

Intentionally supporting and extending young children's learning about and through the visual arts: Suggestions and strategies for early childhood education teachers

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Abstract

The New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, encourages teachers to intentionally implement learning experiences so children learn about and through the visual arts. Acknowledging the tensions between intentional teaching and play-based learning, teachers are urged to be neither hands-off nor very structured in designing visual arts learning experiences. In the absence of practical guidance on how this might be achieved, this article synthesises a range of national and international research on early childhood (EC) arts education. Suggestions are given around purposeful provision of visual arts resources and spaces, connecting children's home and early childhood education (ECE) art experiences, collaborations between teachers and children, extending artistic vocabulary, utilising picture books and art exhibitions, encouraging reflections and discussions about children's artworks, establishing appreciative audiences for children's artworks, and teachers being truly present with children in their visual-art-making endeavours.

Introduction

The visual arts provide young children with valuable modes for communication and meaningful play-based learning experiences as they make meaning of their worlds, express their ideas and thinking, and experience wonder. The New Zealand early childhood (EC) curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), encourages teachers to design visual arts curriculum experiences that involve children in learning about art as well as through art. This curriculum is based on sociocultural perspectives, which recognises the central place of social interactions and language in children's learning and development. As

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such, it is important that children have rich experiences with “people, places and things” as well as “materials, artefacts and tools” within their lives (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 61). The pedagogical guidance for EC teachers in many Western EC contexts, including New Zealand, is to be neither hands-off nor very structured (Ministry of Education, n.d.) in the provision of art learning experiences. This cautioning speaks to some of the tensions that currently exist about how teachers should (or shouldn't) intentionally interact with young children to support and extend their art learning experiences.

As pointed out in a review of literature on international teaching in EC, which included literature from New Zealand, despite clear evidence of the benefits of teachers' interactions to support young children's learning, intentional teaching in early childhood education (ECE) continues to be a contested concept (Grieshaber et al., 2021). In a fifth of the 101 literature items reviewed, teachers reported tensions regarding the need to have learning outcomes in mind when engaged in intentional teaching. Likewise, understanding their roles in supporting young children's play-based learning was also an area of tension for teachers. Similar tensions were noted by Thomas et al. (2011) in examining the ways two EC teachers in Australia taught mathematical concepts with their play-based programme in their centre. It was noted that intentional teaching was an “essential element of a pedagogy based on learning through play” and how teachers enacted their teaching roles could be “both enabled and constrained by discourses of play and intentional teaching” (p. 74).

Discourses of play and intentional teaching may be especially complex with regards to EC art education. Teachers' pre-existing perceptions of the nature of EC art education impacts on how they see their role in supporting young children's art experiences. These perceptions can be influenced by teachers' own unexamined social, cultural, and historical notions of childhood, the nature of child art, and children's artistic development. For instance, modernist art movements of the early 20th century, when artist such as Pablo Picasso and Paul Klee were inspired by child art, have influenced Western views of child art so that high value has been placed on the expressive and naïve style of young children's drawings (Richards, 2007). These well-established modernist ideas, plus a well-intentioned and long-standing emphasis on young children's creative expression and natural artistic development, have resulted in many EC educators distancing themselves from children during art making (Plows, 2014;

Richards, 2007; Richards & Terreni, 2013; Terreni, 2016). Indeed, adopting a hands-off approach, so children engage in their art making without adult influence, may be seen as empowering for children (Clark & de Lautour, 2009).

Intentionally talking and engaging with children about their art also seems somewhat problematic for many EC teachers in New Zealand (Terreni, 2017; Terreni et al., 2021), as does encouraging children to learn from the artworks of others (Richards, 2019). Research has also revealed that an emphasis on children's individual expression and natural creativity can discourage teachers from talking about or evaluating children's art, entering into children's art-making spaces, or even responding to requests for assistance (Ashton, 2008; Clark & de Lautour, 2009; Lindsay, 2015; Pohio, 2006; Richards, 2009, 2014; Visser, 2005, 2006).

Paradoxically, fostering interactions between young learners and more capable others, including teachers, is an important pedagogical feature of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), and children often seek interactions with more knowledgeable others, in their homes and communities, when engaged in art activities (Richards, 2018b). Successful art teaching strategies, such as encouraging or scaffolding children's art experiences through dialogue and questioning, or modelling art-making skills and demonstrating ideas and techniques, all require active engagement by teachers (Probine, 2019). The EC curriculum in New Zealand, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), does provide some philosophical underpinnings for visual arts education, while providing few pedagogical approaches or teaching strategies for teachers' purposeful interactions with children engaged in art-making experiences.

***Te Whāriki* and visual arts education**

Te Whāriki recognises that visual art is a language through which children develop "increasing competence in symbolic, abstract, imaginative and creative thinking" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 41). It is one of the many multiliteracies that young children use to express their ideas and thinking and make meaning of their lives (Danko-McGhee & Slutsky, 2007; Richards, 2017; Wright, 2019). This idea is supported by research that investigated the use of pūrākau as provocations for art learning experiences (Terreni et al., 2021). This research, and other research (Richards, 2017), confirms that art making can

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be a powerful tool in helping young children to make sense of their personal, cultural, and national identities.

In terms of guidance for New Zealand ECE teachers, the most significant mention of children's experiences in the visual arts in *Te Whāriki* can be found in the goals and learning outcomes in the *Communication/Mana reo* strand. In this strand, teachers are encouraged to assist children to develop skills and confidence with art and craft processes, as well as the use of specific art media—such as crayons, pencils, and paint. Children being “creative and expressive” and being able to express “their feelings and ideas using a wide range of materials and modes” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 42) are important aspirations for learning in this domain. Teachers are encouraged to design visual art learning experiences that involve young children learning about visual art and how to make it, and learning through the arts.

Learning about visual art involves children making their own art through the provision of a range of art media and also involves developing art appreciation skills by looking at, and talking about, artworks—their own and that of others. Through this they can build understandings about the wider purpose and function of art (Fuemana-Foa'i et al., 2009). Art appreciation involves exposure to different art techniques, concepts, and vocabulary, and art from different cultural contexts. Through learning about art, children can develop language skills, artistic understandings, critical thinking, and cultural awareness.

Learning through the arts also creates possibilities for children to engage with visual art in ways that not only develop their creativity but also develop knowledge and skills in other curriculum areas—such as science, technology, and maths (Freeman & Terreni, 2021; Kelly-Ware, 2020). For instance, STEM (integrated learning in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) is increasingly promoted in educational contexts. However, in recognition of the central place of the arts in young children's learning and modes of communication, the arts have been added to this acronym, thus STEAM. Following an investigation into how a STEAM approach was incorporated into several international EC services' curriculum, Kelly-Ware (2020) suggests that “innovative ways to extend teaching pedagogy and practice in STEAM subject areas in ECE are possible and supported in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) through its emphasis on children's working theories” (p. 1). This approach to curriculum enables the incorporation of multiple

disciplines, including the arts, and integrated learning is relevant in ECE's holistic approach to children's learning.

The potential for learning through art also extends into many other knowledge domains. For example, the examination of picture book illustrations can enhance children's engagement in literature. An interpretation of an artwork might be expressed through dance and movement and be the basis for a dramatic enactment or performance. Children can also learn about the visual arts through picture books, with appreciation activities that contain "discussions that involve art vocabulary, including descriptive, analytical, interpretative and judgemental words" (Hsiao, 2010, p. 143).

While *Te Whāriki* positions teachers as key participants in children's learning and development (Ministry of Education, 2017), de Lautour (2020) notes that, although the EC curriculum has "begun to link the visual arts to a total learning process, it remains for each educator to critically reflect and dialogue on how these aspirations can be enacted through [their] practice". As such, there is an assumption that teachers have the necessary "pedagogical awareness of how to foster and build meaningful learning experiences" (p. 4). This assumption may not be well founded, as research findings show that many EC teachers, who have not had specialist training, do not "have the knowledge or skills to teach art" (Twigg & Garvis, 2010, p. 197), thus impacting on their ability to "implement high quality visual arts experiences with children" (Lindsay, 2017, p. xii).

Some further support for teachers' approaches to EC arts education is available online, on the Ministry of Education's website *Te Whāriki Online: Arts* (Ministry of Education, n.d.). In this resource, guidance for teachers is primarily presented as a set of dispositions for teachers. These include being curious and interested in learning about the arts, favouring learning experiences that stimulate creativity, self-expression, and delight, and understanding the place of technical and artistic knowledge in helping children to reach their creative potential. While teachers are urged to design art curriculum around children's experiences and cultures, and embed these in everyday experiences and activities, the guidance does not include practical strategies that teachers can use to foster interactions or dialogue with children when involved in art.

Practical pedagogical art education—suggestions and strategies for ECE teachers

To address this lack of practical pedagogical art education strategies for ECE teachers, existing research and literature relevant to EC visual arts education has been synthesised to provide some suggestions for teachers. These suggestions, which are framed as six proposals, are offered so teachers might confidently engage with children to support and extend their visual arts education. Consideration is also given to the type of resources and areas within an EC centre that can be provided for art making. These ideas sit within sociocultural frameworks (Vygotsky, 1978), where interactions between children and teachers often involve co-constructions and connections with children's cultural and socially lived experiences. As with other learning, children's learning through and about the arts leads their development and occurs in relationships with the world around them and is "mediated by participation in valued social and cultural activities" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 61).

Proposal One: Provide rich and interesting art-making resources and spaces

The provision of rich and interesting art resources and art-making spaces is fundamental to successful art-making experiences (Probine, 2019). Having uninterrupted time to engage in art-making spaces, with a range of quality art resources and materials (paper, card, paint, pencils, pastels, charcoal, scissors, tape, etc.), is also important so children can learn about how to use basic tools and media, and to make connections between different art processes and techniques. Likewise, children who regard drawing as their preferred play activity would benefit from access to their ongoing drawing and art projects (Richards, 2014). Increasingly, there are digital tools that children can use for their art making that could also be considered as relevant in these spaces; for example, iPads or computers (Terreni, 2010). Teachers might also work with and alongside children on digital platforms to research about artworks and topics of interest.

Art areas, whether they are inside or outside, should be well maintained by teachers during sessions and changed from time to time to introduce new art materials, art-making processes, ideas, or provocations for art explorations. New stimuli can be introduced that build on and extend children's interests and explorations (Richards, 2018c). However, while teachers need to be mindful

of building on children's interests, they can also offer experiences that are fresh to children so they can develop new interests. Anecdotal observations of EC centres in New Zealand, as well as research (Duncan, 2011; Terreni, 2019), suggest that teachers who provide rich and interesting resources and aesthetic art-making spaces are cognisant of the important role the environment can play in enhancing learning for children. Attractive, well-provisioned, and clearly designated spaces for art-making and learning experiences can support children's developing art skills (Vecchi, 2010) and enhance their respect and care for materials.

The embracing of pedagogical approaches from Reggio Emilia (Vecchi & Guidici, 2004) has highlighted the importance of aesthetically stimulating learning environments for young children, where the environment can be regarded as a third teacher (Danko-McGhee, 2009; Pairman & Terreni, 2001). Research, which explored four EC centres in the Asia-Pacific region that were influenced by the pedagogical practices of the Reggio Emilia Education Project, suggests "having a variety of artwork or objects displayed in the centre in different styles, from different cultures, and in different mediums (for instance, sculpture, pottery, weaving, cloth, art from different cultures) can also add considerable interest to the environment" (Terreni, 2019, p. 10). Having conversations with children's whānau about visual art objects that children have at home, or experience in their communities (e.g., the tukutuku panels in a whareniui), can provide helpful information for teachers who are looking for relevant art objects and/or art experiences to include in their environments.

Proposal Two: Connect children's home-based and centre-based art experiences

Finding ways to make authentic links between children's art experiences from home and those had in the ECE centres, or schools, can lead to important art explorations (Szekely, 2006). Talking with parents about their children's community- or home-based interests and art skills can assist teachers to consider ways to support and extend these in ECE. For instance, a child's interest in particular toys, TV shows, films, books, themes, or stories may have led to home-based drawings, where children learn about art by looking at examples (Richards, 2019). While teachers may be conditioned to thinking of this as "copying", these skills should be valued and promoted in ECE settings as well.

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Children often have abiding interests, and big ideas, that they carry with them across their home and ECE worlds. When children become deeply engaged in making sense of their worlds through their art making, they can move from superficial recognition of their worlds (yes, I know this thing) to deeper perceptions (Richards, 2012, 2018c). These ongoing interests can be expressed as spontaneous art (Richards, 2014), so having easy access to drawing materials as part of several play areas (and not just at the art table) can enhance art, literacy, and communication skills, and enrich play.

Tuning into children's big ideas and home- and community-based art might help in planning further art learning experiences in ECE. Additionally, the central ideas that interest a child may remain constant, while teachers support this child and other children to explore this in another media—such as encouraging children to translate their home drawings, or photographs, into 3D artworks with clay or construction materials. Children's drawings can also become stimulus for a dramatic play, with their drawings providing a type of graphic script.

Knowing about the different cultural art forms that are present in children's homes may also lead to further explorations of this type of art in ECE centres. Fuemana-Foa'i et al. (2009) describe an instance where kindergarten teachers deliberately introduced art learning experiences that connected to some of the children's home art and Pasifika culture. As a result of this valuing of cultural art forms, the children collaboratively created patterns for tapa (traditional barkcloth used for decorative purposes). The children "drew symbols and patterns that held some significance for them and engaged in discussion of their understanding and experiences of this art form. For many, tapa was part of their everyday lives, while for others it was a new and different art form" (p. 26). Investigating art from diverse cultures can be an exciting investigation for both children and teachers, and bring about cultural inclusion, build communities, and celebrate diversity.

The connections that can be made through home art experiences can be illuminating for teachers about a child's home situation. An example of this can be seen when teachers at Pigeon Mountain Kindergarten supported and encouraged children's development of digital photography as an art form (Pigeon Mountain Kindergarten, 2010). Children took cameras home to capture aspects of their domestic lives and the things that interested them. Important

insights were gained when a child with English as an additional language was given a camera to take home (Duncan, 2011). His photos revealed things that he was unable to tell his teachers about, because of his low English language proficiency, such as his significant relationship with a new puppy. His home photographs were printed at kindergarten and, with the help of his teachers, he was able to create a scrapbook using his images. This scrapbook became a very precious artefact for him. Indeed, encouraging children with English as an additional language to talk about their photographs and drawings can lead to improved communication skills, shared understandings, and expression of complex feelings and ideas (Richards, 2017). It can also lead to greater home-centre connections and strengthen parent–teacher relationships.

Proposal Three: Encourage collaborative art-making experiences

Teachers and children can be fellow art makers. When making art together, adults can tune into children’s interests and model art-making techniques, use arts language with children as they engage together, and help children to problem solve if needed (Jurisich, 2010). Sometimes this is reciprocal learning for children and teachers (ako), as children can help teachers solve problems and give them ideas for their art (Duncan, 2011). Hands-on engagement by teachers in art-making and art-learning experiences can enhance children’s creative processes (and teachers’), enjoyment, and participation. Probine (2019), a visual arts researcher and educator, urges teachers to not “feel afraid to create alongside children ... [as] there is great value in teachers role modelling personal enjoyment in the visual arts” (p. 5).

There is also value in creating collaborative and group art learning opportunities for children. This may provide additional social and communication skill development: “When children create visual arts in groups, the act of representing thinking visually allows them to share their ideas with others. This supports them to transform their understandings through co-construction. In such an environment, children can try out new ideas as well as strategies for working with visual media, inspired by their peers, which they internalise and then draw upon later in different contexts” (Probine, 2019, p. 1). The value of children communicating with one another through their art was also noted by Brooks (2017) when young children were developing joint projects. It was observed that “compiling and comparing observational drawings gave

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the children a reference upon which to build and elaborate their ideas” (p. 29). Children creating art together can facilitate discussions about their working theories (Hedges, 2021), and teachers have a role in facilitating such discussions and encouraging children’s extended arts explorations. Children’s interests and their everyday experience can be central to their inquiries, as expressed through their art, including developing working theories about notions of identity, culture, and gender (Kelly-Ware, 2016; Richards, 2018a). At other times, the art materials will prompt children’s experimentation and testing of ideas around such things as building structures or blending colours.

Proposal Four: Discuss artwork with children and use artistic vocabulary

While “it is not necessary for us to know what a young child is depicting” (Mulcahey, 2009, p. 34), children often have important narratives that they want to share about their work. Talking with children about their artworks, in ways that are authentic, can help children feel comfortable about discussing their ideas with teachers and others. This is an important skill to develop. The key to this type of engagement by teachers is genuine curiosity in children’s thinking and a desire to understand the ideas children have represented in their art works (the product), as well as understanding the processes that children have used to create the work.

Nonetheless, it has been argued that taking a too direct approach (e.g., by asking “What are you painting?”) may cause some performance anxiety and shut down conversation (Brownlee, 2004). However, by warming children up to the idea of talking about their work, by using open-ended questions or comments that focus on art techniques or the elements of art used by children in their work, can be helpful. An example of this could be “I can see that you are really enjoying using the brush to make interesting lines ... I can see a zigzag line in your picture!” With verbal children, a teacher could also ask, “What is your best/favourite part?” This focus on one aspect rather than the whole work can provide insights into what they discovered in their art making—such as liking the way the brush left scratchy marks on the paint. This might lead on to conversations about textures and open up new learning opportunities. This approach can also stop a teacher from “deciding for the child” what was the most significant aspect of the artwork or the art experience.

The elements of art include such things as point (dots), lines, shapes, space, texture, colour, form, and tone. As illustrated in the previous examples of initiating conversations with children about their work, the elements of art can generate interesting discussions and, as McArdle (2012) points out, can provide a vocabulary for teachers and children for art making and verbal engagements. Discussion with children, Engel (1996) suggested, can also involve talking about how the work was organised and teachers could make enquiries about aspects such as composition, perspective, and action. Engel believed that finding out where children's ideas came from can also be illuminating. For example, did the ideas come from their imaginations, popular culture, their homes, or their peers? However, it may also be clear, from observing a child at work, that no discussion is required as the child is engaged purely in the sheer enjoyment of art making. Also, it is a difficult task (even for adults) to talk and make art simultaneously, so discussion about children's art should occur immediately when the children have finished their work or are stepping back from the task to reflect on their art making.

Proposal Five: Explore illustrations in picture books and visit art exhibitions

The illustrations in picture books are often artworks in themselves and can be used to generate discussions with children about art and the artists/illustrators who created them, and the themes in the artwork. Kelly-Ware and Daly (2019) suggest that the role of illustrations “can act as both mirrors and windows on the world. As mirrors they can reflect children's own lives (familiar objects and content), and as windows they can give children a chance to learn about someone else's life (unfamiliar objects and content)” (p. 3). The use of carefully selected picture books with young children can make a difference to children's awareness of issues of social justice and support children's understandings of fairness (Kelly-Ware, 2018). These types of inquiries could also be used to prompt children to illustrate their own stories and create their own books. Research in Taiwan, by Hsiao (2010), found that investigating picture books, and having “discussions that involve art vocabulary, including descriptive, analytical, interpretative and judgemental words” (p. 143) can also lead to positive changes in children's reading and drawing behaviours in their homes.

Teachers can create opportunities for young children to have access to high-quality artwork by local and international artists. Excursions to art galleries,

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libraries, and museums can offer rich experiences of art that represent Aotearoa New Zealand and its diverse cultures (Terreni, 2017), as well as artwork from different parts of the world. There are many questioning strategies that teachers can use with children in these contexts, and the visual teaching strategies (VTS) are increasingly being used by educators in gallery and museum settings. These include strategies that aim at facilitating responses to art works by encouraging children to look closely at work and sharing their thinking, but do not require the facilitator to add any contextual information to the inquiry. There are three basic questions: “What is going on in the picture?”, “What do you see that makes you say that?”, and “What can you find?” (Bell, 2010/11, p. 165). One of the strengths of this approach is that VTS can assist teachers, if they feel they know little about art or artworks and lack confidence, to facilitate inquiries and discussions with children.

Purposeful planning for an excursion to an art gallery can enhance the experiences for children and adults. A research initiative in New Zealand, undertaken by Clarkin-Phillips et al. (2012), analysed kindergarten children's experiences in art galleries, and identified several useful strategies for EC teachers preparing for and undertaking visits. These strategies included, prior to the gallery visit, teachers laminating photographs of the exhibitions and promoting discussions that orient children to the work they will be seeing. Secondly, during the visit, providing children with sketch books to take into the gallery, so they can make their own responses to artworks. Thirdly, during and following the visits, the teachers can develop learning stories about the visit and plan follow-up experiences back in the centre. Lastly, following the visit, teachers or children, or both, could make books about the visit which would provoke further discussions and dialogues.

Children creating and hosting their own art exhibitions as a follow-up from gallery and museum visits can also be a very powerful learning experience, and a good way to help them reflect on their learning in that context (Eales, 2013).

Proposal Six: Encourage children to reflect on their art and establish appreciative audiences

Teachers can provide ways for young children to communicate about and reflect on their art after they have completed it, by attractively displaying artwork in the centre and/or by having photographs of children's work (and art-making

processes) available to view. Moreover, displaying the artworks at child height (Savva & Trimis, 2005) can optimise the children's engagement. Techniques discussed previously may be useful in treating these displays as art exhibitions, while also offering an opportunity for children to reflect on and talk about their artworks, and those of their peers. Pedagogical documentation such as learning stories are also a good vehicle for reflection and discussion between children, teachers, parents, and whānau. Ideally, as the child's experiences and ideas should be central in these discussions and reflections, attentive adults can then help facilitate the child's next part of their art-making journey.

Artists need appreciative audiences to keep them motivated and encouraged so they will persist with their creative endeavours. Children are no different. A key factor to being an appreciative audience for children is to be truly present during and/or after children's visual art-making endeavours. Busy teachers, while they may tell a child they like an artwork and help to hang it up/put it away, so often miss opportunities to engage deeply with children about their art experiences. This involves teachers (or other adults) finding or making time to have authentic conversations with children. This will clearly demonstrate they have an interest in the children's artwork and, through this, affirm their efforts and give them feedback. In busy EC centres, where so much happens during the day, this can be difficult. However, one of the considerations in *Te Whāriki* for good practice involves teachers engaging in conversations with children and making sure to "listen to them attentively to understand their perspectives" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 45). It is in this process that the teachers can acknowledge and do justice to children's creative efforts.

Conclusion

As Grieshaber et al. (2021) pointed out when reviewing literature on intentional teaching (IT) in ECE, "individual, uninterrupted time is difficult to sustain in many settings" and as "questions about IT and managing small groups within larger group settings were left unanswered" this "area requires further research and more diverse theoretical resources than those from developmental psychology" (p. 19). This article attempts to provide some support for EC teachers to intentionally support and extend young children's art experiences. It has examined the pedagogical messages embedded in the New Zealand EC

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curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, that support the provision of visual art education in ECE. The sociocultural underpinnings of the document are shown to be relevant to teaching in this domain. Nonetheless, there are gaps in the information available to teachers regarding the provision of practical visual art education strategies and ideas to implement in ECE.

Through a synthesis of ideas found in national and international research and literature, we have developed a set of proposals and strategies. These include the provision of rich and exciting art resources and art-making spaces, and teachers connecting to art experiences children have at home. Collaborative art-making experiences for teachers and children are discussed, as well as how to create opportunities for discussing artwork using artistic vocabulary. Exploring the illustrations in picture books and visiting art exhibitions are presented as excellent vehicles for exploring the art of others. Creating opportunities for children to reflect on their art and establishing an appreciative audience for their work are highly important for empowering children artistically and keeping children's motivation for artistic expression alive.

Glossary

Te reo Māori as used in the article

tukutuku	ornamental lattice work
pūrākau	myths or stories
whānau	the wider family group
whareniui	meeting house

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