



# **Intentional teaching for visual arts in Early Childhood Education: teachers' practices and perceptions**

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RACHEL DENEË<sup>1</sup>

SUE CHERRINGTON<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Victoria University Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand

## **ABSTRACT**

*The early childhood sector in New Zealand has a long-held tradition of free play and child-led pedagogy, influencing visual arts approaches with young children. However, alongside learning through play, New Zealand's sociocultural curriculum highlights the active role of the teacher and intentional pedagogy. This article explores the practices and perceptions of early childhood teachers regarding visual arts through a mixed methods study, including a nationwide survey and an embedded case study. Data indicated that teachers are confused about the appropriateness of taking an active role during children's visual arts learning, and about when to be intentional versus leaving children to play without interference. Such tensions appear to be founded in contradictory theoretical assumptions, and are evident through a lack of confidence, skills, strategies and language for teaching. The authors argue that professional learning could ameliorate these tensions by clarifying educational theories and identifying intentional visual arts teaching practices that align with current theoretical beliefs about how young children learn in early childhood.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Intentional teaching has gained increasing focus in Early Childhood Education (ECE), internationally and in New Zealand (NZ) since the publication of Epstein's (2007) seminal text. In NZ, intentional teaching has been described by McLaughlin et al. as "the purposeful and deliberate actions of teachers, drawing on both their knowledge of individual children and professional knowledge and skills to provide meaningful and appropriate curricular experiences for all children in ECE" (2016, p. 176). International research into intentional teaching in ECE is evident across a wide range of domain areas, such as literacy, sustainability education, science, and numeracy (Grieshaber et al., 2021). However, the body of research surveyed in Grieshaber et al.'s extensive scoping review included few studies focused on the arts, let alone the visual arts. This article aims to address this lack of attention and to offer a provocation to teachers to (re-)consider their theoretical and philosophical approaches to visual arts teaching and learning. We encourage teachers to reflect on the extent to which their current visual arts teaching approaches enable them to intentionally provide

“meaningful and appropriate curricula experiences for all children” (McLaughlin et al., 2016, p. 176).

Although there is international consensus that teachers play a key role in relation to quality ECE (Dalli et al., 2011) and positive outcomes for children, there is also evidence that teachers remain reluctant and unsure about how to claim and develop that role (Cherrington, 2018; McLaughlin & Cherrington, 2018). In her study of ECE teachers working with infants and toddlers, Dalli (2017) found that teachers were hesitant to describe their own teaching and decision-making as intentional and tended to refer to their responses to children as intuitive. While the revised ECE curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), explicitly articulates that a primary responsibility of kaiako “is to facilitate children’s learning and development through thoughtful and intentional pedagogy” (p. 59), McLaughlin and Cherrington (2018) suggest that “teachers may need support to move beyond intuitive decision making to intentional decision making” (p. 36).

Ongoing tensions regarding the place of intentional teaching, particularly in relation to child-centred and play-based philosophical approaches to ECE, were clearly identified by Grieshaber et al. (2021). Thomas et al. (2011) have suggested that “socially and culturally constructed ways of being an early childhood teacher are both enabled and constrained by discourses of play and intentional teaching” (p. 69). In other words, when ECE teachers hold a strong belief in the value of learning through play, it seems to be more difficult for them to understand how to enact intentional teaching, and yet both concepts are relevant to socio-cultural pedagogy (Edwards, 2017). Fler and Hoban (2012) argue that there does not need to be a dichotomy between intentional teaching and more familiar emergent curriculum approaches, suggesting that knowing children well and listening carefully are closely connected to teachers’ thoughtful decision-making and purposeful practice across both pedagogical approaches.

Richards and Terreni (2022) responded to the paucity of research in visual arts teaching in their synthesis of the available literature, resulting in a collection of six proposals for effective intentional teaching for visual arts in the NZ ECE context. These proposals include providing purposeful resources and environments; making connections between art learning at home and in the ECE setting; encouraging collaborative art-making; extending vocabulary to talk about art; engaging with picture book illustrations and art galleries; and fostering reflective discussions about children’s own artwork.

Further guidance on how teachers might engage intentionally with young children within visual arts experiences can be drawn from the literature about Reggio Emilia’s pedagogical approach to ECE. Within this approach, the teacher is seen as sensitive and responsive to children’s learning, while at the same time making decisions and taking actions as an intentional pedagogue (Stremmel, 2012). In a NZ study on ECE teachers’ reflective learning about visual arts, Probine (2016) found that the Reggio-inspired participant teachers had developed an expectation of their active engagement in children’s visual arts learning, including teaching skills with materials. Through engaging with Reggio Emilia pedagogical ideas, the teachers articulated the value they placed on children co-constructing art knowledge with peers and centring visual arts as a key language for inquiry learning. The participants suggested that children were empowered by being able to represent their own thinking through visual arts.

Brooks and Lindsay (2022) have argued that “rich curriculum and pedagogy rely on the critical reflection and intentionality of pedagogues who value the right of all children to experience rich and relational encounters with materials, environments, self and others” (p. 25). However ECE research in NZ and internationally has consistently highlighted tensions around how children learn, and the consequent role of the teacher. These tensions appear to be particularly prevalent in visual arts, with research showing that ECE teachers tend to lack confidence and skills in this particular curriculum area (McArdle, 2012; Probine, 2016; Richards & Terreni, 2022). McArdle (2012) highlights this tension, arguing that teachers are comfortable letting children experience art only if they choose to, while simultaneously believing it is the right of every child to be taught literacy and mathematics. McArdle argues that children also have the right to an art education, including to be taught multiple ways of communicating and expressing themselves. Despite such calls for purposeful visual arts education in early childhood, existing research is limited and there is a lack of specific guidance in the literature for practicing teachers or professional learning design to develop visual arts pedagogy in ECE. This article reports on findings from a larger study (Denee, 2022) which sought to understand NZ ECE teachers’ perspectives about visual arts pedagogy and whether teachers’ visual arts pedagogical practices could be strengthened through professional learning. This article focuses on a key theme – intentional teaching for visual arts – drawing on data from both a nationwide survey and a case study.

## **METHODS**

An interpretive constructivist approach (Schwandt, 1994) underpinned this mixed-methods study. There were two main phases: a nationwide survey of qualified early childhood educators focused on visual arts pedagogical approaches, and a case study exploring the use of the network professional learning community (PLC) approach with the aim of improving visual arts pedagogy in ECE settings. This article draws on data from both phases.

The survey aimed to capture current practices and perceptions in the wider sector as a background to the case study. This was carried out via an online platform and emailed to early childhood services on a Ministry of Education contact list; 193 responses from practising ECE teachers and leaders across NZ were received. The survey design incorporated Likert-scale questions with open-text questions resulting in both numerical and qualitative data. The Likert-scale data were analysed within the Qualtrics programme. A thematic analysis (Braun et al, 2019) of the qualitative data was undertaken in order to identify key themes emerging from the data.

The case study participants were drawn from volunteers from the survey and included seven qualified early childhood educators from four different ECE settings. The PLC project involved monthly meetings for 9 months, with practical art workshops led by artists and regular whole-group reflective dialogue. Participants recorded reflective journals and gathered documentation about visual arts teaching and learning in their settings between meetings, trying new teaching approaches and sharing their experiences with the group each month. The researcher acted as the PLC facilitator, providing oversight and support to the group and facilitating discussion to ensure equitable learning opportunities

for all group members. Case study data sources included individual interviews with the PLC participants and their centre leaders, focus groups with the four ECE teams and with the PLC group, and PLC participant reflective journal writing. The source of data extracts included in this article are primarily from PLC participants and their centre leaders. Supplementary data sources included learning story assessment documentation, photographs, and recordings of meeting dialogue. The thematic analysis approach was informed by Braun et al. (2019), whereby an iterative process of analysis resulted in a range of themes and sub-themes.

## **FINDINGS**

The findings from this study regarding tensions around intentional teaching emerged from both the national survey and the PLC case study. The findings are presented here under the two main phases of the research: survey findings and case study findings.

### **Survey findings**

The survey data revealed a range of conflicting beliefs across the sector about the role of the teacher in ECE. While the focus was on visual arts teaching and learning, respondents described theoretical assumptions and pedagogical approaches to teaching generally, and some of these findings are relevant to ECE in a broad sense. Three main issues emerged in relation to intentional teaching: the need for teaching skills and strategies; a pervasive belief in natural development and free play; and a socio-cultural view of the teacher in ECE.

#### *Skills and strategies for teaching*

In response to a question about teachers' self-efficacy in their own role, survey data indicated a range of levels of confidence, with 25 comments clearly indicating low self-efficacy about what and how to teach visual arts in ECE. In this set of comments, the key issue appeared to be a lack of skills, strategies and language to use when working with children, and confusion about what appropriate practice looked like. The following quotes from the survey data are illustrative of these ideas:

I would love to do more with tamariki, but I am lacking ideas and techniques.

Never know what to say about children's art. I try [to] talk about the colours and lines etc and if there is more detail, I will ask them about their painting etc and encourage them but that's as far it goes.

Another challenge for these respondents was the tension between when to interact and when to stand back from children when they were engaged in an experience – when and how was it appropriate to intervene in children's learning as an intentional teacher. One respondent said, "How much I should get involved has always terrified me!"

*Belief in natural development and free play*

One common perspective was that teachers should stay out of children's visual arts experiences, and 27 respondents shared a perception that the teachers' presence actually hinders children's creativity and learning. These respondents expressed that children were more able to be creative if the teacher stayed away, defining the teacher's role as setting up the environment and then standing back or staying away completely.

I just love to provide the resources, usually asking them what they want and setting the table up. If I walk away, they explore; If I sit and stay, it's "can you cut this out for me, can you draw a picture..." I want children inspired to be creative, to sit and talk with the child next them, to contribute to the whole, to love just moving that paint around, watching, exploring ideas. There's no such thing as a mistake, it's all experience and experiments.

Within the responses indicating belief in a hands-off approach to visual arts, comments such as the following one suggested that the teacher should avoid talking directly about the child's art and instead talk about unrelated topics of conversation, reflecting a view of children's art learning as out-of-bounds for teachers:

Your normal everyday language, talking about life in general with the children, not really focusing on the art, as art is the free medium for the children to express their feelings and emotions, tell their own stories not someone else's.

*Socio-cultural view of the intentional teacher*

Four respondents described a shifting view of the role of the teacher in visual arts over time. These qualitative comments demonstrate current or recent shifts towards seeing the teacher in a more active and intentional role with visual arts teaching. These respondents appeared to be changing the theoretical basis of their pedagogy away from developmentalism and towards a socio-cultural model and were beginning to embrace the use of teaching strategies such as scaffolding, modelling, and instruction of techniques. For example:

I have changed my role many times since starting in ECE. Creating my own work alongside children has been a recent development as I read about how children need role models. I also provide examples of drawings/painting etc for children to see and copy if they choose. I used to believe in letting children develop on their own, but I now realise, if you don't know the basic technique of sewing you won't be able to enter the wearable arts, there is a difference from doing it for children, to showing how to use the medium.

Further evidence of intentional teaching emerged in response to an open-text-box question about the role of the teacher; 34 respondents described intentional teaching strategies. These approaches included a balance of scaffolding, teaching skills and allowing free exploration. The techniques described in these comments are aligned with a socio-cultural view of teaching and learning, for example the

concepts of scaffolding and co-construction. The following examples illustrate broad trends across the survey comments about intentional teaching:

It is up to us to scaffold children learning techniques for art...We can prompt, inspire and demonstrate methods working alongside children without taking ownership of their project.

We encourage children to come to the understanding that you are not immediately an expert, but refining your skills in whatever area of learning, including visual arts, takes time and practice.

Overall, the survey findings here indicate tensions in how ECE teachers understand and practise in their own role as a teacher. Responses ranged from a developmentalist view of the teacher as keeping out of the way of children's development, to the idea of an intentional teacher who includes some direct teaching of skills and knowledge.

### **Case study findings**

The case study data provides a rich view of seven individual teachers, and their perceptions and practices about visual arts teaching and learning. The pre-PLC interviews offer an insight into participants' concerns and challenges about the role of the ECE teacher before the professional learning intervention, and the post-PLC interviews demonstrate a shift in thinking in all participants towards a more intentional and active role as an ECE teacher.

#### *Pre-PLC uncertainty about the role of the teacher*

In the pre-PLC interviews, participants expressed a desire to learn strategies, skills and language for teaching young children in the area of visual arts and said that they felt confused about what to say or do when sitting alongside children during their visual arts experiences. Participants were concerned with how to interact with children about their art without having a negative impact on the child's creative expression.

The participants raised teacher language as one aspect of teaching they were unsure about – what to say to enrich and extend children's learning. They wanted to learn how to give feedback to children, without overpowering the children's own ideas and processes. This tension left the teachers confused and as a result they tended to stay quiet when sitting alongside children engaged in visual arts:

I don't always know what to say... I don't want to put ideas in their head about what they've created, and I don't want to judge it, but some children are waiting for that feedback, so it's really hard to know where to step in... how you foster the response from the child without telling them.

In the pre-PLC interview, one participant described her centre philosophy as free play and emphasised that the children were always able to choose what they wanted to do in the centre. However, she had noticed that this led to some children never engaging with certain areas, for example, drawing. She had begun to worry that this was creating disadvantages for those learners over the years,

because “when it comes to, you know, start to write, they haven't got the knowledge or the know-how or the fine motor development to sort of know where to start.” In a written reflection, this participant was looking critically at her current approach, but uncertain of appropriate ways to take a more active role in fostering certain valuable learning:

Sometimes it's a struggle to know WHAT TO DO!! as so much about teaching is subjective and relates to your own philosophy, merged with your centre, combined with the latest and greatest theory of the time! I find it a hard balance between what I see as good ECE practice, versus those 'outcomes' of a piece of art that often ends up on the wall... I am able to accept that perhaps there is a middle ground in which we can actually teach some skills and concepts around art, rather than being totally 'hands off'... I worry (too much I know!) constantly about the dynamics between what is accepted practice and what is best practice.

The participants described a lack of knowledge and skills specific to the visual arts and identified a lack of professional learning about practical skills and content knowledge in various areas. They were conscious of the need to take an active and intentional role, but their lack of confidence and strategies made it more comfortable to stay in the role of the observer, providing the resources and then stepping back while children engaged without adult involvement. At the first meeting of the PLC, the group shared goals around building confidence to know what to say and do as teachers to facilitate children's art learning in meaningful, effective and appropriate ways.

#### *Post-PLC empowerment as intentional teachers*

After participating in the PLC, the participants had changed their perspective on their own role as intentional teachers. They had all built up a toolkit of strategies, phrases, and skills with materials that allowed them to step forward in visual arts learning. The participants were able to identify that where they had used common socio-cultural phrases before such as scaffolding and co-construction, they had not often been enacting them, whereas after the PLC they were utilising these strategies more in practice:

I think the phrases like 'work-at-elbow' and co-construction... we will talk about principles like co-constructing, but – are we? So, instead of letting them go for it and then maybe write their name... actually talk to them about their artwork a bit more.

The positional leaders at the four centres observed changes in the participants' teaching practice, where each PLC member had become more engaged and intentional in their teaching. Further, the positional leaders described shifts across the teams where the PLC members' colleagues were also taking a more active role in teaching:

I think what's been noticeable... is [the participating PLC teacher's] ability to understand a bit more about her role in the child's art [learning]. So, there seems to be a lot more almost role-modelling, and working with the children, as opposed to just setting it up and letting

them go for it. They seem to be working a bit more alongside, and not feeling like that's inhibiting them, but is actually supporting and...being available to respond to them.

As a result of teachers' professional learning throughout the PLC, these teachers described how learning about the art materials and techniques before offering experiences to children had become one of their key intentional teaching strategies. The participants discussed how empowering they found it to undertake some prior learning and then sit alongside children with more skills and language to work as an effective teacher. These teachers found that when they were able to teach some specific techniques, skills and knowledge, the children were then empowered to go further in their learning:

It's not just about putting clay on the table and then wandering off and leaving them to go for it. It is important to be there and talk about how the different things can come together, and how your coils can then turn into a bowl... doing that modelling for them, and then it's up to them where they want to take it. Yes, but they have some ideas of how to start, because it can be quite frustrating when all you can do is stick your fingers in it, and you don't actually know what to do with it. I mean, I didn't know what to do with clay till after the workshops.

The participants started working with materials alongside the children as an intentional strategy, and this allowed them to use role-modelling and to verbalise their actions. These approaches made the teachers feel more confident to have a voice and to impart knowledge in a gentle way to the children. One participant explained:

One thing I did was when I sat down with either the water-colours or the clay, I talked about what I was doing and how I was doing it and the reason behind it... So, just kind of talking through the process... Whereas I might have been a lot quieter, and just kind of not really wanted to interrupt, take over. It was interesting how children would pick what you were saying and then when other children came to the table, you'd hear them saying your words. So, it was great peer-tutoring.

The participants also came to see setting boundaries as an intentional strategy to allow flexibility. When the teachers set up some rules and limits around learning experiences, they found that the children were able to enjoy more freedom and relaxed exploration rather than less. For example, the participants explored reducing the number of children able to participate in the visual arts experience at a time (e.g., reducing from open access to a maximum of four children at the table at any one time). The participants found that this allowed more meaningful teacher conversations and interactions, and that the children were able to wait for a turn and then have their own time with more teacher attention. Previously, participants had felt that they must allow every child to join in however they wanted to, which they said tended to lead to stress, mess and chaos. However, once the teachers changed their thinking from 'the child's right to join in' towards



‘the child’s right to a pleasing learning experience,’ the teachers had the time and space to offer language, ideas, and role-modelling instead of spending their time managing the group.

The intentional teaching strategies developed by the PLC participants are applicable throughout an ECE setting. While these data are focused on visual arts materials and processes, the approaches could be transferred to any domain area such as science, literacy or nature education. In the following discussion, the findings are examined in relation to literature on intentional teaching.

## **DISCUSSION**

The survey and the PLC case study have highlighted some common tensions and challenges for ECE teachers striving to understand and enact intentional teaching. A lack of alignment between espoused theory and teachers’ practice, tensions between different theoretical positions, along with mixed levels of confidence, all contributed to holding teachers back from engaging in visual arts learning with young children. In the following discussion, three key issues around intentional teaching are explored: whether intentional teaching supports or impedes children’s creativity; teachers’ narrow focus on interest-led teaching and learning; and confusion about the role of the teacher in a free play approach including visual arts.

### **Intentional teaching and creativity**

Despite the data showing that ECE teachers place high value on visual arts learning, this study showed that many teachers are confused and constrained about what is effective practice. A particularly common conundrum raised in both the survey and the PLC interviews was the question of how to take an active teaching role in visual arts without taking away from children’s creativity. Some survey respondents and PLC participants could see the contradiction between developing active intentional teaching practices in ECE more broadly while still feeling restrained by pervasive developmentalist ideas about visual arts which kept them in a hands-off mode in this one curriculum area. However, this awareness did not help them to know what to do next in terms of their teaching for visual arts. The results of this study suggest that teachers’ low confidence in their own visual arts ability makes it difficult to push through the uncertainty about what is effective for ECE visual arts teaching. Further, for many teachers it was more comfortable to continue to stand back, supporting similar findings from other ECE visual arts research (for example, Lindsay, 2021; McArdle, 2012; Richards and Terreni, 2022).

Teachers in the survey and at the beginning of the PLC project reported that they had a limited repertoire of ways to talk to young children about their visual arts, and many were left wondering if there was more they could do to enrich and extend children’s learning. Participants reported that the most commonly accepted, and often only, approach in the ECE sector is for the teacher to ask the child whether they want to tell the teacher about their artwork. While the question has some value as part of a wider toolkit of teaching practices, on its own this strategy puts the teacher in a passive role, relying entirely on the child to know how they want to take the conversation forward. The question might

occasionally be the spark for a rich conversation with a child but as a sole approach it is limited in its potential to progress learning and leaves the teacher disempowered, as the PLC participants uncovered through reflective dialogue on the matter. This concern reflects the issue discussed earlier of teachers' fear of interrupting the child's natural creative development through any input or extension from adults. Previous studies have similarly highlighted uncertainty in teachers about what and how to teach in the visual arts (Lindsay, 2017; Probine, 2016), but there remains a lack of clear guidance for effective visual arts pedagogy (Lindsay, 2021; Richards & Terreni, 2022). In this study, the PLC participants articulated a shared goal for the PLC as learning how to give feedback, extend skills and engage in dialogue with children about their visual arts without interrupting the creative process. By the end of the PLC, the participants had developed a shared understanding that offering feedback, skills and dialogue did not take away from children's creativity but instead empowered children to better express themselves through visual art. This change in perspective left the participants feeling more confident, relaxed and prepared to engage in visual arts teaching and learning.

### **Free play and intentional teaching**

The survey and interview data in this study highlight an issue with a common belief amongst NZ ECE teachers that decisions about what to teach next should always come from children's interests. Teachers in the survey and the PLC regularly used terms such as 'child-led' and 'interest-led' when discussing planning for learning, and some participants specifically said that teachers only introduced extension ideas based on what children showed an interest in during free play and exploration. Survey and interview data indicate that adhering to the 'always-interest-led-learning' approach can be restrictive for teachers. One survey participant was prompted to reflect:

Reading this question, I think we only discuss visual arts if there is a plan around children's interests. We haven't discussed our own approach or a team approach to visual arts - or indeed any of the arts areas.

The PLC participants changed their thinking over time, developing the idea that they may struggle to enrich children's learning and broaden their worldview in the absence of introducing ideas which the children have never come across and therefore cannot have developed as an interest. This thinking contributed to the participants' increased confidence to enrich and extend children's art-making experiences, and during meetings the PLC group discussed how this was woven in with following children's interests, rather than at the expense of following interests. This study adds to NZ research focused on interest-led curriculum (for example, Hedges & Cooper, 2016), supporting current strengths of knowing children well and listening carefully to what children know, but also offering a challenge to include aspirational learning beyond the known. In the context of NZ ECE, Ritchie (2013) proposes that from a socio-cultural perspective, "the role of educators can be viewed as being to thoughtfully stimulate and generate dispositions of the children in their care, as opposed to a reactive model of purely responding to the interests demonstrated by children" (p. 322). Such theoretical

arguments for making purposeful decisions about what to teach may be helpful for those ECE teachers who have previously been told by leaders, colleagues, and teacher education providers to singularly follow children's interests, as evident in the survey data.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research has provided further evidence about ECE teachers' struggle between intentional teaching and persistent developmentalist views of how children learn. Such views are argued by Fleer et al. (2009) to reflect "(mis)interpretations of Piaget's research and theory by early childhood educators" (p. 197). We suggest a need for targeted professional learning and organised sector-wide development about intentional teaching approaches appropriate to the revised *Te Whāriki* (2017) and how these work with, rather than against, the value of learning through play. The participants who volunteered for the PLC are likely to have come with motivation and interest in visual arts education; it may be useful to investigate further what impact the professional learning approach would have on a cross-section of practicing teachers with a variety of interest and resistance to the topic. While the focus on visual arts teaching and learning in this research was not intended to incorporate a thorough study on intentional teaching specifically, the findings suggest that this is an area of tension for ECE teachers in NZ. The findings from this study indicate a need to support teachers to develop more nuanced understandings of the implications of both developmental and socio-cultural theories for their teaching roles. The experiences of the participants in this case study indicate that teachers can be supported to develop contextually relevant intentional pedagogies for visual arts education, informed by strong theoretical understandings, to enrich young children's learning in early childhood settings.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

### RACHEL DENEЕ

*Victoria University of Wellington*



Rachel Denee is an early career researcher with interests in leadership, professional learning, early childhood pedagogy, and visual arts education. Rachel has recently completed her doctoral studies investigating a network professional learning community approach to improving visual arts pedagogy. She has been an early childhood teacher and leader for over twenty years and brings in-depth professional sector knowledge to her academic career.

Contact: [rachel.denee@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:rachel.denee@vuw.ac.nz)  
ORCID: 0000-0002-9508-6083

### SUE CHERRINGTON

*Victoria University of Wellington*



Sue Cherrington is an Associate Professor and Director of the Institute for Early Childhood Studies at Te Herenga Waka: Victoria University of Wellington. Sue has an extensive background in early childhood education, both as a kindergarten teacher and in early childhood teacher education. Sue's over-arching research focus is on professional and pedagogical practices in ECE, including EC teacher thinking and reflection, professional learning and development, and the use of innovative data collection tools for use by teachers in ECE settings.

Contact: [sue.cherrington@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:sue.cherrington@vuw.ac.nz)  
ORCID: 0000-0002-9547-3534