
Comment

"Early Years in the wider context: Perspectives on wellbeing and belonging" is the topic of this special issue. *Belonging/Mana whenua* and *Wellbeing/Mana atua* are crucial constructs and strands of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) that develop in the context of relationships with people, places, and practices in early childhood (EC) settings, and within broader contexts of families and communities. How wellbeing and belonging in Aotearoa New Zealand can be supported through early childhood education, especially where different cultural beliefs require negotiation, is of particular interest. Belonging is portrayed as a fundamental human need, a basis for contributing to society, and a way of connecting with others and the environment. Wellbeing is often described in relation to health. But deeper understandings and processes of belonging and wellbeing and how these are facilitated through pedagogical practices are less well understood. The topic is especially significant during the threat from the COVID-19 virus; early years settings can play a vital role in supporting wellbeing and belonging at this time.

Carmen Dalli, Anna Strycharz-Banas, and Miriam Meyerhoff provide valuable reference to scholarly literature on definitions of wellbeing and belonging, which they describe as under-researched as pedagogical concepts. They explore wellbeing and belonging from perspectives of children and teachers in a multi-ethnic early childhood centre in a major city in New Zealand. They draw on their 18-month investigation of conflict and peace-making, focusing on the structure of conflict among children aged 2–5 years, and conflict as a means through which children negotiate wellbeing and belonging. The authors use examples from teacher focus-group discussions and video-recorded episodes of children's interactions to analyse

conflict episodes. Importantly, their investigations of child-led actions that happen post conflict, demonstrate the many peace-making strategies children use to repair, maintain or develop relationships. In doing so, the authors argue that young children are constructive in managing peer conflict and that through conflict children learn social rules in context. In their peace-making strategies post conflict, "children are also actively restoring their wellbeing and learning the dynamics of belonging". The examples and analysis will be of particular interest to teachers who are likely to encounter similar episodes in their teaching practice, and who may like to use the article in discussion about conflict within their own settings and their role as teachers.

Acting in a dual role as researcher and new entrant class teacher, Hazel Woodhouse explores the potential of Facebook™ to create a virtual community of practice to support children and their families' transition to school in a case study of three ECE settings and a decile 10 primary school. Drawing on the concepts of Gilly Salmon's five-stage model (2010) for e-learning, the author argues that social media can provide opportunities for families to co-construct and support their sense of belonging in a new environment. The context for this article is very interesting—an innovative development of a new entrant families Facebook platform, and the process over time. This is a topic that readers, especially ECE and primary teachers, would enjoy, and perhaps would encourage some new entrant teachers in schools to trial something similar in their own contexts. The topic is especially timely when such means of communication are becoming more prevalent and necessary in education contexts.

Mana whenua/Belonging through assessment—a kōhanga reo perspective explores ngā kōrero tuku iho as an assessment approach

within kōhanga reo. Discussing findings from a Teacher-led Innovation Fund (TLIF) project undertaken by Te Kōhanga Reo ki Rotokawa, Hoana McMillan discusses the processes that led to development of the kaupapa Māori assessment approach, where learning that is valued within te ao Māori is made visible. Further, she describes how the approach acts as a counter to discourses that led to valued practices in the kōhanga reo being largely unnoticed in formal Education Office Review processes which privileged Western assessment approaches. The article describes a final wānanga, where changes that occurred for whānau through the assessment approach are linked to *Mana whenua/Belonging*. This research can make a contribution to understandings of kaupapa Māori assessment approaches in not only te kōhanga reo but in all early childhood education services.

Three articles in this special issue form a set, being authored by teacher participants in a 2-year Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) funded project: “Strengthening belonging and identity of refugee and immigrant children through early childhood education” (2018–2020). The project, a partnership between University of Waikato researchers and practising teachers in four culturally diverse EC settings, sought to gather data, theorise and explore a range of pedagogical strategies for enabling refugee and immigrant children and their families to construct pathways to belonging and contributing within Aotearoa New Zealand (Mitchell et al., 2018). Underpinned by a sociocultural–ecological framework, the project adopted a two-cycle design-based research process (Penuel, 2014) where various pedagogical strategies were developed, trialled, and evaluated. Within each EC setting in the project, data were collected through videoed observations, drawings, artefacts from home, learning stories, interviews with teachers and children’s families and teacher reflections. Data were analysed using thematic (Braun & Clarke, 2006), conversation (Sacks et al., 1974) and membership categorisation analyses.

The article by Jacqui Lees and Olivia Ng, “Whenuatanga: Our places in the world”, highlights the importance of using the visual arts such as drawing and storytelling, and place-based education to value families’ cultural funds of knowledge and foster children’s sense of belonging. Significant stories and information about the local mountains (maunga) in children’s home countries and near their EC centre were used as an initial exploration to

nurture, sustain and extend children and their families’ connections with place. Excursions to two local maunga offered further opportunities for conversations and deepening connections with place in Aotearoa New Zealand. These pedagogical strategies supported and strengthened children’s growing sense of identity and belonging within their local community and homeland. The authors conclude that belonging-based pedagogies can be developed when teachers respect and listen to children and their families, seek to learn from and with children, and establish ongoing productive conversations with children.

Louise Treweek’s article, “Treasure Boxes: A strategy for encouraging belonging”, considers how children’s sense of belonging can be strengthened through inviting children to bring an artefact from home that represents some connection or sense of belonging they have to their homeland, to share with their peers. This artefact could be any number of things: a photograph of a significant place or person, a physical object of importance such as a taonga of some kind, another item or document of significance to the family, or a story or song. The diversity of artefacts that each of the three immigrant case-study children at the kindergarten shared generated much interest from their peers and contributed to the case-study children’s developing confidence, English language skills, and sense of belonging. Videoed episodes of children’s sharing provided helpful starting points for productive teacher–parent conversations and connections to learn more about children and their families’ immigration journey and needs. The author asserts the importance of teacher reflexivity and developing “positive, trusting reciprocal relationships” with families if they are to develop relevant strategies that foster a sense of belonging for the children and their families.

The final article by Sammons et al., “Fostering belonging through cultural connections: Perspectives from parents”, exemplifies the use of cultural/religious artefacts, role play, and reciprocal relationship building in fostering children’s sense of belonging. These drew from children’s cultural funds of knowledge to connect home-based cultures to the centre and Aotearoa New Zealand culture. The findings illustrate how the case-study children at the centre and their whānau grew in their confidence and sense of belonging as a result of these pedagogical actions. As recommendations for teachers, the authors highlight working as a

team to develop a shared vision for learning and respect as a basis for creating a safe environment for reciprocal relationships with whānau, validating families’ aspirations and contributions to the curriculum, and, understanding children’s history and reasons for migration to Aotearoa New Zealand.

Linda Mitchell, Editor

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