



## **Introducing Aotearoa - New Zealand's National early childhood curriculum *Te Whaariki* as an ethics-based approach to education**

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In this paper I introduce *Te Whaariki*, Aotearoa-New Zealand's early childhood education curriculum document (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 70). I consider how *Te Whaariki* can be used by teachers as an ethical guide to accessible and inclusive curriculum and pedagogy. I describe *Te Whaariki* and its innovative and emancipatory approaches to curriculum, learning, teaching, inclusion and diversity in Aotearoa – New Zealand. A strong aspect of inclusion and diversity in *Te Whaariki* and this paper is the bi-lingual and bi-cultural journey of the curriculum's development, philosophy and content. The Principles and Strands of *Te Whaariki* reflect a commitment to equity, multiplicity, lived experience and relationships within early childhood education settings. The strongly ethics-based approach contained within *Te Whaariki* makes space for and can guide teachers, families and communities to create thinking, practices and educational environments that are transformative and inclusive of all children.

### **Introduction to *Te Whaariki***

We are in a fortunate position in Aotearoa-New Zealand to live in a small Country where pedagogical approaches, such as those contained within the New Zealand early childhood curriculum document *Te Whaariki* offer an emancipatory methodology based on ethical, critical, bicultural and situated understandings of teaching and learning (Carr, May, & Podmore, 2001; Carr, et al., 2000; Podmore, May, & with Mara, 1998; Ritchie, 2010). *Te Whaariki* provides teachers with potential lenses for learning from, listening to and developing relationships alongside *all* children, families and communities (Ministry of Education, 1996).

From 1990 – 1996 Margaret Carr and Helen May (Pakeha – White New Zealand, early childhood educationalists, researchers and academics), and Tilly and Tamati Reedy (Maori

academics and representatives of the indigenous Maori National Kohanga Reo Trust) were successful in leading a nationwide, consultative and inclusive process in developing and trialling *Te Whaariki*.

### *Te Kohanga Reo*

The National Kohanga Reo Trust is an indigenous pan-tribal organisation that supports early childhood total immersion te reo Maori/Maori language centres throughout Aotearoa-New Zealand. Maori educationalist Linda Tuhiwai Te Rina Mead explains that:

Kohanga Reo (Maori language Nests) began in 1982 as an attempt to revitalise Maori language as a community language, and became the fastest early childhood development within two years... Te Kohanga Reo marks a major shift in perceptions Maori held about development, about education and about our own cultural survival. Its beginnings brought back to the centre of Maori life the role of kaumatua or elders, the relationship between kaumatua (elders) and mokopuna (grandchildren) and the importance of Te Reo Maori (the Maori language) as one of the foundations of our different world views and value systems. Te Kohanga Reo seemed to capture the entire ground in terms of a positive framing of Maori aspirations (1997, p.79).

The first Te Kohanga Reo (TKR) centre was established at the beginning of 1982. By the end of that year there were 50, by 1984 there were 240 and four years later, in 1988, there were 520. This rapid growth shows the huge need and support that local Maori communities throughout Aotearoa-New Zealand placed on regaining control over their children's education. Tuhiwai Te Rina Mead describes the kaupapa or philosophy of TKR as "...a very simple kaupapa. This can be summarised as following (i) the revitalisation of the Maori language, (ii) the revitalisation of the whaanau (extended family network) , (iii) the revitalisation of the concept of Maori Mana Motuhake (self determination)" (1997, p. 96).

### *Partnership and collaboration*

*Te Whaariki* was Aotearoa-New Zealand's first National early childhood education curriculum document. It was written for written for English language medium and Maori language total immersion early childhood education settings. Partly or perhaps largely due

to wide consultation, successful partnerships and the meaningful inclusion of diverse cultural and interest groups throughout the curriculum's development, *Te Whaariki* was welcomed by early childhood teachers and quickly became embraced by the Aotearoa – New Zealand early childhood education sector as a whole (Te One, 2003). Over the six year trajectory of its development, and up to the release of the final document in 1996, *Te Whaariki* managed to retain and strengthen its socio-cultural, bicultural, family-community centred, critical and relational approach to early childhood theory and practice (Carr & May, 2000).

It is important to situate *Te Whaariki* within its bicultural, relational, socio-cultural and critical theoretical framework/s. Many groups and individuals representing a myriad of interests, including inclusive education for disabled children and their families, within the early childhood sector were invited to participate and contribute to the curriculum's development and contents. This process included a draft of the document being released to all early childhood education services in 1993 and trialled for three years before the final document was written and released in 1996 (Ministry of Education, 1993). The partnership between the Tangata Whenua (indigenous people of the land) and Tau Iwi (new peoples to Aotearoa-New Zealand) in the process of developing *Te Whaariki* meant that the contents, structure and philosophical, cultural underpinnings of the document are infused with Maori understandings of and aspirations for teaching and learning (Reedy, 2003). Indigenous Maori early childhood educationalist Bronwyn Thurlow explains that the "Maori conceptual base (of *Te Whaariki*) has been gifted by *Te Kohanga Reo* (Maori medium early childhood learning centres) as evidence of good faith and progress towards inclusivity..." in early childhood education (in Gunn, et al., 2004, p. 300). Arapera Tangaere Royal (2000, p. 29) from the National Kohanga Reo Trust describes *Te Whaariki* as:

...a taonga (treasure) gifted to us from our tupuna (ancestors). It encapsulates the Māori world and is based on Māori traditions and values (tikanga Māori), which is our body of

knowledge, Māori pedagogy (ahuatanga Māori) through the transmission of the Māori language.

Of course Maori understandings, aspirations and commitments and the interests of other marginalised groups in society are not always recognised or fully enacted within English language-medium early childhood education settings in Aotearoa – New Zealand (Ritchie, 2003). Like all curriculum documents and approaches to pedagogy, *Te Whaariki* is open to multiple interpretations and is, as such, a site of where knowledge, values and pedagogy are contested and, when this is recognised, can be negotiated. Interpretations and professional practice are influenced by the social-cultural-political positioning of those responsible for enacting the curriculum. Dominant and resistant discourses also circulate around competing images of children, explanations of and responses to ‘diversity’ (Ballard, Purdue, & MacArthur, 2003; Macartney, 2008). However, New Zealand Government legislation, policy and curriculum documents include an expectation that education and social services will recognise, embrace and respect diversity based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability and socio-economic status (Ministry of Education, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2007; Ministry of Health, 2001; New Zealand Education Act, 1989; New Zealand Human Rights Act, 1993). There is a particular and additional emphasis in official discourse in New Zealand on respecting the dual cultural heritage of the partners to the Treaty of Waitangi which was signed by representatives of the British Crown and the Maori tribes of Aotearoa-New Zealand in 1840 (Ministry of Education, 1996, 1998; Ritchie, 2010).

#### *The bi-lingual and bi-cultural structure of Te Whaariki*

The document’s bi-lingual content and format reflect a reciprocal power sharing relationship between the Tangata Whenua (indigenous people of the land), and the Manuhiri (visitors), Tau-lwi (new peoples) and Pakeha (New Zealanders of European descent) of Aotearoa - New Zealand (Carr & May, 1994; May, 2001; Reedy, 2003; Ritchie, 2003; Te One, 2003). *Te Whaariki* includes a separate indigenous curriculum text based on Maori language, knowledge and world views. Nga Kohanga Reo (translated into English as

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'Maori language nests') and other total immersion Maori language early childhood centres base their curriculum and pedagogy on the Maori language text contained within *Te Whaariki*.

The 'Principles' and 'Strands' of *Te Whaariki* contain the ethical underpinnings and key concepts and approaches to teaching and learning in the curriculum. These are articulated in both te reo Maori and English in the document. The English and Maori language sections and concepts are not direct translations of each other because they are based on different cultural worldviews, aspirations and social positionings. The intention of using Maori terms alongside English in the 'English language' sections of the curriculum was to encourage key Maori concepts and worldviews to influence an inclusive pedagogy and empowerment through learning in regular education settings (Ritchie, 2003).

#### *A weaving metaphor for pedagogy*



*Te Whaariki* uses a weaving metaphor for pedagogy in its title, structure and contents. "*Te Whaariki*" translated from te reo Maori into English refers to "the woven mat". The weaving metaphor, and the document's bicultural emphasis were part of the writers' efforts "to set up a curriculum that was not dominated by one worldview of the child and childhood" (Carr & May, 2000, p. 61). The weaving metaphor is used to encourage teachers and other adults to approach the curriculum as a whaariki or mat *inter-woven* by members of each learning community within the threads of their curriculum and their specific philosophical, historical, cultural and relational contexts (Carr & May, 2000).



The weaving metaphor highlights and emphasises diversity, teacher and child agency, multiplicity and the importance of family and community contexts in early childhood education (Carr & May, 2000; Ministry of Education, 1996). Pedagogical practices such as assessment, planning and reflection on practice involve communities, families, teachers, parents and children weaving diverse curriculum strands. These strands include the philosophical underpinnings within particular early childhood education services, the lived context, recognition of Maori language and culture, and valuing the aspirations, cultures, interests and talents of all children, families, teachers and wider communities (Carr, et al., 2000; Ministry of Education, 1996).



Each early childhood setting is expected to weave their curriculum through co-constructing a pattern of learning and relationships that is inclusive, responsive to and empowering for children – mokopuna, teachers, families, whanau – hapu (sub-tribe/s) – iwi (tribe/s) and wider communities (Carr & May, 1994; Ministry of Education, 1996). This

‘situated’ approach to pedagogy involves recognising and negotiating culturally based values and beliefs as central to growing an early childhood setting as an inclusive community of learners in Aotearoa-New Zealand (Carr & May, 1994; Carr, et al., 2000; Ministry of Education, 1996; Reedy, 2003; Ritchie, 2003).

The bicultural and bilingual framework of *Te Whaariki*, and its view of pedagogy as a process of actively weaving diverse strands, provides two powerful metaphors for inclusive approaches to pedagogy for every child and family. In early childhood education in Aotearoa, central Maori cultural concepts and practices such as ‘ako’ (teaching/learning), manaakitanga (hospitality towards, caring for and obligation to others), tuakana/teina (sisterly and brotherly support and mentoring), and whanaungatanga (kinship ties and family relationships) are encouraged (Ministry of Education, 1996). Each of the above concepts resonates with Western based ecological, socio-cultural and critical theories about education and society. Both socio-cultural and Maori pedagogical approaches emphasise learning and teaching as distributed and embedded in relational, historically and culturally situated family and community contexts. Concepts and practices such as manaakitanga, tuakana/teina and whanaungatanga also resonate with an ethic of care, hospitality, reciprocity and mutual obligation (Dalhberg & Moss, 2005).

### **The Contents of Te Whaariki**

*Te Whaariki* was written with the explicit intention of disrupting a universal, static, Western and singular image of ‘the child’ and ‘child development’ (Carr, Hatherly, Lee, & Ramsay, 2003; Carr & May, 2000; Fler, 2003; Reedy, 2003). Rather than using a prescriptive framework for pedagogy, *Te Whaariki* is based on a set of guiding principles, strands, goals and learning outcomes.

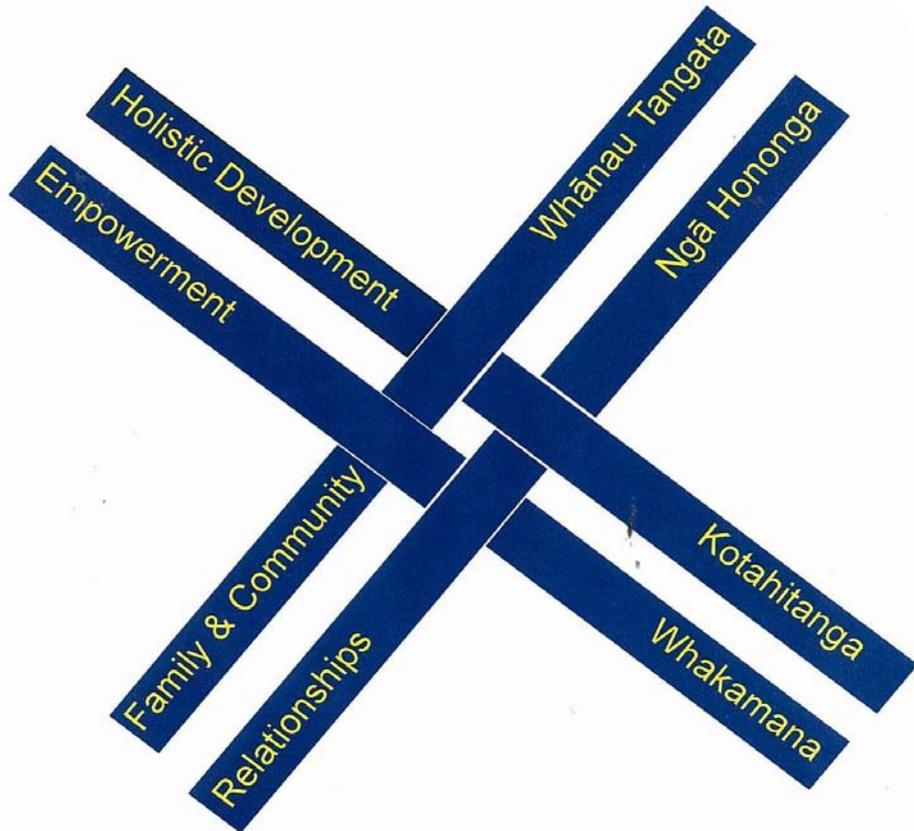
Teachers are required by the curriculum to interpret and negotiate how the principles, strands, goals and learning outcomes relate to their specific centre community. ‘Curriculum’ is defined broadly in the document as “the sum total of the experiences,

activities, and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster children’s learning and development” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 10). Although the non-prescriptive nature of the curriculum can be viewed as supportive of responsiveness to diversity, there have been criticisms of the challenges this poses for teachers and teacher educators who are required to understand the socio-cultural, bicultural, critical and ecological underpinnings of the curriculum in order to fully realise its potential for inclusive education (Cullen, 2003; Flear, 2003; Meade, 2002; Ritchie, 2003).

### *Te Whaariki Principles – Ngaa Kaupapa Whakahaere*

The Principles and Strands of *Te Whaariki* lay out the ethical obligations of New Zealand early childhood educators and settings towards young children (0-6yrs) and their whaanau-families (Macartney, 2011). The entire curriculum is underpinned by four key ‘principles’ which require teachers to: recognize and foster the *empowerment* of young children as they learn and grow; practice in ways that reflect a *holistic* understanding of children and their learning; acknowledge the integral place of the wider world, *community and family* in children’s learning and participation; and view learning as an intersubjective process where children: “... learn through *responsive and reciprocal relationships* with people, places and things” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 14).

The Principles and Strands provide a foundation for dialogue and negotiation about children’s (and adults’) rights, and teachers’ responsibilities and obligations in early childhood education settings in Aotearoa-New Zealand. The Principles are introduced on the following page.



The Principles are ethical statements that focus on what should inform teachers' thinking, practices, relationships and environments within early education settings (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 14). The principles are:

**Empowerment – Whakamana (Care & Respect)** - The early childhood curriculum empowers the child to learn and grow.

**Holistic Development – Kotahitanga (Unity)** - The early childhood curriculum reflects the holistic way children learn and grow.

**Family and Community – Whānau Tangata (extended family networks, sub-tribe and tribe)** - The wider world of family and community is an integral part of the early childhood curriculum.

**Relationships – Ngā Hononga** - Children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things.

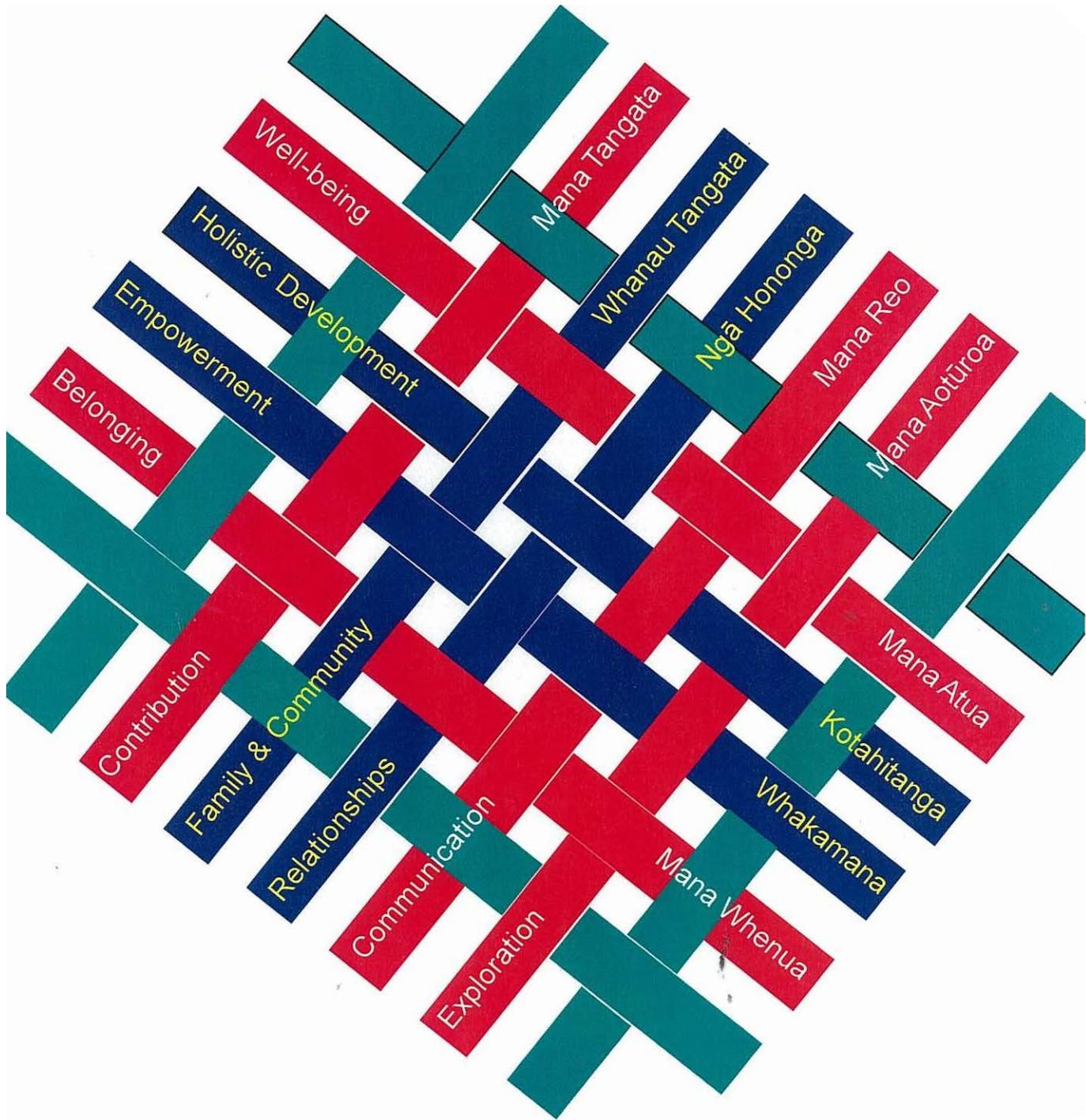
### *Te Whaariki Strands – Ngaa muka*

The curriculum 'strands' and 'goals' of *Te Whaariki* are drawn from the guiding Principles of empowerment, holism, family and community involvement, and relationships. The strands further emphasise learning and education as situated, ethical and relational. Their focus is on children and families – whaanau having experiences that are characterised by *belonging, well-being, engagement, exploration, communication, self expression, contribution* and *responsibility* to and for each other. They focus on children experiencing a sense of belonging and well-being; as being engaged in active exploration; as possessing and developing diverse ways to communicate and express themselves; and as having their contributions valued and developing a sense of responsibility towards others.

The Strands are:

<b>Curriculum Strands – Ngaa Muka</b>	
<b>Belonging - Mana Whenua</b>	Children and their families feel a sense of belonging
<b>Well-being – Mana Atua</b>	The health and well-being of the child are protected and nurtured
<b>Exploration – Mana Aotuuoroa</b>	The child learns through active exploration of the environment
<b>Communication – Mana Reo</b>	The language and symbols of their own and other cultures are promoted and protected
<b>Contribution – Mana Tangata</b>	Opportunities for learning are equitable, and each child's contribution is valued

Inter- Weaving the Principles and Strands of *Te Whaariki*



(Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 19)

### **Whakamana – Empowerment & Mana Whenua – Belonging: An example**

Inclusive curriculum can be developed through teachers, family, whānua and communities inter-weaving and exploring the connections and tensions between the Principles, Strands and lived experiences and relationships within early childhood education contexts. Each strand is linked to a small number of goals and each goal is linked to a series of associated learning outcomes. Rather than being tightly worded and easily 'measured', the learning outcomes have a dispositional focus that describes learning as a combination of "knowledge, skills and attitudes" (Carr, 2001; Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 44). For each goal and set of learning outcomes there are questions for critical adult reflection and dialogue. The curriculum also contains examples of practices, and experiences that could help to meet the learning outcomes for infants, toddlers, and young children, and outlines adult obligations and responsibilities in these regards. To demonstrate this inter-weaving process I have chosen the Principle of Whakamana - Empowerment and the strand of Mana Whenua – Belonging as an example.

The Principle of Whakamana-Empowerment is based on the (ethical) expectation that the early childhood curriculum will *empower* all children (and their families) to learn and grow. In relation to 'Belonging' and 'Mana Whenua' *Te Whaariki* suggests that "children and their families (must) feel a sense of belonging" within their early childhood education environment (p.15). According to the related *Te Whaariki* goals, this sense of Belonging - Mana Whenua involves teachers supporting a curriculum where "Connecting links with family and the wider world are affirmed and extended;" "They (families, whānau and children) know they have a place" and where "They feel comfortable with the routines, customs, and regular events" within the setting p.54).

### *Space for multiple interpretations*

How the Principle/s of Empowerment - Kotahitanga, and Strand/s of Belonging – Mana Whenua and its associated goals are interpreted and what they look like in practice will vary for different children, families, whaanau, teachers and early childhood education settings. For example, for Maori children and whaanau, Mana Whenua - Belonging is closely related to place, time, and whakapapa – genealogy (Pere, 1997). To be secure in their sense of belonging, Maori children need to learn about where they are from in terms of their tribal rohe (land/s, water ways, mountain/s) and affiliations, significant places and events within their tribe – iwi and ways of connecting with their whaanau (extended family), hapu (sub-tribe/s) and iwi (tribes/s). Knowing these things acknowledges for each Maori child and whaanau their status and Turangawaewae – ‘place to stand’. Understanding and being connected to their tribal knowledge empowers Maori children and whaanau to feel secure in the sense that they know they have a place, can be proud of their heritage and experience belonging within their early childhood education setting.

An important *bi-cultural* implication of Mana Whenua - Belonging for non-Maori children families, settings and for teachers is to learn about, respect and uphold the Mana Whenua of the land and the indigenous people from and within the tribal area in which the education setting is physically located. In this regard, a stated learning outcome of *Te Whaariki* is for children to develop “knowledge about the features of the area of physical and/or spiritual significance to the local community, such as the local river or mountain” (p.56). A related goal that can be inter-woven from the Mana Reo - Communication Strand is that “children experience an environment where they experience the stories and symbols of their own and other cultures” (p. 78).

Through negotiating and weaving together the Principles, Strands, Goals and Learning Outcomes of *Te Whaariki*, early childhood centres can create and grow inclusive environments with diverse children and families based on reciprocal, respectful and responsive relationships. The curriculum states that: “The programme of each centre will

incorporate strategies to fully include children with special needs (sic)” and specifically stipulates that the “care and education (of disabled learners) will be encompassed within the principles, strands and goals set out for all children in early childhood settings” (p.11). Therefore, the concepts of ‘empowerment’ and ‘belonging’ are as equally relevant to disabled children and their families as they are to others. This suggests that *all* children have, and should be given, the right to fully participate and belong within an early childhood education setting and that they be empowered “to learn with and alongside others” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 70).

#### *Te Whaariki: Assessment and documentation*

The development and growth of *Te Whaariki* has stimulated a relational, narrative, experience and context focussed turn in approaches to assessment and pedagogy in early childhood education in Aotearoa-New Zealand (Carr, 2001). An orientation and practice of ‘attentive listening’ as a process for teaching, learning and transformation is reflected in New Zealand’s *Te Whaariki* based, ‘learning and teaching story’ approaches to assessment, documentation and critical reflection (Carr, 1998, 2001; Carr, et al., 2003; Carr, et al., 2000; Greerton Early Childhood Centre, 2010; Ministry of Education, 2005; Te One, et al., 2010).

Since 1996, much work and qualitative research has been undertaken in Aotearoa – New Zealand to explore and attempt to realize the implications of a *Te Whaariki* based framework for assessing and planning for children’s learning, and teacher reflection on practice (Carr, 1998, 2001; Carr, et al., 2003; Carr, et al., 2000; Greerton Early Childhood Centre, 2010; Macartney, in press; Ministry of Education, 2005; Podmore, et al., 1998; Ritchie, 2003; Te One, et al., 2010). An implication of this relational and narrative turn for assessing children’s learning has been a focus among teachers, families-whaanau and children on telling, documenting, discussing and interpreting stories of learning ‘in action’, within the relational context/s in which learning and teaching are happening (Carr, 1998,

2001; Moore, Molloy, Morton, & Davis, 2008). These discussions form the basis of curriculum planning and implementation.

### *Barriers to disabled children and their families' inclusion*

*Te Whaariki* contains statements that strongly support 'inclusion' and communicate the expectation and requirement that teachers will value and be responsive to diverse groups of learners, their families and wider communities. As such, *Te Whaariki* can be approached as an ethical framework that communicates an emancipatory vision for diversity and social justice as central to New Zealand early childhood education environments, pedagogy and society. However, the wide acceptance of deficit assumptions about disability that circulate in education and society makes it particularly problematic that the *Te Whaariki* curriculum document doesn't explicitly address the role that education plays in reproducing social inequalities and exclusion regarding disability (Macartney, 2011). Other researchers have made similar criticisms from the standpoint of lesbian and gay families (Lee & Duncan, 2008). *Te Whaariki* is silent about disabled adults and children, and non-heterosexual families as marginalized groups within education and society. Within *Te Whaariki* disabled children are mostly subsumed within the groups, "students", "children", "infants", "toddlers" and "young children". This may have been intended as a way of not separating disabled children and their rights to access the curriculum from the rights of non-disabled children. Where they are identified in the document, disabled children are referred to as "children who have special needs" (p.11). An effect of not critically addressing the commonplace exclusion and marginalization of disabled children and adults in education and society, is to not identify and highlight their inclusion as an important issue for teachers to consider and address in their relationships and work (Macartney, 2011; Millar & Morton, 2007). The absence of an explicit recognition of the teacher's role to identify and remove barriers to disabled students' learning, infers that a critical consideration of disabled children's participation is not necessary, relevant or important. It is likely that many teachers, without being given information and direction about deficit discourses and the exclusion of disabled children,

will default to thinking and practices that maintain exclusion even when they have a guiding curriculum document that can and does support inclusive pedagogies (Macartney, 2009b, 2011; Moore, et al., 2008; Purdue, 2004; Slee, 2003).

## **Conclusion**

Aotearoa-New Zealand's early childhood education curriculum document challenges and disrupts narrow, colonial, Western perceptions of education, 'reality', and 'diversity' as involving negative deviations from the norm. Instead *Te Whaariki* has attempted, with some success, to lay out a pedagogical framework through which diversity is recognised, welcomed and valued as integral to learning and teaching environment and outcomes and to wider social transformation. Perhaps there are lessons to be learned and insights to be gained for teachers from other geographical and cultural contexts through a consideration of *Te Whaariki*. In this paper I have suggested that these lessons and insights may coalesce around the inclusive possibilities of an understanding and approach to teaching and learning as ethical, relational, transformative and nested within particular social, cultural and political contexts (Macartney, 2009a).

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