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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

This special edition of *Early Years* draws on research from Aotearoa New Zealand and comprises six papers that shed light on both the policy context and the curriculum in action. This focus on New Zealand is timely as New Zealand has attracted world-wide attention in recent years for its curricular innovations at both the early childhood (*Te Whariki*, Ministry of Education 1996) and school level (*New Zealand Curriculum*, Ministry of Education 2007). There has also been a strong focus on early years research, funded through the current *Teaching and Learning Research Initiative* (TLRI) and the *Centres of Innovation* programme (which ran from 2003–2009). A vibrant early childhood sector is providing new insights into learning and teaching, whilst also navigating a time of political change with challenges around funding. This introductory paper provides a brief overview of early years education in New Zealand, picking up on and extending some of background information provided by the contributors to this special edition.

New Zealand

The estimated resident population of New Zealand is just a little under 4.5 million, with about 20% of this total being children under the age of 15 (Statistics New Zealand 2011). A sense of the ethnic diversity of the early years population can be gained from the Year 1 school statistics. Figures for 2010 indicate that of over 58,000 Year 1 students, around 53% were European/Pākehā, 26% Māori, 10% Pasifika, 9% Asian, 2% classed as ‘other’ (Education Counts 2011). Within this diversity, Maori hold a special place as the indigenous people of New Zealand. About 15% of the total population identify as Maori.

Early years education

Five of the six papers in this edition focus on early childhood education and the sixth paper looks at learning in the early years of school. In New Zealand, early childhood education is non-compulsory and covers the ages from birth to school entry. There is a diverse range of early childhood services (see Ministry of Education 2009b). These include teacher-led settings such as kindergartens, education and care settings and home-based settings with qualified and registered coordinators. Some settings, such as Te Kōhanga Reo and Pacific Island language nests have a particular language or cultural base. The sector also includes a range of parent-led services. Linda Mitchell’s paper provides more detail regarding the types of services and discusses funding, participation and other policy initiatives.

The majority of children attending early childhood services are three- and four-year-olds, who in 2009 accounted for nearly 62% of total enrolments. The figure for under one-year-olds was 4.4% of the total, with one- and two-year-olds repre-

senting 33%. The smallest group were five-year-olds, who account for just 0.6% of enrolments (Ministry of Education 2009a). The low enrolment figures for five-year-olds reflects the fact that while New Zealand children do not have to start school until they are six, most children move from early childhood education to school on or just after their fifth birthday.

The staggered entry to school, with children starting on or near their fifth birthdays, contrasts with the more common annual, biannual or termly school entry practices that occur in other countries. New Zealand teachers are therefore managing transitions throughout the year as children leave early childhood education to enter school, and others take their place in early childhood settings. The timing of the child's birthday often determines the size of class that he or she joins and a child's relative age ranking in the class changes, at least in the first year, as new children arrive.

Māori education

Reedy (2003) notes that in traditional Māori society a child was likened to the central shoots of a flax plant, and the flax bush was a metaphor for the family, with the outer leaves of the flax representing the parents and grandparents, protecting the child at the centre to ensure its survival. The whole family shared common roots and derived strength from the collective (Metge, cited in Pihama, Jenkins, and Middleton 2003). Reedy (2003) commented that, due to colonisation, economic and demographic changes, the Māori child in the twenty-first century no longer enjoyed this level of protection, nurturing and sustenance.

To address some of these issues there have been a number of Māori educational initiatives, which aimed to provide cultural and language-based alternatives to mainstream schooling and open up new possibilities for Māori children and their families. These include immersion and bilingual choices in early childhood through Te Kōhanga Reo (which translates as language nest) and Māori medium schooling. Te Kōhanga Reo was developed to ensure the survival of the Māori language but has also been credited with revitalising Māori culture. It has been described as the 'most vigorous and innovative educational movement' in New Zealand (Reedy 2003, 65). As graduates from Te Kōhanga Reo entered the school system, demand for the continuation of the language and cultural focus begun in early childhood led to the development of Kura Kaupapa Māori and immersion language classes at school. Cooper et al. (2004) provided some insights into the experiences of children moving from Te Kōhanga Reo to Kura Kaupapa Māori.

However, many Māori children are enrolled in mainstream English-medium settings. Ritchie and Rau (2006) cite a number of surveys of Māori families, which have indicated that even those who send their children to conventional early childhood centres and schools, rather than to Kōhanga Reo and Kura Kaupapa, still want their children to learn their language and expect that this aspiration will be supported within this regular educational provision. The current Māori Education Strategy, *Ka Hikitia* Managing for Success (Ministry of Education 2008a) spans the entire education sector. It reflects the Ministry of Education's approach to improving the performance of the education system for and with Māori. Efforts to improve the educational system for Māori have drawn attention to Māori world-views, language, culture and scholarship. These will be considered further in the following section on curriculum.

Early childhood curriculum

The central aspirations in New Zealand's early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, are for children to:

...grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society. (Ministry of Education 1996, 9)

Carmen Dalli's paper provides a detailed overview of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education 1996), and illustrates its enactment through an in-depth look at a 'day in the life' of one early childhood teacher.

Te Whāriki was New Zealand's first bicultural curriculum document. Carr and May (1993), co-directors of the early childhood Curriculum Project that produced *Te Whāriki*, described the influential support and commitment of Maori working-group members during the development process. A decision was made early in its development that the curriculum would not be about content, but would 'provide a framework for action, guided by philosophical principles. Underlying these principles were universal goals and beliefs about the well-being of children and the culture of Aotearoa New Zealand as it affected early childhood care and education' (Te One 2003, 32).

Te Whāriki's framework is woven from the curriculum principles of empowerment, holistic development, family and community and relationships, and the curriculum strands of well-being, belonging, contribution, communication and exploration. The idea of mana underpins each of the five strands. Mana comes from a Māori world view and has been explained as prestige, power and influence (Simpson and Callaghan 2005). Lesley Rameka's paper in this edition provides a deeper insight into this and other concepts that are important for understanding both *Te Whāriki* and early years education in New Zealand. She also illustrates some of the goals for Māori education by describing assessment developed by Māori for Māori. These ideas are important to consider for all children; not just those of Māori heritage. For example, one of the teachers in Carr et al. (2008) explained that, as 'children begin to take pride in themselves—an aura or mana ... appears to come from trust in themselves and others that leads to an identity of self-belief' (54).

Te Whāriki is not aligned to traditional subject areas, but provides an 'integrated foundation' for each child's development (Ministry of Education 1996, 15). The learning outcomes are indicative, rather than prescriptive, and emphasise the development of working theories and learning dispositions (Ministry of Education 1996). Carr et al. (2009) noted that dispositions 'act as an affective and cultural filter for trajectories of learning in the making. They can turn knowledge and skill into action... [they] are strengthened, adapted, transformed or interrupted by circumstances and experience' (15). Working theories become increasingly useful for making sense of the world, for giving the child control over what happens, for problem solving, and for further learning. As children gain greater experience, knowledge, and skills, the theories they develop become more widely applicable and have more connecting links between them (Ministry of Education, 1996). The papers by Margaret Carr and Helen Hedges relate to these two key learning outcomes. Margaret Carr looks at the pedagogical approaches that might encourage children to reflect on their own learning and Helen Hedges examines teachers' understandings of working theories.

School curriculum

Initially the conceptual frameworks of the school and early childhood curriculum documents were very different and this had important implications for the ways in which learning was viewed and assessed in the two sectors (Peters 2004). However, in 2000 the Ministry of Education began a major review of the New Zealand school curriculum. The findings and recommendations from this review were published in the *Curriculum Stocktake Report* (Ministry of Education 2002a). One of the recommendations was that the number of essential skills in the curriculum should be reduced, that the skills should also include attitudes, and that ‘there should be three dimensions of these skills and attitudes – the capability to use skills, discernment in use, and willingness to use skills (Ministry of Education 2002a, 63). To capture this fundamental change, in a background paper for the curriculum project Brewerton (2004) proposed that the new curriculum should include key competencies. She drew on the OECD notion of competencies ‘that contribute to a successful life and a well-functioning society’ (Rychen and Salganik 2003, 54). The OECD Defining and Selecting Key Competencies (DeSeCo) project had developed three categories of key competency: interacting in socially heterogeneous groups, acting autonomously, and using tools interactively. The objective was to focus on *key competencies* that were ‘relevant across different spheres of life and important for all individuals’ (Rychen and Salganik 2003, 54).

Through extensive sector consultation the OECD competencies were adapted to five key competencies for the New Zealand context: relating to others, participating and contributing, using language, symbols and texts, thinking and managing self (Ministry of Education 2007). The key competencies are intended to be integrated into the eight learning areas (mathematics and statistics, English, the arts, health and physical education, learning languages, social sciences technology and science. Bronwen Cowie and Kathrin Otrell-Cass’s paper illustrates learning in science for five-year-old children in the first year of school, and discusses the value of discussion of ‘horizontal’ learning.

The transition from early childhood education to school

The school document therefore has more of a focus on traditional learning areas than the early childhood curriculum, but conceptually there are many similarities between learning dispositions and key competencies. The alignment between the strands of *Te Whāriki* and the key competencies at school is illustrated in the school curriculum (Ministry of Education 2007, 42), providing a potential bridge between the learning in early childhood education and school. However, a recent literature review indicated that there is still much work to do to understand and support positive transitions for children (see Peters 2010), despite the fact that enhancing transitions features in a number of strategic plans in New Zealand (e.g. Ministry of Education 2002b; 2008a; 2008b) and the transition to school is often seen as a move of particular importance.

Although there is potential alignment between *Te Whāriki* and the school curriculum this is not always achieved in practice. New Zealand faces similar challenges to other countries, where curricula ‘can become “sites of struggle” between ideas about what early years education is for, and what are appropriate content and contexts for learning and development’ (Soler and Miller 2003, 57) and there is a potential pressure point at school entry when the ECE curriculum ‘collides’ with

the school curriculum (Cambridge Primary Review 2009, 1). The papers in this collection draw on a range of research projects to provide insights into some key ideas in early years education and illustrate that despite the differences, there may be much to gain from examining the practices in both sectors.

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