

Exploring children's self working theories: Reflections of a graduating early childhood teacher

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This article reports on a professional inquiry conducted by a graduating early childhood teacher, in collaboration with her lecturer, exploring children's working theories of self-identity and capability. Focusing on self-esteem, self-concept, self-efficacy, and motivation, the inquiry examined how children's perceptions of themselves as learners shape their engagement and participation. Drawing on observations and reflections from practice, the findings highlight the relationship between positive self-working theories and children's developing learning dispositions. The study highlights the importance of intentional teacher responses in supporting children to see themselves as capable and valued learners.

The inquiry project — getting underway

In the final year of study at the University of Otago College of Education, Bachelor of Teaching (ECE) students engage in a small-scale professional inquiry project into their own practice. The project encourages students to focus their attention on an area of their own strength, interest, or challenge. The process involves the student choosing an area of interest, setting goals, and then reflecting on their understandings. Students are encouraged to reflect on relevant readings, observe their own practice, and engage in discussions with others while writing reflections on their deepening understandings, ultimately to strengthen their own practice.

I (Meredith) was Bri's visiting lecturer during her final year of study. During the first two years of her initial teacher education, Bri experienced a range of different ECE centres and age groups. Through these experiences Bri developed an interest in working with

older children who were verbal in their thinking and communication. Bri completed her final year of teaching practice in a kindergarten with children aged 2–5 years.

The project

During an early visit in Bri's final year of placement, we sat together observing children at play. One child caught our attention. She was seated on the floor arranging materials in distinct ways. The patterns weren't immediately clear, and we found ourselves wondering what thinking lay behind her choices. Familiar with the child's play history, Bri offered some thoughtful interpretations. Knowing my interest in schema learning theory (Athey, 2007), Bri noted the child's repetitive, strategic, and deliberate organisation of items. Schema broadly refers to the idea that a child's thinking can be observed through repetitive interests and behaviours. This encounter sparked Bri's curiosity. She began exploring a range of theoretical perspectives on children's working theories and their relevance to teaching practice. Over time, Bri developed a deeper understanding of how engaging with children's working theories and evolving ideas supports teachers' knowledge and pedagogical practice (Hedges, 2022).

Alongside her classroom teaching practice, Bri was exploring how children's working theories align with learning dispositions. Working theories are “the evolving ideas and understandings that children develop as they use their existing knowledge to try to make sense of new experiences” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 23). *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) articulates the interrelated ways working theories are constructed alongside children's learning dispositions or tendencies towards learning. Learning dispositions refer to children learning “courage and curiosity, trust and playfulness, perseverance, confidence, and responsibility” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 23). As children participate in and engage with new experiences, they develop, extend, and refine their working theories. These experiences also support robust learning dispositions (Ministry of Education, 2017). Bri became increasingly interested in how children's working theories might influence their learning dispositions. For example, a working theory of themselves as a learner might have an impact on their engagement and curiosity. This line of thinking led Bri to her inquiry project's focus. Early in the inquiry project, Bri reflected:

Over the past year, I have learned that there are different types of working theories: social theories; self-theories; cultural and values theories; and theories of the way the world works. This has sparked my curiosity about how children view themselves.

The following provides insight into Bri's journey and professional inquiry.

Brianna's story

During my final year of study at Otago University College of Education in Invercargill, I became interested in children's working theories, particularly how these theories relate to children's developing sense of self. At college, I came to understand working theories as children's developing understandings and ideas of how people, places, and things function. Working theories constantly evolve as children engage in social interactions, co-construct knowledge, and take on new perspectives and ideas. I learned it was important for teachers to have an in-depth understanding of children's working theories alongside learning dispositions.

According to Hedges (2022), socio-cultural approaches in teaching and learning influence the ways in which children develop or change the ways they think. Children's inquiries, expressed through their questions, explorations and interactions, offer valuable insight into how they think, make sense of their experiences, and learn with and from others. By closely observing these moments, teachers can better understand children's evolving ideas and support the development of their working theories and learning dispositions. Teachers play a crucial role in observing and engaging with children's inquiries, whether expressed through curiosity, questions, explorations, or ideas. Through observation and active engagement, teachers can uncover children's working theories and use this understanding to explore and extend their learning dispositions.

Through my investigation and exploration of literature, I became determined to deepen my understanding of working theories during my placements and in my teaching practice. I came to realise that children's working theories can be shaped by every encounter, experience, and interaction they have with people, places, and things in their lives (Ministry of Education, 2017). Following a conversation with my visiting lecturer, Meredith, I decided to explore children's working theories of "self." I explored *self-working theories* through learning stories, theoretical models, and examining how self-working theories are described and valued in *Te Whāriki*.

During placement, I observed and worked alongside children, maintaining a focus on children's emotions and how I responded to them. I attempted to validate each child's feelings by offering positive guidance and encouragement, actively listening and being present at their level. To explore my thinking and practice further, I developed four key

indicators from the work of Helen Withy (2019), which enabled me to gauge a sense of a child's self-working theories. The indicators are self-esteem, self-concept, self-efficacy, and motivation. I focused on each indicator individually when observing children's learning.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem refers to how individuals value themselves (Withy, 2019). This involves a child's sense of worth or value that they assign to themselves and is influenced by experiences, social feedback, and interactions with peers and adults. According to Withy (2019) and Hedges (2022), positive self-esteem is essential in shaping a child's emotional well-being and their ability to engage with the world confidently.

I observed children's behaviours, actions, and reactions during situations and would take notes before putting together learning stories, ensuring that I was capturing an authentic view of each child I was documenting. The following example is of a child's working theory of self-esteem:

I have observed that E's confidence within her learning has significantly grown. E now expresses herself by taking the initiative to share her ideas during group experiences and eagerly participating in new challenges. She shows pride in her accomplishments, which highlights her growing self-esteem and enthusiasm for learning (August, 2024).

Self-concept

Self-concept refers to a child's developing understanding of who they are, including their traits, abilities, and characteristics (Withy, 2019). Children's self-concept is shaped by their experiences and interactions within their environment. For example, a child's self-concept may include beliefs about whether they are good at certain activities (e.g., drawing, problem-solving) or whether they are a "good" or "bad" person, based on social feedback. The following example is of a child's working theory of self-concept:

E seems proud as she said to me, "See Bri, I can read all of the words. I'm good at reading." E's voice within this interaction strongly highlights her developing self-concept and positive self-image, particularly within her sense of value and self-worth.

Self-efficacy and motivation

Self-efficacy refers to children's growing ability to actively engage and participate in their world, developing their self-identity and an increasing sense of their own capabilities (Withy, 2019). I was able to capture children's self-efficacy and motivation through their voices, observing how their words, actions, and reflections revealed a growing belief in their own capabilities. Below are examples of what I wrote about E:

E's thinking reflects that through her role play as a teacher and her focus on modelling kindness ... E views herself as a role model for her peers. E views herself as an empathetic and kind individual who values treating others with kindness. She also understands how being kind makes others and herself feel (August, 2024).

Through her learning experiences E is learning a positive self-image of herself and discovering her strengths and values, such as empathy, kindness, and leadership through role play (August, 2024).

By listening closely to what each child was saying during play and learning experiences, I gained insight into how children viewed themselves. When writing learning narratives, I wanted to be as reflective as possible to ensure I was looking beneath the surface of children's interests and making meaning of their perceptions of self as a learner.

I reflected on the importance of kaiako having strong, respectful relationships with children's whānau. Relationships with whānau help kaiako identify how children make sense of themselves as learners. In one reflection, I wrote:

Self-working theories are evident in children's behaviours, actions, and attitudes towards learning, and also through their beliefs about themselves, regarding their value and worth. Their working theories of self are reflected in their behaviours and can be observed through their explorations, investigations of ideas, and critical thinking at both home and centre (August, 2024).

By highlighting children's strengths, acknowledging their efforts, and celebrating their contributions, I aimed to support the development of a positive sense of self within children. For example, I had been observing one child over a three-week period. I

noticed she displayed low self-esteem through her words and actions. She appeared anxious and hesitant, often attempting to climb on the climbing frame but stopping after one or two attempts. She would become upset and discouraged, saying, “I can’t do it. I don’t want to do it.” In these moments, I knelt beside her to validate her feelings, gave reassurance, guidance, and confidence to promote a more positive working theory about herself as being capable and resilient. This repetitive approach aimed to tune into the child’s self-esteem and overall sense of self as being a capable learner. A week later, I noticed the same child again, climbing the frame and calling out to her peers, “I’m really good at climbing now,” transforming her working theories about herself as a capable learner. I joined her and we discussed the ways in which she had practised each day and how she might approach doing new tasks in the future.

This focus of children’s self-working theories has allowed me to write learning stories that were not only reflective of their learning but also nurturing of their identity and wellbeing, highlighting the important role we play as teachers in supporting self-working theories of all children.

Reflections of a beginning teacher

My reflections highlight how much my thinking about children as learners developed during my inquiry project. Over my third year, I increasingly recognised that how children feel about themselves has a big influence on their learning dispositions, including being willing to be involved, express opinions, be curious, take risks, and engage with others.

Investigating children’s self-working theories has had a profound impact on how I approach teaching. It has encouraged me to look beyond surface-level behaviours and delve deeper into why each child thinks, responds, and acts the way they do. I’ve come to understand that every action and expression holds meaning, often connected to a child’s evolving sense of self, shaped by their experiences, relationships, and environment. By taking the time to consider potential influences behind each child’s behaviour, whether emotional, social, or cultural, I’ve become more intentional and empathetic in my teaching. This deeper understanding helps me respond in ways that are supportive rather than reactive, nurturing rather than corrective. It’s not just about guiding behaviour but about supporting the whole child, helping them to see themselves as capable, valued, and worthy.

As a teacher, I see the powerful role I play in influencing how children perceive themselves and their place in the world. I’ve learned that through consistent

encouragement, strong relationships, and affirming each child's unique voice and strengths, I can foster a positive outlook that helps children not only grow in confidence but truly flourish into who they are becoming. My teaching is now guided by the belief that when we support a child's self-working theories with care, understanding, and intention, we create conditions for meaningful learning and personal growth. As a teacher, having a strength-based focus for children is important; equally important is empowering children to believe in themselves, to keep trying, and to work hard to achieve their goals because they have the capacity to overcome obstacles. Supporting children in this way lays a foundation that will benefit them far beyond the early childhood setting, influencing all areas of their lives.

Conclusions and thoughts for the future

Bri's experiences highlight the importance of kaiako continuing to explore and value children's thinking (working theories) as meaningful learning. Lovatt (2014) and Hedges (2022) have also highlighted the importance of kaiako noticing and responding to children's ideas of how their world works, and provoking the complexity of their thinking. Bri's small-scale inquiry project has captured the importance of teacher engagement with not only children's working theories, but additionally the importance of children's working theories of themselves as learners and people.

We would suggest that nurturing a young child to have positive working theories of themselves is critical in terms of developing robust learning dispositions (Carr, 2001). As this article was based on Bri's own reflections of her observations with children, it leaves considerable scope for further investigation and research into postgraduate study, an option Bri is now exploring.

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Bri completed her Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood Education) at the University of Otago, College of Education in Invercargill in 2024. She then spent time teaching in Australia in primary schools before returning to New Zealand in 2026 and beginning a Masters Degree. Bri has a love of Early Years education and more recently, new entrants primary teaching.

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