Weaving Patterns: Developing National Early Childhood Curriculum Guidelines in Aotearoa - New Zealand

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Early Childhood Curriculum initiatives in New Zealand reflect the changing role of Government in the development of early childhood services. As funding has increased so has the Government interest in quality curriculum. In 1991 the Ministry of Education awarded a contract to the authors to write national curriculum guidelines for early childhood; the draft was submitted in November 1992.

Since these Guidelines include all services and early childhood settings that provide chartering programs, the development process was complex, with extensive consultation and a broadly based curriculum development team as key features. The curriculum development process is described in the sources of curriculum analysed, and the principles and aims are summarised. The title, Te Whāriki (in Maori, a woven mat) is a central metaphor. Curriculum development is seen as a weaving; the guidelines provide a framework; each program weaves its own pattern, each child weaves his or her own curriculum.

Early childhood in Aotearoa: New Zealand

Early childhood care and education in Aotearoa – New Zealand is provided by a diverse range of services most of which are coordinated under umbrella organisations: local kindergarten associations and their two national parent bodies, the Playcentre Federation, community child care trusts, New Zealand Child care Council (an affiliation of mainly private centres), local and national family day care organisations, Te Kohanga Reo (Maori immersion) National Trust, the Pacific Island Early Childhood Association, Montessori, Steiner, etc. Apart from a few privately owned child care centres, services are community owned but exist in a financial and regulatory partnership with the Government – the Ministry of Education. Prior to 1989 each service had negotiated a different kind of funding and regulatory partnership with Government. In 1989 as a result of an extensive political campaign over the previous two decades, the nature of this partnership altered. There is now a common formula irrespective of the kind of service and, in relation to funding for example, each child enrolled now receive entitlement to a sessional grant based on age. Likewise the requirements for defining quality programs and minimum regulations are the same across all the different kinds of services. These reforms are known as the Labour Government’s Before Five early child policy. National Government, which came to power in 1990, adopted the Before Five policy but reduced the funding for under-twos.

The implementation of the Before Five reform has been complex, but the process has created a new awareness of 'what is quality' and encouraged centres to debate and argue their philosophy. Centres and home based programmes wanting Government funding must not only meet all regulatory requirement but also develop a Charter which outlines their philosophy and goals and states how they will deliver a quality program. The Ministry of Education requires that the Charter is developed in consultation with the parents, the staff and the community. It is then negotiated with the Ministry of
Education and reviewed annually by an Education Review Office. Government's role in early childhood curriculum has thus become increasingly focussed and directive. The work we have undertaken at Waikato University in the development of Te Whāriki: The National Early Childhood Curriculum Guidelines in New Zealand (1992), has been a fundamental aspect of this new involvement. This paper traces the Government's changing role in defining early childhood curriculum and then describes the development process and structure of the document Te Whāriki.

Government and early childhood curriculum: the changing role of government

(i) Regulatory focus

In the traditional partnership between community organisations and government for the delivery of early childhood services, past governments did not concern themselves directly with curriculum content or process. The domain of curriculum, in the sense of what actually happened for children in the programs, was seen as the responsibility of the various organisations and services. Each of these had a distinctive curriculum that reflected their own rationale for providing early childhood programs. Regulations for child care centres had only minimal statements on 'suitable activities' with no attempt to define what this might mean.

(ii) Training

Government reticence in dictating curriculum content did not, however, mean a lack of interest; the focus was one of attempting to influence curriculum rather than to define it. Regulations for both child care and kindergarten required various levels of training; the assumption was that training meant that the curriculum for children would therefore be appropriate. The increasing government support for training of workers for kindergarten and later for playcentre and child care centres was ultimately to do with curriculum concerns, culminating in 1988 with the introduction of the new three year integrated Diploma programs where Government prescribed general areas of study and integral themes.

(iii) Advisory and inservice

Another area where Government traditionally saw a role in influencing early childhood curriculum was through the establishment of its own advisory services and later inservice training. During the early postwar years Government was intent on promoting reforms for a more child centred approach to learning throughout the whole education system and early childhood curriculum was an integral part of the endeavour. The techniques used to bring about change for early childhood were that of persuasion and cajoling as Advisory Officers travelled the country visiting programs and offering inservice training.

(iv) Lopdell courses

From the late 1970s a more direct government focus emerged with regular Department of Education 'think tank' forums for policy formulation at a venue called Lopdell House. These forums involved key people across all the early childhood groups and have been crucial in the development of a cohesive approach to early childhood curriculum amongst diverse organisations and services. Most important was the 1988 Lopdell Curriculum Statement which identified 15 basic principles of early childhood curriculum (NZ Government, Department of Education 1988). These principles were published in an important document that preceded the Before Five Reforms, 'Education to be More', known as the Meade Report (Early Childhood Care and Education Working Group, 1988). This document was widely distributed; it was the first time that the word 'curriculum' had been applied nationally to early childhood, to all services and to all ages from birth to school age. It also defined curriculum as 'the sum total of all children's direct and indirect learning experiences in early childhood services'. This definition later held firm for the curriculum development process.

(v) The Before Five reform process

In the Before Five implementation process a series of working parties with broad community representation was established. The Working Party on National Guidelines, Charters and Minimum Standards made recommendations for common regulations, national guidelines and
charter requirements across all early childhood services. The working party documents recommended much stronger statements regarding curriculum content and process than had previously been the case. Thus, the new *Education (Early Childhood Centres) Regulations 1990* and later *The Education (Home-Based Order) 1992* had expanded requirements. The management of chartered early childhood services was now required to provide a program rationale and to involve parents and staff in discussions on the program.

In 1990 the new Ministry of Education published a *Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices for Chartered Early Childhood Services* which provided the framework upon which centres and home-based programs were to develop their Charters. There was a large section detailing curriculum requirements. However, there were still no guidelines on what these regulatory or charter requirements for curriculum actually meant in practice, and each Government agency (i.e. licensing, reviewing, advisory, training) was making different interpretations. It was clear that early childhood services were operating amidst much confusion and that defining a common early childhood 'curriculum language' was one rationale for national curriculum guidelines. But another was looming.

(vi) **Developing a national school curriculum**

The National Government took office in late 1990, with a promise to continue the education reforms but with an agenda to focus on curriculum and assessment. In 1991 they moved to overhaul the school curriculum. After wide circulation of a draft document the Government published in 1993 a new Curriculum Framework for schools, and national curriculum documents for subject areas are being progressively written. These are written in levels, with achievement based assessment, by level, in mind. It is a logical step from these documents to look at what might constitute the earlier levels, i.e. the early childhood curriculum. The school curriculum documents had created a new interest in curriculum in the early childhood community and practitioners were becoming concerned at the possible 'trickle down' effect of level 1 requirements in school subjects.

Experience elsewhere supports this concern: in the UK attainment targets in the school curriculum are influencing the early childhood curriculum, often inappropriately (Sylva et al, 1992; Fleer, 1992; Pascal, 1990). Kathy Sylva and others surveyed early childhood educators in three local authorities in the UK and reported a typical comment from more than half the nurseries (p.47):

We have changed our record-keeping completely. We used to keep it all in our heads or occasionally put a child's drawing into a folder. *Now we know what we are looking for* (our italics) and have organised our records according to the headings of the new UK curriculum.

**The development process of the National Early Childhood Curriculum Guidelines**

When the Ministry first proposed letting a contract for the development of National Early Childhood Curriculum Guidelines there was a muted response from the early childhood community. On the one hand they were tiring from the confusion of change, were concerned about who might be awarded the contract, and in particular saw national curriculum guidelines as limiting the diversity that characterised early childhood services. On the other hand they saw that maybe it was timely to define the early childhood curriculum in more detail to both protect and promote early childhood philosophy. In the event, our proposal from Waikato University was awarded the contract with the full backing of the early childhood organisations. Our proposal argued for multiple curricula blueprints and in particular a bicultural approach to its development and content.

The development process was complex, with extensive consultation as a key feature.

(i) The core Curriculum Development Team reflected the diverse range of services and settings in early childhood in New Zealand. Its 15 members encompassed practitioners from all the major services, educators at tertiary level in early childhood, and parents. It included the
out to acknowledge these differences and to emphasise the links with families and the wider local community.

(iv) Developmentally appropriate
The early childhood curriculum starts from the capabilities, needs and interests of different age and developmental skills of infants, toddlers and young children. It defines developmentally appropriate practice: (a) an emphasis on play or on the child’s work; (b) hands-on experiences; (c) a central role for the adult as a provider of support, encouragement, warmth, acceptance and challenges for creative and complex learning and thinking; (d) an emphasis on symbols and meanings through which people make sense of their worlds; and (e) a minimal separation of attitudes from knowledge and skills.

(v) Individually appropriate
Children, especially very young children, vary in the rate and timing of growth and development and in the capacity to learn new things in new places. The early childhood curriculum set out to recognise this, and to build on current needs, strengths and interests by allowing children choices and by encouraging an increasing responsibility for their own learning.

(vi) Educationally appropriate
The early childhood curriculum followed some general principles of educational practice and direction that are particularly appropriate for early childhood: an emphasis on the process and on the strategies children are using for learning, opportunities for cooperative ventures, discussion and negotiation, a focus on children’s interests and strengths, links with prior learning and experiences, fun and enjoyment, learning in ‘meaningful’ contexts, solving problems that the children have chosen, and ways of learning that reflect a balance of listening and watching, discovering, and creative inventing.

Te Whāriki
The title, Te Whāriki is a central metaphor. The early childhood curriculum is envisaged as a whāriki, a mat for all to stand on, which is woven from the framework of these Guidelines. Different programs, services, centres or organisations would contribute their own pattern to the whāriki. Distinctive patterns from:

- Cultural perspectives such as total immersion Maori or various Pacific Island Language Groups.
- Structural differences such as sessional or full day programs.
- Organisation diversity such as Kindergarten or child care.
- Environment situations from home-based to centre-based.
- Philosophical priorities such as in Playcentre, Montessori or Rudolf Steiner programs.
- Different resources available in urban and rural settings.
- The ways in which the local community participates.
- Special emphases on areas such as music, or art, or storytelling.
- Different contexts and resources for learning in any program.
- The age range of children in the program.

The Principles, Aims and Goals defined in the Guidelines provide the framework which allows for different perspectives to be woven into the fabric of the weaving. There is a suggestion here too that the curriculum for each child is rather more like a weaving than a flight of stairs. Eisner (1985) compares a ‘step’ model of curriculum to a ‘spiders web’ model. Certainly, many skills and concepts have a sequence, and, as the school document Mathematics in the New Zealand Curriculum (NZ Government, Ministry of Education, 1993) points out 'some concepts are better introduced to older students, and ... the effective learning of some ideas depends on a prior understanding of other ideas' (p.16). But the alternative model, that of knowledge and understanding as being a context specific tapestry of increasing complexity and richness, is also a useful one for early childhood.

The curriculum principles
The four Curriculum Principles, which guided the choice and elaborations of Aims, and will guide the way the curriculum is implemented.
members of the two major age-specific working groups (infant and toddler, and the young child) and the coordinators of four specialist working groups: Maori Immersion, Curricula for Pacific Island Children (Tagata Pasifika), Including Children with Special Needs, and Home-based Programs. The idea of multiple curricula within a common framework was implicit in the structure of the core Development Team. At the first four-day meeting the common framework was sketched out; a framework that was comfortable for all the interest groups, a framework of principles and aims that it was hoped would represent the early childhood community's values for the next generation. In the event, that framework guided the entire later curriculum development process.

(ii) The national Te Kohanga Reo Trust chose the members of the Maori Immersion Specialist Group, and worked in close consultation with them, providing extra resources for their consultations. This support and commitment to being part of a national curriculum meant that the early childhood curriculum could reflect the bicultural vision of the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi between Maori and European. In its final form, the Early Childhood Curriculum was bilingual, with the sections on Maori Immersion curriculum written in Maori, of particular interest to the approximately 900 Kohanga Reo (Maori language nests') throughout the country.

(iii) To encompass the diverse interests of early childhood that would need to come together for this project an Advisory Group was established which included representatives from all national early childhood organisations, all training institutions, Government agencies, research institutions and universities. This large group was unwieldy but crucial because it brought together Government, provider, training and academic advocacies from which joint positions could be negotiated.

(iv) The co-Directors and the coordinators of the Specialist Working Groups held seminars and consultations with groups that included people from as many of the over 20 different types of early childhood services as possible. These consultations played a key part in ensuring that the framework could embrace diverse settings, that concerns could be discussed and compromises reached.

The source of curriculum

The framework and content of the Principles and Aims presented in the document Te Whāriki were derived from six sources: the curriculum did not just come from considerations of the developmentally appropriate (Stonehouse, 1991). The introductory section of Te Whāriki details these sources of curriculum with the view that early childhood curriculum is described as being about experiences that are:

(i) **Humanly appropriate**

One of the principles of the early childhood curriculum is that it will 'empower' the child. A curriculum includes values about equity, respect for children's rights and their rights to: equitable opportunities to participate; the development of personality, talents and mental, social and physical abilities to their fullest potential; dignity and self-reliance; rest and leisure; protection from physical and mental violence, or injury; play as a vehicle for learning; recreation; affirmation of their own culture, religion or language, full participation in cultural and artistic life; active participation in the community; and access to a clean and protected natural environment.

(ii) **Nationally appropriate**

National curriculum guidelines make decisions about the knowledge skills and attitudes that are regarded as valuable for everyone in the nation. In this case the Guidelines were written for children growing up in a democracy, and in a country that has two official languages—Maori and English—and in which the Treaty of Waitangi provides a foundation document for the vision of a bicultural society. The Guidelines also made links with school curriculum.

(iii) **Culturally appropriate**

A curriculum includes making available to the next generation the knowledge skills and attitudes regarded as valuable by the culture. Different cultures have different child rearing patterns, beliefs, and traditions, and value different skills and attitudes and ways of knowing. The early childhood curriculum set
The early childhood curriculum will empower the child to learn and grow

Empowerment means that early childhood care and education services contribute towards providing families and children with the independence and resources to direct their own lives.

The early childhood curriculum will reflect the holistic way children learn and grow

Holism means that the physical, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual dimensions are interwoven, rather than seeing the child as a combination of separate skills. The early childhood curriculum takes up a model of learning that is more like the weaving of increasingly intricate patterns of linked experiences and meaning. Holism means that we should look at the meaningfulness of the task and the child as a person who wants to learn, rather than trying to break tasks into little pieces that can be 'trained, measured, counted and charted' (Heshuish, 1986, p.29).

The wider world of family whanau and community is an integral part of the early childhood curriculum

There is an interdependence between the well-being of children, adults in the early childhood setting, families, whanau, local communities, neighbourhoods and cultures. Quality care and education for children is only possible if the well-being of all of these are supported, the connections between them are strong, and there are matches from one part of the child’s world to the others.

Children learn through responsive reciprocal relationships with people, places and things

The learning environment assists children in their quest for making sense of and finding out about their world by: adults knowing the children well, providing the basis for the ‘give and take’ of communication and learning; appropriate and interesting play materials that children can change and interact; opportunities for children to have an effect, to change the environment.

A developmental continuum of needs and capacities

The Guidelines define three age groups (infants, toddlers and the young child) but consistent with the idea of the curriculum for each child as being more like a weaving than a flight of stairs, we do not see them as self contained stages. We included the idea that learning and growing during the early childhood years should be seen as part of a continuum, linked to age but recognising that growth patterns will vary for individual children in unpredictable ways. The direction and speed of learning and growing will fluctuate for each child on a daily basis. It will also vary with where they are and who they are with. Over time, for nearly all children, the balance tips towards one end of the continuum and away from the other. Movement along the continuum, however, will not be even and will vary for the different domains of need and capacity as set out in the table below.

The Guidelines suggest that curriculum for the early childhood years must, therefore, be able to embrace the everyday realities of: rapid change, leaps and regressions, uneven development, and individual differences. This means a curriculum that is flexible and can meet each child’s particular needs for that particular time, place, day or level of development in that particular domain. The younger the children the more flexible and individualised the curriculum must be. The early end of the continuum defines the characteristics of the very young infant. The later end of the continuum defines the growing capacities and capabilities of children approaching school age as well as younger school age children.

Aims for children

The Aims for Children defined in the first instance by the Curriculum Development Team received wide acclaim throughout the development process. They are derived from the six sources listed above. The Aims are set out in parallel in Maori and English. They are not exact translations, but the curriculum areas they describe are seen as equivalent. Developing the concept of dual Aims was an important breakthrough in attaining the framework for a bicultural and bilingual document.
A developmental continuum of needs and capacities

dependence on others for well-being < .......... > growing independence
highly vulnerable < .......... > increasingly robust
fluctuating behaviour < .......... > more predictable behaviour
uneven rhythms < .......... > growing consistency
needing stability < .......... > managing change
immediacy of need < .......... > increasing ability to delay immediate meeting of needs
developing sense of memory < .......... > increasing memory capacity
intimacy of social interaction < .......... > widening of social interaction
learning a sense of self < .......... > learning a sense of others
individual needs and interests < .......... > increasing common needs and interests
totally sensory < .......... > widening domain of discrimination
beginning awareness of things < .......... > developing tools for symbolisation and representation
learning techniques for communication < .......... > increasing range of communication methods
rapidity of physical changes < .......... > consolidating physical development
needing predictability < .......... > seeking challenge
physically uncoordinated < .......... > growing control of body
developing range of skills < .......... > expanding mastery of skills
purposeful activity is limited < .......... > growing purposefulness of activity
experiences are new < .......... > expanding experiences and ordering of the world
magical explanations < .......... > early logic
making sense of the world < .......... > making sense and understanding nonsense
focussing on the here and now < .......... > growing abilities in abstract thinking

MANA ATUA WELL-BEING
MANA WHENUA BELONGING
MANA TANGATA CONTRIBUTION
MANA REO COMMUNICATION
MANA AO TUROA EXPLORATION

As pakeha (non-Maori) with strong links into the international early childhood discourse we believe these Aims encompass the breadth of early childhood curriculum, but in a unique arrangement appropriate to our country. They also avoid the sometimes artificial divisions of early childhood curriculum into areas of the physical-intellectual-social-emotional. Summarised below are the Aims and Goals in English and a brief rationale for each.

1. Well being

AIM: The health and well-being of the child is protected and nurtured.

GOALS FOR LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT: Children will experience an environment in which:

1.1 Their health is promoted.
1.2 Their emotional well-being is nurtured.
1.3 They are protected and safe from harm.

All children have a right to health and to protection from harm, and to harmony, consistency, affection, firmness, warmth, and sensitivity. Young children are experiencing transitions from home to centre, from centre to centre, from centre to school, and an optimum amount of consistency and continuity of experience is needed for both the confidence and trust to explore and for establishing a firm foundation of remembered and anticipated people, places, things and experiences.

2. Belonging

AIM: Children and families feel they belong here.

GOALS FOR LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT: Children will experience an environment in which:

2.1 Connecting links with the family and the wider world are affirmed and extended.
2.2 They know that they have a place.
2.3 They feel comfortable with the routines, rituals and regular events.
2.4 They know the limits and boundaries of acceptable behaviour.

The feeling of belonging, in the widest sense, contributes to inner well-being, security, and identity. Children know that what they do can make a difference, and that they can explore and try out new activities here; they know that acceptance is unconditional. They recognise too that this place is part of their wider world.

3. Contribution
AIM: Opportunities for learning are equitable and each child’s contribution to the community is valued.

GOALS FOR LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT: Children will experience an environment in which:
3.1 There are equitable opportunities for learning irrespective of gender, disability, age, ethnicity or background.
3.2 They are affirmed as individuals.
3.3 Opportunities to learn with and alongside others are encouraged.

Each program should recognise, acknowledge and build on each child’s special strengths and allow each to make a contribution or to ‘make his or her mark’ (Greenman, 1991) acknowledging that each child has the right to active and equitable participation in the community. Making a contribution includes developing satisfying relationships with adults and peers; early social confidence has long-term effects and adults in early childhood settings play a significant role in encouraging the children’s ability to initiate and maintain relationships with peers.

4. Communication
AIM: The languages and symbols of culture are promoted and protected.

GOALS FOR LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT: Children will experience an environment in which:
4.1 They develop non-verbal communication skills for a range of purposes.
4.2 They develop verbal communication skills for a range of purposes.
4.3 They experience the cultures’ stories and symbols.
4.4 They discover different ways to be creative and expressive.

One of the major cultural tasks is to develop competence in and understanding of the languages of the cultures. Language is not just words, sentences and stories, it is art, dance, drama (pretend play), mathematics, movement, rhythm, and music. Children are learning to communicate their experience in many ways and to experience the way others have communicated and represented it. They are developing an increasing ability with symbolic, abstract, imaginative and creative thinking.

5. Exploration
AIM: The child learns through active exploration of the environment.

GOALS FOR LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT: Children will experience an environment in which:
5.1 Play is valued as meaningful learning and spontaneous play is important.
5.2 Confidence in and control of one’s body is developed.
5.3 They learn strategies for active exploration.
5.4 They develop working theories for making sense of their living physical and material world.

The context of learning here is both the natural (living and physical) and the ‘person-made’ (material) environment: the living, the physical, and the material worlds. This aim covers learning strategies for infants, toddlers and young children to explore and make sense of the world. Goals come from knowledge and research about learning that says that children are scientists in social settings: they learn through play, by doing, by asking questions and interacting with others, by setting up theories or ideas about how things work and by trying them out, by trial and error, by purposeful use of resources.
In the Curriculum Guidelines each Goal is then elaborated in relation to what it might mean in different contexts (home-based programs, including children with special needs, Maori immersion programs, and for children of Tagata Pasefika) and for different age groups. Sections on planning and evaluating programs, and on links with schools, are included.

Conclusion

The development process of *Te Whāriki* has indicated that there is an extraordinary consensus amongst different early childhood services concerning the proposed Curriculum Principles, Aims and Goals for Children which for the first time have been codified in a national document. During the consultations, practitioners were saying, 'This is us, this is what we do, this belongs to us.' *Te Whāriki* is being published and distributed by the Ministry of Education in draft form for a year before a final version is released and promulgated as a regulatory requirement for all chartered early childhood services. There are also plans for staff development and resource packages to support the implementation. We believe that *Te Whariki* provides a practical document of use to practitioners that is able to make a difference for children. And, as well as providing a strong protective curriculum framework for early childhood services, it is now poised to inform the school curriculum.

Since this article was prepared for printing, the draft curriculum document has been published by the Ministry of Education. Requests for copies of *Te Whāriki: Draft Guidelines for Developmentally Appropriate Programmess in Early Childhood Services* can be sent to Curriculum Functions, Ministry of Education, PO Box 1666, Wellington, New Zealand.

References


