

# An Evolving Vision for Designing Professional Learning

## Inspiration From Aotearoa New Zealand

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### Abstract

A study tour of early childhood education (ECE) programs in Aotearoa New Zealand offered a rich opportunity to explore the implementation of *Te Whāriki*, the national ECE curriculum. This article describes three central aspects of the *Te Whāriki* approach that have garnered international admiration as a model for ECE: the high value placed on the child's image, voice, and identity; nurturing a culture of inquiry; and the use of learning stories to document children's explorations. The authors share questions that have emerged in considering how to apply a parallel approach to the work of designing and facilitating professional learning experiences for educators.

If you always look out of the same window, you always see the same view. We have been working in professional development in the field of early childhood education (ECE) for a combined total of more than 40 years, increasingly wondering how our perspective of the work could be expanded or improved. Recently we had an opportunity to see ECE curriculum and pedagogy through a new window, and it is affecting our view of professional development in some exciting and profound ways.

### The View From 8,000 Miles Away

Seeing from a new point of view usually requires shifting positions. This new perspective on our field of work required us to make a big shift—to the other side of the globe. Aotearoa New Zealand's<sup>1</sup> natural landscape offers impressive scenic views that draw people from around the world. Equally as impressive and attractive is the country's ECE landscape. For more than 2 decades, Aotearoa New Zealand's progressive, culturally rich

approach to young children and their care and education has drawn the interest of ECE leaders and thinkers from around the world. (See Box 1.)

When the opportunity came for us to join a study tour focused on the national curriculum and its implementation in local programs, we were eager to sign up, in spite of 20 hours of flying to get us there. Although reading books and articles on the topic would have been far more convenient, the study tour experience offered all of the most effective supports for participants to gain deep understanding: a carefully structured series of experiences, support from our pedagogical guides, opportunities to observe the curriculum in action in a wide variety of programs, conversation with many practitioners, presentations by those who have shaped the nation's ECE system, guided discussions in communities of practice, and opportunities for personal reflection. The result of this immersive learning experience for us was two-fold: a deep appreciation for the Aotearoa New Zealand approach to ECE curriculum and pedagogy, and the emergence of many questions about implications for our own work with ECE professional development in the US.

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1 Aotearoa is the Māori name for New Zealand. The combined name, Aotearoa New Zealand, is widely used and considered respectful of the history and heritage of the country.

## Box 1. *Te Whāriki*: A Unique View of Early Childhood Education Curriculum

A *whāriki* is a woven mat that has deep symbolic and spiritual meaning for Māori, the indigenous people of New Zealand. Weaving a *whāriki* “takes knowledge, skill and time. It is almost always done collaboratively. When finished, an intricately woven *whāriki* is a *taonga* [treasured object] valued for its artistry and *kaupapa* [collective wisdom]” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 10). A woven mat is also the powerful metaphor chosen to represent the Aotearoa New Zealand approach to early childhood education (ECE), reflected in the title of the national curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, and visually represented on its cover. The symbolism goes even deeper in representing the intricate, intentional, visionary framework of the curriculum. Curriculum principles and strands are woven together to express the Aotearoa New Zealand image of and vision for its children. The expectation is that teachers, children, parents, and family members in each local community will begin with the guidance of *Te Whāriki* and then collaboratively weave into the curriculum their own identities, values, and vision to create a local curriculum that uniquely and authentically reflects and serves them.

The four principles and five strands identified in *Te Whāriki* reflect a perspective of children profoundly embedded in Māori culture in which “children are seen to be inherently competent, capable and rich, complete, and gifted no matter what their age or ability” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 12) and must be regarded within the context not only of their immediate family but of their ancestral lineage. The values and aspirations of the nation are also reflected—equity and respect for the rights of all children and a responsibility to nurture their growth as confident, valued, contributing members of a diverse democracy.

The four principles are intended to guide decision making at every level of ECE program, pedagogy, and practice. These principles are empowerment, holistic development, family and community, and relationships. The five strands identify areas of learning and development: belonging, well-being, exploration, communication, and contribution. *Te Whāriki* specifies goals for each strand that describe characteristics of an ECE environment that support that aspect of children’s development and learning, and outcomes, or indicators that one could expect to see in children who consistently, over time, experience interactions and environments with these characteristics.

*Te Whāriki* was first published in 1996, making Aotearoa New Zealand a visionary ECE pioneer internationally (Lee, Carr, Soutar, & Mitchell, 2013). The curriculum was updated in 2017, reflecting “changes in the early learning context, including the diversity of New Zealand society today, contemporary theories and pedagogies” (Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 2017, p. 2).

While other tour members got excited thinking about how they could bring aspects of the *Te Whāriki* approach to supporting young children’s learning and well-being back to their own programs, our minds took us to a different place. We wondered if the elements of *Te Whāriki* that made it such a nurturing yet powerful educational approach with children could be woven



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into an equally nurturing and powerful approach to supporting professional learning and practice for their teachers. Perhaps this approach to supporting learning has proven so beneficial and effective not because it is consistent with how young children learn best but because it is consistent with how human beings learn best.

By happy circumstance, shortly before the study tour, we discovered a recently published book that poured gasoline on the fire of our thinking. *From Teaching to Thinking: A Pedagogy for Reimagining Our Work* (2018) was written by two leaders in the field of professional learning in early childhood education, Ann Pelo and Margie Carter, who also happened to be early explorers and proponents of the Aotearoa New Zealand approach to ECE curriculum and pedagogy and referenced it several times in the book. In fact, Carter had launched the study tour program more than a dozen years prior. So it was no surprise that the book and the study tour complemented one another.

In their book, Pelo and Carter challenged us to think deeply and critically about the traditional approach to professional development for ECE educators. We were encouraged to ask ourselves what we believe to be true about and aspire to for educators, and to then examine how well the professional learning experiences that we design and facilitate support those beliefs and aspirations. “Educators deserve—and are sustained by—professional learning that strengthens their development as thinkers, researchers, innovators, and constructors of knowledge” (Pelo & Carter, 2018, p. 28). In other words, educators deserve the same regard for and approach to their learning as children do.

Photo credit: Drew Giles



Both indoor and outdoor spaces offered children an inviting variety of loosely defined areas with collections of materials intended to spark imagination, investigation, creativity, and experimentation.

We were in complete agreement and, with their provocations in mind, we set off for New Zealand to see what the *Te Whāriki* approach looks like in action and to consider what a similar approach might look like for educators' learning.

In this article, we reflect on the three characteristics of the Aotearoa New Zealand approach to early learning that stood out to us as elemental and essential. We then explore the implications of applying those same characteristics to the professional learning experiences that we offer ECE practitioners in the US.

### The Image, Voice, and Identity of the Learner

In Māori culture, a child is seen as a genealogical link between the past, present, and future, carrying on *mana* (power of being, prestige, authority) from the child's ancestors that must be

valued and enhanced. Children are seen as born eager to learn, each on a unique life-long journey. The first principle identified in the national curriculum is empowerment, and a critical role of early educators is to "empower them for their journey" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 7). Educators do this by noticing and supporting children's interests and ideas, by listening to their communication (both verbal and nonverbal), and by gradually giving children more power to make decisions that matter to them. They create environments and experiences around the things that children are curious about and encourage children's exploration and problem-solving. Educators foster rather than dampen the innate dispositions of curiosity, initiative, imagination, and risk-taking that incline children toward learning and equip them for rapid, copious learning in their early years. (See Table 1 for questions that reflect the voice of the child for each of the five *Te Whāriki* strands.)

In the programs that we visited, we saw ample evidence of this regard for children as the drivers of their own learning and of educators being fellow learners, joining in and supporting children's investigations, but only to the degree needed to stretch their thinking or skill development just a little further. The environments were abundant with materials that invited children to explore and use them in many different ways. Teachers watched and listened as children engaged with materials (or didn't). Teachers' comments and questions reflected their belief that each child had an intention to their action, an idea or question worth acknowledging and supporting. They carried an image of each child as a capable thinker with interesting ideas, and their words helped reinforce that image within each child. Whether an infant was exploring the look and feel of her own fingers or a 3-year-old was engrossed in acting out an elaborate story with his friends, each child's endeavors were regarded by teachers as serious learning efforts worth reflecting on and supporting.

The consistent effect of this perspective in every classroom we visited was that children, from infancy to prekindergarten age, were happily engaged, confidently making choices, and excitedly making discoveries. They were not waiting to be told what to do or where to go or what the right answer was. They would

**Table 1. Evaluating Curriculum Implementation From the Child's Point of View**

When *Te Whāriki* was first introduced, practitioners engaged in a research project to develop program evaluation guidelines in relation to the curriculum's strands and goals. In keeping with the philosophy of empowerment of children, quality was viewed from the child's perspective. Five questions reflecting the child's voice were developed to guide practitioner's assessment of their implementation of the five strands of *Te Whāriki*.

Curriculum Strand	Child's Question—Full Form	Child's Question—Simplified Form
Belonging	Do you appreciate and understand my interests and abilities and those of my family?	Do you know me?
Well-Being	Do you meet my daily needs with care and sensitive consideration?	Can I trust you?
Exploration	Do you engage my mind, offer challenges, and extend my world?	Do you let me fly?
Communication	Do you invite me to listen and communicate, and respond to my own particular efforts?	Do you hear me?
Contribution	Do you encourage and facilitate my endeavors to be part of the wider group?	Is this place fair for us?

Source: Carr et al., 1999

ask for help if they were stuck, and educators would give them just enough of a nudge to help them continue their activity. But children had a sense of agency that made asking for help fairly rare. These classrooms were joyful and playfully busy.

### Implications for Professional Learning Design

As we consider the implications for the adults whose learning we support, we are wondering if the learning experiences we design have a similar effect on the professionals who participate. If not, why not? What about our approach or design could be changed to result in happily engaged, confident professionals actively making discoveries and building knowledge rather than passively waiting to be given the “right” answers?

### A Culture of Inquiry

One of the five strands of *Te Whāriki* is exploration: children are viewed as active learners who build their understanding of the way their world (natural, social, physical, spiritual and human-made) works by “doing, asking questions, interacting with others, devising theories about how things work and then trying them out and by making purposeful use of resources” (Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 2017, p. 46). The role of the educator is to create a physical and psychological environment—a culture—of inquiry. Educators do so by acknowledging, respecting, facilitating, nurturing, and providing engaging spaces for children’s exploration. Children are understood to be developing as thinkers, motivated by curiosity about the world around them and the desire to solve problems that matter to them. Children’s questions are not only valued, they serve as the skeleton upon which the curriculum is built.

Evidence of this approach to ECE was everywhere in the programs that we visited on our study tour. Both indoor and outdoor spaces offered children an inviting variety of loosely defined areas with collections of materials intended to spark imagination, investigation, creativity, and experimentation. As children generated and tested their ideas in these spaces, the educators were careful to spend time observing and considering what each child was doing and saying before joining the child. Once they did, we could hear them offering a comment about what they had observed the child doing or an “I wonder...” statement to communicate that they appreciated the child’s thinking and could join in as a thinking companion, if the child was interested. Sometimes an adult might provide the answer to a question that a child couldn’t discover through exploration or provide assistance for a task when a child was becoming overwhelmed with frustration. But care was always given to only offering enough scaffolding to help the child continue without losing her sense of agency.

In this approach to education, learning how to think is valued over learning what to think. Children are encouraged to use trial and error to test possible solutions. Adults communicate clearly that the risk of a “wrong” answer or unsuccessful attempt at achieving a goal is an expected part of the learning process for everyone, including themselves. Children are encouraged to



Photo credit: Drew Giles

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reflect on a sticky problem or challenge and try again, maybe using a different strategy, without fear of embarrassment or shame. They aren’t quizzed on or praised for repeating rote-learned information but instead are given opportunities to describe or show their own thinking and to hear and see the perspectives of others and appreciate the variety represented.

### Implications for Professional Learning Design

Pelo and Carter proposed that “the development of an investigative attitude toward life” (Pelo & Carter, 2018, p. 39), where curiosity, critical thinking, and making evaluative judgments based on data are fostered, is in fact the whole purpose of education as an endeavor of society. Cultivating what they call a culture of inquiry is not only a critical approach toward the education of young children, but also toward the education of those who teach them. The professional development system in Aotearoa New Zealand is built on the view of ECE professionals as researchers who are curious about children’s learning and how best to facilitate it, willing to test hypotheses and think critically about the results, and continually evolving in their practice (Carter, 2010).

As we consider the early educators for whom we design learning experiences, we are wondering about the kind of culture we have been perpetuating, both intentionally and unintentionally. Do participants in our learning experiences find an environment (physical and psychological) that invites them to investigate questions that are of interest to them? Do we observe them as they engage in the activities we’ve planned and join in as fellow investigators, providing new information or prompts only when needed to scaffold their learning? How can that intention be carried out in the varied types of professional learning that we



Photo credit: Drew Giles

Educators create environments and experiences around the things that children are curious about and encourage children's exploration and problem-solving.

offer (e.g., conference session, online study group, keynote presentation, on-site technical assistance visit).

## The Power of Learning Stories

One of the most influential contributions to the global ECE community of the Aotearoa New Zealand approach has been the use of descriptive narratives, called learning stories (Hanrahan, Niles & Whyte, 2019), as the primary method of gathering information about children's interests, skills, and learning dispositions. Learning stories are composed of a series of structured narratives, often accompanied by photos or artifacts, that are constructed by an educator while observing a child during a learning moment and often reflect not only what the educator sees but also include her interpretations and wonderings.

This approach to assessment was developed to be used with *Te Whāriki* and, as such, reflects the same values and ideals. Children are understood to be on a learning journey and are seen as competent and eager to make sense of their world. Learning is understood as situated in activity, embedded in interactions between the mind and the physical and social environment (Carr, 2001). Children are viewed holistically: learning is seen as a social, emotional, spiritual, and cultural endeavor as well as a cognitive one. The learning outcomes described in learning stories include dispositions toward learning, such as curiosity and perseverance, as well as discrete skills and knowledge. Learning stories capture *Te Whāriki's* broad view of curriculum as everything that a child experiences in an environment designed to nurture development and learning.

On our tour of programs, we saw many examples of learning stories, usually accompanied by photos and, for verbal children, dictation of their comments. Documentation of children's ideas and actions around recent investigations were displayed around the environment to encourage children to revisit and think further about the experience and to talk with each other, their teachers, or their families. Teachers wrote down observations and reflections about individual children as well as groups, and it was clear from their words that they were thinking deeply about the experience from the child's point of view. Most of the time, these stories were written in first-person voice to the child and, as a result, reflected the teacher's affection and high regard for each child as an individual with interests, capabilities, and a unique personality.

Examples of teachers' planning documents and conversations with teachers highlighted the value of learning stories and documentation for identifying changes to the curriculum that will best support each child's current interests and developmental progress. Both documentation and curriculum planning were considered living, evolving things that were never "finished." Documentation informed planning, resulting in changes to the learning environment, which in turn led to new evidence of children's explorations and progress to be documented.

We also saw many examples of portfolios—large, homemade books for each child with samples of learning stories and documentation collected over time that also sometimes included stories contributed by family members. Many of us, during our time visiting the classrooms, had the delightful experience of being joined by children as we looked through their portfolios. It was evident that this form of documentation was not only a tool for educators to use in assessment and planning, but was also an important catalyst in the development of each child's identity. Teachers' stories focused on positive attributes, areas of growth, and new knowledge gained. As Margaret Carr and Wendy Lee, early architects of the learning stories approach, have said,

*It is the Learning Story and its portfolio—revisited with others—that enables [a child] to recognize the learning journey that is valued here...adults and children telling and re-telling stories of learning and competence, reflecting on the past and planning for the future. (Carr & Lee, 2012, p. 1)*

## Implications for Professional Learning Design

In a similar approach to assessment, the Reggio Emilia philosophy describes documentation as making learning visible (Rinaldi, 2006). Making educators' learning visible, through learning stories or other forms of documentation, is the most challenging concept for us to apply in professional learning situations. One of the study tour's facilitators, Eliana Elias, shared her experimentation with writing learning stories about a group of educators whom she was coaching. As she worked with these educators over time, she was able to document with narrative descriptions the changes in their thinking, practices, and identities as professionals. She observed that it was a very meaningful experience that not only supported the educators' learning, but

also nurtured the relationships among the group and between coach and coachee. But we still have questions about how to make professional learning visible in other settings in a way that makes it as valuable to educators as a tool for reflection and identity formation and for us as input that shapes our facilitation and support strategies.

## Embracing Evolution

An image that has stayed with both of us is the *koru* (Māori for loop or coil), based on the spiral shape of an unfurling frond of the silver fern, native to Aotearoa New Zealand and found throughout the natural world. The *koru* is an important symbol in Māori culture and represents new life, growth, and nurturing. For us it also serves as a reminder of a recurring message throughout the study tour: everything is evolving—including children, teachers, the curriculum, programs, and ECE systems.

We find great energy and freedom in taking an evolutionary view of our own efforts to provide meaningful professional learning experiences. Seeing our professional selves and our work through this lens removes the fear of risk in trying innovative approaches and the pressure of needing to be right or perfect. It's a relief to take off the "expert" hat and, instead, view ourselves as members of a network of pedagogical leaders who are committed to exploring, questioning, observing, experimenting, discussing, and challenging ourselves and one another in the pursuit of improving our practice. Such a shift does require becoming more comfortable with uncertainty and missteps. But as so often is the case, we can learn from young children, who are refreshingly unbothered by criticism (internal or external) as they explore and attempt new things. There is a sense of excitement and joy in viewing ourselves as thinking partners during professional learning events, joining together with educators in exploring their interests and questions and learning from one another, just as we are encouraging educators to do with children.

It feels as though we have experienced a growth spurt as a result of the new connections we've made with the educators and pedagogical leaders in Aotearoa New Zealand and those in the United States who are challenging us to reimagine our work. We have identified several components of our current educational design work that already fit well with the values and ideals of *Te Whāriki*, as well as several possible areas for modification and innovation. We eagerly look forward to joining our fellow investigators in playing with new concepts, approaches, and strategies that will make ECE professional learning as effective, meaningful, and captivating as the early childhood programs we visited in Aotearoa New Zealand. To paraphrase that wise philosopher, Dr. Seuss, oh, the places we'll go!

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Communities of Practice for Professional Development

M. Carter (2009)

*Exchange*, 190, 20–24

Using "Learning Stories" to Strengthen Teachers' Relationships With Children

M. Carter (2010)

*Exchange*, 195, 40–44

Continuing Professional Development in Early Childhood Education in New Zealand

S. Cherrington & K. Thornton (2013)

*Early Years*, 33, 119–132

My Past Is My Present Is My Future: A Bicultural Approach to Early Years Education in Aotearoa, New Zealand

L. Pohio, A. Sansom, & K. A. Liley (2015)

In L. R. Kroll & D. R. Meier (Eds.), *Educational Change in International Early Childhood Contexts: Crossing Borders of Reflection* (pp. 103–122)

New York, NY: Routledge

Dispositional Development as a Form of Continuous Professional Development: Centre-Based Reflective Practices With Teachers of (Very) Young Children

T. J. Swim & Z. Isik-Ercan (2013)

*Early Years*, 33, 172–185

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earned her master's and doctorate degrees in early childhood education and pursued a variety of opportunities to design and facilitate professional learning for educators. In her current role, Dr. Reschke contributes to the conceptualization, development, implementation, and enhancement of ZERO TO THREE's professional development products and services.

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early career, Donna worked in a variety of early childhood settings and across roles as a teacher in center-based care, family child care, and preschool and as an early interventionist. For the last 2 decades she has focused on professional development through work at the state level as well as an adjunct instructor in community college. In her current position with the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning, Donna continues to provide training and technical assistance to early childhood practitioners.

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