

# Early Education



*Volume 65 Spring / Summer 2019*

- Politics of funding for Playcentre
- Walking the talk: Leadership in ECE
- Te Whariki and inclusive practice
- Soft skills of collaborative reading
- Joining a Kahui Ako
- Quality in ECE in China



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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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## Our thanks to our reviewers

Karyn Aspden, Claire McLachlan, Vijaya Tatineni

## Our thanks for the photos

Thank you to Ashleigh Barnett who supplied the photo for the front cover.

Thanks also to Jessica Smith for allowing us to use the image of Millie and Declan Edwards in the photo.

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

## Contributions

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

*Early Education* welcomes:

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- 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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ISSN: 1172-9112

# An examination of the updated *Te Whāriki* in relation to inclusive practice

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Thecla Kudakwashe Moffat

*The curriculum serves as the foundation for policies and practices that are put in place in a setting. The curriculum is shaped by the context of the local people (Alvestad, Duncan, & Berge, 2009) and therefore Te Whāriki reflects the bi-cultural and multicultural community of New Zealand. It was the first national early childhood education (ECE) curriculum of Aotearoa/New Zealand, first published in 1996 and then reviewed and updated in 2016 (Ministry of Education, 2017). In updating Te Whāriki the Ministry of Education affirmed their commitment to a curriculum document that would stay relevant into the future stating, “We want the updated Te Whāriki to be relevant and valued. Above all else we want it to empower every child to be competent, confident and eager to keep learning” (Ministry of Education, 2016). The revised curriculum is significant for the ECE sector in shaping future directions. Ensuring that everyone feels included and equity is promoted is essential in current and future education settings. It is therefore important to examine whether the inclusion of children with additional learning needs [those children who require learning support] is mentioned in the updated Te Whāriki, whether the language used is inclusive, and what this analysis means for the early childhood sector. This article will explore how the notion of inclusion is reflected in the revised curriculum.*

## Key shifts from 1996 to 2017 in relation to inclusion

As I have argued elsewhere, “inclusion is strengthened when the inclusive position is clearly stated in the policy and curriculum documents of a setting” (Moffatt, 2017, p. 62). *Te Whāriki* was previously based on socio-cultural theory and ecological theory (Ministry of Education, 1996) with the ecological theory being the more dominant, as is the only theory cited in the document. The

updated version has extended the theories to include bioecological, Kaupapa Māori, Pasifika approaches, critical theories as well as emerging theories stemming from neuroscience (Ministry of Education, 2017, pp. 60–62). This suggests a new approach and thinking which is embracing of the diversity of the Aotearoa New Zealand population and current knowledge. Specifically, the inclusion of emerging research reflects the current need for evidence-based practice. While *Te Whāriki* is the prescribed framework as required in the regulations (Education Review Office, 2013) providing a framework of principles, strands and goals which forms the basis of practice, the revised curriculum is more aspirational, allowing for the diversity and richness of services. Therefore, services and teachers interpret the curriculum in ways that suits their philosophy within the framework of principles, strands and goals. It is significant to note that the updated version has a section dedicated to the responsibilities of teachers and it outlines the experiences that children should have in early childhood settings. These simple but significant changes have set the tone for a more inclusive user-friendly early childhood curriculum.

The updated *Te Whāriki* highlights the importance of including children with additional learning needs in their local settings, the mandate to effectively plan for and support the needs of all learners and establishes the responsibility of Kaiako/teachers to provide additional support to those who need it (Ministry of Education, 2017). Further, it seeks to ensure that children’s unique needs are catered for and equitable opportunities for learning are provided. It clearly states the need for teachers to adapt their teaching styles and teaching/learning environment to suit the needs of learners attending each setting. When such an approach is implemented, there can be greater confidence that the needs of all children are met

within their early childhood settings (Ministry of Education, 2017).

One of the key shifts between the 1996 and 2017 versions has been the removal of the term 'special needs' and the inclusion of the 'rights' of the child. In the revised version the emphasis is meeting individual needs of all children regardless of their abilities, strengths or differences and giving them the right to protection. The language used reflects the current thinking about recognising all children as individuals with their unique needs (Moffat, Laureta, & Rana, 2016). Some authors have argued that the words 'special needs' act as barriers to the inclusion of children (Macartney, Purdue, & MacArthur, 2013; Purdue, 2006). The revision of *Te Whāriki* does not mention these words at all. It uses positive language and recognises each child as an individual capable of learning. It is centred on the rights of the child and it states, "this curriculum acknowledges that all children have rights to protection and promotion of their health and wellbeing, to equitable access to learning opportunities, to recognition of their language, culture and identity and increasingly, to agency in their own lives" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 12). Having the words 'rights of the child' clearly identified in the curriculum document and linked to UNCROC (United Nations, 1989) is a major change and reflects the importance of including everyone in the early childhood settings in the revised curriculum. *Te Whāriki* is an inclusive "curriculum for all children" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p.12) who should be given the opportunity to learn with and alongside their peers by engaging in significant experiences to them. This sets the scene for a truly inclusive curriculum.

## The strengthening of implementation advice for inclusion

While the principles and strands of *Te Whāriki* remained unchanged as they are part of the gazetted curriculum, what they mean in practice has greatly been improved in the updated version (Stover & McLachlan, 2017). The goals were reduced so that there is a clear focus for the teachers (McLachlan, 2017). McLachlan further states that the updated curriculum requires teachers to critically think about how well they are meeting the needs of individual children and their families through implementation of the principles, strands and goals. *Te Whāriki* also emphasises the need for the provision of learning support for children with behaviour needs, developmental needs and communication needs.

A striking change in the language is seen where the updated *Te Whāriki* talks about "adapting environments and teaching approaches as necessary and removing any barriers to participation and learning" as a prerequisite for offering an inclusive curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2017, p.13) which was absent in the old version. This statement also places significant responsibility on the teachers to work with families, whānau and community to actively remove any barriers to participation and learning in their settings. For example, if there is a child with autism who could be sensitive to certain noises, it is the teachers' responsibility to find ways to minimise or block these noises for the child to feel safe and secure. This could be achieved by teaching the child to put noise reducing headphones on during the noisy times or ensuring that there is a quiet place where this child can go during the noisy times. The imperative for inclusive and individualised practice encourages teachers to reflect on what could be the barriers to participation for a child and work to dismantle these. *Te Whāriki* requires teachers to respond to the needs of each individual child, which suggests the need for an Individual Plan (IP) for each child with additional needs, which clearly articulates the child's needs and strategies on how teachers in conjunction with families intend to meet these (Ministry of Education, 2019a). Families are regarded as very important in the process of teaching children inclusively and importantly removing the barriers (Ministry of Education, 2017). Therefore, in this process:

Collaborative decision making is at the heart of supporting all students with special education needs. The student and their classmates, parents/caregivers, whānau, and communities are supported to be active participants in the IEP [Individual Educational Plan] team and process. All educators involved in a student's [child's] learning are included. (Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 4)

Teachers can utilise ideas provided under assessment, planning and evaluation in the new curriculum and using the principles of 'family and community' and 'relationships' to give families a voice and the principles of 'empowerment' and 'holistic development' to endeavour to meet each child's needs. Working collaboratively with families, teachers need to identify learning progress and the next steps for each child, and this will aid the intentionality of teaching that is advocated in the revised curriculum.

*Te Whāriki* further encourages that each early childhood programme provides additional resources and suitable activities to support each child's independence. By stating that *Te Whāriki* is "an inclusive curriculum" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 13) the curriculum encourages service providers and teachers to critically think of ways and ideas they can put in place to promote inclusion. This reinforces the need for teachers and service providers to consciously think about how they are creating an inclusive environment. However, what happens in actual practice may be totally opposite of what *the curriculum states*. For example, Gordon-Burns, Purdue, Rarare-Brigs, Stark, and Turnock (2012) found that children who require learning support are more likely to experience limited access to intentional teaching as teachers tend to concentrate more on typically developing children at the disadvantage of those with learning needs. Some have viewed *Te Whāriki* as a powerful curriculum document (Reedy & Reedy, 2013), but it is also argued that its successful implementation depends largely on the **attitude** and **commitment** of the teachers and service providers and to some extent on the provision of adequate funding from the government (Carr & May, 2000). Therefore, inclusion is more visible and successful when teachers and service providers have a positive attitude and are committed to meeting individual needs, but the availability of government funding is also very important in the inclusion endeavour. All parties need to work strongly together for the successful implementation of the new curriculum to effectively achieve inclusion.

To further the notion of inclusion another major change in the updated *Te Whāriki* is the inclusion of New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) which is not mentioned in the old version. The updated *Te Whāriki* states that, "It is desirable that children in ECE settings should also have the opportunity to learn NZSL, an official language of New Zealand, and to learn about Deaf culture" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 12). The curriculum encourages using NZSL so that those children and families who use NZSL feel included and recognised. The early learning action plan 2019–2029 is advocating for *Te Whāriki* to be gazetted as a mandatory curriculum and not just the principles and strands (Ministry of Education, 2019b). It is therefore, encouraged that ECE settings and teacher education providers start thinking about incorporating teaching/learning NZSL as mandatory for the teachers in order for them to pass this knowledge on to children. ECE settings can achieve this through making available to their teachers' professional development which

teaches the use of NZSL. Providing these professional developments specific to meeting unique needs of children will enhance inclusion in early childhood settings.

In honouring the Treaty of Waitangi and respecting the bi-cultural nature of New Zealand as part of inclusion for all, *Te Whāriki* states the importance of use of Te Reo Māori and the use of Kaupapa Māori methods/interventions in educating Māori and supporting those with additional needs. Such an approach which has been advocated by many Māori educational researchers such as Bevan-Brown, et al. (2015), Berryman and Woller (2015), Macfarlane (2005), and Macfarlane and Bateman (2005) who argue that using Māori methods of teaching is best for Māori children. Therefore, the need to use interventions and practices which are culturally responsive is clearly stated in the new version of the curriculum not only for Māori, but for all cultures present in a setting. While some cultures are mentioned by name *Te Whāriki* realises that New Zealand is a culturally diverse country and therefore highlights the importance of recognising children's languages and cultures and working closely with families (Ministry of Education, 2017). Teachers are encouraged to achieve this through recognising the importance of aspirations for each family and through enacting the principle of partnership with family and community.

## Implementing inclusion through the strands of the curriculum

Meeting children and their families' individual needs is the focus of the new curriculum. The strands of *Te Whāriki* relate to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow (1943) believed that all individuals need to have their basic needs met before they can achieve a sense of security, safety, belonging, and self-actualisation. Some advocates of inclusion have argued that this philosophy sits well with inclusion which focuses and insists on meeting individual needs of the children (Prince & Hadwin, 2013). This makes the strands of *Te Whāriki* very relevant for inclusion. The strand of Wellbeing aims to ensure that, "the health and well-being of the child are protected and nurtured" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 26) the goals for the teachers will be to promote the children's health, nurture their emotional well-being and keeping them safe (Ministry of Education, 2017). If this is achieved in early childhood settings then, the children's first basic needs are met. This will then help "Children and their families feel a sense of belonging" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 31). Building on a

sense of safety, teachers can support children with additional learning needs to build relationships and work towards a sense of security and belonging.

Inclusion is very explicit in the contribution strand as it states, “opportunities for learning are equitable, and each child’s contribution valued” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 36) [note emphasis added]. Gordon-Burns et al. (2012) argue that inclusion “is about rights, social justice and equity” (p. 155). When teachers are working to provide equitable opportunities for children and valuing their individual contribution then they are effectively respecting their rights and this promotes inclusion. As children with diverse needs learn together it is essential that teachers support equitable and fair opportunities to learn.

The Communication strand identifies that teachers can support different types of communication, for example, using visual support to communicate with children with autism or using the use of NZSL to support children who are deaf will promote the inclusion of these children and their families. The Exploration strand supports the children to pursue their inner talents as they explore and experiment and therefore, beginning their journey towards finding themselves. Teachers are encouraged to foster this by focusing on the goals to support exploration for individual children so that each child feels included and that teachers value their contribution. For these five strands teachers can use the reflective questions to self-review and evaluate how well they are meeting the needs of children with additional learning needs.

## Summary and conclusions

The updated *Te Whāriki* enhances the emphasis on the inclusion of children with additional needs in their local early childhood settings and encourages that the programmes provided meet their individual needs. The language used in the curriculum document reflects the true spirit of inclusion as it has moved away from the deficit labels such as ‘special needs’, and instead prioritises the responsibility of teachers to meet the individual needs of all learners in inclusive and responsive ways. *Te Whāriki* is intended to be inclusive for all children, regardless of gender, ethnicity, diverse abilities, learning needs, culture, values and beliefs and it builds upon the foundational belief that children’s educational and developmental needs will be met as children learn together and teachers adapt environments and remove barriers to suit each child (Ministry of Education, 2017). It will be important that government policy and funding for early

intervention is provided by government to ensure that the promise of the revised curriculum is realised.

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