

Early Education



Volume 67 Spring / Summer 2021

- TLIF Round 5: The use of tools for reviewing shifts in practice and learning outcomes
- Reflections on the role of teachers in contemporary ECE: Pedagogy, leadership and engagement with fathers
- The past, present and future of rural playcentres
- ECE and COVID-emotional factors for teachers and leaders
- Supporting Associate Teachers across the years





Volume 67 Spring / Summer 2021

Early Education' is a professional journal for people involved and interested in early childhood education. A partially peer-reviewed journal, it is published yearly by the Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research, University of Waikato.

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Editors

Prof Claire McLachlan,
The University of Waikato

Dr Karyn Aspden,
Massey University

Associate Professor Sally Peters,
The University of Waikato

Design and layout

Margaret Drummond

Our thanks to our reviewers

Karyn Aspden, Monica Cameron, Glynne Mackey, Claire McLachlan, Jessica Smith and Sue Stover

Our thanks for the photos

Thanks to Daniel and Kimberley Smith for the cover photo.

This issue is the second issue of Early Education published by Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research, The University of Waikato.

ISSN: 1172-9112

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.

Contributions can be sent to the 2022 editors

Claire McLachlan:
cmclachlan@waikato.ac.nz

Karyn Aspden:
k.m.aspden@massey.ac.nz

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Education across the ages

Philippa Isom

Introduction

“Me help you?” she asked as her small fingers reached for my pen and notebook. And before I knew it, my small companion who had plopped down beside me moments before was carefully taking the observational notes that I was supposed to be taking and chatting away about her teacher, animals that she liked, and the bubbles that others were blowing that enticed her to leave her careful note taking with instructions to me of “you do.”

My initiation into Early Childhood Education (ECE) over the past year has been nothing short of joyful. It has also been confronting at times and has shifted my perspective on childhood, school, and learning—as a Primary educated practitioner, those are some very foundational perspectives to have shifted. In the 25 years since leaving Auckland College of Education with a freshly minted Bachelor of Education and Diploma of Teaching (Primary) I have had a varied career spanning all age levels, including some time as an ECE in home carer while my own children were small. However, I had always approached roles through the lens of Primary Teaching. This year has had me remove that primary lens to replace it with an ECE lens which at times has felt disorientating and many times has had me in the wonderful position of being a student of my students who were completing the Graduate Diploma of Learning and Teaching (ECE). The following story describes some of the areas where I have been inspired, frustrated, and challenged. I have broadly grouped this thinking into the

following: the politics and work of ECE; the child and learning; and what happens post ECE.

The politics and work of ECE

When I agreed to join the ECE teaching team at Massey University at the beginning of 2021, I took the opportunity very seriously and to that end I asked colleagues for book recommendations to upskill. I found myself reading *Politics in the Playground* (May, 2009) and being at turns surprised, indignant, and thankful. I was surprised by the fraught history of ECE in Aotearoa which I had no previous knowledge of. I was indignant of the way in which ECE had been consistently marginalised and politicised and where limited access was used to restrict the freedom of women to choose a career outside of the home. I was thankful for the women who had fought for and demanded better ECE services for both tamariki and wāhine.

Through this year, I have become aware of the on-going politics and work of ECE such as funding, ratios, access, corporatisation, and qualified/unqualified staffing. I now know that ECE does not have enough government funded Kindergartens and therefore relies on private enterprise to provide services to the majority of whānau. However, private services are not funded at the same level. I have also learned much about aspects such as play spaces, equipment, and air quality in ECE centers where operational decisions may be based on cost. For me, coming to this awareness was not about despairing of the current system but about understanding what was important for our students to know and in turn may be able to influence in the centres in which they will work and lead. New graduates need to be excellent practitioners *and* able to engage in work to influence the future of the sector with

their eyes firmly on tamariki, whānau, and community.

The child and learning

In my transition into ECE, and especially through Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996), I have found the language and practice that I have been reaching towards that formal schooling does not always make room for. In many schools there remains an almost exclusive focus on numeracy and literacy with the on-going effects of National Standards (Ministry of Education, 2019). There is little room for the expansive domains of play and learning that are fully embraced in Te Whāriki.

In engaging with Te Whāriki, my practice has been challenged by the notion of the child as complete for who they are now, not reliant on their future potential. The notion of whāriki (weaving) encourages the interaction of various domains with social and emotional learning. In the sandpit, numeracy and literacy is happening alongside scientific concepts, artistic skills, technological understanding, all woven with the negotiation of relationships—not to mention that there is also room for play for the sake of play so as not to structure the child as a learning machine. Perhaps if formal (school) learning environments were conceptualised as a 'sandpit' there would be greater authentic engagement. Currently, engagement is a thin veil for compliance in a formal classroom that often needs to be managed through coercion. In my utopian vision, there would be authentic engagement and joyful participation in all learning across the ages, such as seen when observing three toddlers playing together at a water table.

This year I have observed authentic, joyful engagement when play follows the interests of the child. This has been achieved through the excellent observational skills of practitioners knowing when to engage in and support play and when to leave the child to be the child. I have seen much less anxiety about academic progressions, but an embrace of the natural ebb and flow of learning through a day, a week, a month, a year, and across the years, and the

unforced invitational practice in centres where children are seen as “confident and competent learners from birth” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 12). Strengths and differences are celebrated and supports are put in place where needed while continuing to see the mana of all.

What happens Post ECE

Although I have made the transition into ECE, it is what happens post ECE which has been most confronting when considering my practice. If I am honest, I have seen ECE as a kind of holding space for children until they enter school where they will begin their education. I feel embarrassed at this admission, I know how completely wrong it is. This year I have seen the stark outworking of this belief as tamariki enter primary classrooms where competence is not assumed, but must be proven to a hidden standard which the school system demands. I am not for a moment criticising New Entrant and Early Years teachers, I am asking questions of the system in which they work. In contrast to Te Whāriki and the statement that children are “confident and competent learners from birth” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 12), the vision of the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) is based on the future potential of the child. There is a focus on the adult that the child will become rather than the person they are now. Many of my primary colleagues feel the impact of this in the ways in which they are required to report on student learning in siloed curriculum areas, are ruled by the school bell, and rather than following the interests of children they are limited by the resources in the school and need for assessment points to be met. What happens to the interest a child has in reading and books when their book selection is made for them at school? What happens to their love of writing observational notes like my friend at the beginning of this story when they are forced to write single letters on a line with a finger space in between? There is a place for formal learning, but I would suggest that as educators, we should be following the lead of a confident and competent learner as Te Whāriki and ECE has been modelling.

Conclusion

I am still a child in ECE. However, in this space I have been welcomed as a confident and competent learner. I have learned and will continue to learn alongside colleagues and students alike.

Halfway to the bubbles, she looked back at me and then returned to where I was sitting writing my notes. As she reached to take my book and pen again, I thought she wanted to resume her note-taking duties. But she put them to the side, took my hand and said, “you come too.” It was not a question. It was a statement from a confident and competent child. She was confident that what I needed was

some time with her and her friends and the pleasure of chasing bubbles across the play area. She was right.

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