Unpacking a Puzzle of Practice: Supporting consistent, intentional and culturally responsive teaching to promote children's social-emotional competence

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In this article, we describe a Teacher-Led Innovation Fund (TLIF) project focused on enhancing early childhood social-emotional teaching practices, and share insights about intentional teaching. Over a two-year period, our project team used teacher-inquiry and reflective data tools to support and document changes in teachers' use of effective practices to foster children's social-emotional learning. Key findings highlighted shifts in teachers' understanding of social-emotional competence. Additionally, teachers reported increased confidence and use of effective strategies to facilitate children's social-emotional competence.

Introduction

Children's emerging social-emotional competence has been identified as critical for developing strong foundations for learning and wellbeing in the first 5 years of life (Collie et al., 2017). A focus on social and emotional competence is strongly evident through the Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood education and school curricula, particularly from a health and well-being perspective (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2007, 2017). Specifically, the early childhood curriculum Te Whāriki describes how it is the role of the teacher to intentionally and responsively support children's social participation and interaction alongside creating opportunities for children to understand and explore their emotions (Ministry of Education, 2017). Furthermore, there is an emphasis on intentional teaching through the provision of planned and in-the-moment strategies that teachers should use to facilitate children's learning in ways that are responsive to their identity, language and culture.

Being intentional is essential when considering social and emotional competence. Denham (2023) suggests that there is a difference between being aware of emotional competence for individuals and various ages, and knowing what to do to effectively strengthen their competence, arguing that teachers, alongside whānau and psychologists, "must know why development is so crucial, and what aspects of it need fostering" (Denham, 2023, p.17). Social competence and emotional competence are generally associated under the umbrella of social-emotional competence. However, it is important to note that strong emotional competence contributes to social competence, ultimately leading to successful outcomes for children (Denham, 2023).

Extending on notions of being intentional, the social-emotional supports provided must also be responsive to children's unique ways of being. Macfarlane et al. (2017) highlight the importance of cultural and indigenous perspectives of social-emotional learning. They suggest that social-emotional competencies can be explored through an indigenous lens, with both complementary and distinct knowledge bases to support "teachers to attain a clearer vision of their students' cultural identities and ultimately become more attuned to the way their cultural interactions are able to be played out within learning contexts" (Macfarlane et al., 2017, p. 273).

This article will provide an overview of a MoE funded teacher led innovation (TLIF) project based on one ECE centre's use of teacher inquiry to explore social-emotional teaching and learning. We will describe the ways teachers were supported to explore and reflect on their social-emotional teaching strategies and highlight key project findings, including shifts in teacher practice that resulted in positive outcomes for children and their whānau.

Project context

The TLIF project, Unpacking a Puzzle of Practice, focused on supporting consistent, intentional and culturally responsive teaching to promote children's social-emotional competence. The project involved teachers, leaders, tamariki, whānau and critical friends at BestStart Palmerston North. A key aim of the project was to explore and use effective teaching strategies for extending children's social-emotional competence. Extending children's learning from a te ao Māori perspective was a priority for the participating ECE centre, triggered by outcomes of an internal evaluation and the goal of achieving the vision of Te Whāriki as a bicultural curriculum (MoE, 2017). The importance of teachers creating a curriculum that strengthens learning from a te ao Māori perspective, ensuring equitable opportunities are created for Māori learners has

been described by Rameka et al. (2022). This concept is also discussed throughout Te Whāriki, which encourages teachers to use models such as Te Whare Tapa Whā to understand "Māori approaches to health and wellbeing" (p. 26).

When the project began in 2018, reflective practice tools focusing on social-emotional competence, such as those within He Māpuna te Tamaiti (MoE, 2019) and Kōwhiti Whakapae (MoE, 2023) were not yet available. The team therefore developed a "centre-based teacher practice reflection tool" and a "child assessment learning tool" informed by research, local knowledge and values, and whānau aspirations. These tools provided teachers with strategies for strengthening children's social-emotional competence alongside supporting their understanding of what social-emotional competence could look like at different times in a child's learning journey.

To connect with Te Ao Māori perspectives, the tools were framed using Mason Durie's (1994) Te Whare Tapa Whā model and aligned with relevant learning outcomes from Te Whāriki. Thus, we created a framework that included sections for children's physical, social, emotional and spiritual well-being related to the broad area of social-emotional learning and reflected outcomes in our local curriculum. The framework described key aspects of what teachers need to know and be able to do to support and progress children's social-emotional competence. More details about the project, including the project report, can be found via the [Education Counts website](#) under publications.

Methods

The project used teacher-led inquiry, supporting teachers to engage in ongoing-mini inquires. These inquiries were guided by the model from the New Zealand Curriculum (MoE, 2007, p. 35) as team members had previously engaged in inquiry using this approach. Data focused on teacher practice, child outcomes and whānau perspectives were collected at successive points throughout the project. Ongoing collection and review of data allowed teachers to review progress and guided the leadership team's support for teachers.

Participants

The first author was the curriculum manager at the time and worked collaboratively with the head teacher from each of the six rooms, making up the leadership team for this project. Responsibilities included the development of the teacher self-reflection tool, facilitating the inquiry, engaging in coaching alongside teachers, and supporting data collection and analysis. The teaching team was made up of 34 teachers, both

unqualified and qualified, working with 178 children aged 6 months to 5 years. The project had organisational support as well as two critical friends: the co-authors of this article. Teams engaged regularly with families and whānau to gather information, share important learning, and discuss key teaching strategies that were making a difference for their child.

Data collection tools and analysis

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The project used three main data collection tools:

- Centre-developed "teacher practice self-reflection tool"
- Centre-developed "child assessment of children's social-emotional learning"
- Ongoing collection of learning stories and other assessments

Also included was an end of project survey to gather teachers' perspectives about the use of the teacher practice self-reflection tool and child assessment of children's social-emotional learning.

Centre-developed teacher practice reflection tool

Teachers utilised the centre-developed teacher practice self-reflection tool to reflect on their teaching practice and identify their focus for inquiry. The reflection tool outlined key teaching practices to support children's physical, social, emotional, and spiritual (sense of self and identity) learning. Each of the four areas had a list of six to seven teaching strategies. Teachers self-rated their current use of the strategies on a scale of 1 to 4, ranging from not yet evident to strongly evident. Strategies from the Teaching Practice List (McLaughlin et al., 2015) were used to develop the reflection tool, identifying core teaching strategies most relevant for the setting. These strategies were then unpacked and formulated into a supporting document by the team that identified what each strategy could look like in practice. The teacher practice reflection tool was

used by teachers to reflect on their practice and identify specific strategies to focus on for their inquiries. If the project was repeated today, resources such as the self-reflection tool within He Māpuna Te Tamaiti or the Kōwhiti Whakapae resources could be used or adapted to achieve a similar purpose for teacher reflection.

Centre-developed child assessment of children's social-emotional learning

The child assessment of children's social-emotional learning tool was modified from a tool related to profiles of children's social-emotional learning and progress, which was in development by the second author. The assessment was designed to help teachers reflect on children's current and emerging social-emotional competence, organised by our four key areas: physical, social, emotional, and spiritual learning, and aligned with relevant learning outcomes for Te Whāriki. The tool outlined how learning within key areas might progress over time with examples of what this learning might look like for children. Teachers considered what they knew about children's learning and used the information in the tool to plan for new learning in partnership with whānau. It also supported teachers to be responsive to children and be more intentional in their use of strategies.

Ongoing collection of learning stories and other assessments

The assessment tools above were always utilised in conjunction with other forms of assessment data, including learning stories, event recordings of key behaviours or skills, running records of child talk and whānau perspectives recorded in the online portfolio system. Whānau perspectives and working together on child planning were also supported through daily interactions during drop-off and pick-up times.

Inquiry cycles

To examine their own practice, teachers used an on-going cycle of inquiry based on observation, reflection, planning, trying out practice, revisiting, and receiving feedback using a centre-developed inquiry planning sheet. The project spanned over two years. During this time teachers engaged in at least three mini-inquiries, often using the successive points of data collection as an opportunity to re-set their inquiry focus. Table 1 outlines the inquiry phases over time.

Table 1. Cycles of inquiry

Term	Key objectives	Data gathered and reviewed
Term 3 2018	Project start-up	N/A

	Teachers review practices and learn about teacher practice child assessment tools	
Term 4 2018	**First mini-inquiry:** Complete teacher reflection Select inquiry focus Complete planning form including actions and next steps	Complete teacher reflection tool
Term 1 2019	Video observation and feedback Revisit planning form and next steps Implement inquiry plan	Teacher reflections on progress Assessment & planning, child voice, whānau comments
End of Term 2 2019	Evaluate inquiry **Second mini-inquiry:** Teachers revisit and complete teacher reflection tool Reset inquiry focus Complete planning form including actions and next steps	Complete teacher reflection tool
Term 3 2019	Video observation and feedback Revisit planning form and next steps Continue implementing Inquiry	Teacher reflections on progress Assessment & planning, child voice, whānau comments
End of Term 4 2019	Evaluate Inquiry **Third mini-inquiry:** Teachers revisit and complete teacher reflection tool Re set inquiry focus Complete planning form including actions and next steps	Complete teacher reflection tool
Term 1 2020	Video observation and feedback Revisit planning form and next steps Continue implementing Inquiry	Teacher reflections on progress Assessment & planning, child voice, whānau comments

Extended due to COVID Term 3 2020	Evaluate inquiry	Final teacher survey collected

The inquiry planning form supported teachers to focus on key aspects of the inquiry process alongside providing a consistent approach to inquiry across the team of 34 teachers. Teachers received ongoing support and coaching from a head teacher, teacher, or curriculum manager throughout their inquiry. Supports included assistance to use and make sense of information gathered by the reflective data tools, focusing inquiry goals on specific teaching practices and strategies, and using video and observation-based reflective discussion and feedback to support teachers as they tried out new practices.

Findings and discussion

The project fundamentally changed the intentionality and consistency with which the teams fostered children's social-emotional competence in culturally responsive ways. While project findings were numerous, we highlight findings related to shifts in teacher practice and knowledge and increased engagement and communication with whānau.

Shifts in teacher practice and knowledge

There were many important shifts in teachers' practice and knowledge, however, five key areas stand out: 1) changes in teacher intentionality, 2) increased awareness of child learning, 3) stronger connections and knowledge of te ao Māori, 4) emphasis on emotions and 5) use of supporting resources.

Changes in teacher intentionality

As shown in Figure 1, teacher ratings of their use of social-emotional teaching practices increased over the duration of the project (pre–post) with all areas of practice moving from "sometimes evident" to "consistently evident." The figure represents teachers' ratings averaged across the 6 to 7 practices for each area.

Figure 1. Teacher pre-post ratings across practice domains
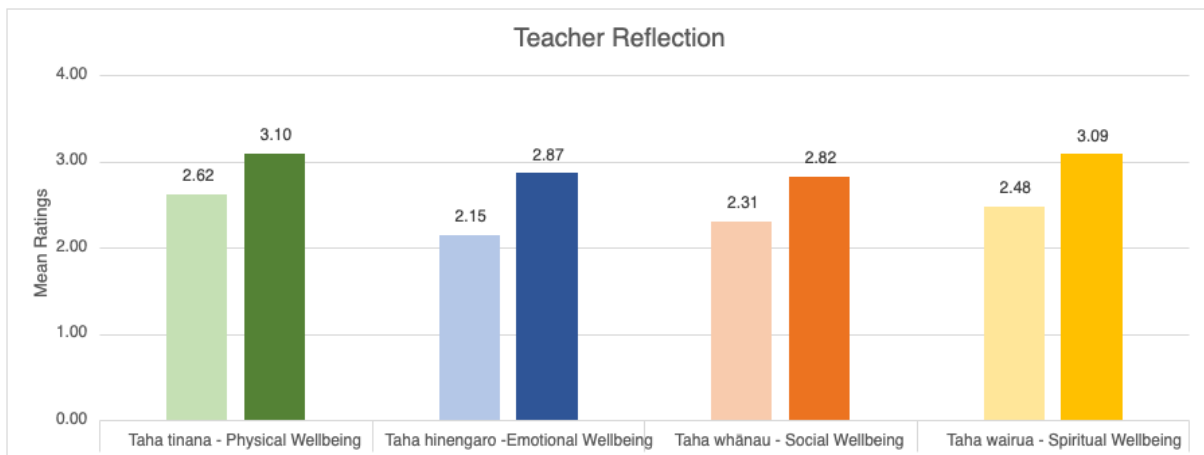
Note. Pre–post ratings were collected in November 2018 and July 2020. The scale for rating practices was 1 = Not Yet Evident, 2 = Sometimes Evident, 3 = Consistently Evident, 4 = Strongly Evident.

Specific examples of teacher growth related to their intentionality and use of specific teaching practices. The following quotes from teachers highlight these shifts:

> I have found myself using a calm voice and being able to regulate and calm an upset child more easily using the strategies I have learnt and observed that have worked. I have noticed these strategies have worked well with some of our children as they are now seeking me to help them in situations when they are upset or frustrated.
>
> The strategies I use with children have changed. I now use recall when I am supporting children with their social and emotional learning (sharing/turn taking in particular) and refer to photographs as a visual prompt of either themselves, or their peers, interacting in a positive way.)

Increased awareness of child learning

Teachers described developing a greater understanding of key aspects of children's social-emotional learning, being able to recognise and articulate the learning that was happening and being better able to help children recognise and support their own learning. Progress in children's social-emotional learning was observed through a range of assessment approaches including learning stories, video, time sample and event recordings across the centre, as well as the child assessment of social-emotional learning tool. Teachers also described increased confidence in communicating and

documenting children's learning and progression, as well as with working in collaboration with whānau to support social-emotional learning. The following comments from teachers highlight their increased awareness of children's learning.

> I could see the growth for the children and see just how valuable this tool (child assessment tool) was for providing an idea of future growth so we could get/use appropriate resources and time for each child.
>
> I could see the movement in children which made me feel good about what I had been doing to support them over this time. Overtime it made me think more about each child and what I could do more to support them in the different areas.
>
> We (team) now look more deeply into children's perspectives and what they are trying to communicate from a social and emotional perspective.

Stronger connections and knowledge of te ao Māori

The impact of the teacher reflection tool being embedded in Durie's (1994) Te Whare Tapa Whā model was significant. Te ao Māori ways of being and doing were woven within the teacher reflection tool, thereby prompting teachers to focus on extending their teaching practice from te ao Māori perspectives. As teachers engaged with and used more resources that promoted te ao Māori ways of being and doing, Māori children became more confident in voicing their identities as Māori. For example, one child noted to his teacher during play, "K, I'm Māori and my dad's Māori." Teachers also developed confidence and effective strategies for supporting children to regulate their emotions using tools and teaching strategies that reflected te ao Māori ways of being and doing. Below is an excerpt from a learning story and teacher reflections, highlighting tools and teaching strategies.

> I really enjoyed our time together looking at the social story pukapuka about deep breathing. We are learning about when we can use our deep breathing technique like when we are a little bit pōuri or pukuriri. I noticed you really liked the last page which says how we can take a deep breath through our nose and blow it out through our mouth. This is like when Tāwhirimātea makes the wind.

Teachers' reflective comments:

> I've learnt how to draw connections between te ao Māori and children's emotions.
>
> Children now have opportunities to develop understanding of their emotions from a te ao Māori perspective.
>
> T has been looking at the other children and naming how she thinks they are feeling in te reo Māori.

Child's comment to a teacher:

> K, that boy needs to do his big, deep Tāwhirimātea breaths to calm his body.

Emphasis on emotions

Teaching emotions was another area of significant growth in teacher practice. Specific strategies used included assessing children's current understanding of emotions, increasing teacher talk about emotions, developing resources and using stories to talk about emotions, asking children about their emotions, and supporting children to safely express and regulate their emotions when upset or feeling frustrated. Teachers' comments and observations, below, reflect the focus on emotions.

> H was reading 'The Best Loved Bear' with S and he was identifying the emotions in the picture without being prompted. This led to a discussion on emotions.
>
> S now calms her body quite quickly and has removed herself from overwhelming situations. S has returned to situations on a couple of occasions after calming herself independently.

Use of supporting resources

Teachers developed resources to support children's learning including photo boards, social stories, emotions cards and games. Teams noticed that as the resourcing and teacher supports increased, so too did children's overall curiosity and engagement in

social-emotional thinking and learning. Children began to access resources spontaneously and regularly from within the environment to support their communication and interaction with their peers and teachers. As one teacher commented:

> There are now opportunities for children to revisit their social and emotional learning on the walls and through booklet format within the environment. The children engage with these resources regularly throughout the day, with and without teacher support.

This learning and use of resources became generalised into home environments and with whānau where children began sharing, showing, and telling their whānau about social-emotional competence strategies they could use, or sharing the resources with them. One teacher documented the following reflection as part of her inquiry:

> Families and teachers visiting from other rooms are making comments about the resources on the walls and how the children are using them. One family shared: "J loves looking at pictures … she loves pointing at all the pictures as we leave. Thank you for giving her these opportunities.

Increased engagement and communication with whānau

Communication with whānau was essential and occurred in variety of ways, including holding whānau social events where the focus was on shared kai and getting together with the additional lens on discussing social-emotional competence and sharing resources. Teachers reported feeling more confident in talking with whānau about social-emotional competence and their ability to share what was happening for children. For example, one teacher commented, *"My confidence has grown in general. When communicating with whānau the focus is on the child and their progress."* The progression of children's learning was made visible through learning stories, photo time samples, event recordings and via video through children's portfolios. Teachers' growth in confidence and knowledge led to more involvement of whānau in their child's learning as teachers initiated conversations about their child's progress in social-emotional competence. For example, one teacher noted, "H's Mum gave feedback about how she has seen a difference in H and now he is talking about his feelings and what he sees around feelings at home."

There was also an increase in comments from families on the learning stories shared through StoryPark. The following comments were posted from whānau:

> The deep breathing story/techniques are a great start for us at home as I found that S has told me I (Mum) have to calm down and take deep breaths, lol, so it's great that he can also recognise when others may need this technique as well.
>
> A was telling us, 'I am not pōuri, I am pai but not the pie that you eat.
>
> Thanks T, this was such a good idea, along with the "faces photos" with H, we also have been doing this at home.

Conclusion

Overall, positive outcomes for children's learning alongside increased confidence and knowledge of effective teaching practices and increased engagement and communication with whānau were strongly evident as a result of the project. Looking back at the project, we believe there were several factors that supported success. First, having teachers engage in ongoing cycles of teacher inquiry with support over an extended time was important. The experience emphasised the importance of dedicating and prioritising time to discuss and articulate key aspects of children's learning and teacher practice, in partnership with whānau.

Second, to make the workload manageable, the focus on social-emotional learning was incorporated into staff and team meetings as well as programme-wide internal evaluation during the project period. We sought to streamline and incorporate project activities into existing systems in the centre. Third, the engagement with information from the teacher reflection and child assessment tools supported teachers to more intentionally consider key aspects of teaching strategies and child learning. This aligns with the concept introduced by Timperley and colleagues (e.g., Earl & Timperley, 2008; Timperley, 2010), which emphasises the importance of using data and having access to alternative practices to enhance teacher thinking as a crucial element of effective teacher inquiry. McLaughlin et al. (2020) expanded these ideas of data-use to support ECE teachers' thinking and practice through their Data, Knowledge, Action project.

Fourth, the development of the teacher practice reflection tool and child assessment tool framed by Te Whare Tapa Whā supported the focus and incorporation of Māori views of well-being to be integrated with the focus on social-emotional learning.

Macfarlane et al. (2017) specifically highlight how indigenous frameworks such as Te Whare Tapa Whā can help "create responsive practices that inherently reflect elements of social-emotional learning" (p. 285). Shifts in outcomes for children's learning included the increase in consistent teaching practices, resources and tools that emphasised emotions and reflected te ao Māori knowledge in ways that aligned with our tamariki and whānau. The fifth factor that supported success was the leadership and coaching support for teachers, including the use of video, reflection and feedback. Leadership and coaching aspects of the project have not been specifically explored in the current article but are noteworthy of mention and further exploration in future work.

Finally and most importantly, authentic engagement and collaboration with whānau and tamariki supported the project's success. As children's social-emotional learning increased, teachers' motivation and enthusiasm to support this learning grew. As teachers started to observe small, subtle shifts in children's growing capabilities, they became more attuned to these changes and began celebrating them with the children and their families. This in turn increased families' engagement and interest, which further motivated children to share and show their whānau what they were learning. Whānau involvement and communication about their child and their learning was a key driver in the project's outcomes.

In summary, through the TLIF project, we were able to unpack a puzzle of practice by developing local tools and processes that helped our teams to better support consistent, intentional, and culturally responsive teaching to promote children's social-emotional competence across the centre. The learning for our project team, inclusive of the leaders, critical friends, kaiako, whānau and tamariki was deep and wide, and we encourage other teams to consider how social-emotional teaching and learning is supported in their settings.

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