

# Early Education



Volume 66 *Spring / Summer 2020*

- Teacher Led Innovation Round 3
- Teacher Led Innovation Round 4
- Peer learning in ECE
- Privatisation in ECE
- Children, families in prison and ECE practice
- Reflexes and support early learning



# Contents

## Early Education Volume 66 Spring / Summer 2020

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### *Editorial*

Editorial Claire McLachlan	I
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### *TLIF 3 Collections*

A leai se gagana, ua leai se aganu u, a leai se aganu u ona po lea o le nu u Janice Tauoma, Eneleata Tapusoa, Moasina Vili and Ashley Stanley	3
Nelson Central School: Raising student achievement by developing a whole school nurturing culture Tracy Watkins	11
Ngā reo e toru: Trissessment listening to whānau, tamariki and kaiako voices to make learning visible through assessment Sue Werry, Eric Hollis and Roberta Skeoch	13
Transition to school strategies: Strengthening our practice to support whānau and tamariki Kaye Hoffman and Hazel Lam Sam	21
Northcote Baptist Community Preschool: Digital fluency in the presence of an intentional teacher Elizabeth Lupton and Ann Hatherly	27

### *TLIF 4 Collections*

Data, knowledge, action: A teacher led inquiry into data informed teaching in early childhood education Lynda Hunt, Tara McLaughlin, Sue Cherrington, Karyn Aspden and Claire McLachlan	31
Hokowhitu Kindergarten's journey: TLIF data, knowledge, action project Susan Hildred, Heidi Burden, Kylie Clayton, Julia Jones, Wilma Aldridge and Sue Cherrington	35
Kelvin Grove Kindergarten: Our TLIF journey Tammy Dodge, Leanne Walls, Angela Gibson, Penny Burton, and Jess Ballentyne, supported by Coralie Stanley and Tara McLaughlin	39
Riverdale Kindergarten's TLIF journey Coralie Stanley, Jules Greenfield, Nicki Walshe, Megan Philpott and Tara McLaughlin	43
TLIF Data, Knowledge, Action project: West End Kindergarten's inquiry journey Jo Ellery, Mel Kenzie, Debby Gough, Marie O Neil, Sue Cherrington and Lynda Hunt	47
The role of critical friends and organisational leadership in supporting teacher inquiries in ECE settings Sue Cherrington, Gaylyn Campbell, Roybn Vine-Adie and Tara McLaughlin	53

### *Peer reviewed articles*

Children as teachers: How do we support children to be leaders amongst their peers?  
Penny Smith 57

Challenging the old normal: Privatisation in Aotearoa's early childhood care and  
education sector  
Caitlin Neuwelt Kearns and Jenny Ritchie 65

### *Editor reviewed articles*

Opening doors: Teachers supporting children with a loved one incarcerated  
Charlotte Robertson 73

Reflexes and their relevance to Learning  
Leanne Seniloli 79

### *Book reviews*

Politics in the playground: The world of early childhood education in Aotearoa  
New Zealand  
Reviewer: Sue Stover 85

Working with two-year Old's: Developing reflective practice  
Reviewer: Karyn Aspden 87

### *Contributors*

Contributors..... 89



Volume 66 Spring / Summer 2020

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## Contributions

Contributions of articles and photos are welcome from the early childhood community.

*Early Education* welcomes:

- Innovative practice papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words and up to five keywords.
- Research informed papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words, and up to five keywords.
- Think pieces with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Commentaries on management matters with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Book or resource reviews with a maximum of 1000 words.

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# Opening doors

## Teachers supporting children with a loved one incarcerated

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Mā te huruhuru te manu ka rere  
Adorn the bird with feathers so that it may fly

Charlotte Robertson

*Being awarded the Margaret M. Blackwell Travel Scholarship for the early childhood sector in 2018 opened doors for me to research internationally how teachers can support children of prisoners and what local communities and government can do to. My motivation when applying for this scholarship was prompted by years of advocating for children of prisoners and realising the variances in understanding among many who interact with these children. My research both confirmed and challenged our responses when children in educational settings are affected by the incarceration of a loved one. Information was collected through prison visits, observations and interactions with children and prisoners, professionals and volunteers working in organisations and settings related to prison life. I read everything from academic research to pamphlets and attended a children and trauma conference. Among others I am indebted to advocates for children of prisoners here in Aotearoa: Liz Gordon and Pillars, Ka Pou Whakahou, Venezia Kingi and Sir Clinton Roper.*

### Opening doors: Teachers supporting children with a loved one incarcerated

It might be that when you read this article and reflect on your practice you realise this is what you already know and do, or it might be the impetus to evaluate your role and decide what more you can do. When a child or young person discloses to you that someone important to them has been arrested or is in prison, what do you do or say? If you have ever been a victim of crime, how does this influence your

attitude to children when you know they have a parent or family member in prison? And then again, do you know when children have a loved one in prison? Whether consciously or not would your expectations of and responses to these children and/or their family be any different from others? How aware are you of your own or your colleagues' feelings, triggers and signs of compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma? So, the underlying question is when children have a loved one incarcerated, what do you think your role is?

Rather than a prescription of what to do or say this article is a description—a smattering—of ideas to raise awareness of possibilities to ameliorate marginalisation and to be a catalyst to create positive trajectories ensuring the wellbeing, welfare and education of children affected. I believe even small changes in our understanding as teachers can be instrumental in creating an equitable, inclusive, fair, just and culturally responsive learning environment. Gordon (2016) recognises that teachers are not expected to solve everything these children bring to their educational setting. Gordon (2016, p. 2) recommends four fundamental things teachers can do: “destigmatise prison, watch out for the kids, use resources to help the children of prisoners and understand why they may not be learning (and help to overcome that)”.

While few statistics are recorded, everyday there are approximately 20,000 children of prisoners in Aotearoa New Zealand which Treasury (Ball et al., 2016) identified as a key risk factor affecting schooling, and I assume early childhood outcomes. As Roberts (2012, p. 7) argues, “It is not the imprisonment of the parent in and of itself, but the

response to the imprisonment (social isolation and sense of shame in addition to trauma) that increased the risk factor”.

Every child and their family face some similarities when a loved one is arrested, yet many also encounter challenges that are unique such as the offense, how the child was affected, and whether they were involved. It is estimated that one in five children in Aotearoa New Zealand witnesses a family member’s arrest (Gordon, 2009). They could be woken early in the morning by police hammering on their door, made to stand outside in nightwear while the house is searched and witness their parent being handcuffed and taken away without any explanation of what happens next. There are often nightly police checks when bail is granted. Media attention can be overwhelming. Children can attend court. The sentence might be unexpected or anticipated. The length of sentence, placement, related costs and child friendliness of prisons affect visiting. Home detention, release and reintegration can be wanted or feared.

Children, and their families, often experience shame, stigma, financial hardship, siblings being separated, caregiver changes or moving house which means losing their friends and support systems. It can be hard to disentangle the effects of imprisonment from other adversities faced: intergenerational poverty, discrimination and family violence. Fears and anxieties may lead to sleep disturbances, nightmares, bedwetting, loss of confidence and a deterioration in health such as asthma and impact on their ability to concentrate (Gordon, 2016).

Some children are oblivious to where and why their loved one disappeared. The loved one may be a wider family member—the one person the child trusted. Children can decide who is important. Their sense of loss reflects a close relationship with a sibling, grandparent, aunt, uncle or cousin. A key factor is ascertaining discreetly what the child thinks, feels and knows, or suspects and how significant the relationship with the person was prior to imprisonment and what sort of relationship they want now. “Respect what children choose to disclose so don’t ask what the crime is, instead ask how they are coping,” (C. Orellana, personal communication, 7 November, 2018) and ask children what would make things better for them, what they need and what would help them. So, for adults a key message is “do not put your own feelings on the child. It may be a relief” (S. Sjödin, personal communication, 8 November, 2018). While it is important for adults to

give young children the words to help them express their feelings bear in mind that “it’s affecting you not them, they have to know how you feel not how they think you feel” (Young person, in Sutherland & Wright, 2017, p. 36).

Families make decisions at each step of the judicial process. When this is new territory, they maybe unsure about if, when and how to tell their children. It is not an easy task and parents know the circumstances and their child the best, yet the longer it is left the more likelihood children will know something is up and imagine the worst, or hear it from someone else (Mulcahy, 2017). A thirteen-year-old stated what is indicative of younger children’s anxiety or curiosity:

We children are good at imagining when we are not told the truth. The grown-ups always say that they don’t know, but ... they know more than what we do and this is what we want to know. (Philbrick et al., 2014, p. 43)

For some children and their families, the media and social media interest can be intolerable as the premise that ‘someone is innocent until proven guilty’ seems harder and harder to uphold. In contrast some children are not told openly about what has happened and may have been told or assume that the person is away working or in hospital (Morgan & Gill, 2013).

Whoever is caring for the child may not be ready to disclose what has happened; that is their way of dealing with the impact of incarceration. As teachers we realise that however hard it may be, it is important for children to be told the truth, not bluntly but in a sensitive and reassuring way—maybe a simplified version. Check with parents or carers “what children have been told and how much they think they know” (Sutherland & Wright, 2017, p. 29). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) Article 3 states that the best interests of the child be the primary consideration. Aotearoa New Zealand ratified UNCRC in 1993 therefore we should be incorporating its intention into our daily practices. While the decision to tell is up to parents who know their children and the situation, as teachers we can raise awareness with family and whānau of the effect of not being honest and how that disrupts children’s sense of trust (Mulcahy, 2017).

At the same time always bear in mind there may be existing issues, such as sexual abuse, restricting

child/prisoner contact which contribute to the child's feelings of guilt, shame and stigma. There are situations where "some prisoners still cause harm whilst in prison" (Sutherland & Wright, 2017, p. 18), yet most prisoners want the best for their children. Relationships are a key to building resilience however some children feel they have no one who believes in them and to talk to. It may be the offence was against the child or that the parent's relationship has broken down and children may feel caught between supporting the caregiving person and visiting the prisoner (Morgan & Gill, 2013) or sometimes caregivers resist prison visiting. The needs of children can be overlooked as some struggle in isolation to cope without access to support services. They may assume adult responsibilities when their lives become engulfed in multiple upheavals (Saunders & McArthur, 2013). It is important to support children to express their ideas around what is most helpful for them. Use books like *"For each and every child: He Taonga Tonu te Tamariki"* (Collins, 2011) as a catalyst for starting conversations, enable children to discuss their artwork, or be a partner in imaginative play as children work through issues concerning them.

It is recommended to formulate and review policies and practices to consider how to build relationships with these children, their families and whānau, to support their wellbeing and welfare and promote their learning (Morgan & Gill, 2013). Like children who face the loss of one or both parents, siblings or other family members through mental or physical illness, accident, death, separation, divorce, drug and alcohol use and abuse, children with a loved one in prison may have experienced trauma and be grieving. Their grief may manifest itself in many guises from withdrawal, sadness and anxiety, to outright anger so understanding and knowing how to respond thoughtfully to their fears and anxieties is crucial (Sutherland & Wright, 2017). While the following quote was about earthquakes, the process is relevant.

Children not severely traumatized benefit from opportunities to process the events. Talking to a caring and trusted adult, finding support from their peers, expressing their feelings through creative, physical, and arts-based activities or guided conversations are ways that support emotional processing. These activities help children to view the events more objectively, to integrate or assimilate them into their personal histories, and

to look towards a hopeful future (Mutch, 2017, p. 5).

When children are traumatised, stressed, and on hyper alert in a constant state of tension and arousal, it is hard to focus on learning, to concentrate, be attentive, retain or recall information and make positive peer relationships (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2020). This is naturally affected by what kind of relationship the child had, has or wanted to have with their loved one before the arrest. This person might be psychologically present, but physically absent or have an ambiguous attachment, and the child might have disenfranchised grief as open mourning is not socially supported (Sutherland & Wright, 2013, p. 26).

For some children there may be a sense of relief rather than grief, so despite what we know, or think we know, avoid making assumptions. Working on building a trusting, attuned, responsive relationship with the child helps us to ascertain their views, their fears, hopes, dreams and wishes and to find empathy and compassion. Take time to reflect on how reciprocally, responsively, and respectfully is the child communicating with you and you with them? How could you build reciprocity and demonstrate and develop prosocial competencies like empathy, trust, respect and compassion for all children in your setting?

## Sensitive responses

One way is developing a sensitive trauma informed and responsive environment for all children, such as being conscious of triggers like the sound of police sirens, loud banging, making Father's or Mother's Day cards or police visiting. It is important to both recognise the potential and real triggers and know how to relieve them. Children's, and for that matter teachers', actions and reactions can be affected by many factors. Make grounding strategies accessible for children needing time out to rejuvenate—NOT as a punishment. It could be having a secluded calming space indoors or out with something to cuddle, soft flowing plants or larva lamps, soothing options like water, items for doodling or the child being actively engaged building a relationship with a teacher. Also important is working out what supports are in place for teachers—in fact all adults in your setting—like time for reflections, discussing strategies and self-care, positive feedback and relaxation.

A teacher in Oakland, California (Anonymous, personal communication, 6 October, 2018) disclosed her sense of helplessness when a child attended school the day after witnessing a fatal drive by shooting in their lounge. While an extreme example, looking behind children's reactions to ascertain what kind of support the child needs is relevant to any situation. Reactions and actions to behaviour can be approached quite differently if thinking is moved from the premise of the child being challenging to viewing it as a child being distressed. Be really aware what is triggering the child from you e.g., a look, tone or expression (N. Mudaly, personal communication, 27 July, 2018). In order to support the child and foster their learning potential recognise the particular sensitivities and needs these children may have (Morgan & Gill, 2013).

Building relationships is crucial so “listen, listen, listen. Look at children with a special eye—are they hungry, worried, scared? Just open your ears and listen. Don't be afraid of what you are hearing” (C. Lindall, personal communication, 8 November, 2018). Ascertaining children's beliefs around what prison may be like can relieve fears as often their imagination is worse than the reality. Maltreatment, such as experiencing or witnessing emotional and verbal abuse, can shut down language centres in the brain when in crisis so provide other ways for children to express themselves. Cathy Malchiodi (2018) suggested doodling or drawing for 15 minutes to reduce cortisol levels and help children verbalise more and use weighted blankets and calming spaces. Teachers can help parents to understand that different types and timing of maltreatment has different effects on the brain and opportunities for intervention and resiliency.

## More strategies

It is recommended that teachers, like parents, recognise their own triggers. In building relationships teachers can set the tone by being calm, firm and consistent and finding an equilibrium between empowerment and limit setting. Adults have the ability de-escalate power-based rage and help children comply, i.e., “I want you to be here in our group” or “I see you need help with ...” when a child is about to throw blocks (Malchiodi, 2018). Use ‘time in’ rather than ‘time out’ strategies bringing children closer to you rather than sending them away so view them as “attention needing” rather than “attention seeking” (Downey, 2020, p. 6).

For all traumatised children, it is important that each day is treated as a new day, and that grudges aren't held. Teachers and carers must find it within themselves to forgive, move on, and to invite the student back to learning in an open and welcoming way (Lovell, 2020). Lovell (2020) suggested a designated person check in on the child regularly to ascertain any support needed. This applies to teachers having support too.

## Your privilege or your right?

When a child, or a family member, discloses their experiences be careful what is done with that information to respect their right to privacy and seek their approval before confidences are communicated to anyone. A child in Liverpool (L. Brookes, personal communication, 31 October, 2018) shared her devastation when after weeks of indecision she finally disclosed to her teacher and almost immediately at morning tea that teacher told a second teacher who offered the child support in her next class. Presumably both teachers imagined they had the child's best interests at heart, but the child disclosed feeling betrayed and losing trust. So, question personal motives, the ethics of sharing information and consider who makes that decision and who does the sharing. Time Matters UK facilitator Lorna Brookes (personal communication, 31 October, 2018) is adamant that “it is your privilege to know, not your right,” which reflects “the value of creating a cultural shift around sharing information or creating a climate of trust. What is important is that teachers demonstrate to a child and/or parent that they can be trusted. Of course, if there are issues around safeguarding time is needed to explain to the child and/or their family your legal, ethical or moral obligations before they put their trust in you. BUT always bear in mind this particular child may have had their trust in adults, like their parent or parents, police, welfare agencies, compromised to such an extent that they are fearful of what adults might do.”

While sharing of information is important children and their families affected by incarceration are entitled to confidentiality. Teachers can reflect on and recognise the difference between information they might want to know and what is essential to know (Roberts, 2012, Sutherland & Wright, 2017). When children or their families have disclosed find meaningful ways to support them both within your setting and in the community.

## Policy into practice



What policies and practices would be important for you and your workplace to instigate? Morgan and Gill (2013) recommend involving children and their families to strengthen the effectiveness of educational setting's practices, having notices identifying a contact person, mentioning support in newsletters, having books for children and teachers and knowing local support services. They provide self-assessment guidelines for teachers and educational settings and recommend professional development around the impact of imprisonment for all staff in contact with children—education support workers, administrators, caretakers, support staff, librarians. In Gordon's (2016) Pillars toolkit for teachers' checklist it states "ensure the child is not subject to bullying or cyber-bullying, stigma or discrimination from other students or anyone else for any reason" (p. 6). Pillars' services here in Aotearoa New Zealand include mentors for children of prisoners.

The cumulative rippling effect of a loved one in prison can impact directly on children's educational success and behaviour escalating to being bullied, becoming the bully and contributing to stand downs or expulsions. A prisoner (Anonymous, HM Prison Eastwood, personal communication, 28 October, 2018) requested separate classrooms for children of offenders and victims after her child was harassed.

Teachers facilitating engagement with the prisoner can be a stimulus for a child to talk about their loved one. This could be through emails, phone calls (from prisoner), mail, visits or technological links. All communication with prisoners has to be approved by the prison staff first. Children cannot give anything to the prisoner on visits. Children could create a memory box or book in their educational setting to keep things about or for their parent. In Parc Prison, Wales, teachers have parent/teacher meetings and children do homework with their parent (C. Morgan-Armstrong, personal communication, 24 October 2018). Reports, achievements, interests, dispositions for learning, photos and homework sent enables the child and prisoner to work together. When an opportunity arises to visit a prison overcome any apprehension and go so you acquire some understanding of what children face.

It is possible to work with prisoners to help allay children's fears. A prisoner disclosed (Anonymous, HM Prison Eastwood, personal communication, 28 October 2018) how her daughter's teacher created a natural nest outdoors for her children to rejuvenate with the teacher. The teacher relayed the child's

fears of mother's shaved hair and wearing striped pyjamas to the parent in prison who responded without identifying the source. The mother rang her daughter and said she was brushing her hair and putting on her flowery pyjamas thereby avoiding any reference to the child's or teacher's disclosure. Prior to imprisonment the teacher and parent had established a relationship. Clear guidelines for communicating with prisoners could be outlined in your policies.

## A key to opening the door

Through my travels one factor stood out—attitude—the attitude of anyone who comes in contact with or has influence over children and their families: the person in prison, everyone in educational settings, other children and their families, the community, prison staff and the government. A relevant plea from children of prisoners is "Don't assume that I will end up in prison like my mum or dad." (Roberts, 2012, p. 7) and from prisoners "Be kind to my child". An inquiry question could be 'How well do all the staff in your educational setting support and promote the rights of children and their families, relationships and integration and understand the effects of trauma, stigma and shame?'

Attitude is, I think, a key factor in creating a positive trajectory supporting the resiliency and agency of children affected by the incarceration of a loved one. Children are not responsible for the crime committed nor the circumstances they find themselves in. Attitude can open or close doors. It can be supportive, encourage and enlighten or it can contribute to shame, stigmatisation, humiliation and isolation. It can and does influence the learning process for children. The attitude of each individual has an immediate and long-term impact on every child. A provocation for all of us is to empower children and young people to support their agency and foster their well-being, welfare and learning. So, think deeply about your own attitude and how you can be that catalyst and a role model for others.

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