
Comment

Hot on the heels of the 2017 publication of *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa* (Ministry of Education, 2017) (*Te Whāriki 2017*), the Institute of Early Childhood Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, held its October Spring Research Seminar, offering opportunity for “practitioners and researchers to explore some of the possibilities and realities of the revised *Te Whāriki*.” Entitled *Te Whāriki 2017: New Realities and Possibilities*, the seminar had as its whakataukī “Whaia te iti kahurangi. Kī te tūohu koe, me he maunga teitei.” This whakataukī was paralleled with the aim to “Set your sights on the lofty heights, and through talking, listening and valuing one another we can create lively colourful futures”.

This special issue of *Early Childhood Folio* publishes articles derived from a selection of the keynote speeches and workshops presented on the day. These articles are offered as an opportunity to think differently and therefore critically, to enable us to see what we may have taken for granted in the 1996 *Te Whāriki* (Learning Media, 1996) (*Te Whāriki 1996*), to think about the tools offered in both the 1996 and 2017 curriculum statements—these things are of mutual benefit in helping push forward thinking and practice.

Four of the six articles make comment on the bicultural framing of *Te Whāriki 2017*, arguing biculturalism and honouring of Te Tiriti o Waitangi to be essential foundations for early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand. Mere Skerrett’s article, originally a combined keynote address with Jenny Ritchie, discusses shifts in *Te Whāriki 2017*, which she describes as “being a curriculum for all children, having a stronger bicultural framing, the intentionality of curriculum design, the importance of community engagement, the

centrality of kaupapa Māori theory and its relationship to identity, language, and culture”. Skerrett moves to examine in depth the value of a critical kaupapa Māori theoretical approach. She demonstrates how whakapapa can be woven into critical kaupapa Māori pedagogy through drawing on the stories from Pīpīwharau and Tānerore. A further practice example discusses how using Robyn Kahukiwa’s book *Taniwha* helped to shape a curriculum story telling project around Papatūānuku and her unborn child, Rūaimoko. In these ways Mere Skerrett theorises a whakataukī, and demonstrates ways that teachers can start to address pedagogical and political challenges of *Te Whāriki 2017*.

Jenny Ritchie’s article discusses whether the 2017 curriculum responds to pressing challenges for Aotearoa New Zealand and global challenges for our epoch: the ongoing challenges of honouring the commitments to Māori made in Te Tiriti o Waitangi; the more recent issue of cultural and linguistic superdiversity; and the climate-change crisis and associated need for education to address ways of living sustainably on a finite planet. Ritchie looks back to the original *Te Whāriki* document, giving praise to the original writers and their processes of consultation, and also raising some earlier concerns that its non-prescriptive nature could lead to a neglect, a bypassing of crucial epoch-typical challenges. A common theme throughout her consideration of *Te Whāriki 2017* is her focus on Te Tiriti o Waitangi and ongoing recognition of the status of Māori as tangata whenua. She bemoans that a crucial “call to account” from the *Te Whāriki 1996*—“In what ways do the environment and programme reflect the values embodied in Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and what impact does this have on adults and children?”—is missing in the 2017 version. Yet new strengths of the

document are highlighted. An overarching message is for us to “to avoid the constraints of conventional, colonial thinking in order to build on the strengths of the document and transcend its weaknesses”.

Carmen Dalli’s article starts with discussion of some of the shifts in *Te Whāriki 2017*. She argues that deletion of the prefix “to grow up as” from the aspiration statement “Competent, 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”, can be linked to the notion of children as powerful agents in their own lives, and is further linked to the Māori concept of the mana of the child. Like Ritchie, she argues that cultural inclusivity has been given a new imperative for action. In “Refreshing our Work with Infants and Toddlers: Mantras from Theory and Research into Practice” the main focus is on the bringing together of a selection of “mantras for good practice in infant and toddler settings, accumulated from theory and from research alongside teachers, and in making connections to the text of the refreshed *Te Whāriki*”. What is unique in Dalli’s article is the clear elaboration of theoretical foundations that underpin the mantras, such as the linkage between attachment theory, psychosocial theory, and neurobiological research, and the mantra “sensitive responsive caregiving” and “respectful, reciprocal, and responsive relationships”. Within her discussion, Dalli highlights subtle changes within the *Te Whāriki 2017* principles, such as addition of the word “respectful” within the term “responsive and reciprocal relationships”. Examples from research studies are used to bring alive practice implications and offer a sound research base for her analysis. This article addresses a pressing need for relevant and thoughtful consideration of work with infants and toddlers.

New approaches to learning in early childhood education and school made clear in *Te Whāriki 2017* are highlighted in Sally Peters’ article. According to Peters, the image of the whāriki is explored in greater depth to illustrate the complexity of weaving and the breadth of possible connections between *Te Whāriki*, *The New Zealand Curriculum*, and *Te Marautanga o Aotearoa*. Peters remarks also on “a greater recognition that the realms of mana represented in the five strands of *Te Whāriki* are a basis for learning and are relevant across the lifespan and

relate not just to key competencies but to all aspects of learning”. The idea of “split-screen pedagogy” is also new to *Te Whāriki 2017*, denoting a simultaneous focus on teaching concepts and strengthening learning capacity. Peters uses this concept to draw attention to the need for a “dual focus”, a balanced weaving between learning dispositions and working theories associated with the strands of *Te Whāriki 2017*. Her examples from research studies offer starting points for those wanting to explore connecting curricula in early childhood education and schools.

Ann Pairman’s “Little Boxes, Rambling Houses, and Children’s Agency” takes the greater emphasis in *Te Whāriki 2017* on children’s rights to exercise some agency in their own lives as a starting point for considering how built environments can influence children’s agency. She draws on her research in four spatially diverse early childhood centres to demonstrate these influences. In particular, Pairman describes and theorises how spatial complexity “thickened” children’s agency, by enabling diverse rhythms to coexist harmoniously, private spaces to which children could withdraw, opportunities to transform space and to protect interactive play. Noise transfer and visibility were also studied and had influence, alongside factors such as relationships with teachers, other children, and the overall attention to or emphasis given by teachers in the setting to children’s voice, power, and agency. Pairman points out that early childhood centre design in Aotearoa New Zealand is left to the free market and constrained only by minimum regulations. She argues that “we need to debate what kind of contexts we think built environments should create to support our new curriculum framework”.

Tara McLaughlin and Sue Cherrington claim *Te Whāriki 2017* more explicitly invites teachers to view their role as active and embrace intentional teaching. Specifically, they draw attention to the new section of *Te Whāriki 2017* entitled “Responsibilities of Kaiako” that uses the words “thoughtful and intentional pedagogy” as the way to fulfil the primary responsibility of facilitating children’s learning and development. The authors offer international and local definitions of intentional teaching, and make it clear that “both an intentional pedagogical approach and the currently prevalent child-centred approach are important for children’s learning within a rich curriculum”. Drawing from McLaughlin et al.’s research, the authors offer potential teaching strategies to use with children that they argue could support teacher intentionality and decision making.

This special issue comes at a good time for practice and policy in Aotearoa New Zealand, offering food for thought for practice and pedagogy and pointing directions for considerations in the development of the Aotearoa New Zealand strategic plan for early learning.

Linda Mitchell, Editor

References

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