
Comment

Supporting inclusion in times of change

In this issue we bring attention to the multifaceted experiences of early childhood education (ECE) kaiako and leaders who support diverse learners in Aotearoa New Zealand. Against the backdrop of proposed educational policy changes, including ECE regulatory reforms explored in *Early Childhood Folio* 2025, 29(2), articles in this issue highlight the complex roles and responsibilities of educational practitioners who continue to provide quality education and care for all tamariki, despite experiencing constant shifts in teaching conditions and environments.

The articles present research on the everyday practices of teachers and leaders as they engage with tamariki across various dimensions of diversity, including ethnicity, age, sociocultural context, language, communicative mode, and (dis)ability. Responding to diverse learners requires ECE educators to take a flexible and collaborative approach, while adopting scrutiny in the ways they might notice, assess, and respond to tamariki and their wide-ranging perspectives.

Each article presents research findings that have challenged and transformed pedagogy and practice in ECE settings. Collectively, the articles make an important contribution to deepening our understandings of diversity in ECE contexts, while also emphasising the potential for teachers, leaders, and researchers to prioritise possibilities for inclusion for all tamariki in times of change.

Ally Attwell and Rachel McKee remind us of the potential for using New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) to support equity, connection, and learning for all tamariki. The authors report on findings from a master's thesis study in three ECE centres in Aotearoa New Zealand, providing a multilayered view on the use of NZSL in those settings. Interviews with kaiako and other experts revealed aspects of signing that were valuable in supporting the multimodal communication and participation all tamariki, including those who are hearing as well as Deaf. Findings also highlight the critical importance of professional development for ECE teachers to sustain and extend their use of NZSL, with practical suggestions to help kaiako systematically embed NZSL into daily routines and environments.

Alex Gunn, Sonya Gaches, and Jenna-Lee Pfeiffer raise important questions relating to assessment practices in ECE settings, exploring teachers' use of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) and large language models (LLMs) to create learning stories. The authors provoke discussion around potential benefits and risks of kaiako using free GenAI tools in their narrative assessment of children's learning, based on their observations and experiences of increased technology use in the context of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) (hereafter, *Te Whāriki*). Following consideration of what constitutes quality assessment in ECE, and narrative assessment in particular, the authors demonstrate the potential consequences of using LLMs by prompting and analysing a learning story for a fictional child, using ChatGPT. This article raises critical ethical and professional questions around the role of technologies in assessment, calling for further ongoing dialogue about this highly topical and rapidly changing aspect of ECE practice.

Paola E. Pedrelli brings together international perspectives of leadership in the hybridisation model of leadership (HMOL), a resource for ECE centre managers. The model draws on findings from Paola's PhD research with centre managers in England, highlighting personal and professional complexities of ECE leadership reported in her interviews with participants. HMOL illustrates themes that reflect the multilayered "knottiness" of ECE leadership life, with examples of narratives, relationships, and systems from the research data. In designing the visual model to represent these findings, the author was inspired by three existing frameworks—*Te Whāriki*, and Zulu beadwork and the ubuntu philosophy from her own South African background. Pedrelli discusses synergies between principles across the three frameworks, and explains how concepts from each have been interwoven into HMOL.

Tahera Afrin, Tess Mason, Kym Perez, and Sanam Bagherian present findings from a literature review exploring sensory aspects of autism in young tamariki. As a group who share personal and professional experiences of autistic children, the authors were interested to find

out what knowledge exists on sensory dimensions of autism, as well as implications for ECE kaiako in the context of *Te Whāriki*. Three thematic categories were identified in the literature, including neuromotor competencies, sensory responsive play, and behaviours associated with sensory patterns. The authors then discuss consider how kaiako might interpret each of these themes using the principles of *Te Whāriki*, and offer practical suggestions to support ECE kaiako in each of the strands of *Mana atua/Wellbeing*; *Mana whenua/Belonging*; *Mana tangata/Contribution*; *Mana reo/Communication*; and *Mana aotūroa/Exploration*.

Julie Watkins, Angela Hay, and Sonya Gaches explore ways that kaiako weave together diverse pedagogies to support the learning dispositions and learning of language literacies and maths in infants and toddlers. Part of the impetus for this study was their concern around the potential “push down” of school-readiness pedagogies following revisions of the *New Zealand curriculum* for schools (Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga Ministry of Education, 2025),

alongside similar shifts they had experienced overseas. In response, the team wanted to demonstrate how care, teaching, and learning of key skills in infants and toddlers occur all the time through everyday interactions. Collaborative video-stimulated conversations with kaiako–researchers revealed evidence of teachers’ pedagogical practices supporting learning dispositions, language, and maths within the context of everyday relationships with infants and toddlers.

Tara Solomon, Lisa Winiata, Deborah Wansbrough, Pandora Hawke, and Wendy O’Brien share findings on how a kindergarten teaching team fostered inclusion for a Deaf child, guided by *Te Whāriki* and Aotearoa Deaf Community’s social model of disability. In this case study, the authors illustrate how kaiako enact their role as “agents of inclusion”, providing examples of ways kaiako actively removed barriers to enhance the child’s ECE experiences to support her transition from ECE to school. Emergent themes are framed around the five child-centred learning questions of *Te Whāriki*: Do you know me? (*Mana*

whenua/Belonging); Can I trust you? (*Mana atua/Wellbeing*); Do you let me fly? (*Mana aoturoa/Exploration*); and, Is this place fair for us? (*Mana tangata/Contribution*). The authors reflect on implications for supporting teachers in planning and delivery of an inclusive ECE curriculum, highlighting the importance of working conditions that critically include optimal levels of funding, staff qualifications, and teacher–child ratios.

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References

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