Looking back, looking forward: three decades of early childhood curriculum development in Aotearoa New Zealand

Joce Nuttall

Abstract
In this reflection on early childhood curriculum development in Aotearoa New Zealand since the mid-1980s, the author identifies some of the factors that were influential in the genesis, and subsequent implementation, of Te Whāriki. The article concludes with a discussion of possible future directions in early childhood curriculum, including issues in policy and practice that remain unresolved.

There is a Māori proverb that states that in order for the canoe to know where it is going it has to understand where it has come from. This is an apt metaphor for understanding the last 20 years, and thinking about the next 10 years, in early childhood curriculum development in Aotearoa New Zealand. The release of Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996) marked a turning point for early childhood education in New Zealand, but the development of Te Whāriki had been preceded by at least 10 years of rapid development in early childhood provision. These developments had, in their own right, flowed from decades of debate about the nature and purpose of early childhood services in New Zealand and elsewhere (May, 1997, 2001). Almost 10 years after the publication of Te Whāriki, 2005 has been marked by another milestone in early childhood education in New Zealand: the release of Kei tua o te pae: Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars (Ministry of Education, 2004).

In the first part of this article I describe where the canoe has come from, tracing the genesis of Te Whāriki, particularly from 1986 onwards. Next, I reflect on the period from 1986 until today, and the present status of early childhood curriculum development in New Zealand, including the place of Kei tua o te pae. In the final part of the article I speculate on
future directions, highlighting those questions that, in my view, remain unresolved.

The origins of *Te Whāriki*

The story of how *Te Whāriki* was conceptualised, drafted, written, and consulted upon remains one of the great unwritten PhD theses in education in New Zealand. Te One (2003) gives an article-length account of the process of *Te Whāriki*’s development, and the thinking of the leader writers of the document has been well documented (Carr & May, 1991, 1993a, 1993b, 1994, 2000; May & Carr, 2000; Reedy, 2003). Less is recorded about the context for the development of *Te Whāriki* provided by the years prior to the writing of the early childhood curriculum framework (begun under contract to the Ministry of Education by the University of Waikato in 1990). In this section, I reflect on a number of key influences in the early childhood field which, with the benefit of hindsight, help explain the nature of *Te Whāriki*, as well as subsequent developments in the field.

The 1980s were characterised by renewed interest in the educational potential of good-quality early childhood education, following on from the calls of “second wave” feminists of the 1970s who had largely subsumed early childhood services into a wider vision for the emancipation of women. Anne Meade was particularly influential in examining and creating policy surrounding early childhood education in New Zealand, both as a bureaucrat and as an academic (see Meade, 1981, 1990, 2000). At the same time, Helen May (then Cook) was consistently re-emphasising the political dimension of early childhood services, particularly their impact on women’s lives (Cook, 1983, 1985a, 1985b, 1985c). I argue that the work of May, Meade, and others during the 1980s, by persistently focusing on the scope and quality of early childhood provision, provided an important platform for the subsequent development of *Te Whāriki*.

At the same time, the “galloping development of Te Kōhanga Reo movement … [and] … the development of Pacific Islands language nests … had a massive impact on government policy and on education generally” (Cooper & Tangaere, 1994, p. 83). The rapid rise of kōhanga reo during
Curriculum Matters

the 1980s as a major force in early childhood education was a fundamental influence on *Te Whāriki*, which was not only an articulation of, but a response to, the crisis in early childhood education for Māori whānau. Implicit in the rise of the kōhanga reo movement was a critique of early childhood educational provision at that time: that it did not, and could not, serve the needs of young Māori children and their whānau. Burt (2003, pp. 381–382) argues that there are two principal explanations found in the strategic change literature for crises in organisational practice: strategic drift (whereby institutions slowly become misaligned with the environment in which they operate); and paradigmatic change (where sudden shifts are made in response to external conditions). Although many centres (particularly Playcentres) had been established by and for Māori in the 1960s, preschool education of Māori remained on Pākehā terms (Cooper & Tangaere, 1994). By the 1980s, paradigmatic change was inevitable and the rise of Te Kōhanga Reo “forever changed early childhood care and education for Māori children and their whānau” (Cooper & Tangaere, 1994, p. 96).

The response of the wider early childhood field was to embrace biculturalism, both in principle and in practice. Although this embrace may often have been uneven or superficial, it was sufficiently powerful to ensure that both the conceptualisation and the development of *Te Whāriki* was fundamentally bicultural (Reedy, 2003), and this commitment continues in *Kei tua o te pae*. The writers of *Te Whāriki* recognised and articulated the possibility of different, but equally valid, educational arrangements. While the bicultural basis of early childhood curriculum provision in New Zealand is probably still more aspirational than actual, the international significance of the partnership reflected in the document has been considerable (Fleer, 2003).

A third factor in the genesis of *Te Whāriki* was the series of Lopdell House in-service courses in the late 1980s that brought together key thinkers in early childhood education (Te One, 2003). The most obvious remnant of these courses is the definition of curriculum that appears in the opening pages of *Te Whāriki*, which was developed at the 1988 in-service course on early childhood curriculum: “The term ‘curriculum’ is used in this document to describe the sum total of the experiences, activities, and
Looking back, looking forward

events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster children’s learning and development” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 10). In conversation with teachers, teacher educators, researchers, and policy makers who attended these courses, it quickly becomes evident that much of the negotiation of the recent discourses of early childhood education that are taken for granted in New Zealand today—particularly the shift from “programmes” to “curriculum”—occurred at and around these residential gatherings.

The well-established ability of New Zealand’s early childhood sector to mobilise around political and statutory shifts has always been largely due to close leadership networks in early childhood education, and these were both created and strengthened during the Lopdell courses. These courses were, in my view, an important part of the professionalisation of the early childhood field in New Zealand, coming as they did immediately after the shift of the administration of childcare services, in 1986, from the Department of Social Welfare to the Department of Education. For present-day graduates of early childhood teacher education, it perhaps seems extraordinary that early childhood services should be thought of as anything but educational but, in my present position as an early childhood academic in Victoria, Australia, I am perhaps more easily able to reflect on the magnitude of what this transfer of responsibility meant for the early childhood field as a political, conceptual, and professional shift, not just as an administrative restructuring. At the time, however, May (1990) was less optimistic:

> [W]hile this [the shift of all childcare services under the educational umbrella] was philosophically the ‘correct’ move, it brought few direct benefits to childcare centres ... Of more long term benefit to early childhood, however, were the moves by the new [1984 Labour] Government to integrate and invest more money in early childhood training. The rewards of this are still to be felt. (p. 6)

Although it may seem self-evident with the benefit of hindsight, it is difficult to think of how *Te Whāriki* might have come about without this shift in the statutory and conceptual basis of early childhood provision. By positioning early childhood provision as explicitly educational, the door was opened to discourses of curriculum and the formalisation of
Curriculum Matters

expectations around learning, not just service provision in response to economic or social needs.

Perhaps it is inevitable that, as a teacher educator, I should single out changes in early childhood teacher education programmes in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a further influence on the development of *Te Whāriki* and on subsequent understandings about its use. By 1990, all universities and colleges of education in New Zealand had integrated their two-year programmes of kindergarten teacher preparation with their one-year childcare courses, and three-year diploma-level programmes became the norm. In the early 1990s, these diploma programmes morphed again, into three-year degree-level programmes (Cooper & Tangaere, 1994). At that time I was making the move from the childcare field into teacher education, and I can recall the continuous re-examination of programmes that was provoked by this further change. At the 1991 Early Childhood Convention, held in Dunedin, Helen May and Margaret Carr presented papers on both the early stages of the development of *Te Whāriki* (Carr & May, 1991) and the work being done at the University of Waikato to reconceptualise its programmes of early childhood teacher preparation (Carr, May & Mitchell, 1991). I argue that these conversations about curriculum for children and curriculum for student teachers inevitably converged within the universities and colleges of education. In order to make sense of programmes for students of early childhood education, teacher educators had to identify those key principles of child development, early childhood history and politics, curriculum, and pedagogy that would underpin the content of diploma- and degree-level programmes. Although the writing of *Te Whāriki* was led by the University of Waikato, the lead writers headed a consortium of specialist writers with broad networks in the early childhood field who consulted widely (Te One, 2003). The principles that emerged—a commitment to the holistic nature of young children’s development, the centrality of family and community, the emphasis on relationships, and the commitment to children’s empowerment—were not new, but re-interpretations of the radical history of early childhood provision in Western societies since the 18th century (May, 1997).
Looking back, looking forward

Te Whāriki in the 1990s and the origins of Kei tua o te pae

It is perhaps ironic, given the preceding comments about the centrality of curriculum principles, that implementation of Te Whāriki in the 1990s became somewhat derailed. Instead, early childhood educators during this decade were preoccupied with two aspects of early childhood provision that were critical to the implementation of Te Whāriki, but which were not focused on curriculum provision as such: achieving regulatory compliance, and learning about assessment practices.

In 1990 I was seconded by the Ministry of Education for several weeks to join a team of Ministry staff who were investigating early childhood centres’ compliance with the minimum standards of service provision, specified in the newly revised licensing regulations. It was soon evident that many centres, particularly those run by parent volunteers in community facilities such as public halls, did not meet these requirements. In addition to the 1990 Education (Early Childhood Centres) Regulations (Ministry of Education, 1990a), centres were required to demonstrate compliance with the Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices for Early Childhood Services (Ministry of Education, 1990b). These specified the administrative and educational practices required of chartered centres (that is, centres receiving direct funding from Vote: Education based on enrolments; also known as bulk funding). These were designed to both guide centre practice and serve as accountability measures for the Education Review Office (the crown agency then responsible for external review of early childhood centres). In this environment, it was inevitable that many centres and services would be focused during the early 1990s on compliance with regulatory structures, rather than on curriculum development.

I argue that, despite the release of the draft version of Te Whāriki in 1993 (Ministry of Education, 1993), the widespread reform of New Zealand’s education sector in the late 1980s actually narrowed the focus of early childhood educational provision in the first half of the 1990s. From 1992, I was involved in the delivery of the first early childhood teacher professional development and advice contracts funded by the Ministry of
Education and, while some centres were genuinely attempting to grapple with curriculum construction, many services were focusing on improving standards of structural quality, principally ratios of staff to children, overall group size, and teacher qualifications (Smith, Grima, Gaffney, Powell, Masse & Barnett, 2000). These three factors had been well established in the international literature as key indicators of high-quality early childhood provision. For this reason it can be argued that, while the focus on minimum standards deflected attention from Te Whāriki, many centres could not attempt the implementation of the curriculum framework without first attending to basic features of quality provision.

After the release of the draft of Te Whāriki in 1993 several pilot projects trialled the document in use, but it was not until the end of 1995 that the Ministry of Education finally funded a round of teacher development contracts offering widespread support specifically for the implementation of the curriculum. In 1997, however, these contracts were merged into the pre-existing early childhood professional development contracts and the focus on curriculum was once again diluted.

A second explanation for the lack of direct attention to the implementation of Te Whāriki was the widespread exploration, during the 1990s, of teachers’ understandings about assessment in early childhood settings. Even the most superficial reading of Te Whāriki demands that, in order to implement the curriculum framework in a meaningful way, teachers need ways of securing sophisticated understandings about children in early childhood settings; in particular, they need to find ways of learning about children’s lives beyond the centre setting. This, plus a charter requirement to implement assessment policies (Ministry of Education, 1990b), meant that considerable attention was turned on assessment during the 1990s (Carr, 1999).

The Early Childhood Exemplar Project, again led by Margaret Carr but involving academics across multiple institutions, sought to develop ways of representing aspects of learning that are culturally and institutionally valued in early childhood settings, in ways that honour traditional principles of early childhood education such as meaningful play. Based on the strands of Te Whāriki, “learning stories” (a key pedagogical tool conceptualised by Carr (1991) and developed within the project) focus on
Looking back, looking forward

identifying and fostering learning dispositions in young children. *Kei tua o te pae* provides both a bank of assessment exemplars, many of which use the learning story format, and a rationale for the use of narrative forms of assessment in early childhood settings. As many early childhood services sought to develop facility in assessment during the 1990s, particularly the use of learning story formats and portfolio assessment and reporting, questions about the nature of curriculum construction in early childhood settings were less central, despite Carr’s reminder that assessment is a subset of curriculum rather than separate from it (Carr, 2003). Hopes for the impact of the exemplars are high and the New Zealand government has made a considerable investment in their implementation:

The exemplars consist of a series of books that help teachers to understand and strengthen children’s learning and how children, parents, and whānau can contribute to this assessment and ongoing learning … More than $12 million is being spent to develop this resource and provide professional development on assessment for early childhood teachers. I am pleased to be part of a government that recognises the importance of early learning experiences and values early childhood education.


In the 2000s, there is some evidence that *Te Whāriki* is finally moving back to the centre of New Zealand early childhood educators’ discourses of curriculum. The government’s release of a 10-year strategic plan for early childhood education, *Pathways to the Future: Nga huarahi arataki* (Ministry of Education, 2002), positions teachers’ understandings about *Te Whāriki* as a critical factor in raising the quality of educational provision in early childhood settings. Perhaps even more importantly, the writers of *Kei tua o te pae* have systematically signalled the relationship between assessment for learning and the principles, strands, and goals of *Te Whāriki*.

**Te Whāriki in the 2000s**

In the final section of this article, I turn from the history of *Te Whāriki* to an examination of its future potential. This discussion is inevitably speculative, but aims to contribute to four debates that are well established
in early childhood education internationally: the need for a base in evidence for claims about the effectiveness of curriculum frameworks; the vexed question of early childhood curriculum content; the particular role of early childhood curriculum and pedagogy in raising the educational achievement of the most marginalised children; and the costs and benefits of state involvement in early childhood curriculum implementation. These questions need to be grounded in a firm understanding about the limitations of curriculum texts as pedagogical tools. Curriculum implementation is not a process of applying curriculum principles in unitary and unproblematic ways. Instead, curriculum construction is most usefully thought of as an ongoing social construction, constantly reiterated through teachers’ synthesises of reflection on their own and others’ experiences (particularly those of children and families), constructs drawn from available curriculum frameworks (such as *Te Whāriki*), their own beliefs and value systems, and theoretical informants found in programmes of teacher education (Nuttall & Edwards, 2004).

This understanding underpins my first assertion about the future of *Te Whāriki*: that, despite the official sanctioning of *Te Whāriki* and its influence internationally (Broström, 2003; Fleer, 2003), the ways in which it has been appropriated by individuals and groups of teachers are still poorly understood. This leaves *Te Whāriki* vulnerable to direct criticism. The open prescription provided by *Te Whāriki*—that the curriculum is everything that children experience in early childhood education settings—signals the diffuse and continuously negotiated nature of the curriculum in early childhood settings. This complex negotiation is partly due to the rapid flux of young children’s interests and development, but is also a consequence of constant negotiation between adults in multiteacher classrooms. Furthermore, this negotiation largely occurs at the same time as the curriculum is experienced, making early childhood curriculum construction a particularly slippery focus for study. Nevertheless, there is almost no empirical evidence examining whether *Te Whāriki* is actually making a difference to children’s learning and development, relative to other possible models (Smith et al., 2000). Without this process of evaluation, the effectiveness of *Te Whāriki* remains open to doubt. Research into teachers’ appropriation and use of *Te Whāriki*, and the ways in which the resulting programmes provoke children’s learning, would
Looking back, looking forward

seem to be an important next step in increasing the level of sophistication of early childhood curriculum implementation in New Zealand.

This view is reinforced by a consideration of teachers’ contributions to *Kei tua o te pae*. Smith’s (1999) assertion of a fundamental principle of sociocultural theorising—that the development of higher mental functions in children depends on fostering their engagement with more skilled and knowledgeable members of the culture—is cited in *Kei tua o te pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004, Book 2, p. 5), but this is not uniformly borne out in teachers’ interpretations in the exemplars provided. Many of the exemplars, for example, show children engaged in sophisticated literacy practices, yet these appear to be overlooked in the teachers’ interpretations. Instead, the teachers tend to emphasise dispositions such as collaboration and exploration. This is probably inevitable, given the link between learning stories and the principles and strands of *Te Whāriki*. Specific exemplars have also been included because of the aspects of assessment they portray, rather than particular curriculum domains. However, while *Kei tua o te pae* asserts that assessment is about “making learning visible”, it is important to be aware that the nature of the learning described in the exemplars reflects a particular view of what learning looks like.

This point relates to my second area of speculation about the future relevance of *Te Whāriki*: the often unwelcome spectre of debates about curriculum content in early childhood settings. Joy Cullen (2000) has been a persistent but almost sole voice in calling for debate about curriculum content in early childhood education in New Zealand and, in this respect, it is worth quoting her at length:

Increasing acceptance of social constructivist views on teaching and learning in early education means that early childhood teachers are being encouraged to be more proactive in the teaching of curriculum areas previously thought to be the province of primary education (See, for instance, Fleer, 1996; Inagaki, 1992; McNaughton, 1995; Young-Loveridge, Carr & Peters, 1995). Further, research on children’s learning highlights the importance of very young children’s foundational knowledge (Wellman & Gelman, 1998) and the need for teachers to acknowledge and build upon this personal knowledge in educational settings. (p. 5)
This argument comes with an important qualification: that debates about curriculum content in early childhood education do not have to reflect those in the primary or secondary sector. Cullen goes on to say that:

This argument does not imply that early childhood programmes should become subject-oriented or that the holistic, integrated nature of an early childhood curriculum is invalid ... Further, the embeddedness of children’s early learning in their everyday environments is emphasized in the work on domain knowledge. This finding is highly consistent with the integrated, holistic nature of Te Whaariki [sic], and should encourage, rather than discourage, a focus on what children are learning.

(pp. 5–6, emphasis in original)

I argue that the potential of Te Whāriki as a tool for curriculum construction that respects and acknowledges the importance of children’s domain knowledge is a second area that needs urgent exploration.

This question cannot be ignored when addressing my third area of speculation: debates about early childhood educational provision for children from marginalised families and communities. The latest trend in early childhood services in such communities is the move toward “joined up services”, which attempt to promote social cohesion and to reduce social pathology (Pugh, 2001) by co-locating and integrating a range of family support agencies, including early childhood centres. What is the role of Te Whāriki in advancing the life chances of children from disadvantaged backgrounds? It is one thing for early childhood services to craft their use of Te Whāriki so that early childhood programmes are genuinely inclusive of diverse children and families; it is another to offer programmes that actively foster long-term success for children from families who do not find it easy to negotiate the discourses of mainstream schooling (Fleer & Robbins, 2004).

Such programmes need to go beyond following children’s interests and reporting on their learning dispositions. Teachers will also need to be able to foster systematic connections between children’s novice understandings and the sophisticated and culturally valued understandings in the wider culture, whatever those understandings may be.
It is these children with whom the 10-year strategic plan for early childhood education, *Pathways to the Future*, is most concerned (Nuttall, in press). One of the key assumptions of early childhood curriculum policy in New Zealand, expressed in the strategic plan, is the relationship between the implementation of *Te Whāriki* and outcomes for the most marginalised of the nation’s children, who are predominantly of Māori or Pasifika descent. This causal relationship is, however, something of an article of faith; frequent restating of the claim does not make it any more valid. In his launch of the early childhood exemplars, the Minister of Education stated this claim once more:

*Te Whāriki* is a world class early childhood curriculum and has been a significant factor in putting New Zealand on the early childhood world stage. I fully anticipate that these early childhood exemplars will reinforce and strengthen this position.

(Hon. Trevor Mallard, Minister of Education, press release, 17 January 2005)

The Minister’s assertion may be entirely accurate but, despite his confidence, the early childhood field, both in New Zealand and internationally, awaits evidence of the utility of *Te Whāriki* in raising educational achievement for all children.

This claim raises a fourth question about the future of *Te Whāriki* that warrants some speculation: what is the agenda of the state in positioning early childhood curriculum in this way? The assumption that early childhood curriculum has a pivotal role in widespread social engineering is not unique to New Zealand, but the present government has been particularly forthright in viewing early childhood education in this way. Meade (1990), Meade and Dalli (1991), Dalli (1993), May (1997), and Nuttall (in press) have each described the state’s increasing involvement in the early childhood field in New Zealand across several decades, and the picture portrayed is one of a succession of both costs and benefits. In the early 21st century, considerable benefits are signalled for the early childhood sector (including $12 million for the implementation of the exemplars alone). But what will be the nature of the mandatory implementation of *Te Whāriki*? Will increasing support for service provision and teacher preparation come at the expense of the field’s long-
valued autonomy and community orientation? I have argued elsewhere (Nuttall, in press) that the language of *Pathways to the Future* is not neutral; rather, it reinforces a deficit view of marginalised communities, which lack whatever it is that bureaucrats mean by “capacity”. As the government seeks greater accountability for the educational outcomes of early childhood services, *Te Whāriki* has been signalled as a principal yardstick for compliance (Ministry of Education, 2002). How, then, will centres mediate between compliance in curriculum implementation and the highly interpretative basis of the early childhood curriculum framework? And how will this challenge play out in the scenario envisaged by *Kei tua o te pae*, where the meaning accorded to educational success is viewed explicitly as being culturally and locally negotiated? As this article goes to press, the role of *Te Whāriki* as a mandatory aspect of early childhood provision remains unclear.

**Conclusion**

No field of endeavour is ever fully resolved and continuous change is fundamental to the nature of human activities. By looking back at the last two decades of curriculum discourse in early childhood education in New Zealand, the breadth of the change is clear. For many early childhood services in New Zealand in the 1970s, it was sufficient to provide safe, custodial care, where children could choose from a range of age-appropriate activities. As debates about quality took hold in the late 1980s, high-quality services were those that went beyond minimum standards to provide respectful, reciprocal relationships with children and families. With the development of *Te Whāriki* and now *Kei tua o te pae*, the level of expectation for early childhood education has been raised once more, so that early childhood services across New Zealand are now understood as explicitly educational enterprises. This is a welcome development and, while no curriculum or assessment text is beyond critique, I salute the writers of *Te Whāriki* and *Kei tua o te pae* for the national and international significance of what they have contributed.

My prediction (and my hope) is that the next advance in early childhood curriculum provision in New Zealand will be the widespread implementation of programmes based on systematic professional inquiry.
Looking back, looking forward

Although early childhood professional development programmes have for many years been based on strategies such as action research, the recent development of Centres of Innovation (Meade, 2003) signals the foregrounding of practices informed by evidence, rather than solely by formalised theories, or by custom and practice. Te Whāriki and Kei tua o te pae are an enormous contribution to the conceptual and pedagogical tools with which early childhood teachers can once again attempt to raise the quality of early childhood educational provision in Aotearoa New Zealand.

References


Curriculum Matters


Looking back, looking forward


Curriculum Matters


Notes

1 Childcare and kindergarten services in Victoria continue to be administered by the Department of Human Services, the state government department responsible for health and welfare.

The author

Dr Joce Nuttall is a New Zealander and a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Monash University, Melbourne. Joce’s research interests are in teachers’ thinking and decision making, teachers’ professional learning, and early childhood curriculum and policy. Joce is the editor of Weaving Te Whāriki: Aotearoa New Zealand’s Early Childhood Curriculum Document in Theory and Practice.

Email: joce.nuttall@education.monash.edu.au