is a refreshed document that brings what some see as new energy and insights into the national curriculum for the early years in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is, from the authors’ perspectives, an inspired, inspiring, visually beautiful publication, a national taonga, a national treasure. In terms of the underpinning commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi), this document continues to be a powerful foundation for bicultural early childhood education. This curriculum whāriki is grounded in te ao Māori

as well as a vibrant and dynamic image of the active, confident child. The refreshed curriculum has included the original (Ministry of Education, 1996) curriculum principles / kaupapa whakahaere, strands, and goals, but has introduced some changes. These changes include a reduction in the number of learning outcomes, from 118 to 20. These learning outcomes are succinct and targeted towards an image of children 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, 2017a, p. 5). Another adjustment is the inclusion of visual images and whakataukī that remind the reader of the essence: young children are the focus of the curriculum.

When the revised *Te Whāriki* curriculum document was being prepared in 2016, teachers around Aotearoa New Zealand were invited to comment on the draft. In response to the statements in the draft, one of the authors of this article protested that a statement that children “need to learn how to learn” was not pertinent for the image that this author has of the competent child, nor is it consistent with the image that is presented in the principles and strands of *Te Whāriki*. That statement was written into the 2017 curriculum document (Ministry of Education, 2017a). We, the authors of this article, struggle with the fundamental thinking that children need to learn how to learn. We ask, what values, knowledges, and truths are guiding this statement in *Te Whāriki*? How can this statement add value to our philosophy and practice?

It may seem innocuous and well-intentioned but, for us, that phrase has elicited a response that cannot be overlooked. To the authors of this article, this phrase could be likened to a loose, crumpled spot in a mat on a floor. That crumpled place in the mat could be avoided, but someone else could trip up on this flaw unless it is noticed and recognised. That phrase, we believe, needs to be regarded through a critical lens, questioning this notion against the foundational values of *Te Whāriki*, where children “are positioned as confident and competent learners from birth” (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 12). Like Malaguzzi (1993), we believe that the image of the child that teachers hold is where teaching begins.

This article has two intentions: first, to report this flaw in the mat, in the whāriki, to highlight the disconnect between the controversial phrase and

the values of *Te Whāriki*; and, secondly, to disrupt the phrase and to provoke conversation about its relevance and position in our national curriculum.

Continuing the conversation: Do children need to learn how to learn?

The full statement related to this phrase in the 2017 version of *Te Whāriki* reads as follows:

A curriculum must speak to our past, present and future. As global citizens in a rapidly changing and increasingly connected world, children need to be adaptive, creative and resilient. They need to ‘learn how to learn’ so that they can engage with new contexts, opportunities and challenges with optimism and resourcefulness. For these reasons, *Te Whāriki* emphasises the development of knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions that support lifelong learning. (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 7)

Most points in this paragraph make sense and add value to the image of the young child and the aspirations for children. The embedded phrase, “They need to learn how to learn” is, however, dissonant in terms of the powerful image that we have of children, the power that children hold as they learn, through play. This image has been developed from professional and theoretical knowledge, the understandings that we have been privileged to access of a *te ao Māori* view, and what we, the authors, have observed in our many years of being with, and working with, young children. Even when considered within the context of the above paragraph, we are concerned about the message that is being given about young children. We see this phrase introducing a deficit view of children as learners.

A deficit view is in conflict with images that, although they are linked to *Te Whāriki*, are outside of this document. We refer to the well-used assessment tool, learning stories, in which children’s learning is understood and celebrated from a credit rather than a deficit base (Carr, 2001). For example, the first learning story in Book 1 of *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004, pp. 7–9) describes young Tim’s interest in vacuum cleaners (the Dyson brand), his drive to explore his working theory and knowledge, and how the teacher supports and extends his learning. In this story, Tim knows what he

wants to learn about and is highly motivated to engage in that learning. The teachers are there to work with him as he investigates his interest in a complex way. In terms of children knowing how to learn, all the books in the series *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004, 2007) are rich with stories that illustrate this partnership between child and teacher as the child explores/learns and the teacher engages, intentionally, to support that exploration.

When and how do children learn?

A starting point to this thinking is recognising that children learn even before they are born, while they are in utero. This learning is complex and dynamic and continues as they develop and grow, nurtured, and supported by the people who care for them, who interact with them, with outcomes that are reliant on the quality of the relationship and environment. Mosier and Rogoff (1994) sought to show how infants are active participants in their interactions with others, seeking to engage the others, to regulate their responses. One of the authors, too, has noted how her almost 3-month-old grandson uses his gaze, and the effective speech sounds that he makes, to directly involve the caregiver (in this case, the grandmother). No one is teaching the infant how to learn; this comes spontaneously from them. “A six-day old child is powerful because he wants to learn, he wants to live with us” (Rinaldi, as cited in Duncan, 2010, p. 100). Further, Moylett (2013, p. 1) starts her book with, “the authors of this book believe that all children are born ready, able and eager to learn”. These statements provide affirmation of the child as a powerful learner, wherever that child may be, whatever the culture, the time, the place. As kaiako we understand that children love to play, they love to explore and learn. Theorists provide support for this notion of the child as a strong learner, with the added realisation that learning is a social process (Rogoff, 1995).

Te Whāriki draws on sociocultural theory (Ministry of Education, 2017a). Sociocultural theory has extended the ideas of constructivist theorising to include the importance of the role of the kaiako and others in childrens’ learning. This quote from Yelland and Wai Man Vivienne (2016, p. 104) serves to expand on these ideas:

Numerous studies on learning theory have shown that children learn gradually and construct knowledge with the assistance of adults. From

the perspective of constructivist learning theory, children are active and self-motivated in their learning process. Teachers have to take up the roles of facilitator, motivator and supporter to help children learn and grow.

Buchheister (2018, p. 2) provides this useful example of a child’s agency in their learning, and presents the image of the child as a powerful learner:

Consider a 4-year-old child playing with wooden blocks. Her exploration leads her to arrange the blocks in various ways, from a horizontal line of blocks on the floor, to a more complex cognitive feat of balancing blocks vertically to construct a castle tower. She begins by attending to bits of information she collects during the experience as she observes the attributes and properties of the wooden blocks. Then, through trial and error, she begins to notice features of the blocks and her construction methods that either inhibit her building process or contribute to her architectural success. She continually reflects on her experiences, talking to herself during the play scene, as she organizes and connects information she gleaned through her observations to become a more productive builder. The young engineer reminds herself of these conclusions as she finalizes her construction after earlier attempts to build a tower ended in the blocks collapsing. She begins to place a long, wide rectangular block atop a smaller rectangular prism near the apex of the tower, then seeing it wobble, removes it and puts it at the base.

What stands out for us in Buchheister’s example is that the process of learning, through play, is complex and dynamic, that the child is powerful in her learning, in her agency, and in her motivation to learn, through her interaction with things and people, and through her reflections on her learning. The collaborative process of learning is not based on a need to learn how to learn, it is driven by the desire to learn, the desire to play, and is based on dynamic collaboration, what O’Connor and Greenslade (2011) refer to as open-ended, organic opportunities. The assistance of an adult may make skills and dispositions for learning explicit in the context of play, but in play the child is agentic.

Play and learning

There is extensive literature on the prevalence and role of play in the child’s life. A snapshot of research from a literature search on play and learning includes work by Brabazan (2016); Brooker et al. (2016); Thomas et al.

(2011); Wong and Logan (2016); and Wood (2013). Essentially, this literature has contributed responses to the question: Are play and learning a dichotomy or are play and learning interconnected?

In their discussion on play and learning, Pramling Samuelson and Pramling (2016, pp. 176, 177) refer to the “playing learning child”. They note that children do both things: they play and they learn. They refer to Einarsdottir (2011) who noted that “young children do not themselves distinguish play from learning until they are socialised through schooling into doing so”. It seems that this is a key point. If it is accepted that playing and learning are intertwined and inseparable, then in the statement in *Te Whāriki* that “children need to learn how to learn” there is arguably an implicit assertion that children therefore need to learn how to play. However, it does not make a lot of sense to say that children need to learn how to play. We note from our many years of experience in early childhood education that children choose to play, given the chance. In the same way, through their play, children choose to learn, given the chance.

In another example of research relating to play and learning, Wong and Logan (2016, p. 21) refer to Froebel who argued that through play, children learn for the rest of their life: “The plays of childhood are the germinal leaves of all later life” (Wong & Logan, 2016, p. 21). In relation to the aspirations for children’s futures in *Te Whāriki* that children “can engage with new contexts, opportunities and challenges with optimism and resourcefulness” (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 7), these aspirations are fundamentally met through play in the early years as children continually develop and hone their learner identities.

Learner identities

We acknowledge that, as they explore their worlds through play, children are further developing their strategies for learning, they are honing their learning dispositions, their attitudes, and motivation towards learning. They start with an ability to learn and “recognise and appreciate their own ability to learn” (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 23) as they strengthen their sense of identity as a learner. Further, according to Anne Smith, children develop through their experiences and their own agency in their interactions

with those experiences (Smith, 2013). Assessment of that process, through learning stories for example, further influences children’s identity as learners. Learning stories were developed to add assessment practices to early childhood education. These are not based on what the child cannot do, and needs to be able to do, but on what the child can do (Carr, 2001) and how the zones of actual development and proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) can be celebrated and supported. In these learning narratives, the image of the child is of a powerful, competent learner who is developing and growing holistically, through their bodies, their minds, their spirits, and in their relationships with others.

Through the stories of their learning, children build up a positive sense of themselves as learners, as achievers (Lee & Carr, 2016). “They [learning stories] are about orientations towards learning challenges, responsibilities and enthusiasms, and they contribute to growing learner identities” (Carr, 2009, p. 25). In their book, Carr and Lee (2019) use the term “funds of learning disposition” to describe the store of knowledge that children have from their homes, from their communities, from their cultures. Somehow, this aspect of the child, as having that knowledge, having those learning dispositions, is diminished when we phrase our aspirations for the child as needing to “learn how to learn” rather than acknowledging that they *are* powerful learners, already rich with human and cultural capital, and potential.

Constructing the image of the child

Each statement in the curriculum document has authority and these curriculum statements provide a basis for our image of the child. A variety of statements are woven into the *whāriki* that provide a social construction of the child and the related work of early childhood education. In examining statements in *Tē Whāriki*, their underlying values and changes in different versions of the curriculum, shifts in points of emphasis and meaning are revealed. In relation to the notion of children learning to learn, an explicit statement that children need to learn how to learn does not appear in the 1996 version of *Tē Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), although a brief comment in the *Big Picture* video of *Tē Whāriki* (Davies et al., 2000) “children are becoming learners” does hint at this idea. In the 2017 document, the idea of learning how to learn is alluded to by the then Minister of Education, Hekia Parata, on page 2.

The full phrase that children “need to learn how to learn” is written just once in the English side of *Tē Whāriki*, in the introduction on page 7.

Although the idea of children learning how to learn appears in the 2017 document, stronger emphasis is given within the curriculum to the idea that children are agentic learners. Within *Tē Whāriki*, the essence of beliefs about children is that they are essentially powerful, agentic learners. This idea is repeated in the learning outcomes in *Tē Whāriki*. The thinking that is expressed in the words *children need to learn how to learn* does not reappear in the document after the introduction. If this statement is important enough to be included, why is it mentioned briefly? It is our view that it stands outside the rest of the document as a loose thread in the whāriki, unravelling the image of the child as potent, and outside of the view of childhood that recognises children as agentic, as “confident and competent learners from birth” (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 12).

The view of children needing to learn how to learn is not evident in the *Tē Kohanga Reo* section of *Tē Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017b) which is written in te reo Māori. We would have been surprised if it had been, given the image of the child that is embedded in te ao Māori. This statement by Tilly Reedy (Reedy & Reedy, 2013, p. 1) explains some of the values, knowledge, and beliefs about children and their learning and the role of others in supporting that learning:

Tē Whāriki is a curriculum which is child-centred and learning-oriented—ko te whakamana i te tamaiti ki te ako te pūtake o tēnei marautanga. The basic principle that underpins *Tē Whāriki* is ‘to empower the child to learn’.

Empowering the child to learn does not imply that the child needs to learn how to learn. In our interpretation, it is an acknowledgement that the child’s mana needs to be enhanced and the opportunities that are provided through “people, places and things” (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 12) need to support their inquiry, their journeys. Kaiako build their relationships with the children and whānau. In effective early childhood settings, kaiako intentionally utilise effective, place-based, moment-centred, and forward-thinking skills and strategies for learning and teaching. Kaiako empower the child, nurture the child’s learning, and the contexts of their learning so that

their intrinsic drive to learn, to be powerful and agentic, remains part of their mauri, their life force, their life journey.

Life-long learners

In documents and literature that support an interpretation of early childhood curriculum, how children learn before birth and continue beyond is well-documented (Cullen, 2008; Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017a; Moon et al., 2013; Rogoff, 1990). An aspiration for lifelong learning appears in this statement in Book 13 of *Kei Tua o te Pae*, “The world outside is increasingly valuing the ability to learn—knowing how to learn, how to keep learning, how to learn with others—over the ability to master specific bits of knowledge” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 5). *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Book 1) notes that the contexts and technologies that our children will meet as they grow up are beyond what we know or even what we can imagine: “In an ever-changing world, we know that young children’s horizons will expand and change in ways that cannot be foreseen. Children will travel beyond the current horizon, and early childhood is part of that” (Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 5).

It is worth noting though that Anne Smith stresses that when applying a futurity perspective, which sees children in the process of becoming adults, this “portrays them as incompetent and immature” (Smith, 2013, p. 40). We need to be mindful that we acknowledge who children are when they are children rather than positioning them in the state of becoming learners, and the state of becoming adults. In revisiting the words of Malaguzzi from his seminar in 1993, “your image of the child is where teaching begins”, we note that the words we use to describe children are how we consciously and/or unconsciously perceive them to be. That image can take hold and inform how we teach.

Concluding comments

We agree with Keeling and Nguyen Lehman (2018) that humans participate in change but their agency is subject to other forces. Humans, including children, exist in a world in which they have some agency, but there are influences from the living world, the physical world, the material world, and

in life beyond our planet (Ministry of Education, 2007) that shape contexts and experiences. Working from the principles and strands of *Tē Whāriki*, and holding on to a credit and optimistic view of the child, however, we find it difficult to view the child with anything less than having mauri, mana, and agency, with anything less than a powerful image of the child as being born with “immense potential” (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 2) and of the curious, playing, learning child (Pramling Samuelson & Pramling, 2016).

Is our aversion to the statement that “children need to learn how to learn” an aversion to the semantics of that phrase and to how it may be interpreted in curriculum and pedagogy? The answer is in the affirmative. Taking the meaning from that statement that children need to learn how to learn, however well-intentioned that phrase may be, is contrary to our values, our knowledge, and the image of the child, both in our own philosophies and in the core principles of *Tē Whāriki*.

It is our contention that the statement, “children need to learn how to learn” is an anomaly, a loose thread that does not belong with the *Tē Whāriki* image of the child 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, 2017a, p. 5)

We do not need to mute our view of the child with that deficit thread in what we think is an otherwise exceptionally strong curriculum whāriki.

The statement from *Tē Whāriki* that children are “confident and competent learners from birth” (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 12) aligns with the key thoughts in this article. We hold onto the notion that young children do not “need to learn how to learn”. They are born knowing how. Through their meaningful interactions with “people, places and things” (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 12), including their interaction with early childhood teachers, through their play, through their learning dispositions, through their working theories, with their funds of knowledge, they continue to build on and strengthen their learning and knowing as they traverse and transition through childhood.

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Glossary

ako	“The concept of ako describes a teaching and learning relationship, where the educator is also learning from the student and where educators’ practices are informed by the latest research and are both deliberate and reflective. Ako is grounded in the principle of reciprocity and also recognises that the learner and whānau cannot be separated.” (<i>Ka Hikitia</i> , Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 20). https://www.education.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Ministry/Strategies-and-policies/Ka-Hikitia/KaHikitiaAcceleratingSuccessEnglish.pdf p.16
kaiako	“teacher, instructor.” https://maoridictionary.co.nz
kōhanga reo	“Māori language preschool.” https://maoridictionary.co.nz
mana	“prestige, authority, control, power, influence, status, spiritual power, charisma—mana is a supernatural force in a person, place or object.” https://maoridictionary.co.nz
mauri	“life principle, life force, vital essence, special nature, a material symbol of a life principle, source of emotions—the essential quality and vitality of a being or entity.” https://maoridictionary.co.nz
rangatiratanga	“kingdom, realm, sovereignty, principality, self-determination, self-management—connotations extending the original meaning of the word resulting from Bible and Treaty of Waitangi translations.” https://maoridictionary.co.nz/search?&keywords=rangatiratanga
taonga	“treasure, anything prized.” https://maoridictionary.co.nz
tangata whenua	“local people, hosts, indigenous people—people born of the whenua (i.e., of the placenta and of the land where the people’s ancestors have lived and where their placenta are buried).” https://maoridictionary.co.nz
tauiwi	“alien, stranger, foreigner, non-Māori.” https://maoridictionary.co.nz
te ao Māori	“the Māori world.” https://www.otago.ac.nz/maori/world/index.html
te reo Māori	the Māori language.
Te Tiriti o Waitangi	The Treaty of Waitangi.
Te Whāriki	The Woven Mat—the early childhood curriculum. https://www.education.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Early-Childhood/Te-Whariki-Early-Childhood-Curriculum-ENG-Web.pdf

whakatauki	“proverb, significant saying, formulaic saying, cryptic saying, aphorism.” https://maoridictionary.co.nz
whānau	“extended family, family group, a familiar term of address to a number of people—the primary economic unit of traditional Māori society. In the modern context, the term is sometimes used to include friends who may not have any kinship ties to other members.” https://maoridictionary.co.nz
whāriki	“floor covering, ground cover, floor mat, carpet, mat.” https://maoridictionary.co.nz

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