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Special Section: Human Development

Special Section on Human Development as a Critical Voice in Education: Editor's Introduction <i>Lise Bird Claiborne</i>	3
Human Development <i>Wendy Drewery</i>	9
Exploring Children's Perspectives: Multiple Ways of Seeing and Knowing the Child <i>Sally Peters & Janette Kelly</i>	19
"Not Right in the Head": How Should Teachers Assess New Talk About Teenagers? <i>Monica Payne</i>	31
Whose Future? Whose Choosing?: Counselling in a Context of (Im)possible Choice <i>Elmarie Kotzé and Kathie Crocket</i>	45
"It's About Empowering the Whānau": Māori Adult Students Succeeding at University <i>Tina Williams</i>	57
Making Sense of Children's Sexuality: Understanding Sexual Development and Activity in Education Contexts <i>Paul Flanagan</i>	69
General Section	
The Te Kotahitanga Observation Tool: Development, Use, Reliability and Validity <i>Mere Berryman and Russell Bishop</i>	81
Now What? First Year Student Teachers' Reflective Journal Writing <i>Bill Ussher and Jade Chalmers</i>	95
Using Professional Colleagues as Interviewers in Action Research: Possibilities and Pitfalls <i>Anne Hume and Jenny Young-Loveridge</i>	111
Grappling with the Complexity of the New Zealand Curriculum: Next Steps in Exploring the NZC in Initial Teacher Education <i>Judy Bailey, Marilyn Blakeney-Williams, Wendy Carss, Frances Edwards, Ngārewa Hāwera, & Marilyn Taylor</i>	125
Teaching and Learning Together: Making Space for Curriculum Negotiation in Higher Education <i>Frances Edwards</i>	143

Doctoral thesis Abstracts

- Fa'afatāmanu Talafeagai mo Lesona Fa'asaaienisi: O le Tu'ualalo Mo A'oga a Faia'oga Saienisi Fa'aōliōli. Culturally Appropriate Formative Assessment in Science Lessons: Implications for Initial Science Teacher Education.
Desmond Lee Hang 157
- Young Women and Leadership Development: Co-Constructing Leadership Learning in a New Zealand Secondary School.
Rachel McNae 159
- Decolonising Pākehā ways of Being: Revealing Third Space Pākehā Experiences
Micheal Brown 161
- Working Across Cultures in Indigenous Science Education.
Michael Michie 163



Special section on human development as a critical voice in education: Editor's introduction

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“Development” is one of those concepts that everybody seems to understand, yet is notoriously difficult to define. This special section of *Waikato Journal of Education* focuses on new directions in research and theory that offer support for innovative educational practice. This collation is the result of engagement by a network¹ of researchers who are exploring questions about development and counselling in a variety of educational and community settings. The diverse research reports here offer critical voices with significance for education. One aspect of this work is the amplification of sometimes inaudible views of young children, students, teachers, counsellors, parents and extended families.

The concerns in this collection also reflect the distinctive place of human development within the field of education in New Zealand. In other countries such research is usually found in family studies and human service disciplines. Part of the distinctiveness of developmental research in Aotearoa is the continuing engagement with indigenous Māori perspectives and the foregrounding of questions around inequality, justice, culture and economics. Rather than the hope for a straightforward path with predictable stages for every person's development, we attend to diversity and difference amongst people, working to “de-centre” dominant euro-western theories in the field. We do this not by rejecting traditional theories, but by shifting their place from one of unquestioned authority to one alongside various international and indigenous voices.

This de-centring has implications for the initial teacher education curriculum, which includes core knowledge of child and adolescent development. For the past decade, Wendy Drewery and I (e.g., Claiborne & Drewery, 2009) have worked to create texts about human development in Aotearoa as alternatives to popular US textbooks (or “glossies”, as Brantlinger, 2006, calls such books). Overseas books tend to reify the idea that each child around the world develops through a universal sequence of progressive improvements (stages) over time. The researchers in this section acknowledge that there is a large body of knowledge about expected levels and changes in learning, emotion and social life for every age group from infants to older adolescents. The papers in this special issue, however, go further, because the writers are committed to multiple



disciplinary approaches to lifespan human development informed by a social constructionist perspective. Such an outlook considers development to be as much influenced by society's expectations for us at each age as by chronological predictions about our improvements in understanding (e.g., James & Prout, 1998). Such a view has an inherent concern with recognition of diversity and a commitment to social justice. To a greater or lesser extent, we also draw on Michel Foucault's (e.g., 1977) groundbreaking notion that we are shaped by social forces we can barely grasp, learning to be the selves that society requires of its citizens through the technologies we learn as we grow up. Examples of these "technologies of the self" might include attending to our mobile phones every few minutes to be sure we are in the right place at the right time or being sure to look "on task" in a classroom or a staff meeting while worrying about an entirely different matter. Each paper in this collection raises challenging questions about what it means for students of all ages to grow and develop in an unpredictably changing world in which different groups have competing hopes for the advancement of future generations.

Wendy Drewery (this issue) shows how the field of human development has changed over time, from child study to "lifespan" development across the whole of life. She questions the relevance of much standard theorising in human development, asking us to go beyond the focus on personal development—with its roots in biology and psychology—towards a view that takes into account the work of the United Nations Development Project in mapping how nations are developing, with particular attention to living standards and records of human rights.ⁱⁱ This has resonances with Erica Burman's (2008) call for "developments" to mean both personal and economic development, collapsing two fields into one. Drewery shows how important the economic context is for young people today with her analysis of changing demands of the future workforce in these tough economic times. She argues that classic theories about "career" or "adult" development may not be specific enough to be widely applicable today. She makes a timely reminder for us to keep in mind that there are effects from "both global and local social and economic conditions" on what is considered "optimal development for individuals".

Several other articles in this section deal with this difficult conundrum of thinking about individuals we interact with while also paying close attention to the big picture nationally, globally and in our communities. A key strategy has been to put the ethical commitments we make to the students we work with at the heart of the matter, drawing further on that longstanding questioning raised by human rights advocates since the 1700s in Europe: to create a society more respectful of all of its citizens. This fits well with a second strategy of widening current views of development to consider its diversity across time and space. Contributions in this special section explore both these strategies.

Ethics of development: caution, care, respect

Ethical commitments inevitably come from the position of human development as key knowledge for service professions such as teaching, social work, nursing, medicine and counselling. As Vandenburg (1999) pointed out, drawing on Levinas's views on care within shared interactions, "Developmental research, to have meaning and significance, must necessarily entail ethical commitments and consequences" (p. 42). A key ethical concern with human development is respect for the voices of developing persons.

Sally Peters and Janette Kelly (this issue) point to children's voices as of increasing importance throughout society. This has become part of our national policy framework in many areas of social development as New Zealand has grappled with the implications of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations Commission for Human Rights, 1989); the place of children's voices has moved from backstage to centre stage. There are also parallels between research that takes the voices of children and young people seriously and moves in educational policy and practice (after some hesitation till the 1990s: see, e.g., Bird, 2003) that have led to greater sounding of student voices within school governance. Research, too, has moved beyond simple attempts to collect voices of children of varying ages to consider issues of representation and authenticity. Peters and Kelly focus on recent research to give teachers and teacher educators insights into contemporary debates on ways to enhance children's participation in research, policy and practice.

Taking a different tack on the issue of voice, Monica Payne (this issue) presents the big picture regarding quantitative or "realist" developmental research that purports to give a definitive picture of the "teenage brain". Pointing to a number of overgeneralisations and other flaws in research that are reported as fact in popular media, Payne makes a case for research that is founded on more respectful views of young people as human beings capable of maturity and insight about matters that concern them. This resonates with Peters and Kelly's (this issue) contention that there is now wide acknowledgement that young people deserve respect, care and the chance to participate in decisions about the risks they might take and health consequences they might experience.

Ethical concerns are also at the heart of Elmarie Kotzē and Kathie Crocket's (this issue) poignant demonstration of the conflicts faced by secondary school counsellors who attempt to apply culturally responsible support for young people in difficulty. To reduce possible harm that might come from telling of a narrative, they use an exploratory fictional form to highlight issues of school, culture and religion in the specific case of a secondary student's unexpected pregnancy. They focus on the work of counsellors who attempt to support the cultural and religious beliefs of young women and men in the context of family as well as school, exploring implications for the future working lives and careers of young people when there are contradictions and conflicts between values and beliefs of different generations and different cultures. Of course, attention to the diversity of development is itself part of ethical concerns about attention and care.

Putting the diversity of human development at the centre

Human development has always been grounded firmly in the realities of positive change in the community. This grounding requires a tentative and questioning stance about cultural questions, to ensure that research considers development within a diversity of ethnicities, countries of origin, genders and sexualities.

Māori culture has its own ontology, with complexities around relationships between people over time. For example, whakapapa (often translated as "genealogy") and whānau ("extended family") are interwoven concepts that show the importance of ancestry for people today and tomorrow and for the interlinking of goals for development (however defined) for all generations together (see Durie, 1997; Metge, 1995). Tina Williams (this issue) addresses the intersections of adult students within a

Māori view of development that points to the importance of whānau in a university setting that can unintentionally devalue these crucial supports. Longstanding views of adult development (cf. Drewery's contribution)—which emphasise independence from the family of origin so that the young person can “integrate” into university life—are clearly based on a rather eurocentric notion that individual development is more important than development of families and communities. Williams elegantly summarises some of the key findings of her doctoral work (Williams, 2011) on the many subtle, interrelated ways that whānau *are* what success at tertiary education is all about.

Sexuality and health are also of key importance to human development. Paul Flanagan's (this issue) work is with children whose sexual expression brings them to the attention of teachers and counsellors. A child who behaves in a way seen as sexually active by an adult might be labelled as deviant, but what is the child's understanding of his or her actions? Seen in the context of the research on children's voices (cf. Peters and Kelly's contribution), Flanagan reminds us that we cannot know the child's point of view simply by observing the child's behaviour. Given longstanding taboos around expressions of childhood sexuality (e.g., Kitzinger, 1998), it is too easy to interpret the child's behaviour from the point of view of a more knowledgeable and experienced adult. Using a fictionally reconstructed account of such a case from his past practice as a family counsellor, Flanagan urges adults to avoid the mistake of trying to guess just what a particular child's intentions might be. Instead, supportive adults could keep multiple possibilities in mind regarding the stories and the positionings that children may take up in various circumstances, remembering that children are influenced by their own history as well as by their emergent understandings of sexuality.

Flanagan's approach resonates with work of other researchers in our network who should be acknowledged here. Lisa Hayes' doctoral thesis (in preparation) explores the impact of leisure choices on health of rangatahi, including the possible harm that comes from young people's use of alcohol at after-sports events. She explores Māori views of health education materials about safe sex practices with a variety of participants, including wahine who are HIV positive. Again drawing on ethical concerns for more respectful communication with young women, Hayes attends to kaupapa Māori protocols (e.g., Pihama, Cram, & Walker, 2002) as part of a culturally sensitive research practice.

Finally, attention to diversity within current social constructions of human development means questioning assumptions about individuals identified by particular abilities and/or impairments. The goal is a more inclusive view of human development that questions labels that purport to define the “essence” of an individual as well as stereotypical expectations about the course of a “normal” life. This approach includes challenges to ideas about “readiness” to learn, which can depend on questionable developmental norms (e.g., Bird, 2006). While we acknowledge that there are real impairments that affect people's lives, we define “disability” with reference to the *New Zealand Disability Strategy* (Ministry of Health, 2001), which argues that disability is socially constructed by barriers in society that impede achievements of people who operate outside certain expected norms. Within our network, Carol Hamilton and Ashlie Brink (in preparation) are investigating the way initial teacher education students respond to courses designed to enhance inclusive practice through the lens of a disability rights perspective.

A wider picture for questions about how people develop

As mentioned earlier, the researchers represented here all draw on a social theory that has been influential for practice in many countries over the past few decades: social construction. There is, however, more than one approach to this theory. Despite the diversity of viewpoints in this special section, we all share a move away from earlier euro-western discourses about individuals as separate beings with clear control (“free will”) over their own motivations and actions. A focus on rational and predictable forces of cause and effect still underpins many approaches to intervention with young people. In contrast, the contributions in this section view individuals as shaped by their cultures and languages, as well as by moves towards greater recognition of children’s rights (in Kelly & Peters’ contribution) and strong indigenous cultural traditions (in Williams’s contribution). The researchers here also recognise that our individual development is constrained by the taken-for-granted discourses of certain times and places that limit the sorts of people we are able to be (in contributions by Flanagan and Payne).

Many of us (Kotzē, Crocket, Hayes, Hamilton and myself) also put development within the wider sphere of neoliberal discourses (Davies, 2005) that affect education; these construct misleading possibilities of the “choices” in our lives. Through social constructions that encourage us to see ourselves as autonomous individuals responsible for the events that happen to us, we can fail to see the impossible pressures of which our lives are constituted. This aligns with Drewery’s (this issue) emphasis on the wider economic setting that can determine our advantages or disadvantages in work, health and social connection. The strong focus on individualism also affects every culture in our communities, working against whānau (see Williams’s contribution) and likely against family supports across many cultures. That is not to say that theories of development that focus on individual progress, from Piaget to Erikson, do not have important insights to share; however, all the papers in this section posit that human development is about much, much more.

The contributions in this special section argue for an approach to development that pays attention to ethics, economics and social justice as part of the care that connects people to each other. This approach seems to us to offer a critical voice of relevance for education. Rather than seeking predictable, comfortable patterns to describe developmental paths across age, we strive to research collaboratively with children, students, professionals and communities, and to be reflexive about the often unexpected implications of this research for our practice as teachers and counsellors. As the contributions here demonstrate, this is done through careful weighing of evidence from research and experience, debating possibilities with each other and working towards reaching consensus on alternatives, rather than assuming that there is a single correct strategy for supporting people in their development.

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i Papers in this special section are the product of collaborative work in the Research Network on Human Development and Counselling at the University of Waikato. I would like to thank anonymous reviewers from around New Zealand for their helpful suggestions that have strengthened the work presented.

ii At the time of writing, my postgraduate students in diversity and development, many who come from “developing” countries, have raised criticisms of the UN’s Human Development Index (HDI), a measure of national wellbeing, for its tendency to focus solely on cross-national comparisons rather than the huge economic and cultural differences within countries. Educators might find it a useful exercise to ask students to choose their own components for the HDI; in the past year the website (<http://hdr.undp.org/>) has become more interactive, allowing visitors to see how the index is altered when factors such as differences in access to health care, education, longevity and other factors are taken into account.