

Creating a rich curriculum through intentional teaching

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Abstract

Early childhood curricula are designed to provide young children with a range of experiences and interactions in order to grow their knowledge, skills, and dispositions for learning. New Zealand early childhood teachers typically aim to provide rich play and learning experiences which foreground children's interests, position teachers as facilitative and where extensive teacher engagement within children's play may be perceived as undesirable interference. This passive positioning of teachers in early childhood education may be detrimental to young children's learning and well-being. To address this, we propose teachers' engagement in intentional teaching as an important aspect of ensuring children experience the rich curriculum intended in *Te Whāriki* 2017.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on a presentation at the Victoria University of Wellington Institute for Early Childhood Studies 2017 Research Seminar, *Te Whāriki: New realities and possibilities*. The authors thank the teachers and stakeholders who have contributed to our combined work and understandings related to curriculum and intentional teaching in New Zealand.

Cite this article

McLaughlin, T., & Cherrington, S. (2018). Creating a rich curriculum through intentional teaching. *New Zealand Council for Educational Research: Early Childhood Folio*, 22 , 33-38.

In this article, we argue for a new era in how early childhood (EC) teachers talk about and engage in their pedagogical work with children and offer examples to promote effective practices. Nearly two decades ago, in reference to the 1996 version of *Te Whāriki*, Meade (2000) noted that the curriculum and EC discourse positioned teachers as passive in children's learning and argued that this positioning was detrimental to EC teachers' professional status in society and children's learning. Several historical, philosophical and political factors led to the passive positioning of EC teachers in New Zealand (and elsewhere), many of which are still influential today. It is our contention that this positioning has resulted in missed opportunities to optimise children's learning and well-being. We, along with others, are advocating for an increased focus on intentional teaching.

Fortunately, *Te Whāriki 2017* more explicitly invites teachers to view their role as active and embrace a thoughtful and intentional pedagogy. McLachlan (2017) noted that "In *Te Whāriki 2017* teachers are portrayed as 'intentional', which is a marked shift from the previous document and the guidance for teachers reflects this shift with advice about what intentionality looks like" (p.8). Alongside this inclusion on intentionality within the revised *Te Whāriki 2017*, a growing body of research has explored and informed our understandings of intentional teaching in the New Zealand EC context (cf. Batchelar, 2016; Cherrington, 2011, 2016; McLaughlin et al., 2016). Although the term intentional teaching (or intentional pedagogy) is now in vogue, several voices in New Zealand have long advocated for the importance of teachers' active roles in children's learning (e.g., Cullen, 1996; Hedges, 2000; Jordan, 2009; Meade, 1999, 2000). For example, Hedges (2000) argued for the active involvement of teachers in children's play, teacher-initiated as well as child-initiated learning experiences and a "pro-active role for teachers in creating challenging learning environments and providing the appropriate teaching assistance at the right time to move children forward in their learning" (p. 20).

From a project that explored New Zealand EC teachers' thinking and reflection about their teaching practice, one of us, (Cherrington, 2011, 2016), developed a model that helped explain teachers' thinking and practice (See Figure 1). As evident in the figure, when thinking about and reflecting on their pedagogical interactions, teachers explicitly focused on children and what they knew about them but rarely emphasised their decision-making and teaching strategies to support learning or identified the theories that underpinned their teaching practice. These different aspects of teachers' thinking were conceptualised using the familiar metaphor of a whāriki: the broad, strong strands representing teachers' knowledge of and thinking about children, their learning and their curriculum experiences were interwoven with narrower, weaker strands representing teachers' decision-making, pedagogical roles, and their values, beliefs, theories and educational principles. This unevenness between the broad child- and curriculum-focused strands and the narrower teacher-focused strands creates gaps in the whāriki, thus reducing its strength and, Cherrington argued "the strength of teaching and learning in EC settings" (2016, p. 11).

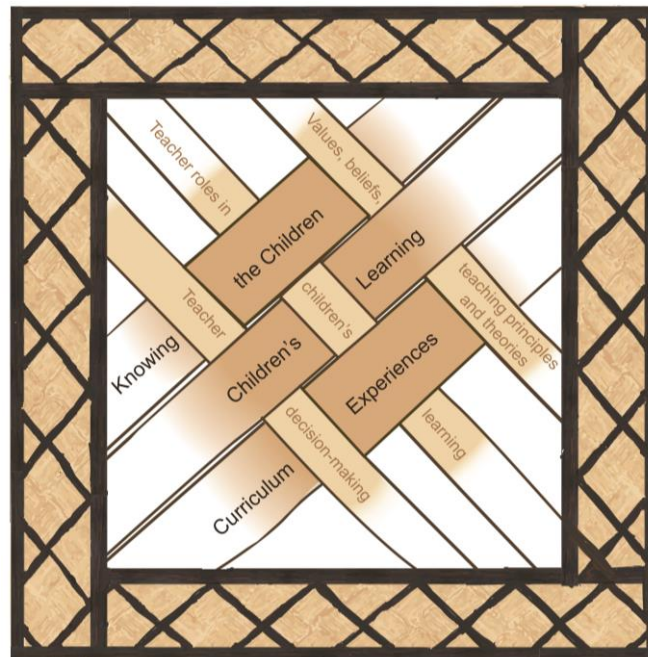


Figure 1. *Teacher thinking and reflection on practice*. Reprinted with pending permission from Early Years. An International Journal of Research and Development from Cherrington, S. (2016). Early childhood teachers' thinking and reflection: a model of current practice in New Zealand.

New Zealand EC teachers' continuing and primary engagement with a child-centred philosophy and their resulting practice is unsurprising, given the prominence of this approach within the original *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) and other influential resources such as *Kei Tua o Te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2004, 2009). In each of these documents, the predominant teaching role articulated is one of providing resources and experiences with little attention paid to interactive teaching strategies that support children's learning. Given the shift toward intentional teaching in *Te Whāriki 2017*, further attention "to teaching and to teacher thinking and metacognition in order to strengthen the whāriki woven out of the interplay between teaching and learning" (Cherrington, 2016, p. 11) is necessary. Such increased attention to intentional teaching does not, however, mean abandoning a child-centred approach where teachers know children well but rather using this knowledge in deliberate ways to inform both planned and in-the-moment decisions about teaching interactions.

International research and curricula development has also increasingly considered and grappled with notions of intentional teaching and the important role of the teacher within EC contexts. Emanating from her work with the *Effective Provision of Pre-school Education* (EPPE) study in the UK, Siraj-Blatchford (2009) stated "teaching should be considered a legitimate aspect of early childhood professional practice" (p.155). A follow-up study, *Researching effective pedagogy in the early years* (REPEY), found that effective practitioners "orchestrate pedagogy" (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, & Bell, 2002, p. 43) and that an important aspect of effective pedagogy was offering a balance

between teacher-led planned activities and child-initiated play activities in which teachers participate to extend children's learning.

Longitudinal research in the UK and US has demonstrated the importance of teacher-child interactions, both in terms of the frequency of interactions and the quality and content of interactions to support children's learning (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). New Zealand research has also shown the importance of teacher-child interactions with this indicator having stronger and more consistent associations to children's learning than any other features related to process quality (Hodgen, 2007). Notably, Wylie and Thompson (2003) identified the following, more specific practices as having the strongest and most consistent positive association with children's future competencies:

- Staff are responsive to individual children
- Children can select from a variety of activities*
- Staff guide children in centre activities
- The centre is 'print saturated'
- Staff ask open-ended questions*
- Staff join children in their play*

Those practices with an asterisk * scored poorly in a fifth or more of the ECE centres observed in the study (Wylie & Thompson, 2003), suggesting room for strengthening teacher interactive practices.

On the basis of evidence from research about the importance of teaching and the teacher, particularly with regards to the frequency and quality of teacher-child interactions, Epstein (2007) coined the phrase the "intentional teacher" and described intentional teaching for ECE. Since then, notions of intentional teaching have become increasingly evident across jurisdictions and curricular approaches. Intentional teaching is now identified in the US as a core aspect of effective practice in EC (Epstein, 2014; NAEYC, 2009) and is also highlighted in the Australian national curriculum framework, *Belonging, Being and Becoming* (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [AGDEEWR] 2009). Most recently, intentional teaching is visible in the revised *Te Whāriki 2017*. The new *Responsibilities of kaiako* section states that "Kaiako are the key resource in any ECE service. Their primary responsibility is to facilitate children's learning and development through thoughtful and **intentional pedagogy**" (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 59, bold emphasis added) and outlines 15 essential capabilities of EC professionals that contribute to intentional teaching.

Defining intentional teaching

As the terms *intentional teacher*, *intentional teaching* and *intentional pedagogy* are increasingly used in ECE, having a clear understanding of their meaning is important in order to avoid adopting new labels for old practices or using the terms to justify poor practices. With this in mind, we turn now to descriptions of intentional teaching found in the literature.

Intentional teaching is described by Epstein (2007) as “to always be thinking about what we are doing and how it will foster children’s development and produce real and lasting learning” (p.10). Intentional teaching has also been described as teachers’ planful, thoughtful, and purposeful use of knowledge, judgment, and expertise to organize learning experiences for children (Epstein, 2014; Grieshaber, 2010). The Australian EC curriculum indicates “intentional teaching involves educators being deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful in their decisions and action” (AGDEEWR, 2009, p, 15). Epstein (2007, 2014) identified the importance of teachers a) having clearly defined learning goals or objectives, b) using play, routine, or activity based learning approaches, c) having a repertoire of teaching approaches and strategies, and d) engaging in continual assessment of children’s progress in order to make ongoing pedagogical adjustments.

One of the primary purposes of Epstein’s introduction of intentional teaching was to address the debates within ECE that have presented child-initiated learning *and* learning that is adult guided in opposition (Epstein, 2014) in which the former is valued more highly than the latter. Epstein argues that effective teaching draws upon and values both child- and adult-initiated learning using a model of the *optimal learning equation*. This equation posits that some combination of:

child-guided experience + adult-guided experience = optimal learning.

In their work with teachers on supporting inclusive practice through embedded instruction and its relation to intentional teaching, Snyder and colleagues (2017) extended Epstein’s equation to include peer-mediated experiences:

child-guided experience + peer-mediated experience + adult-guided experience = optimal learning.

Snyder et al., also emphasise that each child’s optimal learning equation is different and individualised based on their strengths, interests, abilities and needs, a stance that is in line with the inclusive and child-centred nature of *Te Whāriki*. This notion of mixing, matching, and blending approaches to support learning based on context and children is also evident in the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (Victoria Department of Education and Training, 2016). This framework, developed prior to Australia’s national curriculum, refers to integrated teaching and learning approaches in which teachers weave and combine guided play and learning, adult-led learning, and child-directed play and learning approaches to promote effective learning environments for children (Kennedy & Stonehouse, 2012).

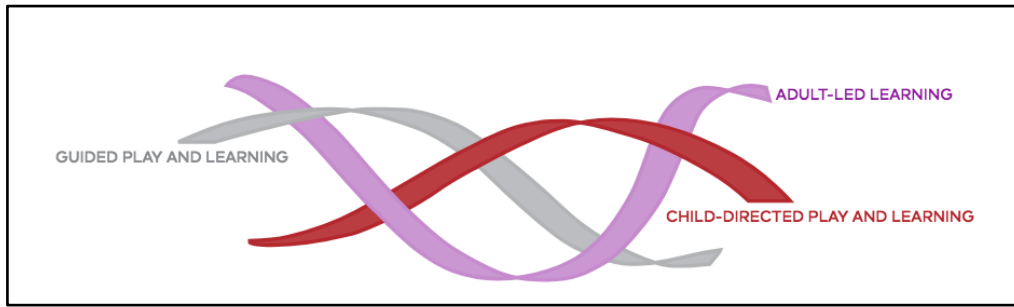


Figure 2. Integrated teaching and learning approaches from the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (Victoria Department of Education and Training, 2016, p. 15). Reprinted with permission from the State of Victoria, Department of Education and Training under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Licence (CC BY 4.0).

These models offered by Epstein (2014), Snyder et al. (2017) and the Victorian curriculum (2016) illustrate how intentional teaching involves teachers engaging in deliberate, flexible, responsive, and contextually-based decision making to interweave different approaches to support children’s learning.

Moving Forward with Te Whāriki and Intentional Teaching

In releasing the revised *Te Whāriki 2017*, the Ministry of Education has identified areas of practices to be strengthened across the sector. These include: providing a rich curriculum for every child; focusing on learning that matters within the local setting; affirming children’s identity, language and culture; engaging parents and whānau engaged in their child’s learning; and, developing personalised pathways from ECE to school and kura (Ministry of Education, 2017b). Whilst each of these aspects require teachers to be intentional in order to strengthen practice and outcomes for children, here we focus on teachers being intentional in their decision-making and use of specific teaching practices in order to provide a rich curriculum for each child.

The notion of a **rich curriculum** requires that EC services offer “rich and responsive curriculum” (Education Review Office, 2016, p. 8) experiences across the breadth of *Te Whāriki*’s strands, goals, and learning outcomes whilst also enabling children to deepen their learning in areas of interest. The Education Review Office’s recent synthesis of 17 national reports focused on aspects of the implementation of *Te Whāriki* from 2006 - 2016 (Education Review Office, 2016) identified wide variability in both the depth and breadth of curriculum that children experienced within their EC service. Whilst most services were “making some use of the prescribed framework, principles and strands”, only 10% of EC services were “fully exploring the underpinning theories and explicitly linking their curriculum to the four principles, four strands and their associated goals” (p. 8). Increased intentionality is necessary, both in terms of how EC services weave their local curriculum and in how teachers support individual children to experience a rich curriculum.

Intentional decision-making requires teachers to engage in reflection-in-action and on-action (Schön, 1983) and what Marland and Osborne (1990) described as interactive thinking in order to make decisions and guide actions. In her study, Cherrington (2011) found that teachers drew upon their knowledge of children

(including their ability to read children's cues) and their learning interests across each of these modes of reflection and thinking. However, they seldom articulated their teaching intentions or deliberately planned experiences to support children's learning and, for some, their selection and use of teaching strategies appeared intuitive rather than deliberate. Furthermore, whilst some teachers were able to clearly describe both their thinking and actions in the learning moment, others' descriptions about what was happening focused on the children's actions to the extent that teacher thinking and behaviour remained somewhat invisible. These findings suggest a more balanced focus on teaching and learning in ECE is required, and that teachers may need support to move beyond intuitive decision-making to intentional decision-making. Bringing greater awareness and intentionality to teaching will enable teachers to more easily describe and explain their thinking and decision-making to others.

To support teachers intentionality and decision-making about potential **teaching practices** to use with children, one of us, McLaughlin, initiated a research project in collaboration with colleagues and teachers to create the Teaching Practice List (McLaughlin, Aspden, & McLachlan, 2014) and the Infant-Toddler Teaching Practice List (Aspden & McLaughlin, 2017). Each list describes specific teaching practices used and valued by EC teachers following a multi-phase research process. Each list is organised around core practice areas related to *relationships, environment, social-emotional teaching, intentional teaching, and confident and competent learners* with the addition of *responsive caregiving and transitions* for the infant and toddler version. Given our focus on intentional teaching, selected sections from the intentional teaching section have been included as an Appendix to this article: *make learning visible, active teaching, and deepening children's learning*. The practices listed provide possible strategies teachers might use to support children's learning as they make intentional decisions and blend the use of learning experiences guided, led or mediated by adults, peers, and children to offer rich curriculum experiences. More information about the development of the practice lists and their intended uses can be found in the following EC Folio articles: McLaughlin, Aspden, and McLachlan, 2015 (Relationships) and McLaughlin, Aspden, and Clarke, 2017 (Social-Emotional).

Conclusion

The revised *Te Whāriki 2017* includes an explicit expectation that teachers recognise that both an intentional pedagogical approach and the currently prevalent child-centred approach are important for children's learning within a rich curriculum. The challenge with this expectation lies in supporting teachers to embed a broader construct of pedagogy into their daily practice and within their beliefs, so that they are able to make intentional decisions about when to be engaged in or guide children's play, as well as when not to be involved as children self-explore or explore with peers, in order to support learning.

Multiple strategies, at a macro-level (i.e., government, sector and organisational level), service level, and individual team and teacher level are necessary to support the adoption of an intentional pedagogical approach. As a starting point,

the construct of teaching as central to the learning process (Fleer, 2010; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009) needs to be more actively embraced. Whilst New Zealand academics have contributed to discussions about such a role for EC teachers, greater engagement by the EC community is necessary to develop this broader re-conceptualisation of the role of the teacher. Such re-conceptualisation requires access to professional learning opportunities to support teachers' engagement with underpinning conceptual ideas, including how such ideas are enacted in practice. In addition to resources such as the Teaching Practice Lists (McLaughlin et al., 2014; Aspden & McLaughlin, 2017) outlined above, the 17 national reports into multiple aspects of practice synthesised by the Education Review Office (2016) offer detailed examples of effective practices together with actions that professional leaders and management need to take to support the development of teachers' intentional pedagogy.

As notions of intentional teaching in EC are increasingly foregrounded within the sector it is our hope that teachers will blend teacher-guided, child-initiated, and peer-mediated experiences in ways that support optimal learning for each child and thus realise the promise of Te Whāriki 2017 as a rich and responsive curriculum for all children.

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Selected aspects from the *Intentional Teaching/ Whakaako Whaitake* section

Make Learning Visible/ Kia mārama kehokeho	
<p>Teachers make children’s learning visible.</p> <p>Ka whakarite ngā kaiako kia mārama kehokeho te ako a ngā tamariki.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teachers regularly revisit prior learning with children to extend current learning and thinking.
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Teachers use talk-aloud to narrate children’s learning in context or to explain their own thinking about an activity as a model for children.
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Teachers state the learning intentions of an activity and/or ask children about their learning intentions for an activity.
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Teachers display the learning purpose(s) of current activity areas.
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Teachers display photos of children engaged in previous activities with statements of learning outcomes or children’s statements of learning shown.
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Teachers ensure visual displays are updated regularly and create displays that support both children and families to see the learning that is taking place.
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Teachers transcribe children’s spoken communication to share children’s learning and thinking with others.
Active Teaching*/ Te tino whakaako	
(Actively teach* is used in other sections and includes the following teachers’ actions)	
<p>Teachers use active teaching strategies to support children’s learning.</p> <p>Ka whakamahi ngā kaiako i ngā tino rautaki hei tautoko i te ako a ngā tamariki.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teachers break down learning objectives into teachable steps that are 1-2 steps ahead of what children can currently do (ZPD).
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Teachers use their knowledge of the child to make decisions about which active teaching strategies to use to support child learning, including the following: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Teachers alter the design or demands of an activity (environment/ resource) to support a child’s success or extend learning (make easier or harder). b. Teachers use peers as models and partners to support a child’s learning. c. Teachers provide verbal guidance, as needed,

	when a child is learning from watching a peer.
	d. Teachers use a variety of show and tell strategies (e.g., model, demonstrate, use puppets) to support learning.
	e. Teachers have a range of materials, resources, and activities available and help children to access materials to support their learning.
	f. Teachers use video modelling and self-video modelling to show children examples of skills and behaviours in action and in context.
	g. Teachers use different types (verbal, visual, physical, and gestural) and intensities of prompting and cueing strategies to support a child's learning or ensure success, and fade supports over time.
	h. Teachers use positive forecasting statements and descriptive praise to support learning.
	i. Teachers encourage children's self-reflection of their own learning and give children feedback on their learning.
	j. Teachers use strategic commenting and open-ended questioning to encourage children's thinking and curiosity.
	3. Teachers consider the role of culture in learning and use teaching practices and strategies that will connect with the child's ways of knowing and being.
	4. Teachers allow sufficient time for children to respond to activities, materials, comments, questions, prompts, and/or directions, based on their knowledge of the child.
	5. Teachers recognise teachable moments and engage children using a variety of active teaching strategies to support and extend learning.
	6. Teachers use natural opportunities to introduce new language and concepts in the context of children's play to support learning.
	7. Teachers use a range of domain related terms and ideas to focus children's attention on domain concepts in ongoing play (literacy, arts, language, math, science, technology, social science, culture, and health/physical).
	8. Teachers embed learning opportunities/educational interactions (planned and spontaneous) in natural and logical activities, transitions, and routines through the day.

	9. Teachers create opportunities for children to practice and strengthen skills and abilities by designing additional activities or having them show other children or other teachers what they can do.
Deepen Children's Learning / Kia whanui to ako	
<p>Teachers use a variety of strategies to deepen children's learning.</p> <p>Ka whakamahi ngā kaiako i ngā rautaki huhua hei whakawhānui i te ako a ngā tamariki.</p>	1. Teachers support child-initiated project investigations and on-going inquiries.
	2. Teachers conduct their own research, as well as support children to research information about an interest, in order to be knowledgeable about the topic.
	3. Teachers encourage creativity and imagination in children's thinking and actions when exploring new ideas, problem-solving, playing, creating, or building. (<i>e.g., how else might we do that? what might happen if we....?</i>).
	4. Teachers focus children on the process of learning by commenting and questioning in ways that connect to children's working theories (<i>e.g., when a child gives an answer to a question, asking what made you think that or how did you figure that out?</i>)
	5. Teachers focus children on the process of learning by commenting and questioning in ways that connect to positive dispositions for learning (<i>e.g., you're really taking responsibility here, what will you do next?</i>)
	6. Teachers focus children on the process of thinking about their thinking to be strategic, effective learners (<i>e.g., help child plan, focus, and direct attention to complete a child-initiated learning task</i>).
	7. Teachers provide children with feedback and feed forward on their learning that acknowledges their efforts, success, and potential next steps.
	8. Teachers support children to consider their learning through different or multiple cultural perspectives (<i>e.g., how an important event or activity is experienced in different cultures</i>).
	9. Teachers integrate the use of technology (<i>e.g., laptops, iPads, computers, digital cameras</i>) into learning moments to strengthen, extend, or revisit children's learning (<i>e.g., see picture or watch video clip related to idea or research a topic</i>).
	10. Teachers engage in reciprocity in learning (co-construction) with children to learn together and

	develop shared knowledge through times of shared sustained thinking.
	11. Teachers acknowledge children's contribution to the teacher's own learning and the learning of others (i.e., position the child as the teacher).
	12. Teachers re-visit children's learning and accomplishments to affirm and celebrate as well as make connections to new learning formally and informally.
	13. Teachers support children to make connections between their learning and their social, cultural, and physical world.