New Zealand ECE teachers talk about *Te Whāriki*

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MARIT ALVESTAD
University of Stavanger, Norway

JUDITH DUNCAN
University of Canterbury

ANITA BERGE
University of Stavanger, Norway

ABSTRACT

This article presents a group of nine New Zealand early childhood teachers' understandings of aspects of their educational planning and practice related to the implementation of the national curriculum document – Te Whāriki*. We discuss one of the research questions: What are New Zealand teachers' understandings of learning, knowledge and strategies in their educational work with children and planning, and how is this related to the national curriculum? To conclude our discussion some of the main findings in this study are briefly related to findings in two parallel, and independent, studies carried out in Sweden and Norway (Alvestad, 2004a, Alvestad & Berge, 2009).*

INTRODUCTION

Educational pedagogy arises from multiple understandings of any given curriculum document: the interpretation of the curriculum, fundamental views on education and learning, frames and resources for promoting development, and systems of evaluation and assessment. In investigating curriculum documents, analysis of the document themselves and how teachers interpret and enact the underlying ideas and principles are two different things. Until now not much has been known about the relationship between official curricula and how these are put into practice, how early childhood educators construct and interpret the official curriculum frameworks, whether the curriculum becomes part of the discourse of early childhood centres, and how this then becomes enacted in activities and interactions. As pointed out by many researchers, implementation of national curricula is a complex task raising many questions (Alvestad, 2001; Goodlad, 1988; Goodson, 1988; Jackson, 1996; Nuttall, 2003), including the need for highly trained educational staff.

Historically, early childhood teachers have been familiar with their own services' philosophies for programming, planning, and scheduling activities and routines. However, as part of the international education reforms in the 1990s, and increased awareness and understanding of the importance of the early years, several countries have begun to construct and develop curriculum framework documents for their early childhood education services.[1] Each of these documents reflects the socio-political and socio-cultural contexts of the development of the document, the enactment of the document, and the overall understanding of its connection with teaching and learning. As Nuttall and Edwards (2007) highlight in their discussion of curriculum frameworks:

> Curriculum frameworks also represent highly localised, textual responses to time and place, particularly to the dominant discourses of educational provision at the time the frameworks were written. (p. 5)

While researchers and writers within their own countries have traced the development of their own curriculum documents, comparative studies between curricula documents are less common. Comparative studies have the potential to increase understanding about the contexts that children are learning in, and the lessons to be learned from each other's experiences of curriculum and teaching practices. According to the OECD (1999) there has been a need for comparative research of this kind in order to 'strengthen the international knowledge base' (p. 44). It was with this focus in mind that the authors of this paper engaged in this small comparative study. One of the authors (Alvestad) had undertaken a comparative study of Norwegian and Swedish curricula as part of her doctoral studies (Alvestad 2001, 2004b, 2004c; Alvestad & Pramling Samuelsson, 1999). Her work was then enlarged to a comparative analysis with Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood teachers' perspectives on *Te Whāriki* (Alvestad & Duncan, 2006).

This article describes nine Aotearoa New Zealand teachers' perspectives on children's learning and their day-to-day strategies of teaching and learning, gathered in 2002. As part of the comparative study we also describe the three curriculum documents. In conclusion, we compare these teachers' responses with the teachers from Norway and Sweden to conclude our discussion.

CONTEXT: *TE WHĀRIKI* – THE NEW ZEALAND CURRICULUM

The context of each country impacts on the philosophies, visions, and strategies for enactment of a curriculum document. *Te Whāriki* reflects the Aotearoa New Zealand context by being created as a document for both English speaking and Māori-language immersion centres (presented in English and Te Reo Māori), and is shaped by strong sociocultural visions for learning and teaching (Ministry of

[1] Other countries include, among others, France, England and Scotland (Ministère de l'Education Nationale Direction des Ècoles, 1995; Ministry for Education and Skills, 2000; Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum, 1999).

Education, 1996, p. 19). As Aotearoa New Zealand's first national early childhood curriculum, extensive consultation with stake-holders in early childhood and the wider education sectors shaped its construction (Carr & May, 1991, 1993a, 1993b; May & Carr, 1996; Nuttall, 2003). However, its final production was a negotiated one with the dreams of the early childhood sector and the demands of the Ministry of Education producing some compromises and differences that even now, in 2009, disrupt some of the intent of the original visions. Nonetheless, *Te Whāriki* has provided a shared vision for all early childhood centres while, at the same time, supporting a diverse delivery of the vision to reflect the different types of early childhood provision that historically have made up the preschool sector in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Te Whāriki differs from other curricula in that it does not prescribe content or methods, but leaves it to the teachers to weave their own 'Whāriki' (mat). In this way, each service can maintain its own 'ways of working' with children and families which are in keeping with their setting. For example, the contexts differ greatly between a home-based setting and a centre-based Māori language immersion setting. By not prescribing content or methods, *Te Whāriki* has enabled the diverse early childhood provisions to be maintained within one national curriculum. Researchers have identified that this has been both a strength and weakness of the curriculum due to the skill levels required by teachers to be able to make such professional judgements (Carr & May, 1993c) and the risk that the challenges of the curriculum to traditional practices may be ignored (Cullen, 2003).

Nuttall and Edwards (2007, p. 20) describe *Te Whāriki* as prescribing 'a series of four *inviolate* principles (empowerment, holism, family and community, and relationships) and five strands (well-being, belonging, contribution, communication, and exploration)' [emphasis added] which teachers use to craft their daily learning and teaching environments and experiences. Drawing on the metaphor of a woven flax mat, the principles, strands and goals of the curriculum are symbolically interwoven to demonstrate their interrelationships and enactment in teaching and learning. There are no prescribed methods or strategies included in the document, and teachers are required to translate the curriculum principles and strands into teaching and learning within their own centres.

In Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood centres provide education and care for children between birth to five years of age. Therefore, children from birth until they reach school, no matter which early childhood setting New Zealand children experience, will have their learning positioned within the vision created by *Te Whāriki.*[2]

[2] For further discussion on the history and development of *Te Whāriki* see Brewerton, 1996; Broström, 2003; Burgess, 1999; Carr & May, 1993a, 1993b, 2000; Cubey & Dalli, 1996; Education Review Office, 1995, 1998; Foote, Irvine, & Turnbull, 1996; Gaffney & Smith, 1997; MacNaughton, 1996; Mara, 1998; May & Carr, 1996, 2000; Ministry of Education, 1993a, 1993b, 1996; Murrow, 1995; Mutch, 2003; Nuttall, 2003; Podmore, May, & Mara, 1997; Reedy, 1993; and Smith, 1996.

GATHERING TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES

To gather Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood teachers' understandings of planning and practice, in-depth interviews were carried out (Kvale, 1997). The basic Norwegian interview guide[3] was adjusted to the contexts of Aotearoa New Zealand bringing a joint focus to all the conversations. A strategic sample of nine teachers was chosen (Cohen & Manion, 1985); that is, a particular selection of early childhood teachers were invited to participate to ensure a range of teachers. All nine teachers had recognised teaching qualifications and were employed in a variety of early childhood centres, for example: private /public, and a range of size and age groups. The sample was, for practical reasons, selected by the New Zealand author (Duncan). The interviews were carried out by one of the authors (Alvestad) in December 2002. The interviews were transcribed by a New Zealander and checked by the New Zealand author (Duncan) to ensure that the transcripts were accurate. When the transcription of the interviews was finished, they were returned to the participants for comments and checking. Two participants indicated they wished to make small changes to explain and expand on their comments. All three authors have participated in the analysis and discussion of the findings.

As in any comparative study, expressing the different understandings within and across the actual contexts has presented a challenge for us in understanding the different concepts and embedded meanings. We have often found ourselves struggling to articulate the different perspectives but this has made this study a particularly interesting one in contributing to understanding international contexts from differing perspectives and in understanding how the context both shapes the creation of and understanding of curriculum in the early years. That one of us comes from Aotearoa New Zealand provided a solid and robust framework for interpreting and presenting these Aotearoa New Zealand findings.

FINDINGS

The main question in this study was: *What are New Zealand teachers' understandings of learning, knowledge and strategies in their educational work with children and planning, and how is this related to the national curriculum?*

The findings in this article are presented in two broad categories: *Aotearoa New Zealand teachers' perspectives on 'children and learning',* and *Aotearoa New Zealand teachers' perspectives on 'teaching strategies'*.

[3] In all three countries the interviews were structured using open-ended questions which asked the teacher to discuss: 1) The planning of your work with children's learning, 2) Planning and organisation of your work, cooperation with staff and parents in planning, 3) The national curricula, other plans seen in relation to your planning and work with children and staff, 4) Looking back on last year's planning, what kind of thoughts do you have about that? (see Alvestad, 2001).

Aotearoa New Zealand teachers' perspectives on 'children and learning'

The opening aspiration statement of *Te Whāriki* sets out the vision for New Zealand 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, p. 9)

This vision was clearly a key influence in shaping the New Zealand teachers' visions for the children in their early childhood settings. These ideas of capable, confident and competent children were often expressed in all the teachers' interviews. Teacher D expressed how important this was in her work:

> There are agreed aspirations for children – to be confident learners, happy, good sense of esteem and well-being. Those things are important.

The term 'curriculum' in *Te Whāriki* itself is defined in terms of learning:

> The term 'curriculum' is used in this document to describe the sum total of the experiences, activities, and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster children's learning and development.
>
> (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 10)

This sense of curriculum as being 'everything' was captured in all the nine New Zealand teachers' interviews. They spoke about learning as an everyday concept they were familiar with in their early childhood settings.

> *Teacher E:* Learning? Sometimes we use the term growing and developing, you know, is learning. … It's almost like children learn, you know, and they learn all the time. We all learn, you know, we are learning beings. We're growing, we're developing, we're changing, we're thinking, we're doing and that's all part of learning.
>
> *Teacher G:* I suppose my understanding of learning is everything – right from birth, virtually, children are learning. How to suckle when they're born and they're learning how to communicate with mother. It's just a process that starts with birth and ends with death I suppose.

Teacher B described learning as the child's active participation with the world: seeing, doing, listening and remembering things. She emphasised the importance of the adults structuring an environment that enabled this engagement, which involved both the physical environment and the interactions between teachers and children. For example:

> You're just up there … doing all the actions to the song and singing it and then you see these little children just coming back and doing it, and you can see the learning that's taking place there.

Teacher C similarly emphasised the importance of a well-resourced and equipped environment combined with positive interactions between those in the environment:

> It's got to be fun. I don't see it as something myself as … strict and you sit down and you dictate to the children. You set up the environment and you give them sort of things that prompt them to want to learn. It's sort of spontaneous and fun and they don't know that they're learning, they think they're just playing but they're actually learning. I don't like it too structured and formal. I like it to be informal and inviting.

Learning, in this way, was described as a free play-based process, centred on the children's own interests, but most importantly as sharing the excitement and the achievements of learning:

> *Teacher F1:* Learning and power sharing, because you then have something you can pass onto somebody else, that you have something that you'd like to share and that can actually benefit something else. Or it's just that pride in being able to say: 'Look, look at this, I know about this'. Or: 'I can do this'. Or: 'And I didn't use to be able to, and now I've learned how to'. And you know, children are doing that all the time. With children it's really good to know that they can do something and if it hasn't worked that's okay, because they have another shot of it and: 'Look, now I have done that'. And they're big steps for children.

The teachers also conceptualised learning as the acquisition of new knowledge and skills but in the wider understanding of knowledge for life rather than factual information. Teacher D expressed this most clearly:

> Knowledge, I think, is learning, and that is not to be confused with 'information', because you can have lots of information pumped in. But knowledge, it's using, it's gaining something, and then being able to use it in a practical way and in a meaningful way for the children in their lives.

> Thus, knowledge and skills as learning were conceptualised by the teachers as meaningful learning which enabled children to continue to grow and develop, rather than learning being understood as absorbing information: 'That's learning for me', Teacher D summed up.

The role of the teacher, therefore, was expressed as extending the child's understanding and skills:

> *Teacher H:* It's taking the child one step further from what they already know. But in order to do that you've got to know that child quite well – to know what they do know.

Teacher H goes on to explain: 'If you ask the child: "What do you already know?", it's what they know and through observations, and then you can actually plan to take their learning further'.

These aspects of 'learning' were shared with parents. The teachers all discussed how essential parents' awareness of their children's learning was as this both supported the wider contexts of children's learning experiences as well as encouraging parental engagement in their child/children's learning.

> *Teacher F2:* And we quite often share with parents too and say: 'Look what they've done' and … 'Wow, look what they've done!' And the children are proud of it and their parents are proud of them.

Teacher H described how working in a low socio-economic area had increased her awareness of the need for empowering both the children and their parents in their future life skills, and for acknowledging the skills and abilities that the children brought to the early childhood centre:

> Children come here full of experiences anyway. So learning is imparting knowledge. Really. Empowering the child to have knowledge to go and do what they need to do.

All the nine teachers emphasised that social skills and social competence of children was a key aspect of 'learning' that shaped their teaching day. They described these social skills as about how to get on with other people, making friends, maintaining friendships, and respecting personal boundaries. Teachers H and F1 provided examples on how the principles of *Te Whāriki* support this:

> *Teacher H:* To me, it's to actually work peacefully alongside other children. And that's always what you're encouraging children to do. I mean it's like the beginning of *Te Whāriki* – it's [about] well-being and belonging. And if they can get that peace … if they can work alongside other children in a peaceful situation, I'll be quite happy.

> *Teacher F1:* That they are respected for who they are. That they know how to respect other children, how to talk to other children, how to join a group. And we think if we can get those skills for children to appreciate those, then all this other learning is going to come easier. So I suppose that would be the start for us … that we need to have a child who can relate in an environment that is supportive of them, because they're all little individuals there, and they've all got their own learning styles. And they need to know who they are; their family are all respected and valued. And that is what *Te Whāriki* promotes hugely … those making links between home and kindergarten: and that valuing of the individual.

Interestingly, this value was understood by the teachers to be shared by families in Aotearoa New Zealand, whereby the emphasis on early childhood education is not about formal 'school-based' learning but social learning and social skills for life-long living:

> *Teacher E:* When you talk to parents – you know: 'Why do they come to preschool?' In New Zealand most people won't say for academic reasons, it's for social reasons. You know, and I'd like them to think more academically, but in actual fact there's a very strong cultural imperative that you need to get on with others.

Aotearoa New Zealand teachers' perspectives on 'teaching strategies'

We were also interested in how the teachers themselves bridged the gap between the identified philosophies of the curriculum and what they *actually did.* Consistent with other research in New Zealand, the teachers described to us both traditional teaching approaches to children's activities and learning (Nuttall, 1991, 2003; Nuttall & Edwards, 2007) as well as some new approaches to teaching and learning, which indicated to us some significant shifts towards a socio-cultural lens of learning for children.

The emphasis on the value of learning through play, which has been a traditional approach to early childhood education in New Zealand, remained as an important part of learning for the New Zealand teachers. A major shift which had occurred with the introduction of *Te Whāriki* was an increased focus on supporting children's learning through following children's own interests. This had encouraged teachers to look more closely at children as individual learners who brought their own skills, experiences and interests to the early childhood setting:

> *Teacher D:* And then there's – when you really individualise it to a child, I think the whole process of *Te Whāriki* has made us look at the individual child more closely. You come up with a whole list of things that you want that child to learn, depending on where you know they're at and what they're interested in … And knowing what they are capable of. It's looking from both those angles I think. From the angle of agreed very holistic and quite far-reaching sort of aspirations for children and the individual aspirations for each child.

However, following children's own interests was also a source of tension for the teachers who had their own professional ideas for both skills and content knowledge that they wished the children to experience in the programme:

> *Teacher E:* I think there's general stuff that as early childhood teachers we think are good for children, so that you need to be able to supply them. And that's things like fine motor skills, like the dough – because it strengthens the fingers and helps with the fine motor skills. It is the large physical play – because young children have a lot of energy and they need to know how to jump and run and burn it off and have fit healthy bodies, and that aids the mind. And, yeah, so I suppose it's interests, it's supplying activities for children that we know often interest children – not always – and are good for them. But also being open to debate about that and negotiating that ... and socially you know, developing the disposition to *like* learning – a positive view of learning that they gain independence but within a very supported [context].

Broström (2003, p. 236) in his review of *Te Whāriki* critiques this approach to 'content' saying that:

> Because the discussion of content is rather diffuse in *Te Whāriki*, and because there is nothing explicit on the relationship between aims and content, teachers have to make their own choices about the content … There is a risk that the old child-centred approach will be maintained, with teachers saying that children have to make their own choices.

Importantly, adding to the tensions for bringing about a new approach to teaching and learning, while the concept of learning in *Te Whāriki* is rooted firmly in socio-cultural and ecological theories, the document also incorporates enough mention of developmental stages to undermine a truly radical shift in conceptualising learning and teaching (see Nuttall, 2003). This tension is reflected in the theoretical building blocks of the document:

> Four tall kauri[4] provide important guides: Piaget (Piaget and Inhelder, 1969), Erikson (1950), Vygotsky (1968), and Bruner (Bruner and Haste, 1987). They help us to describe an early childhood path, in particular they provide two main principles of learning: we are concerned with the whole child and a developmental framework (Piaget and Erikson), and with learning in a social and cultural context (Bruner and Vygotsky).
>
> (Carr & May, 1991, pp. 12-13)

[4] Kauri are the tallest and oldest native trees in Aotearoa New Zealand. They symbolise wisdom and strength.

These guides present both familiar and new understandings of learning for teachers. They create a theoretical tension in the curriculum which lent itself to being perceived by teachers as supporting 'what we do already'. This is in addition to proposing a new model of teaching and learning which presents a competent and capable child to the foreground. Broström argued that we need an approach to the curriculum that challenges us: 'We need to build on an idea of fostering "citizens of the world"' not just 'stick to the children's comprehensive development – although this is, of course, a necessary basis' (Broström, 2003, p. 236). These tensions were clearly identified in the New Zealand teachers' descriptions of their teaching activities and programmes.

DISCUSSION

Early childhood teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand, Norway and Sweden all reported familiarity with the concept of learning within their early childhood settings. They articulated learning as a holistic concept. Although this view on learning was articulated in various ways all teachers in the three countries saw learning as meaningful for the children and that the children's learning leads to a better life situation now and for the future (Alvestad, 2004b, p. 89).

When it comes to the teachers' understandings and articulation of strategies and content, the New Zealand teachers predominately referred to the strands in *Te Whāriki* (*Communication, Exploration, Wellbeing* and *Belonging*). As has been identified elsewhere (Cullen, 2003; Nuttall, 1991) this reliance on the Principles and Strands can run the risk of teachers simply repeating and reinforcing their traditional practice. This traditional practice is one where the teacher arranges the environment and leaves the children to find their own way within a passive child-oriented model (Cannella, 1999). Traces of this way of educational thinking were in some way or another found among the early childhood teachers in all the three countries. However, what seems striking to us is that the teachers seem to have recognised a shift in both their thinking and their practices and they were searching for new ways in their educational work with children. Learning was by most teachers expressed in terms of a co-operation where 'we', that is both teachers and children, were learning and growing together, where both teachers and children are described as co-constructers in common learning processes.

Looking at this study, the Aotearoa New Zealand teachers are presented with the challenge of bridging the gap between the overall principles and strands in *Te Whāriki* and their actual pedagogical work. Looking at the Swedish curriculum, which is short and goal-oriented, this causes some of the same problems. The Norwegian curriculum, both the former and the revised Framework, however, describes the content to a greater extent which helps the teachers to bridge the gap between goals and practices (Alvestad, 2004b; Alvestad & Berge, 2009). Interestingly, the earlier Norwegian study shows that some teachers were worried about emphasising learning and academic-oriented content at the expense of social knowledge and skills, while this was not identified in the Aotearoa New Zealand or Swedish studies (Alvestad, 2004b).

While the teachers articulated how children need supportive and challenging environments for learning, so too do the early childhood teachers. The official curricula are important, impacting on how the teachers think about curriculum. Their interpretation, discussions and cooperation with their colleagues and communities are decisive for educational practice. The three studies – Aotearoa New Zealand, Norway and Sweden – demonstrate a shift both in the curricula's designs and the teachers' educational practice. How the shift toward articulating and demonstrating the new pedagogy (which is reflective of active, competent children and co-constructing learning with the teacher and their families) will be supported is dependent on the future of teacher education and ongoing educational knowledge and development opportunities.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

MARIT ALVESTAD
University of Stavanger, Norway

Marit Alvestad is an Associate Professor at the University of Stavanger, Department of Early Childhood Education. She finished her PhD at the University of Gothenburg in 2001 with the thesis 'The Complexity of planning: Preschool teachers on pedagogical planning and practice'. Marit Alvestad earlier worked as a preschool teacher and has a master's degree in Early Childhood Education from Oslo University College, 1987. She teaches in preschool teacher education, and masters papers in early childhood education. Her research areas are curriculum theory and practice and comparative education. She has written research reports, articles and the book, *Annual Plans in Kindergarten*.

JUDITH DUNCAN
University of Canterbury

Judith Duncan is an Associate Professor in Education at the University of Canterbury. When this study was undertaken she was employed at the Children's Issues Centre at the University of Otago. She is an established researcher with over 18 years of research experience, predominantly using qualitative research methods in early childhood education settings. Her research focus is in the area of impacts of policy in early childhood education learning outcomes for children, teachers' experiences, and support for families.

ANITA BERGE
University of Stavanger, Norway

Anita Berge is an Assistant Professor at the University of Stavanger, Department of Early Childhood Education. She graduated with a Cand.Paed degree at the University of Oslo in 1993 with the title: *Students experiences with the learning environment in the Major Subject in the science of education: A survey.* Anita Berge has earlier been a teacher in the compulsory school sector. She now teaches in preschool teacher education, and her research area is curriculum theory and practice and transitions between kindergarten and school. Anita Berge has written various reports and articles.

CORRESPONDENCE ADDRESSES

Marit Alvestad, Associate Professor, PhD
University of Stavanger, Faculty of Arts and Education, Department of Early Childhood Education, N-4036 Stavanger, Norway.
Email: marit.alvestad@uis.no

Judith Duncan, Associate Professor, PhD
School of Maori, Social and Cultural Studies, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch 8120.
Email: judith.duncan@canterbury.ac.nz

Anita Berge, Assistant Professor, Cand. Paed.
University of Stavanger, Faculty of Arts and Education, Department of Early Childhood Education, N-4036 Stavanger, Norway.
Email: anita.berge@uis.no