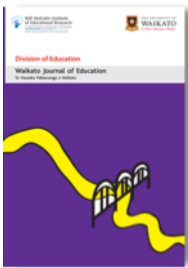

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"The curriculum just flows" – An examination of teachers' understandings and implementation of *Te Whāriki* pre–2017

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Abstract

The revision of Te Whāriki, the New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, in 2017 offered a unique opportunity to gain understanding of the ways teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand think about and enact curriculum in their daily practice. As researchers we were intrigued as to the ways teachers conceptualised the role of curriculum in practice and whether the revised curriculum would generate changes in curriculum implementation. We undertook a research project to capture data about teachers' engagement with, and use of, the curriculum framework, as well as their beliefs about curriculum in the context of early childhood education (ECE). Data collection was designed to focus on two points in time: in 2017 prior to the launch of the revision, with plans to repeat collection after several years with the revised curriculum in effect. Findings reported here draw on interviews conducted with teachers working with Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996) before the revised framework was released. The findings revealed a range of understandings about the meaning of curriculum and the role of curriculum in guiding teachers' enacted practice. Implications for supporting ongoing efforts of enactment and implementation of ECE curriculum are discussed.

Keywords

Curriculum; *Te Whāriki*; teacher practice; curriculum implementation; early childhood curriculum

Introduction

Early childhood teachers' understandings of curriculum are complex and varied. Alvestad et al. (2009, p. 3) draw our attention to the likelihood that there will be "multiple understandings of any given curriculum document". *Te Whāriki* is no exception. First released in 1996, *Te Whāriki*: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996) gained much attention and acclaim nationally and internationally for being a bicultural framework for

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early childhood education that honours Māori as *tangata whenua*, as well as the way in which it establishes a strong aspirational position for the experiences of *tamariki* in early childhood education (Ritchie, 2003). *Te Whāriki* was designed to affirm the diversity of early childhood services, and allows for complex and responsive local curriculum implementation, which reflect the aspirations of whānau and community in meaningful ways (Nuttall, 2003).

Yet, over time, successive national Education Review Office reports (2013; 2015; 2016) have noted concerns about how the curriculum was being implemented in practice by teachers. In addition, the Advisory Group on Early Learning (Ministry of Education, 2015) noted that teachers' understandings of the curriculum and how to implement it were problematic and recommended a revision of the curriculum be undertaken. Shortly after, the Ministry of Education engaged a group of experts to revise the curriculum, whilst maintaining many of the structures and features that were highly valued. In 2017, *Te Whāriki*: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2017) was released for use by all early childhood education services; and *Te Whāriki* a te Kōhanga Reo (Ministry of Education, 2017) was released for use in all kōhanga reo affiliated to Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust. The revised document was viewed as one curriculum with two pathways.

Following the introduction of the 2017 version of the curriculum, Claire McLachlan, a member of the revision writing group, noted that key differences between the 1996 and 2017 versions of the curriculum would require teachers to "revise their approaches to teaching and learning" (McLachlan, 2017, p. 13). Teachers' practice and therefore the learning experiences children are offered, have been closely linked to teachers' beliefs. Despite this critical interplay, studies have identified contradictions and tensions between espoused beliefs and actual practices, with beliefs identified also recognised as resistant to change (Vartuli, 2005). These contradictions may explain Pajares's (1992, p. 307) claim that beliefs are a "messy construct". As a result, curriculum implementation is complex and multi-faceted, as teachers seek to navigate the enactment of *Te Whāriki* alongside their own beliefs and knowledge (Nuttall, 2005). In the study reported here, we were curious to understand how teachers' beliefs informed their enactment of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). By talking to teachers and gaining an understanding of their teaching context, we hoped to explore their beliefs and understandings of curriculum, how their knowledge of *Te Whāriki* has been informed, and how this shaped their intentional, play-based teaching approach.

In our research we are guided by the wisdom of the whakatauki presented in *Te Whāriki* itself:

> He pai te tirohanga ki ngā mahara mō ngā rā pahemo engari ka puta te māramatanga i runga i te titiro whakamua.
>
> It's fine to have recollections of the past, but wisdom comes from being able to prepare opportunities for the future.

Our research seeks to look both to the past, and the significance of the original 1996 Curriculum Framework, as well as how the revised curriculum is shaping the curriculum experiences of tamariki, now and into the future. To set the context for the present study, information about the 1996 version of *Te Whāriki* is described, as well as the social-political context of early childhood education leading into the revision and our initial phase data collection.

Setting the context

Te Whāriki was developed in 1996 as the bicultural national early childhood curriculum framework for Aotearoa New Zealand, in which curriculum is defined as being "the sum total of the experiences, activities, and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster children's learning and development" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 10). The principles of empowerment (*whakamana*), holistic development *(kotahitanga*), family and community (*whānau*

tangata) and relationships (*ngā hongonga*) underpin *Te Whāriki*. Interwoven with these principles, are the curriculum strands of well-being (*mana atua*), belonging (*mana whenua*), contribution (*mana tangata*), communication *(mana reo*), and exploration (*mana aotūroa*), and from these came the associated goals and 118 learning outcomes. *Te Whāriki* is not a prescriptive curriculum, but rather aspirational, requiring each setting to develop and implement a localised curriculum that responds to its unique context, and the wants, priorities, and aspirations of its children and community (Carr & May, 1993). *Te Whāriki* therefore stands as a guide to practice, whereby teachers craft a curriculum that is responsive to its community, whilst also upholding the broad principles and aims for all tamariki.

Because *Te Whāriki* speaks to the nature of experiences for tamariki and the intended outcome of children being capable and confident learners and communicators, rather than providing a prescriptive curriculum, teachers are empowered to make decisions about curriculum provision. Developing curriculum in this way involves teachers making a multitude of decisions on a daily, hourly, and moment-by-moment basis, and therefore requires highly knowledgeable teachers (Cullen, 1995). Teachers make pedagogical decisions about how to implement curriculum and the teaching practices that they will utilise. How teachers enact and implement the curriculum framework in practice is in turn influenced by their knowledge and beliefs not only of curriculum, but also the role of the teacher within curriculum (Nuttall, 2003).

Over the course of many years, early learning scholars noted that teachers often espoused a sociocultural description of their practice that emphasised children's learning in context and leading their own learning through play, with perhaps limited understanding of the role of the teacher in supporting learning within a sociocultural construct (Nuttall, 2003). The emphasis on children's learning occurring as they engage with the environment is in fact more associated with developmental theories of learning, where the adults' role is to provide the learning environment (Hedges, 2000). As a result of challenges in positioning newer sociocultural theories of learning with and alongside existing developmental theories of learning, tensions around the role of the teacher within a play-based curriculum were being grappled with by teachers and scholars (Edwards, 2017). To understand how change in the curriculum might affect the espoused views and narratives, as well the pedagogy and practice, we conceptualised the following study.

Methodology

Designed as a longitudinal study that would visit settings both pre-and-post the revision of *Te Whāriki*, this study adopted a case study approach to allow the collection of both breadth and depth of data about teachers' engagement with, and use of, the curriculum framework, as well as their beliefs about curriculum in the context of early childhood education. Ethical approval for this study was granted by [name withheld] University, on a commitment that the participants and their settings were not identifiable. Interviews took place in the participants' ECE settings, with documentation shared by participants being anonymised. Data collection was designed to focus on two points in time: in 2017 prior to the launch of the revision, with plans to repeat collection after several years with the revised curriculum in effect.

Overarching research questions guiding the 2017 phase of the project were:

- How was *Te Whāriki* being implemented by teachers in a range of early childhood settings prior to the revision of the curriculum framework in 2017?
- How were teachers' using intentional teaching strategies to implement *Te Whāriki*?
- How was *Te Whāriki* being implemented by teachers in a range of early childhood settings once the revised curriculum had become embedded?

The initial phase of the project involved semi-structured interviews with a leader and a teacher from six different education and care settings, generating a total of 12 interviews which were audio recorded

and transcribed, and then shared with participants to verify the contents. A range of artefacts and documentation, such as photographs of the environment, tools for communicating with parents, work samples, policies, planning documentation, and other general materials used in the daily operations of the curriculum were also gathered from each of the six settings involved in the study. This publication focuses specifically on the interview data.

The case study settings were chosen based on participants being fully qualified, registered and experienced teachers and leaders. All but one of the leader participants had been teaching for 20 years or more, with a range of between 9- and 30-years' experience amongst the teacher participants. This provided an extensive foundation of experience with *Te Whāriki* and curriculum implementation. Services were purposively selected to represent a range of diverse early learning settings in Aotearoa New Zealand, including community and privately owned education and care services as well as state kindergartens, and services that included infants and toddlers. For five of these settings, one leader and one teacher were interviewed. In a kindergarten setting the leader and two teachers requested to engage in a collective group interview before the leader was then asked specific questions relating to their leadership role separately. The term "teachers" will be used to describe the participants to support anonymity.

These semi-structured interviews were carried out by the four researchers involved in the project, in the teachers' own settings, and audio recorded to allow for analysis and review. Interviews were chosen as a means of collecting thick and descriptive data, and to allow participants the opportunity to share both their beliefs and experiences. A shared interview protocol was developed to support continuity across the interviews, which was provided to participants in advance to allow them to give prior thought to the areas being explored. Interview questions focused on exploring teachers' understandings and implementation of curriculum just prior to the revision of *Te Whāriki* and provided an opportunity for participants to share their understanding of curriculum, and to describe specific ways they enacted curriculum in their daily practices. Ethical considerations, such as confidentiality, were adhered to throughout the process. Teachers were fully informed of the intent and purpose of the study, were aware of their rights to withdraw at any time, gave informed consent, and non-identification of participants and settings was upheld.

We adopted Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of thematic analysis to enable us to consider the wealth of data collected in a systematic and robust manner, and to give due weight to the thick qualitative responses generated by the interview data. Our initial phases of analysis involved repeated reading of transcripts to become immersed in the words of the participants, and to consider potential units of meaning to generate initial codes. This process was shared across the research team before coming together to look for commonalities and key recurring messages to identify themes. A collective lens helped to ensure a more robust decision-making approach, as emerging themes were interrogated and questioned across the team. As themes emerged, these were then organised in relation to the research questions, as a way of ensuring a tight focus on the original purpose of the study. We undertook an iterative process of refinement and synthesis, allowing us to reach a point where we could define key themes, which in turn formed the basis of a presentation at a national conference, to allow us to gain further feedback from academic and professional peers as part of making sense of the data. Findings shared are the result of this iterative process.

Findings and discussion

What is curriculum?

Curriculum was viewed as being all encompassing with teachers from five of the six settings expressing the notion of curriculum being "everything". For example, stating "It's the essence of who we are …

it's everything that you see and do in our kindergarten, it's our relationships with our families, it's the writing on the wall, it's the way we establish areas of play …".

Similarly, teachers described curriculum as holistic and teachers commonly shared a view of curriculum as inclusive of the environment, the learning experiences provided, and the interactions that take place throughout the day.

> Holistic coverage of all areas of learning. That's how I see it … the word curriculum to me defines sort of formal areas of teaching that are a requirement, but when I think of the term 'curriculum' in terms of our centre, I think of all of the activities that we offer consistently … I always think of the term 'holistic'—not just because that's how *Te Whāriki* was designed to function, but because that's how I see children's learning regardless of what environment you're in.

The idea that curriculum is holistic and means "everything" is not surprising given that the original version of *Te Whāriki* defines curriculum as "the sum total of the experiences, activities, and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster children's learning and development" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 10). However, much has been written about the challenges for teachers when they are faced with such a broad definition of curriculum (Hedges & Cullen, 2005; Ritchie & Veisson, 2018). A holistic view of learning, coupled with a non-prescriptive approach to teaching, poses challenges for teachers, particularly around the implementation of their role. Within this void, teachers then construct and enact their own definitions of curriculum (Nuttall, 2003). In this study, teachers have affirmed the notion of curriculum as being all encompassing and reflective of everything that takes place daily in an early childhood setting.

Teacher's knowledge of curriculum, pedagogy, and curriculum implementation

We were curious to know how teachers were informed about curriculum implementation. While there were some references to initial teacher education and professional development, teachers consistently spoke about their own teaching experiences over time and the influence of their colleagues as the primary source of knowledge about *Te Whāriki*.

> Back when I first started, which was a long time ago, it was a little bit jargon to me—you would open the book and you really didn't understand how this all linked. But after working with it and having experience with it, and seeing different people's interpretations, I've learnt how I see it.

Consistent with previous research, the context of teachers work influences their beliefs. For example, Smith's (2018) study of New Zealand early childhood teachers identified that aspects of teachers' current working environments, such as their colleagues, centre philosophies, curriculum decision making, and day-to-day practices, were found to have a fundamental role in shaping teachers' beliefs about children's learning.

Furthermore, the role of colleagues in growing teachers' understandings of curriculum and the learning that occurs as teachers work collaboratively in early childhood settings is highlighted. Wenger (1998) uses the term "community of practice" to describe the active process of meaning-making and participation in the experiences and practices of knowledge communities. However, participation can be a positive or negative experience for teachers if they do not adopt the shared understandings and practices of the community (Wenger, 1998). Nuttall's (2004) research exploring how early childhood teachers negotiate curriculum found that teachers' enactment of their role is influenced by the discourses that dominate the setting teachers work in. Such discourses may exclude alternative ways of understanding and interpreting curriculum, leading to dysfunctional communities of practice.

How teachers plan for and implement *Te Whāriki*

Teachers repeatedly mentioned the important role that *Te Whāriki* plays in informing their work, particularly in relation to both the experiences provided for and planned for children. Three key themes emerged from the data: variation in how teachers approach curriculum planning and implementation, the use of more generalised and broad descriptions of curriculum, and their favouring of selected aspects of the curriculum rather than an intentional focus across all the strands.

Variation in teachers' approaches

Teachers talked about purposefully and intentionally setting up the learning environment, activities, and opportunities as a way of implementing *Te Whāriki,* and indicated that the curriculum document was used to guide decision making. How this was implemented varied from setting to setting, with each having its own systems and processes for planning the curriculum experienced by children. Of note, there was also variation in how teachers within the same setting talked about how the curriculum was planned. For example, the leader in setting two described the curriculum planning process: "We choose from the curriculum goals, and then we write specific learning outcomes relating to those goals, which then puts it into the forward planning for the next cycle for the child."

However, a teacher from the same setting stated:

> So, when I'm teaching, I don't think, 'Oh, this meeting goal one, strand …' I think it is just part of … Yeah, you know when you set up the environment, you know why you've set it up and you know you are meeting a wide range of needs. So, I think you've got all those different experiences in the different areas, that you know all of those areas are being met.

This variation of curriculum planning within and across teams is not surprising given previous critique and calls for improvement in curriculum planning and provision (Education Review Office, 2013; Smith, 2013). *Te Whāriki*, however, was seen by participants to support curriculum provision in a way that was flexible and responsive to individuals whilst encouraging both planned and spontaneous learning opportunities. This flexibility in turn fosters the variation that exists within and between settings, as teachers seek to respond to individual children and their community.

Broad strokes rather than specific detail when describing curriculum

Most teachers appeared to find it easier to talk, sharing more and speaking more confidently and fluidly about how the setting's philosophy influenced curriculum implementation than how *Te Whāriki* did. Teachers made frequent references to the philosophy of their setting, and for many the curriculum provided to children is inherently linked to and connected with philosophy, as demonstrated by the following quote:

> If we're doing something, every time we look at a programme plan, every time we look at an event, every time we look at changing anything, we go straight back to the philosophy and go, 'Where does it fit? Does this fit in? If it doesn't fit in, are we doing the right thing?'

The apparent ease with which most teachers from this study were able to talk about the collective philosophy of the setting as well as their own, suggests that teachers were perhaps more familiar, or comfortable with, the philosophy than with *Te Whāriki* itself. Teachers grappling with articulating their understandings and implementation of *Te Whāriki* was noted by the Advisory Group on Early Learning

(Ministry of Education, 2015), and was an impetus for the revision of the curriculum. References to *Te Whāriki* being used to inform and guide curriculum were numerous, though many teachers were not able to give explicit examples of how it was used in practice. Instead, responses tended to include broad and generalised statements, such as:

> I suppose for me, it's *Te Whāriki*, and it's the workings of what you do on a daily basis. So, it links to your planning, it links to the children, it links to the relationships you have, the philosophy that you have set in place. And once you've got all of those aspects working well … the curriculum just flows through.

Statements such as these suggest that despite affirming that *Te Whāriki* was being used to guide and inform curriculum provision for children, how this was done in practice was not able to be clearly or explicitly articulated. The challenges teachers experienced in articulating how they supported children's learning as they implemented *Te Whāriki* have also been noted by Smith (2010, 2018).

Some aspects of the curriculum are favoured

The underpinning principles of the curriculum framework, particularly those of relationships and family and community, were evident as teachers talked about how children and families were involved in the setting. The importance of relationships, or *ngā hononga*, which is a Māori concept based on establishing relationships, was frequently voiced. It is worth noting, however, that while all teachers noted the importance of relationships and shared examples of ways they sought to build positive and reciprocal relationships with parents, there were few examples shared of how these relationships were used to inform and support children's learning. The relationships appeared to be the end goal, rather than a starting point from which teachers could support children's ongoing learning.

While some references were made to the strands of the curriculum, these tended to focus on the well-being and belonging strands, with fewer references to contribution, exploration, and communication. These findings are in alignment with those of the Education Review Office (2015), who noted that teachers were prioritising the strands of well-being and belonging in comparison with the other strands. Fewer references were also made to the goals and learning outcomes of the curriculum framework in comparison to supporting children's dispositional learning, suggesting that tamariki may not be experiencing the full breadth of *Te Whāriki*. Teachers prioritising the support of dispositional learning for tamariki in comparison with their support of the working theories, which are expressed in *Te Whāriki* as the learning outcomes, has long been documented (Hedges, 2011; Hedges & Jones, 2012).

The teachers' role, play and intentionality

As we began to unpack teachers' understanding of curriculum and the ways it is enacted, it became clear that implementation is guided by teachers' beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning, the role and purpose of play, and the ways in which the role of the teacher in the teaching and learning relationship is understood.

Espoused importance of the teacher

The role of the teacher was espoused as being of critical importance, but in a way that could be described as passive. Teachers acknowledged the important role that they play in the lives of children and whānau, especially in relation to the early childhood community and learning environment that they create. In doing so, teachers see themselves as mediators of learning, through providing children with the opportunities to engage with people, places, and things, and with a rich early childhood environment

that fosters their capacity to engage with learning. Words such as facilitating, responding, and observing were common to the descriptions that teachers provided when asked about their role.

The importance of environment

One of the strongest themes to emerge from the interview data was teachers' belief in the importance of the early childhood environment, a clear alignment with the message that curriculum is the sum total of all experiences within the early childhood setting. Teachers saw learning and teaching beginning at the junction of when the child enters the learning space. Teachers drew on their pedagogical knowledge to plan and create environments that fostered child engagement, exploration, and a rich range of learning and domain experiences through the day. Once this environment was established, teachers then saw their role as shifting to careful and attentive observation, and then, as needed, providing support or intervention to extend learning and foster development.

Epstein (2007) reminds us that intentional teaching is "to always be thinking about what we are doing and how it will foster children's development and produce real and lasting learning" (p. 10). The teachers, however, seemed more comfortable talking about intentional teaching in relation to preparing the environment. Teachers in this study articulated several ways in which they were intentional in their practice, including short and long-term planning, recognising children's additional learning and support needs, creating provocations and specific activities designed to support domain knowledge or specific skills, and fostering dispositions for learning.

> Intentional teaching? I think it's like picking up on their interests, and actually planning … So, you're not just going with the flow that day, or being spontaneous—you've actually got clear ideas in your mind and set out. It might change as you progress through that task with the child, but you've already got in the back of your mind, 'This is what I want to … the skills that I want to teach the child at this time.' Yeah. It's more … I think 'intentional' as being more planned and structured, and knowing what direction you want to go in.

Of note, teachers typically positioned this intentionality in the context of a team-teaching approach and expressed how important it was that teachers were sharing their knowledge and working collaboratively.

Focus on observing and "knowing" children

Reflecting the emphasis on observation that permeates the 1996 *Te Whāriki*, the participating teachers emphasised that a key element of their role was to gain deep knowledge of each tamariki through careful observation, and then to use this knowledge to guide the nature of support—whether through environmental or interactional experiences. Teachers recognised that a significant element of their role was as a planner—generally enacted in a collaborative way, including the teaching team, and potentially the input of whānau and community.

> We are being very intentional. We're setting specific learning experiences, we're making sure that we are, you know … Within that as well, you're thinking about individual children, group[s of] children, me as the teacher, what's my role. You're thinking about the environment, you're thinking about layers and frequency, and how you're going to be putting those things into place. So, that's you being intentional. You know, when you come to work on the Monday, you're setting up the environment,

> you're reading through those things and you're thinking, 'This is what I'm intentionally going to put out'.

Prioritising children's play and agency

The role of free play in early childhood was strongly evident in the responses of the participating teachers, yet it proved challenging to articulate the way a play-based pedagogy served to implement the scope of *Te Whāriki*. This is the challenge created when all experiences are deemed to be curriculum, and when play is seen as the "child's work". Such positioning assumes learning takes place naturally because of environment provision, and that play does not need mediation from adults (Edwards & Nuttall, 2005). This focus on children's play has therefore at times left teachers out of the picture, positioned in a passive role as facilitators of children's independent and self-guided learning. This positioning was reflected in the data in the hesitancy of many teachers to claim an intentional role for themselves in children's play, though most appeared comfortable with being intentional in relation to how the learning environment was set up. It is now recognised that the focus on play-based provision for children in early childhood settings should be integrated more explicitly with understandings about the important role of social interactions, relationships with teachers, and learning from observation and from models (often teachers, but also peers and other adults) in early childhood learning. In New Zealand research, teachers' interactions with children have been found to be a reliable indicator of higher learning achievement for children than any other measured features of quality. Specific practices that have a strong and consistent association with children's ongoing achievement include teacher responsiveness, open-ended questions, and teachers' engagement in play (Wylie & Thompson, 2003).

Unease with taking an active role in children's play

Though *Te Whāriki* takes a strongly socio-cultural stance in relation to the view of the child and learning, it was evident that a developmental, or Piagetian, approach to early childhood education was still evident in the way in which teachers articulated their role in the teaching and learning nexus. Though the child was seen as an active and agentic explorer within the environment, the role of the teacher was seen as far less purposeful, and more centred on the establishment of the learning environment and provision of resources and experiences, as reflected in the following example.

> Well, that's where the intentional teaching comes in. So, everything's intentional, to the interests, the strengths, the provocations that, you know, that need to be, you know … We changed an area to dinosaurs because, you know, we've got a small group of boys who are really into dinosaurs.

Such reflections suggest that the teacher is seen as a facilitator and enabler of learning, but there was little description offered that positioned teachers acting as co-learners, co-constructors, or intentional participants in the child's learning journey. Given that sociocultural theories of learning underpinning *Te Whāriki* see teachers playing an active role in supporting children's learning (Nuttall, 2003), these findings suggest that teachers are still grappling with their position in this process.

Teachers were careful to articulate that when they did engage with children in intentional ways, they were seeking to be responsive and adaptive, and rejected interventions that were seen to be didactic, teacher driven, or disruptive of children's own play agenda. There was a concern that "teaching" would interrupt play or reflect more traditional models of teacher-directed learning that might be seen in primary classrooms, rather than relational and responsive interactions that build from the child's lead. Teachers reported being more likely to "intervene" in play when there were concerns about a child's development or behaviour, or when additional supports were needed. These findings are somewhat at

odds with contemporary understandings of the role of the teacher, and intentional teaching specifically. Intentional teaching has been described as "the purposeful and deliberate actions of teachers, drawing on their knowledge of individual children and professional knowledge and skills to provide meaningful and appropriate curricular experiences for all children in ECE" (McLaughlin et al., 2016, p. 176). Although intentional teaching requires teachers to support children's learning in collaborative and deliberate ways, it appears that many teachers still maintain more Piagetian views, where the role of the teacher is to provide an environment for children to explore independently.

Complexity of the role

Perhaps the strongest message when teachers explain the nature of their work with children is the recognition of how complex and multi-faceted the role of the teacher is. Within each day teachers must make multiple decisions as they prepare the environment, and then engage with and support learners. Teachers grappled with the idea of their role in a child-led curriculum and at times struggled to articulate what their understanding of curriculum looked like in practice. For example,

> … sometimes you can just watch and just be aware of what they're doing and listen out for their ideas, and there might be something you provide, either at that time or another day. But other times, you can be involved and have those communications and extending their learning. There's a balance, I think … and sometimes you still get it wrong—sometimes you step in and the game stops, and other times you step in, and the game goes to a different place. I think you've got to be cautious about when you do step in and when you don't step in because it can completely change their idea.

The interviews revealed the complex decision making that teachers engage in as they negotiate their practice. Nuttall (2003) acknowledges the construction of the child as an active participant in their own learning within *Te Whāriki*. Despite the agentic view of the child, the role of the teacher is less clearly defined, and teachers are left to negotiate their role within a curriculum framework that values multiple perspectives and views knowledge as socially constructed. Wrestling with a child-led curriculum and the intentional role of the teacher was a key finding of Smith's (2020) study of early childhood teachers, whereby Smith found teachers were reluctant to emphasise the intentional nature of their role and the idea of a child-led curriculum was a dominant discourse.

The need for balance

Teachers expressed the need to balance the intentional aspects of their practice with the drive to respond spontaneously to children's ideas and interests. Learning experiences were described as planned or unplanned and teachers expressed the importance of being responsive to children's interests.

> There's heaps of spontaneous play that we do, but then there's also throughout the day there might be little pockets of planned activities that the teachers have organised for the children, to go on their interests.

Findings suggest that the complexity of the teacher's role brings some tension in balancing the different needs across the day. For example, between care and education, between careful observation and planned intervention, between guided participation and child agency, between emergent moments and planned experiences. There is recognition that these roles are not in competition with each other, but rather that teachers must make complex decisions in the moment as to the priorities and factors that shape each given interaction.

Conclusion

As researchers we considered it a privilege to be invited into these quality early learning settings and to have teachers tell and show us the ways in which they were enacting *Te Whāriki* (1996) in practice prior to the revision in 2017. *Te Whāriki* is a curriculum of great promise, and the findings presented in this study affirm many examples of quality curriculum implementation. Tamariki are firmly positioned as capable and confident learners, developing agency and leadership in early learning settings, in the context of rich, warm, and responsive relationships. Yet the findings also suggested persisting challenges for *kaiako*, in being able to articulate intentional ways in which *Te Whāriki* guided their practice, ensuring breadth and depth of curriculum experiences for all tamariki, and in genuinely building a responsive local curriculum and enacting bicultural practice in the context of partnership.

Of note, the teachers who participated in this study represented a significant wealth of knowledge and experience of early childhood education in Aotearoa. Teachers were very experienced, deeply passionate kaiako and strong advocates for early childhood education, tamariki, and whānau. Each shared a strong philosophical stance in regard to quality provision for tamariki and the strengths of *Te Whāriki* as a guiding framework. The complexity of the teacher's role and curricular decision making was strongly evident. Yet perhaps most significant was the degree to which the findings revealed "taken for granted" practices in early childhood education, without necessarily articulating explicit connections to *Te Whāriki* itself in a critically reflective and intentional manner. There remains a sense that *Te Whāriki* is "what we do every day" in ECE, reflecting the foundational idea that curriculum is the sum total of all experiences within the day. Yet as the Education Review Office (2015) has highlighted in recent implementation reviews, such an approach typically prioritises the relationally focused Well-being and Belonging strands, at the cost of more learning-oriented strands of Contribution, Communication, and Exploration.

Our findings suggest that in 2017, before the release of the revised curriculum, child-led learning, with a strong prioritisation of free-play, was common across the research sites, while intentional teaching and planning were more challenging topics. There was not always a clear pathway from *Te Whāriki,* through to planning and implementation practices, with challenges in defining curriculum design and the role of kaiako. We draw on a quote from one of the participants in titling this piece, "the curriculum just flows", to capture the sense that curriculum implementation is in essence an implicit and organic action, changing and reforming almost daily in response to the currents navigated by tamariki, whānau, kaiako, and community.

The findings reported in this article present only a slice of a larger set of data that we hope to explore further over time. The opportunity to consider the impact of curriculum pre and post a significant revision offers a unique lens into teaching beliefs and practices, and the significance of guiding frameworks in shaping curriculum implementation. The data presented is a brief snapshot in time, and from a small subset of voices from the sector but does offer some insight into teachers' perceptions and experiences of enacting *Te Whāriki* prior to the revised curriculum that may resonate more widely in the sector. Findings suggest future pathways in exploring more deeply the connection between *Te Whāriki* and planning, and to unpack further how the strands, goals, and learning outcomes become more than "taken for granted" when made visible in curriculum planning and implementation. We look forward to upcoming data collection which will provide a comparative lens following the implementation of the 2017 revision, to determine if and how implementation practices may have changed.

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