He Ao Tūhono: A Comparative Look at Indigenous Early Learning Rights

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KŌRERO WHAKARĀPOPOTOTANGA – ABSTRACT

This article examines Indigenous children's rights and early learning through a framework grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi, mātauranga Māori, and international Indigenous education policy. Drawing on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, it argues that children's rights cannot be meaningfully realised without Indigenous authority over language, culture, and education. Situated in Aotearoa New Zealand, the paper critiques the dominance of Western developmental models in early learning and positions Māori concepts of relationality and kaitiakitanga (guardianship) as foundational to rights-based pedagogy. Comparative examples from Hawai'i, Canada, and Australia illustrate how Indigenous-led governance and language frameworks operationalise children's rights through community authority rather than institutional inclusion. The article concludes that genuine transformation requires structural change beyond symbolic recognition, including shared governance with Indigenous communities, mandated professional learning in Indigenous pedagogies, and policy frameworks that centre Indigenous knowledge systems as foundational rather than supplementary.

KŌRERO WHAKATAKI – INTRODUCTION

Indigenous Rights and Early Learning

Children's rights are recognized worldwide, especially through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). For Indigenous children, there is also the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007). These documents affirm that all children deserve education that supports their overall well-being through their identity, language, and cultural heritage, as emphasised by:

- UNCRC Article 29(1)(c) emphasizes that education should respect and develop a child's cultural identity, language, and values.
- UNCRC Article 30 states that children from Indigenous groups shouldn't be denied the right to practice their own culture, religion, or language.
- UNDRIP Article 14 recognizes Indigenous peoples' right to establish and control their educational systems, including education in their own languages and cultural styles.
- UNDRIP Article 17 affirms every Indigenous child's right to protection and equal access to education without discrimination.

In Aotearoa, New Zealand, these international rights intersect with Te Tiriti o Waitangi (1840), which affirms Māori sovereignty and cultural rights. The treaty's principles—Kāwanatanga (governance), Tino Rangatiratanga (self-determination), Ōritetahi (equality), and Ngā Tūmanako (beliefs)—place a responsibility on the Crown to support Māori-led education, protect te reo Māori, and uphold mana motuhake (self-determination) in decision-making.

All of these frameworks converge most strongly in early childhood education (ECE), where identity, culture, and language are central to learning. ECE teachers play a vital role in protecting and nurturing children's rights, yet the systems and politics around them can shape how well they are able to do this. The views of the authors begin here in Aotearoa, grounding the discussion in our own context through key studies and the wisdom of Māori knowledge holders. From there, it looks outward to the experiences of other Indigenous nations in Canada, Australia, and Hawai'i (United States of America) to see how they approach early learning. These stories and examples offer ideas and inspiration for strengthening rights-based, Indigenous-led education.

HOROPAKI O AOTEAROA – AOTEAROA NZ CONTEXT

Aotearoa Child Rights Through a Māori Lens

In Aotearoa, tamariki (children) rights are grounded in Te Tiriti and supported by international law. For example:

- Article One emphasizes governance rights.
- Article Two guarantees Māori tino rangatiratanga — the right to control their taonga (treasures), including language and education.
- Article Three promises equal rights as citizens, including access to quality, culturally relevant education.
- Article Four recognizes and respects all faiths and beliefs.

Mātauranga Māori recognises all tamariki as being tapu (inherently sacred) and interconnected through whakapapa (genealogy). This way of seeing the world shapes teaching approaches grounded in Māori values, the use of te reo Māori, and strong involvement of whānau in children's learning. While the national curriculum, Te Whāriki (2017), clearly acknowledges these bicultural foundations, the way it is put into practice can look very different from one early learning service to another. Many ECE teachers face real challenges when they

haven't had enough support or preparation to bring bicultural curricula to life in ways that truly give effect to this country's dual heritage embedded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi doctrine.

Recent research by Williams, Fletcher, and Ma (2023, 2024) underscores the need for stronger cultural support and better teacher preparation to genuinely uphold tamariki rights within Te Whāriki. Similarly, studies by Williams, Delaune, and Betts (2023) show that teachers often want to adopt a rights-based approach but face barriers like unclear policies, limited resources, and professional development gaps. Cultural authenticity in early childhood settings matters. Jenny Ritchie's (2008) research highlighted how Māori families often experienced superficial gestures—like token te reo Māori or surface-level practices—in some centres. However, where teachers built genuine relationships, incorporated pūrākau (stories), and prioritized te reo Māori, tamariki felt their cultural identities were truly valued. Ritchie called for ongoing professional learning to help teachers become true Tiriti partners, a call echoed in more recent work. Williams' (2022) doctoral thesis offers practical examples—like co-designing local curricula with kaumātua and iwi, using local stories, and involving whānau in creating whakapapa books—that show how a rights-based approach can come alive when grounded in place, whakapapa, and active engagement.

Nevertheless, challenges remain. Policies like the Oversight of Oranga Tamariki System Act 2022 and the Children and Young People's Commission Act 2022 aim to improve child advocacy, yet critiques suggest Māori voices are still underrepresented, and reforms might centralize power rather than empower iwi and hapū. Teachers and educators must advocate for Tiriti principles within this political landscape. Some scholars argue that embedding Tiriti-based frameworks isn't just about acknowledging Māori sovereignty but actively reimagining education systems that dismantle colonial legacies. Came, O'Sullivan, and McCreanor (2021) stress the importance of this shift. Mitchell (2019) pointed out that neoliberal reforms often disproportionately impact Māori children and services, emphasizing the need for policies rooted in mātauranga Māori and tino rangatiratanga to truly support Māori children's rights in early learning environments.

Te Tiriti and the Current ECE Reform

The ongoing reforms in Aotearoa early childhood education system presents a real chance to put Tiriti principles into practice. Moving beyond symbolic recognition, these reforms should centre the rights of tamariki Māori and their whānau, in line with the four core articles of Te Tiriti: kāwanatanga, tino rangatiratanga, ōritetahi, and the often-overlooked article four: Ngā Tūmanako (respect for faith and customs).

Historically, the dominant Western foundations of ECE have marginalized Māori ways of knowing and being. Scholars like Ritchie and Skerrett (2014) argue for structural and pedagogical changes where Te Tiriti isn't just acknowledged but woven into governance, curriculum, and everyday interactions. This involves supporting Māori self-determination, including iwi leadership in governance, co-creating curricula, and empowering kaiako (teachers) with professional development rooted in kaupapa Māori. Williams (2022) provides inspiring examples from iwi-led early childhood programs where Māori pedagogies are at the core. These relationships aren't just about surface-level inclusion—they're about redistributing power, enabling iwi and hapū to lead and shape education in

their rohe (areas). Further, White, Williams, and Martin (2024) explore how Indigenous rights intersect with environmental concerns, emphasizing that education about climate change should be place-based, relational, and co-constructed with tamariki. Their idea of "worrying with" children highlights the importance of acting in solidarity with tamariki, respecting their roles as knowledge-holders and rights-holders. While there is some acknowledgment of Tiriti references in current policies, much work remains to embed these fully into the fabric of early childhood education, transforming it into a space that genuinely respects and upholds Māori rights and sovereignty.

Despite the acknowledgment of Te Tiriti in the Ministry of Education's current consultation materials, the regulatory frameworks under review risk defaulting to generic standards unless co-governance with iwi is formalised. True transformation requires more than consultation—it demands structural arrangements where Māori determine what quality education means for their tamariki. This includes mandated professional learning in mātauranga Māori, te reo Māori, and critical Tiriti analysis for all kaiako and leaders, supported through sustained funding and localised iwi expertise. As Ritchie and Skerrett (2014) emphasise, any educational system that continues to privilege Pākehā norms without deep engagement with Māori pedagogical principles will fail to meet its obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi. The current regulatory review is thus a critical opportunity not simply to "include" Māori content but to re-centre Māori authority, values, and knowledge as foundational to just and equitable early childhood education in Aotearoa.

TIROHANGA AO WHĀNUI: GLOBAL COMPARATIVE INDIGENOUS EARLY LEARNING PATHWAYS

Common Threads, Divergences, and Implications

Across Indigenous early childhood education (ECE) contexts internationally, there is a discernible alignment around philosophies of interdependence, collective responsibility, and the centrality of cultural identity. These shared values challenge dominant developmental paradigms by embedding education within cultural, spiritual, and environmental relationships.

This can be seen in Indigenous early years programmes and frameworks in Canada, Australia and Hawaii (USA) that aspire to uplift and empower Indigenous communities through partnership. In Canada, the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care (IELCC) framework was co-developed with First Nations, Inuit and Métis partners in 2017 and sets the vision and supports high-quality Indigenous ELCC stating:

> …. a commitment to collaborate, through real partnerships with Indigenous peoples, enabling Indigenous-led early learning and childcare programming for their children and families. It points a way to a present and future where Indigenous peoples determine the programs and services their children need and where all Indigenous children grow up in an enriching environment that helps them meet their full potential. (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018, Preamble)

In Australia, the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) – The National Voice for Our Children – an Indigenous led advocacy body for high-quality, culturally responsive early childhood and child-welfare services supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (SNAICC, 2024) with the Early Learning Years Framework (Australian Government Department of Education [AGDE] (2022). Lastly, in the state of Hawaii, the re-establishment of Hawaiian education philosophies and Hawaiian language medium education efforts by passionate Indigenous education leaders are an example of resilience and continue to strive to support Indigenous-led education efforts (Wilson & Kamana, 2020).

These approaches foreground children's relational positioning within land, language, and genealogy, offering philosophical and pedagogical frameworks where learning is inseparable from identity and place, and foundational for holistic development and learning. As such, early learning services can be transformative in strengthening Indigenous-led education which upholds children's rights to their language, culture and identity. For example, in the 1970s' the number of indigenous people who could speak Hawaiian declined to devastatingly low numbers estimated at approximately 2000 speakers, with most above 60 years old. Inspired by language revitalisation efforts occurring in Aotearoa in response to decreasing numbers of speakers of te reo Māori, the Kōhanga Reo movement which provided Māori immersion language nests for mokopuna and their whānau, became a model of teaching and learning to aspire to. Aha Pūnana Leo a not-for-profit community-based organisation made up of young Indigenous Hawaiian education leaders saw the establishment of the first Pūnana Leo (Hawaiian preschool language nest) in 1984 (Office of Hawaiian Affairs, 2025). Like Kōhanga Reo, Pūnana Leo draws on ike kupuna (ancestral knowledge) ohana (family) and kauhale (community), āina (land) and place-based learning grounded and transmitted in ōlelo Hawai‘i (Hawaiian language). Similar to kaupapa Māori theories and mātauranga Māori pedagogies in Aotearoa, traditional knowledge, histories, stories and practices that connect people, and the land is central to implementing an Indigenous curriculum and supports children's cultural knowledge, understanding and wellbeing seen in teachers' practices of mele/oli (song/chant), and mo'olelo (stories) (Benham & Heck, 2018). Furthermore, Aha Pūnana Leo as an organisation and Indigenous education movement have been instrumental in revitalising the Hawaiian language advocating for native language legislation that also recognised native American languages of American Indians and Native Alaskans resulting in the Native American Languages Act 1990 (Wilson & Kaman, 2019).

Partnership with indigenous communities is highly valued by Indigenous nations and considered critical in upholding indigenous rights and implementing Indigenous pedagogies. In Canada, engagement with indigenous communities and recognition of the deep relationships with the land is considered essential in strengthening cultural identity, language protection, and supports children's sense of belonging and well-being (McGlynn-Stewart et al., 2024). Similarly, the SNAICC Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early years programs offer examples of wider culture-based approaches to Indigenous-led education modelling how language-as-curriculum can support teachers ensure indigenous tamariki have access to their language and culture as their right (Bobongie-Harris et al., 2025). Collectively, these Indigenous early years frameworks affirm that culturally grounded approaches enhance children's identity, belonging and

wellbeing that can empower and sustain culture, language and indigenous knowledges and pedagogies. For Aotearoa, these approaches provide compelling evidence that the bicultural aspirations of Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017) can be realised when governance, policy and practices centre Indigenous knowledge systems and pedagogies and recognise the inherent connections between language, land and relationships.

KŌRERO WHAKAKAPI – CONCLUSION

Moving forward, a rights-based Indigenous approach to early childhood education in Aotearoa must move beyond rhetoric and into sustained, systemic transformation. This means ensuring that tamariki Māori are not only acknowledged as rights-holders but are central to decision-making, curriculum design, and pedagogical priorities. Like Indigenous frameworks in Canada, Australia, and Hawai'i, genuine transformation rests on Indigenous authority — where communities determine what best supports their children's learning and wellbeing. Educators play a critical role in activating this change by working in ways that centre Māori worldviews, challenge colonial legacies, and promote language, culture, and identity regeneration.

The promise of a bicultural ECE landscape must be underpinned by structural and cultural integrity – including governance that shares power with iwi and hapū, resourcing that supports kaupapa Māori provision, and professional learning that enables all teachers to enact their Tiriti-based responsibilities confidently. As seen in other Indigenous contexts, such as SNAICC in Australia and the IELCC in Canada, enduring change requires investment in systems that uphold Indigenous-led decision-making and community partnership.

Strengthening teacher practice in this space is not an optional extra but a core condition of justice for tamariki. Embedding child rights through a Māori lens requires a collective reimagining of ECE as a site of liberation, where tamariki are seen as capable knowledge holders, and where relational, place-based, and culturally grounded pedagogies flourish. This vision, echoed in the resilience of Hawaiian language-medium education, is not merely aspirational, it is necessary. A just, inclusive, and culturally sustaining future for all tamariki depends on it.

HE PAPAKUPU - GLOSSARY OF INDIGENOUS TERMS

Aotearoa – New Zealand; the Māori name meaning *land of the long white cloud*.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi – The Treaty of Waitangi (1840); the foundational agreement affirming Māori sovereignty and partnership with the Crown.

Kāwanatanga – Governance or the right to govern; one of the principles affirmed in *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*.

Tino Rangatiratanga – Self-determination or absolute authority; the right of Māori to control their own taonga (treasures, resources, knowledge).

Ōritetahi – Equality; the principle of equal rights and citizenship for Māori and non-Māori alike.

Ngā Tūmanako – Hopes, aspirations, customs and beliefs; used to refer to the fourth article of *Te Tiriti*, acknowledging freedom of faith and customs.

Te reo Māori – The Māori language.

Mana motuhake – Independence, autonomy, or self-determination; often used to express Māori authority over Māori matters.

ECE – Early Childhood Education (included here because it is used as a bilingual concept alongside Māori terms).

Tamariki – Children.

Taonga – Tangible and Intangible treasures e.g.: language, land, knowledge, or cultural heritage.

Tapu – Sacred, special, or inherently dignified.

Whakapapa – Genealogy, lineage, or layers of relational connection linking people, land, and the cosmos.

Whānau – Extended family – kin groups.

Te Whāriki – "The woven mat"; New Zealand's early childhood curriculum, symbolising an interwoven foundation for learning.

Pūrākau – Traditional Māori narratives or stories that carry knowledge and values.

Kaumātua – Respected elders within Māori communities.

Iwi – Tribe or large kinship group.

Hapū – Sub-tribe or extended family grouping within an iwi.

Whakapapa books – Genealogy books; resources co-created with whānau to help tamariki connect to their ancestry.

Mātauranga Māori – Māori knowledge systems; the body of Māori epistemology, philosophy, and worldview.

Kaupapa Māori – Māori approach or philosophy; research, pedagogy, or practice grounded in Māori values and worldviews.

Kaiako – Teacher or educator.

Rohe – Tribal region, area, or district.

Mokopuna – Grandchildren; in education, often used to describe young children with deep ancestral connections.

Te ao Māori – The Māori world or worldview.

Aha Pūnana Leo – "The language nest movement"; Hawaiian early childhood language immersion organisation founded in 1984.

Pūnana Leo – Hawaiian language preschool (*language nest*).

ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi – Hawaiian language.

ʻIke kupuna – Ancestral knowledge, wisdom, or teachings in Hawaiian culture.

ʻOhana – Family or extended kin group in Hawaiian culture.

Kauhale – Community or group of homes; represents interconnectedness in Hawaiian society.

ʻĀina – Land; literally "that which feeds," reflecting a spiritual and reciprocal relationship between people and place.

Mele/Oli – Song/chant; traditional Hawaiian oral expressions used in education and ceremony.

Moʻolelo – Story, history, or legend; Hawaiian narratives that transmit knowledge and identity.

Rangahau – Māori term for research, inquiry, or deep investigation.

Tiriti-based responsibilities – Professional and ethical obligations to honour *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* within education practice.

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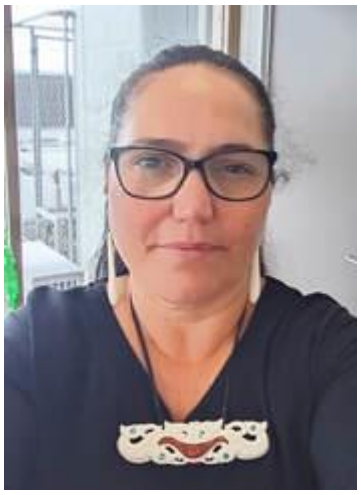

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