

Chapter Five

Stories from *Aotearoa*/New Zealand

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The examples from practice used in this chapter come from Akarana Avenue Kindergarten located in Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand.¹ Akarana is one of 107 not-for-profit, sessional kindergartens managed by the Auckland Kindergarten Association. The kindergarten employs three trained teachers and has 90 children. It offers eight sessions a week with 45 children attending each session. The children range in age from three to five years.

¹ *Aotearoa* is the Māori name for New Zealand.

There is a well known Whakatauki (proverb) in Aotearoa which says:

Tuia te rangi e Tū iho nei
Tuia te papa e takoto nei

Whakatauki

Join sky above to earth below
Just as people join together

Māori proverb

Introduction

In this chapter we use several examples from practice to examine the themes of social justice, pedagogical documentation and *Tē Whāriki*² (the early childhood curriculum for Aotearoa/New Zealand). We suggest that the principles outlined in *Tē Whāriki* have the potential to be emancipatory if early childhood teachers are willing to engage with these ideas in their practice. We show that the use of pedagogical documentation can create a public space where teachers, children and families contribute to the planning and interpretation of learning experiences for children. Involvement in this process can be empowering for children and their families as they begin to see their ‘real lives’ reflected in the kindergarten curriculum. Our final point is that documentation alone does not ensure that curriculum is empowering for families. This practice must sit alongside efforts to build reciprocal relationships with families so that they feel they are able to participate safely.

This chapter shows how documentation has been used to invite families to participate in creating meaningful educational experiences for the children at the centre. The teachers at the kindergarten work closely with the families, who actively participate in a range of ways to support the kindergarten program. The kindergarten reflects the mixed socioeconomic and culturally diverse local community. Many of the families have a long established history with the community and it is also a settling place for many new immigrants. The kindergarten’s philosophy both reflects and is underpinned by the early childhood curriculum, *Tē Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996, p 10), which is founded on the following aspirations for children:

² *Tē Whāriki*: The New Zealand National Early Childhood Curriculum. The name literally means a mat because it is envisaged that the curriculum is woven from the principles, strands and goals that make up the document. Each distinct early childhood service in New Zealand will weave their own *whāriki* depending on their own philosophy and structure. These differences make up the different patterns of the *whāriki*.

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.

Finding out what happens here—sharing teaching and learning experiences

When parents first visit an early childhood centre, they look around to see what happens at that centre. They are looking to see whether their children will be happy there; whether they will ‘fit in’. They are also asking themselves, ‘Do we fit?’ or, ‘How will I fit?’ As they look around they are searching for clues that might help them to answer these questions. A parent looking around Akarana Avenue Kindergarten for the first time would find many clues that would help them answer the question: ‘What happens here?’. High quality visual documentation of the children’s experiences at the kindergarten are everywhere. Photos, children’s work, and descriptions of learning interpreted by teachers, children and families provide a picture of the past, present and future learning opportunities for children at the centre.

A parent walking around Akarana Avenue Kindergarten today might stop at the photographic display of a recent multicultural festival held at a local park. The cultures of many of the children at the kindergarten were represented at the festival. These photos are positioned alongside pictures of children re-creating their home experiences in their play at the kindergarten. In one photo, for example, the children are making roti at the play dough table. Added to this display, our new parent can read the voice of another parent sharing a similar story about their child’s play at home. As she continues reading, she sees how these simple shared experiences have unfolded into a series of events run by families who also wanted to share cooking experiences from their own cultures. She reads how a group of Sri Lankan families, encouraged by the displays, organised a session where they introduced a range of Sri Lankan foods, music and crafts. Around the photos of this day are stories written by other centre families sharing their experiences of the event. A video of the day and a recipe book are also positioned nearby. Through a conversation with a teacher, she learns how a copy of the video was sent to an extended family in Sri Lanka as a way of sharing information about life in New Zealand. Our new parent thinks about family recipes she might be able to share and wonders if she will have the courage to participate in this way.

Nearby, a group of children and parents are gathered around a laptop computer. The computer is placed on a low table for the children to access. Today it is running through a slide show of recent events at the centre. The children are enjoying seeing themselves involved in a range of learning experiences. The adults are provided with a window into the kinds of work their children are

involved with at the centre. Our new parent joins the group to watch the slide show and together they talk about ‘what happens here’ as well as ‘what might happen here next’.

She notices a beautiful mosaic table. As the new parent admires the work, she also reads a display which outlines the centre community’s growing interest in mosaic. The display tells the story of how this interest has unfolded into a long-term project involving children, teachers and parents learning together. She reads how this project grew from one family’s interest and passion for mosaic that was willingly shared with the kindergarten community. She reads about the various mosaic projects occurring around the centre. Other stories tell how children’s and parents’ interest in mosaic grew and about how they developed skills in mosaic together, through a workshop organised for the local community. She is surprised and excited. She wonders what her child will become involved in and whether she will become involved too.

Sharing curriculum—hearing the voices of family and community

The sharing of the teaching and learning experiences through documentation shows the new parent that there is a culture of openness at the kindergarten. She can see that the relationships between children, families and teachers at the centre are collaborative. She comes to realise that shared experience is central to the kindergarten’s program. The documentation describes how interests and experiences have developed at this kindergarten and provides for her an interactive picture of past, present and future possibilities. The accessibility of the displays, alongside the relationships fostered by the teachers at the centre, creates opportunities for teachers and families to reflect, review and evaluate the work that they create together.

At the heart of this practice is the desire to develop environments that are relevant to the lives of the children and the families who use the kindergarten. They are attempting to create a program that empowers children and families to be active participants in the teaching and learning processes at the centre. The displays about both the mosaic and cooking experiences show how families were able to develop, participate in and interpret learning experiences for their own children.

Canella (1997, p 2) proposes that many of the beliefs and practices that guide the field of early childhood education ‘support the status quo, reinforce prejudice and stereotypes, and ignore the real lives of children (and other human beings such as parents and teachers)’. She warns that our views of early childhood education are too narrow, and are positioned within a particular cultural and historical knowledge base (white, patriarchal, middle class and Euro-American) that not only ignores but also silences other perspectives. Canella (1997) asks

early childhood teachers to find ways to hear the voices that have previously been silenced and to construct with children, their families and communities collective visions of education that accept multiple perspectives, values, and truths. The teachers at this kindergarten are using pedagogical documentation to access and invite the ‘real lives’ of the children in their community into the curriculum.

***Te Whāriki*—promoting the child in context**

These kinds of practices are supported by *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), Aotearoa/New Zealand’s national early childhood curriculum. *Te Whāriki* also challenges teachers to acknowledge the ‘real lives’ of children. This challenge is most evident in the four principles which have been developed around principles of Māori pedagogy: empowerment (*whakamana*); holistic development (*kotahitanga*); family and community (*whānau tangata*) and relationships (*ngā hononga*). Key statements from each of these principles are:

Empowerment/Whakamana

The early childhood curriculum empowers children to learn and grow. Early childhood care and education services assist children and their families to develop independence and to access the resources necessary to enable them to direct their own lives (p 40).

Holistic development/Kotahitanga

The early childhood curriculum takes up a model of learning that weaves together intricate patterns of linked experience and meaning rather than emphasising the acquisition of discrete skills (p 41).

Family and community/Whānau tangata

The wider world of family and community is an integral part of the early childhood curriculum... The wellbeing of children is interdependent with the wellbeing and culture of: adults in the early childhood setting; whānau/families; local communities and neighbourhoods (p 42).

Relationships/Ngā hononga

Children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things (p 43).

These statements illustrate that *Te Whāriki* places its focus on the child in the context of family and community. It emphasises the ‘critical role of socially and culturally mediated learning’ (p 9).

Careful consideration of the principles in *Te Whāriki* can enable early childhood teachers to respond to some of the criticisms of traditional early childhood practice such as those put forward by Canella (1997). Just as Canella (1997) challenges

early childhood educators to find ways to hear the voices of the children we teach, so does *Tē Whāriki* require teachers to consider and engage with the wider contexts of each child's life and to develop curriculum that is empowering not only for the child, but also for the family. Keesing-Styles (2002, p 10) points out that *Tē Whāriki* 'promotes an educational approach with the potential for the implementation of programmes that are inclusive and emancipatory'. Other writers have also identified the parallels between *Tē Whāriki* and the principles of critical pedagogy which aims at the empowerment of students by hearing and responding to their voices and the voices of their communities (Ritchie, 1996). This requires teachers to investigate and implement ways of inviting children, their *whānau* and the community to negotiate and participate in the curriculum. It challenges teachers to seek other perspectives about children's learning (including the perspectives of the child) and to accept diverse interpretations of learning and possibilities for teaching.

In addition, *Tē Whāriki* contains a curriculum in *te reo Māori* (Māori language) specifically for *Ngā Kohanga Reo* (Māori language-immersion early childhood centres) that is a parallel document rather than a direct translation of the English language version. It recognises the principle of partnership inherent in *Tē Tiriti o Waitangi* (The Treaty of Waitangi). In addition, the bicultural nature of the curriculum is reflected throughout the entire document in its careful consideration of the social, cultural and political contexts of Aotearoa/New Zealand. (Te One, 2003). Therefore, it is a curriculum that 'interweaves educational theory, political ideology, and a profound knowledge of the importance of culture' (p 42).

The extent to which the emancipatory potential of *Tē Whāriki* is realised, however, depends on the degree to which early childhood teachers in Aotearoa/New Zealand are willing and able to meet the challenges of the principles in their own teaching practice. *Tē Whāriki* avoids prescribing one educational approach. Instead, each early childhood service is expected to weave its own *whāriki* (mat) from the principles, goals and strands set out in the document. There is evidence that some early childhood teachers in Aotearoa/New Zealand struggle with how to use *Tē Whāriki* as a guide to practice. Cullen (2003, p 272), for example, states:

...it could still be argued that the ideals of *Tē Whāriki* have barely been touched in many of our early childhood centres, and that many of the programmes today look remarkably like those of the 1980's and 1990's when the terms 'free play' and 'developmental' dominated the discourse of early childhood education.

Using documentation—making practice public

The teachers at Akarana Avenue Kindergarten use pedagogical documentation to respond to the principles of *Tē Whāriki* in their work with children and families.

The documentation at the kindergarten serves several purposes. It makes public the work of the children and their teachers. It can reify the importance of the work that occurs there as well as the practices and values of the kindergarten. By making this work public it invites reflection on the purpose, value and direction of the work of children and teachers.

The documentation of shared cooking experiences, for example, reinforces the notion that real experiences are valuable learning opportunities for children. It also sends a clear message that contributions from the diverse range of families are valuable and central to curriculum for all children. Readers of this documentation would also come to know that the interests of children and the skills and strengths of their families and teachers shape the kindergarten's program. All of these groups are able to contribute to the way this program unfolds. Rinaldi (2001, p 83) emphasises this aspect of documentation when she writes:

Documentation, therefore, is seen as visible listening as the constructions of traces, (through slide shows, notes, videos and so on) that not only testify to the children's learning paths and processes, but also make them possible because they are visible. For us this means making visible, and thus possible, the relationships that are the building blocks of knowledge.

Pedagogical documentation allows teachers to examine their own practices. Teachers, children and families are able to interpret, reflect and contribute to the happenings of the kindergarten because documentation invites a dialogue among them. This dialogue creates multiple perspectives and interpretations. Rinaldi (2001, p 84) points out that the 'result is knowledge that is bountiful and enriched by the contributions of many'.

'Learning stories' as documentation

'Learning stories' (Carr, Cowie, Gerrity, Jones, Lee, and Pohio, 2001) are one form of pedagogical documentation that can be used to create sites of shared dialogue. The use of learning stories is rapidly being picked up by early childhood teachers in Aotearoa/New Zealand as a form of pedagogical documentation that contributes to assessment procedures in New Zealand centres. Carr *et al.* (2001, p 29) define learning stories as:

...a particular form of documented and structured observations that take a storied approach and a non-deficit (credit) approach, and an underlying agenda of protecting and developing children's identities as learners in accordance with the national early childhood curriculum, *Tē Whāriki*.

They are often supplemented with photos and copies of children's work, and can be written from the perspective of the teacher, the child, or the *whānau*

(extended family). The teachers at Akarana encourage families to write learning stories in their own voices and from their own perspectives. Often these stories are written in the family's home language and translated later on. Children are also encouraged to contribute to the writing of their own learning stories. Therefore, one learning experience has the potential to be recorded and interpreted in several different ways. Each interpretation is considered valuable. The multiple interpretations of learning experiences contribute to the construction of a shared picture of the learning that occurs at the kindergarten, as well as possibilities for future learning.

One mother contributed the following learning story about her son, Hikurangi, after the kindergarten (including many families) visited a local *marae* (a traditional meeting place). The *marae* visit was part of a much wider centre interest that began with exploring *kowhaiwhai* patterns and unfolded into a range of experiences around *tikanga Māori*. As *manuhiri* (visitors) to the *marae*, the kindergarten community was welcomed with a *powhiri* (traditional welcome ceremony). Stories of the carvings and panels inside the *marae* were shared as part of this experience. The visit ended with a shared meal in the *wharekai* (dining hall) next to the *marae*. Frances (Hikurangi's mother) writes:

Hikurangi and Joel held hands and were very quiet and focused during the *karanga* as we were called onto the *Marae*—as were the other children. Hikurangi liked the *waiata* in the *wharenui*, especially 'Whakaaria Mai' which both the *Tāngata Whānau* and *manuhiri* sang together, before the *whaikorero* began. After the *powhiri*, Hikurangi drew a picture of a tarantula, which he said would live in Tane's forest. At home, he talked about M's dad speaking in the *wharenui* and remembered seeing his *Koro* (Granddad, my father) doing the same on our *marae*. He loved the *wharekai* too because 'we all ate together'. It was a wonderful, warm, positive experience—*Kia Ora*.

Other families wrote of how some aspects of the *marae* experience were similar to their own cultures. The experience was interpreted in multiple ways, each valued and valuable for future experiences.

It should also be noted here that the kind of assessment promoted in learning stories is formative. Carr *et al.* (2001) use the following definition of assessment from Drummond (1993, p 13) who states that assessment is the 'ways in which, in our everyday practice, we observe children's learning, strive to understand it, and then put our understanding to good use'. Therefore, assessment through learning stories is not about checking to see what children can and can not do against a list of predetermined skills and competencies but is about creating a shared picture of each child in order to be able to plan for further learning experiences. Carr *et al.* (2001, p 29) have pointed out the potential of the learning stories for enabling teachers, children and communities to engage in dialogue together about learning and teaching and that learning stories

(and similar kinds of formative, narrative and credit-based assessment models) can contribute to forming ‘democratic communities of learning and teaching’.

Pedagogical documentation, including the use of learning stories as a form of assessment, can be one way that early childhood teachers in New Zealand address the principles in *Te Whāriki*, and begin to address issues of empowerment and social justice in their own practice. However, pedagogical documentation alone cannot achieve this. Documentation can invite participation from centre families, but real participation will only be achieved when it sits within a context that has strong, positive and reciprocal relationships with families. The responsibility for this lies with teachers who must find ways to build these relationships. Pedagogical documentation can then be used to affirm the importance of these relationships and to hear the voices that tell us about the ‘real lives’ of children.

<i>karanga</i>	call of welcome onto a marae
<i>Kia Ora</i>	greetings/hello
<i>Koro</i>	Grandfather
<i>kowhaiwhai</i>	traditional Māori art form based on a spiral shape, often seen on the rafters of a marae
<i>marae</i>	traditional meeting place
<i>powhiri</i>	traditional welcome ceremony
<i>Tane</i>	God of forests and birds
<i>Tangata Whānau</i>	community/family
<i>waiata</i>	song
<i>whaikorero</i>	formal speech
<i>whānau</i>	extended family
<i>wharekai</i>	dining hall
<i>wharenui</i>	meeting house

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