
A research portrait of Greerton Early Learning Centre *Infant and Toddler Centre, Emmett Street, Greerton, Tauranga*

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The Emmett Street infant and toddler centre closed in 2017.

This portrait was written by Katrina McChesney to celebrate and preserve our collective memories of that space. It was presented as a gift to the Greerton Early Learning Centre community and has now been shared, at the request of the teaching team, as a resource for others.

Further information about this portrait is available in the associated journal article:

McChesney, K., & Clarkin-Phillips, J. (2020). Space speaks: A portrait of an early childhood centre and the affordances provided by the learning environment. *Early Childhood Folio*, 24(2), 26–34. <https://doi.org/10.18296/ecf.0084>

On the corner of Emmett Street and Greerton Road sits a single-storey, cream weatherboard house with dark green trim. The house is neither stately nor imposing; there is nothing distinctive about its Emmett Street frontage. Rather, the ordinary-looking house blends in with the quiet, simple, tidy but somewhat dated neighbourhood; the house sits nestled between fully-grown trees that show just how long this place has stood in its current form. This place, fondly known as simply “Emmett Street”, has been a stable and welcoming second home—and third space—for the children and whānau of Greerton for over two decades.

The primary entrance to this place is not the formal, solid front door, which separates insiders from outsiders, but a side gate that offers both physical and visual access to the garden. Stepping through this gate, one steps into nature, embraced by the shady protection and the gentle rustling sounds of the leafy cherry blossom tree. One also steps into a place of nurturing, belonging, and care—a place where children are the centre, the taonga,

the lifeblood of all that is and all that happens.

Children and whānau alike delight in the side garden; the much-loved, natural space is full of interesting things to explore. In one sense, it could be anyone’s Kiwi backyard; yet this space has been thoughtfully developed in order to maximise the invitations to play and to learn that are provided by the natural resources. Rocks, tree stumps, and gentle mounds in the grass invite adventure and inquiry. A low planter box—deliberately at child level, like everything in this place—offers the bright colours of flowering impatiens and ripe strawberries; the textures of earth, water, leaves, and flowers; the smells of fresh basil and rosemary; the excitement of hunting for big, fat, wriggly worms. Children climb, crawl, jump, balance, ride bikes, hide, pretend, and negotiate ideas, enjoying the unlimited scope offered by the planks of wood, padded mats, and portable climbing boxes that are available in this space. The cherry blossom tree plays host to an array of treasures: ribbons, a rope ladder, fairy lights, brightly-coloured silk saris. In the spring, babies lie under this tree,

delighting in the sight and feeling of the blossom floating down over them.

The children, absorbed in their exploration and enjoyment of this side garden, are quietly watched, supported, and talked with by the wise teaching staff. A wrought-iron bench, painted dark green, offers a peaceful invitation to both children and adults to sit; to be part of this space; to observe; to experience with all the senses; to snuggle; to tell stories. This space is flexible, enjoyed in different ways depending on the seasons and the interests of the children. At times, it is the site of whānau hui, as the whole Emmett Street community gathers on the grass to celebrate birthdays and “happy leaving days”.

Both children and teachers enjoy being able to watch the world go by from this garden. The grille fencing allows easy visibility for even the smallest members of the Emmett Street whānau, and there is a favourite fence post on which children love to sit: looking across the street to the primary school that many of them will one day attend; waving to parents leaving after the morning drop-off; or saying hello to familiar neighbours—and their pets—who walk by. The children delight in what they see and use their emerging skills to point, wave, or communicate in response.

Next to this side garden runs a covered walkway, linking the centre’s two buildings: the infant whare, at the back of the site, and the toddler whare, the original house visible from the Emmett Street frontage. On arriving at the centre, children are naturally drawn along this walkway toward either the infant or toddler whare, as each child seeks out their own trusted and beloved key teacher to begin the day with a welcoming, reassuring hug. Both children and parents are greeted personally each day; whānau are known and welcomed here, and children—even the very youngest—are respected as being worthy of authentic acknowledgement and communication.

At the infant whare end, the walkway lies at the same level as the entrance to the whare, facilitating budding explorers who are learning to move and, consequently, moving to learn. At the toddler whare end, the walkway leads up a ramp to a corner deck which is a hub of activity at drop-off and pick-up times, full of children, parents, teachers, backpacks, gumboots, wet-weather gear, notice sheets, and emergency supplies. The ramp itself speaks of the risk, challenge, and belief in children’s abilities that are treasured here; many toddlers have spent countless hours zooming down this ramp on bikes,

instinctively learning to swerve and brake to avoid colliding with either the infant whare or the infants themselves who may be exploring the area.

In contrast to the busy, adventure-filled outside spaces, the infant whare offers a safe, quiet and nurturing environment for the smallest children, who need time and space to explore their emerging abilities to roll, reach, wriggle, crawl, stand, and climb. In this calm, uncluttered oasis whare, babies are fascinated by simple things: the difference between the carpeted and hard floor areas; the light pouring in through the doors and windows; the textures of curtains and cushions; the gentle rise in the floor from one area of the room to another; a woven flax mobile hanging from a beam; a long, low mirror inviting babies to come, see, explore. The couch and armchairs in this space are old and worn; they have been loved, and children have been loved in them. A small number of well-chosen, well-loved toys and books lie on the floor around the edges of the room—accessible at child level but not in the way of the important work of learning to move.

While the teachers are always present and engaged, watching, communicating, caring, and comforting, it is the children who lead what goes on here. Each child’s daily rhythms for eating, sleeping, and care moments are accepted and maintained during their days at Emmett Street; during their awake times, the children are free to pursue their own interests and learning intentions and to choose where they want to spend their time. They are never restricted to only the infant whare; this space offers a secure, comforting “home base”, but even the youngest children have ownership and freedom to explore and enjoy other areas of the property and to engage with their tuakana from the toddler whare.

Up at adult level, the items on the walls of the infant whare reflect the intentionality, respect, and love that characterise what goes on here. Photos of the children are displayed along with the stories behind each of their names, and a reminder of the unspoken but profound question asked by children the world over: Do you know me? The teacher inquiries that are documented around the walls of the whare celebrate authenticity and identity: What does inquiry look like in our learning community, where children’s identities as resourceful, resilient, reflective, and responsive social learners are important to us? In what ways can I support whānau aspirations for the children by

developing my authentic self as a teacher? How does my role as a key teacher support children to build trust and develop responsive, reciprocal relationships within this space?

The main house serves as the toddler whare, which is a busier environment for the older children who seek new challenges and experiences. The lived-in, vintage feel of the toddler whare makes it a perfect environment for uninhibited exploration and play; each day it is full of children dancing, singing, chattering, negotiating, and laughing. Natural light streams in through the large wood-framed windows; the open layout lets children move freely between the spaces in this whare and the outside areas. As in the infant whare, the toys and materials here are carefully placed around the edges of the rooms, inviting play without being in the way. A large set of versatile wooden blocks sits on low shelves, the soft, rounded edges of the blocks bearing witness to the countless children who have enjoyed them. Children explore and construct meaning around daily life, family roles, and identity through their imaginative play in the whānau area, with its child-sized bed, doll-sized high chair and cot, dressers, and baskets of dress-up clothes and homewares. Musical instruments, wooden cars, magnets, puppets, simple but sturdy dolls houses are all available, but are not the centre of attention; children frequently bring in treasures from outside—sticks, rocks, shells, flowers, bark, driftwood—that are just as valuable and captivating.

Even within this busy whare, there is still space for quiet enjoyment of stories and snuggles. A basket of storybooks sits invitingly next to a comfortable couch; when a child asks for a story at Emmett Street, the answer is always “Yes”. Boxes of the children’s learning story folders are available under a window, deliberately arranged with the front covers facing forwards to allow children to flip through and find the book that has their own picture and name on the front. *I am known here; I am seen here; I belong here.*

On the walls of the toddler whare are many precious taonga. Photos of children delighting in their learning offer an opportunity to remember accomplishments and special times, fostering children’s sense of belonging in this space. Children’s artwork is thoughtfully displayed: paintings framed in thin sticks of driftwood; sheets of calico decorated by many small hands; twigs dipped in paint or glitter that previously adorned a Christmas tree

constructed and decorated by the children. A canvas, gifted when a child moved on after her season at Emmett Street, bears the child's name and handprints with the profound words: *You let me fly*. The karakia mō te kai that is used daily is displayed prominently; a hand-written list of Tongan vocabulary is posted in the kitchen. Diversity is treasured here in many different ways: from cultural identities to learning goals, from daily rhythms to favourite stories, songs, and activities.

The teachers also make themselves known to the community through what is displayed on the walls of the toddler whare. Their teaching degrees and first aid certificates are reassuringly displayed, but are hung around the very tops of the walls; far more prominent are the colourful, photo-filled stories in which teachers introduce themselves, inviting the Emmett St whānau to come to understand the teachers' passions, whānau, and perspectives on the GELC community and ethos. The teachers' inquiries and pedagogical beliefs are, likewise, displayed, highlighting themes of creativity, real work, respectful listening, a challenging physical environment, continuity of relationships and experiences, "flow", provocative questions, dispositions for learning, curiosity, playfulness, growth mindset.

Behind the toddler whare, a deck opens into the garden. Another flexible space, the deck serves, at various times, as a picnic venue, an art studio, a castle, and a site for celebrations and hui. Children of all ages zoom down the slide that descends off the deck and race around for another go. Even the rails of the deck's balustrade tell stories of the children who have painted the rails, banged on them to make music, peeked through them, and pulled themselves up to help them learn to stand.

At the back of the property is a second garden area, full of further opportunities to explore, investigate, experience, and try out new or ongoing challenges. Rain, hail, or shine, this "yes" space is full of activity. Children naturally respond to the large sandpit's invitation to inquiry and imagination, enjoying their work under the shelter of large shade sails. The gravel pit offers another sensory experience for little explorers, who are intent on their scooping, pouring, driving, spreading, touching, and patting. In summer, the water feature at the back of the garden is full of children splashing, crawling, balancing, and climbing in the tiered ponds and enjoying the feel of the water running down from one level to the next.

Getting wet, sandy, muddy, or grass-stained is welcomed as a natural part of exploring and learning—and the children delight in it.

The whole garden is abundant in natural sights, smells, and textures, with its long grasses, rocks, low camellia hedge, water, harakeke bushes, tall trees, and even a small mandarin tree. Against the side fence, sheltered by the large silk tree, are several swings on a wooden frame; many children have loved these swings and some families have developed a familiar routine of saying goodbye here when it is time for parents to leave for the day. A rope swing hanging from the other side of the tree offers a reminder that there is always another challenge to be explored; another goal to reach for; another reason to practice and persevere.

For over two decades, children have been embraced within this natural, secure, challenging, adventurous, nurturing, child-centred place. Children have also helped shape the space, initiating new ideas, participating in the real work of developing the indoor and outdoor spaces, and contributing the taonga that fill the walls and garden. Emmett Street whānau have seen their children grow, learn, and thrive as a result of the loving relationships and wise teaching practices that underpin everything that happens here. Each child is known; seen. Each whānau is welcomed; connected. The physical space has facilitated these things as generations of children have come and gone, leaving their own marks on the space even after they have

moved on to Mitchell Street or to other homes and communities. Ultimately, however, the space itself is not the greatest taonga—it is the people that fill it and shape it: the children who bring life and purpose with their curious minds, busy hands, and trusting hearts; the teachers who offer their wisdom, aroha, passions, and authentic selves to the community; the whānau who entrust their children to the centre and delight in watching their growth. Spaces may change; people come and go; but there is a spirit and an ethos here that will not be lost with these changes.

He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tangata; he tangata; he tangata.

What is the greatest thing in all the world? It is people; it is people; it is people.

Glossary

aroha	love, respect, compassion
harakeke	flax
hui	gathering
kaiako	teacher/s
karakia mō te kai	prayer/blessing for food about to be eaten
taonga	treasure
<i>Te Whāriki</i>	literally "the mat"; the title of New Zealand's early childhood curriculum
whānau	family
whare	house