Early
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Does the more knowledgeable other and the established discourses that accompany it have a place in ECE today?

Rethinking and re-casting Vygotsky for the twenty-first century

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Introduction

In ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand, we are committed to children and the image that they are 'competent, confident learners' (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 5). We work with children using dominant discourses from socio-cultural theory from which concepts like scaffolding, cultural artefacts and the importance of developing partnerships with whānau and community have evolved. However, in an emerging post-COVID world with memories of long lockdowns, remote learning and total lack of contact with teachers and friends for weeks on end, we have found ourselves navigating a climate of heightened change and uncertainty. Our response to this could be to hold on defiantly to all that we know and have worked with for the past 25 years, and wait for the 'return to the old normal' to come. However, we might take the opportunity as Yelland and Kilderry (2005) assert to be open to evolving social and cultural contexts in order to reconceptualise "pedagogies and content of curricula accordingly to suit the demands of contemporary life" (p. 244). In this pertinent moment we might stop and re-examine our 'knowns', the practices and theories that have evolved as dominant discourses over the past two decades and to consider if they will still meet the needs of children and teachers as we face an increasingly uncertain future.

This paper examines the current climate in which early childhood teachers are negotiating how they approach curriculum design, pedagogy, and respond to learners and their families. We argue three key sets of issues require examination; the dominant interpretations of socio-cultural theories that have emerged since the initial publication of Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996), the ongoing strengths and challenges of the early childhood curriculum, and finally, recent debates about the purpose of education and how this can meet the needs of the 21st century learner. We propose that the pedagogical approach of Inquiry Based Learning has potential to address some of these issues. Finally, we introduce a nationwide research project that aims to examine how inquiry-based

learning is currently begin implemented in New Zealand early childhood centres and the impact of such practices.

As we begin to unpack the guiding theories and practices that have informed our practice for a quarter of a century, we might ask a few germane questions to reassess our personal and collective thinking:

- How do we see ourselves as teachers? Are we still the holders of knowledge (the 'more knowledgeable other' in the lives of children, guided by familiar socio-cultural theories) or has that changed?

- How do we see children in the 21st century? What do new initiatives, for example the Forest School programmes, mean for how we *see* children in our practice? What is a child to you? Importantly, does that match with your practice?

- What kind of education will prepare children for life in the 21st century as the first views in Te Whāriki prepared children for their lives in 1996?

- What kind of relationships are we creating in using the framework of development embedded Te Whāriki? Are the theories that once held Aotearoa's early childhood education at the top of the world still all relevant?

- And, more provocatively, what happens if we see practice the other way up and children become the lead and we the followers as they untangle their environment and make sense of their worlds perhaps in ways we may never be able to?

Socio-cultural theories: Scaffolding vs co-construction

Clarkin-Phillips (2012) argues that sociocultural theories are particularly significant within the early childhood sector in New Zealand as they strongly underpin both the 1996 and the recent 2017 iterations of Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017). Ritchie (2018) concurs,

arguing that Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996) "was ground-breaking in its wide-ranging theoretical approach that recognised the centrality of culture to learning and development, adopting a sociocultural lens which moved beyond the developmentalist focus of the United States' NAEYC's DAP (developmentally appropriate practice)" (p. 9).

Twenty-five years have now passed, and a number of dominant discourses related to sociocultural theories have emerged within the early childhood sector. An example is the Zone of Proximal development (ZPD). This theory, which conceptualises how knowledge construction can be facilitated, has been interpreted in markedly different ways (Brinn, 2016). Bruner (1962), for instance, conceptualised the notion of scaffolding as when a child is able to achieve something new with the support of a more knowledgeable other who supports them to achieve a task by incrementally relinquishing control. Whilst this interpretation has been embraced by many early childhood professionals, Jordan (2009) argues this interpretation is problematic as it is the adult who remains in a position of power as they are valued as more experienced and more knowledgeable. Other pedagogical approaches also challenge this interpretation. For example, co-constructivism positions both teachers and children as knowledgeable and therefore better supports more collaborative approaches to learning where children learn with and from each other. Jordan (2009), an advocate for co-construction, considers this a much more complex pedagogical approach as the teacher needs to have in-depth understanding of the child's prior knowledge, their culture, and their dispositions for learning in order to navigate the learning process in such a way that both the child and teacher maintain their agency. If we see learning in this way, how we view ourselves as teachers needs to change to remain in alignment with how we view children. Perhaps, we must see ourselves as a co-explorers or co-facilitators. After all, how someone else sees their environment can dramatically change how we see ours. This

puts us in the role of co-learner not a 'more knowledgeable other'.

The strengths and challenges of Te Whāriki as a framework

At the same, can we also posit the question of whether the important theoretical framework of Te Whariki needs to be re-examined in light of the teaching approaches we currently use and the aspirations and goals of education that are currently viewed as important. Te Whāriki is a framework that guides and shows us the possibilities in the roles of teacher and learner. It does not and was perhaps never meant to give teachers absolute theoretical clarification of what is happening within children's learning. It was always a wide-umbrella to encompass the many different philosophies that are part of this sector. Beaumont-Bates (2017) describes these ideas "as being situated, with learning being distributed across and stretched over, the cultural tools of people, places and things and integral to the learning process" (p. 349).

A strength of Te Whāriki is that it offers overarching philosophical guidance whilst maintaining space for educators to conceptualise localised curriculum based on partnerships with community and whānau. However, McLaughlin and Cherrington (2018) assert that a challenge of the first iteration was that it lacked guidance surrounding the role of the teacher resulting in the misconception that the teacher's role was passive. A passive role positions the teacher as simply a provider of materials and their engagement with children through for example, questioning, is viewed as detrimental to children's play and exploration. This discourse has become entrenched throughout the past two decades. These authors note that the 2017 version of Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) "more explicitly invites teachers to view their role as active, and embrace a thoughtful and intentional pedagogy" (p. 33) as well as offering guidance about what this means in practice. At the same time, the notion of 'Intentional teaching' has recently become an

emergent discourse within the early childhood sector. Thomas et al. (2011) suggest "there are multiple terms used to represent the concept of 'intentional teaching' (for example, challenging, co-constructing, collaborating, scaffolding, encouraging, supporting, modelling)" (p. 71). However, there is still much work to do in supporting teachers to more explicitly consider, as well as make visible in their documentation, the pedagogical choices they make, and the theories, principles, values and beliefs that inform these decisions (McLaughlin & Cherrington, 2018). We argue that the repositioning of the teacher as an intentional practitioner, realigns the balance by positioning both teacher and children as active participants in children's learning, a stance that aligns more closely with co-constructivist approaches.

Who is the child in the 21st century and what is it they need to learn?

If then, we rethink our relationship with the child in their engagement with their world, what does this mean for how we 'see' the child, our new partner? The image of the child has changed over the centuries from 'little adult' to 'blank slate' to 'competent, confident learner' and teaching and learning strategies have also evolved to meet these shifting notions (Corsaro, 2005). Hawkins (2014) suggests "traditional perspectives of childhood view children as passive learners who operate from an egocentric level." (p. 724) but also that the "twenty-first century ... views children as active participants in the social construction of their worlds" (ibid). The idea of being an active constructor of their own knowledge therefore perhaps does not align so well with the idea of scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development that relies so heavily on the 'more knowledgeable other'. Having active involvement suggests a more co-constructivist approach.

Looking at this active participant in the context of their environment and within the adage that early childhood is a preparation for life (not just school), what are the important things they need to know? Kim et al. (2019)

explains that "The 21st-century skillset is generally understood to encompass a range of competencies, including critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, meta-cognition, communication, digital and technological literacy, civic responsibility, and global awareness" (p. 100). It is important for teachers to consider these skills even though such consideration may challenge their long-held philosophies about children.

Developing these kinds of skills means thinking about how we 'see' the child and their capacity for this journey. It also demands we think about ourselves as teachers if this is what children will need to know. For example, a focus on metacognition will mean the children understand what they know and what they need to know next. How do we ask those questions? How do we enable them to think and answer and importantly, how do we stop and listen in the busy confines of today's early childhood centres? In other words, "how can we improve teacher's 21st century skills to help produce 21st-century learners?" (Kim et al., 2019, p. 100). These author's go on to say that "an individual's ability to learn is regarded as a series of social processes that are inextricably shaped and influenced by his or her context" (p. 101). So, within our contexts and starting with the skills we have, how do we move towards or strengthen this kind of pedagogical approach?

It has become evident in beginning to look at the questions we have posed that there are contradictory perceptions of the role of the teacher. For example, for teachers who subscribe to the notion of scaffolding, they are the ones leading and sitting in a position of power. For others who view their role as passive, a discourse that has emerged concurrently over the past two decades, the child is positioned as the leader of the learning and the teacher, a provider of materials. At the same time, the notion of intentionality in teaching is exciting, but one that needs to be approached with caution, lest we return to previous approaches through a lack of examination or understanding (McLaughlin & Cherrington, 2018). These different positions are not new in early childhood. The broad landscape of early childhood has long been a comfortable home to many philosophies and views of children and their learning. This is a settled broad landscape in which we have all co-existed for some time and it would also be very easy to continue with little change along the road we have set.

However, if we do that, what does this mean for our commitment to children and the lives they will live in the kinds of environment that are now becoming common place. We know that the pace of change has never been as fast as it is now. We know that the amount of information now made available is growing exponentially and we need to be able to pick initially what is true and what we need to know about. We also are becoming aware that there are momentous decisions needed to fix many problems in the world we inhabit ranging from equitable living to the very air we breathe. Surely, it is incumbent on us as teachers to consider the citizens who will be part of making those decisions and the manner in which they do so. Hawkins (2014) commented "Indeed twenty-first century Australian students are members of a global community in a localised setting" (p. 726) and the same can be said of early childhood settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. This idea begs the question does the stance of 'more knowledgeable other' or 'a provider of materials' enable children as they grow into a very different world and how does this empower them to decide what they care about and value.

Inquiry-based project work: A co-constructivist approach to teaching and learning

The answer to this maybe in the final question we posed to frame this paper: "what happens if we see practice the other way up and children become the lead and we the followers as they untangle their environment and make sense of their worlds perhaps in ways we will never be able to?" Stacey (2018) argues that:

> Inquiry gives both teacher and child a right to try-to walk

alongside one another, learning and changing together, co-constructing and collaborating, and wondering about the world and how it works. We live in a world where knowledge is constantly changing, and to know how to ask, search and try is vitally important for not only children but for teachers too. (p. 142)

Based on this argument, inquiry-based project work is a pedagogical approach that has the potential to respond to all these issues.

But if we look at this increasingly recognised approach as a 'marker' for ECE in New Zealand, then the way we see children, the ZPD and fundamentally how we may currently operate as teachers is instantly challenged. In the context of inquiry based learning we are co-constructors and collegial guides while the children are also co-constructors of understanding. But much more than this, the implications for how we view the capabilities of children are truly exciting.

Inquiry based learning: Origins, influences and definitions

It was John Dewey (1938/1998) who developed the idea that education should be experiential and hands-on to be of meaning to the learners. He suggested that:

> The plan … is a co-operative enterprise, not a dictation. The teacher's suggestion is not a mold for a cast-iron result but is a starting point to be developed into a plan through contributions from the experience of all engaged in the learning process. The development occurs through reciprocal give-and-take, the teacher taking but not being afraid also to give. (p. 85).

The roots of inquiry based learning in the context of early childhood education in Aotearoa are complex to untangle due to the different ways this approach to learning has been interpreted and described under the varying guises of 'project-based learning', 'investigations', or 'project work'. The pedagogical ideas of Reggio Emilia have been one of the most significant influences on how this approach has been interpreted. These ideas gained prominence in the early 1980's and their influence on Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996), such as the emphasis on social-constructivism and an image of the child as competent to construct their own understandings, has been noted by several authors (Haplin, 2011; Pohio, 2013; Soutar, 2000). A key aspect of the Reggio Emilia approach is the practice of progettazione, where children and teachers engage in long term inquiry based projects where children are encouraged to formulate theories, conduct research, represent their thinking through the hundred languages[1] and negotiate their own conclusions (Probine, 2015). Another significant influence on inquiry-based learning in New Zealand has been the Project Approach, also known as project-based learning, conceptualised in America by Katz and Chard (2000). Less prominent in the literature, but no less significant, is the work of New Zealand based progressive educators, such as the work of Elwyn Richardson, who developed rich inquiry-based approaches to support children's collaborative learning prior to the impact of these global influences (MacDonald, 2016).

Helm and Katz (2011, cited in Cordoba & Sanders-Smith, 2018) propose that

> … inquiry-based projects provide experiences that involve students intellectually and develop their dispositions to make sense of experience; to theorize, analyze, hypothesize, and synthesize; to predict and check predictions; to

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[1] The hundred languages are a metaphor for the graphic or expressive modes through which children explore and represent their thinking (Vecchi, 2010).

find things out; to strive for accuracy; to be empirical; to grasp the consequences of actions; to persist in seeking solutions to problems; to speculate about cause-effect relationships; and to predict other's wishes and feelings. (p. 4).

In essence,

> Project based learning is a pedagogical approach to instruction in which students actively construct their own knowledge over a sustained period of time, collaborating with their peers to complete a public product that answers a driving question or solves a challenging problem. (Lev et al., 2020, p. xvii)

Indeed, "Including project work in the curriculum promotes children's intellectual development by engaging their minds in observation and investigation of selected aspects of their experience and environment" (Katz & Chard, 2000, p. 2).

This approach aims to develop children's knowledge and understanding of their world around them from authentic tasks that draw children through a sequence of events empowered by their own ideas, discussion and questions. Involved in this process is the growing awareness of who they are as individuals but also within their context and environment with others (Lev et al., 2020). These authors go on to explain that this approach

> … requires us to take a different approach to curriculum planning—specifically, an integrated approach, where the standards and learning goals are viewed as interconnected parts of a whole rather than as isolated skills and knowledge. Using an integrated approach means we teach through the project instead of in advance of the project. (p. 49)

This approach to learning also fosters collaborative development with and within their societies and cultures as they "build relationships with one another, with their teachers, and with members of a wider community in which they play an important part" (p. xvii). Similarly, McClure (2011) argues:

> Negotiating curriculum with children—rooted in their shared interests, desires and questions—and documenting these processes can contribute to a demystification of the myth of inherent creativity and support a view that repositions children as rights-bearing citizens and active producers of culture. (p. 139)

These ideas reflect the idea of children learning what it means to be citizens and part of a local and global community.

So, how do we start a journey with inquiry-based learning?

There is no one way to proceed with a project-based approach, so teachers must decide how to incorporate this. However, as the process starts, somewhere in it, there is consideration of how the child is seen, what aspirations are in place for this child and how can this kind of learning be contextualised for them. It is also very difficult to plan for if you are used to an objectives-based approach. When introducing an inquiry-based approach for the first time, the teacher, will need to role-model wondering about why something is what it is and ask questions that gently focus the children on the questions. They will then need to listen closely and follow where the children are going with just a guiding hand, in order to enable the children to engage in further theorising, hands-on trial and error and to develop personal and collaborative agency. It means laying down the idea of the 'more knowledgeable other' and 'provider of materials' and simply starting a journey, thus, we … "…empower young children to move through life knowing they have a role to play, not just 'when they grow

up', but as young learners. We want our students to know they can contribute to the world around them now, as members of their classroom community, and also as members of the wider community outside of their classroom walls". (Lev et al., 2020, p. 6).

In this approach, we must learn to support children to ask and answer their own questions and consider how we both mediate and encourage such situations. We must think about the complex cultural tools the children will know about and the ensuing perspectives when we may know little about the focus of their investigations. Finally, if co-construction is the path we choose to follow, we need to consider how do we create cultures of inquiry and in doing so, how will our view of ourselves as teachers and the children as learners transform?

Where to now?

We hope that the questions that we have posed here encourage you to think about how teaching and learning is currently valued in your setting. As part of our own process of wondering about these important ideas we have begun our own inquiry, a nationwide research project focused on inquiry-based project work in early childhood settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. This project is a collaborative project involving early childhood researchers and tertiary educators working across the newly established Te Pūkenga institute.

The project aims to understand more about the early childhood communities who are currently engaging in this approach, the pedagogical ideas that have influenced their thinking and what teaching and learning practices they have developed. The study will also seek to understand more about how inquiry-based learning impacts children's learning and engagement. This research will be significant because although discourse surrounding intentional teaching and inquiry-based approaches is currently gaining traction in the context of early childhood, little research has explored how these pedagogical ideas have

been developed or the impact of this work on children's learning in the context of New Zealand (Hargraves, 2020; Probine, 2020).

The project will take place over two phases. The first phase includes a nationwide survey inviting early childhood centres who engage in inquiry-based project learning to share their perspectives surrounding this approach. At the end of this questionnaire, early childhood centres are invited to indicate if they are interested in participating in a second phase of the research. This phase will take place in a small number of purposively settings across New Zealand who currently engage in inquiry-based learning. Through classroom observations and focus group interviews with the teachers, the researchers will work collaboratively with these early childhood communities to tell their stories of their journeys with inquiry-based learning.

If you are interested in participating in this project the questionnaire can be found at this link or at https://surveymonkey.com/r/S6WV3KW

If you are at the beginning of your journey with inquiry-based project work and would like to have a conversation, please contact Sarah Probine at: sarah.probine@manukau.ac.nz or Jo Perry at: Jo.Perry@manukau.ac.nz

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