Te Whāriki: Rhetoric and Reality

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Te Whāriki

Principles

1. Empowerment
2. Holistic Development
3. Family and Community
4. Relationships

Strands

1. Well-being
2. Belonging
3. Contribution
4. Communication
5. Exploration
Praise for Te Whāriki

• “Engaging with Te Whāriki allows teachers to have their own learning journey just as children have theirs. It is for this reason that so many early childhood professionals feel privileged to have such a sound document to work with” (Tyler, 2002, p. 3).

• “Te Whāriki has had an enormous impact on curriculum development in many countries” ... “Te Whāriki has gained international prominence as an early childhood curriculum of great substance and importance” (Fleer 2003, pp. 243-244).
Praise for Te Whāriki contd.

- “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” (Trevor Mallard, Minister of Education, press release, 17 January 2005, cited in Nuttall, 2005, p. 23).

- “[Te Whāriki] that’s basically our bible. We always look to Te Whāriki to make sure we have done it correctly.” “Te Whāriki – gives the defining word on that issue, because it is all in there.” “The value [of Te Whāriki] is enormous ... It’s priceless I think.” (Quotes from teachers interviewed in Alvestad and Duncan, 2006, pp. 36-37).
Te Whāriki - Research Evidence?

- “for children to grow up as competent and confident communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging, and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9).

- Worthy aspirations but little evidence to suggest Te Whāriki is helping to achieve these ideals.

- Nuttall (2005) concluded that “there is almost no empirical evidence examining whether Te Whāriki is actually making a difference to children’s learning and development relative to other models [of curriculum] Without this process of evaluation, the effectiveness of Te Whāriki remains open to doubt” (p. 20).
Support for *Te Whāriki* from the ECE Taskforce (2011).

- “*Te Whāriki* is considered a model of best practice, nationally and internationally but could benefit from a comprehensive review of its implementation” (p. 106).
- “*Te Whāriki* is based on the principles of empowerment, holistic development, family and community relationships. It is not prescriptive, and does not tell teachers ‘what to teach’; rather it focuses on supporting learning dispositions and broad competencies that can be readily transferred to new situations (such as entry to school)” (p.107).
“Research shows that curricula that address motivational aspects of learning, focused on learning dispositions rather than static skills or competencies, are associated with better performance in later schooling than those that are overtly ‘academically’ oriented [Mitchell, Wylie, & Carr, 2008] or standards-based [OECD, 2006]” (p. 107).

“It’s general approach to learning, and the principles, goals and strands it contains, align well with recent research and evidence [OECD, 2006] ... We therefore do not believe that the content of Te Whāriki requires review” (p. 110).
Is the ECE Taskforce fair in its use of research to support Te Whāriki? - A closer look at the two main research reviews cited

- Mitchell et al. (2008) Literature Review
  - includes various US studies – where programmes are more structured and academically oriented than Te Whāriki (e.g., High/Scope Perry). These studies indicate that quality ECE can have benefits, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Inappropriate to use these studies to support Te Whāriki.

- Competent Children NZ Studies (Wylie & colleagues). Cannot be used to support Te Whāriki because it was yet to be implemented when sample children were in ECE.
  - methodological problems (e.g., lack of comparison group of children with no ECE) See Farquhar & Croad, 2005; Nash, 2001.
Concludes “Most of the research to date on outcomes for children has focused on cognitive and social-emotional aspects” ... “There is little yet specifically on the learning dispositions and key competencies identified as important for learning in the 21st century, and included in Te Whāriki” (p. 91).
The other study cited by the ECE taskforce to support *Te Whāriki* - OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II*

- Describes two broad approaches to curriculum
  1. “a ‘readiness for school’ approach, focusing on cognitive development in the early years and the acquisition of a range of knowledge, skills and dispositions that children develop as a result of classroom experiences” (p. 57).
  
    OECD report expresses some concern about overly structured programmes.

  2. “a social pedagogy tradition ... seen as broad preparation for life and the foundation stage for lifelong learning” (p. 57).

“Recent research from the United Kingdom and the United States supports a structured approach to curriculum and learning in pre-school. ... Similarly the recent EPPE study (UK) and the Preparing for School Study in Australia also find that effective pedagogy includes interaction traditionally associated with the term ‘teaching’, the provision of instructive learning environments and ‘sustained shared thinking’ to extend children’s learning. A Dutch meta-analysis of different programming types also concludes that the most enduring cognitive results are achieved when both cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes are pursued simultaneously through structured programming” (p.63).

These findings do not fit with the Taskforce’s interpretation of the OECD report.

“Movement in the United States towards learning standards in pre-literacy and numeracy is defended on several grounds. Firstly – a point sometimes overlooked by critics of early literacy and numeracy – children are genuinely interested from an early age in reading and writing” (p. 136).

“..a genuine democratic concern that all young children should have a fair start in life, be supported in their early development and enter school “ready to learn” Particularly important in diverse societies, “an issue of equal educational opportunity for children from low-income and immigrant backgrounds” ( pp. 136-137).

- Comments about ensuring educational opportunities for children from diverse backgrounds is very pertinent in NZ, given the rising economic inequalities and the wide range of educational achievement (e.g. PIRLS, 2006, study of reading levels.)

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- In summary, it is inappropriate for the ECE Taskforce to use the two cited reviews of research (Mitchell et al. 2008 & OECD, 2006) to suggest that the content of Te Whāriki does not require review.
Ministry of Education Funded Research

- Centres of Innovation (COI) – 40+ projects (≈$5 m.)
- Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) 18 ECE Projects (≈$3 m.)

What can this research tell us about the effectiveness of *Te Whāriki*?

- Very Little

The projects provide descriptions of teaching practices in particular centres but do not provide evidence that the practices impact on children’s learning. (See Meade, 2010; Nuttall, 2010.)
Te Whāriki and Subject Knowledge

- Little guidance in relation to subject content areas (e.g., music, art, maths, science, literacy)
- Smith (2003) argues for the benefits of a process oriented, rather than content oriented, approach:
- “Te Whāriki, in contrast to overseas early childhood curricula (such as the UK curriculum) is oriented towards setting up attitudinal and dispositional thinking. Instead of being preoccupied with specific skills, which children do or do not have when they get to school, the concern is for developing an overall enthusiasm for learning. Te Whāriki encourages children’s autonomy, communication, exploration, commitment and aspirations. Children and their learning, rather than subject areas, are the starting points of educational thinking” (Smith, 2003, p.5).
No evidence, however, that *Te Whāriki* is more effective in encouraging “an overall enthusiasm for learning” in comparison to more subject oriented approaches.

Indeed, lack of subject knowledge in *Te Whāriki* may limit children’s learning.

Enthusiasm for learning – Learning about what?

Subject knowledge makes learning meaningful (See Hedges and Cullen, 2005).
Te Whāriki and Subject Knowledge contd.

- Teacher Education Programmes need to ensure that ECE teachers have subject content and pedagogical knowledge. Particularly important with a holistic curriculum like *Te Whāriki*. Teachers need to promote learning while interacting with children and responding to their interests. This requires knowledgeable teachers.

- No guidelines on how much subject content and pedagogical knowledge should be included in ECE teacher education programmes. Varies greatly (see Kane, 2005). Possible for programmes to include very little on how to enhance children’s learning in key areas.
Fears in NZ about “push-down” curriculum.

• While we need to be cautious about too great a focus on academic goals, Bennett (2005) warns against “excessive suspicion of ‘schoolificiation’ and reluctance to orient children towards learning goals valued by parents, schools and society”

• Partnerships? - Parents, schools and society value literacy but this may receive little attention in some ECE programmes.

• Teachers need to be knowledgeable about how to incorporate literacy learning within play and everyday experiences.
Te Whāriki and Subject Knowledge contd.

- *Te Whāriki* includes numerous learning outcomes related to curriculum subject content such as maths, science, music, and art but there is no requirement to cover these. The structure of *Te Whāriki* means they could be easily overlooked.
- For example, learning outcomes for music occur for a variety of strands and goals. This could be said to reflect the integrated nature of children’s learning.
- But learning outcomes are “indicative, rather than definitive”.

Possible for ECE centre to believe it is covering all the Strands of *Te Whāriki* but be omitting key learning areas.
Programme Planning Using *Te Whāriki*

- Guidelines on programme planning in *Te Whāriki* are very general and suggest each centre should plan in its own way:

  “There are many ways in which each early childhood service can weave the particular pattern that makes its programme different and distinctive. Early childhood services should, therefore, develop their own distinctive pattern for planning, assessment, and evaluation” (Ministry of Education 1996, 28). Centres are advised to “offer sufficient learning experiences for the children to ensure that the goals are realised”.

Te Whāriki and Assessment

- Just as there is no requirement to cover particular learning outcomes when planning, so there is no requirement to assess particular learning outcomes.
- While there is little guidance on what to assess, the Ministry of Education has directed large amounts of funding at telling teachers how to assess.
- Learning Stories (Carr, 1998, 2001). Designed to align with Te Whāriki. Emphasis on processes of learning rather than knowledge and skills outcomes
- An innovative, but unproven approach
Te Whāriki and Assessment contd.

- Dominance of Learning Stories.
- Mitchell (2008) found that 94% of centres were using Learning Stories, often as the only form of assessment.
- Learning Stories can provide descriptions of particular experiences but are not an effective way of assessing and enhancing children’s learning.
Problems with Learning Stories include:

- lack of evidence on validity or credibility.
- problems with defining and measuring learning dispositions over the age range of 0-5 years.
- confusion about where, when, and how often to record Learning Stories.
- situational specificity of Learning Stories limits their value for planning future experiences.
- lack of value for showing changes in children’s learning over time.

See Blaiklock (2008, 2010).
Te Whāriki

• Much to admire in the sentiments and aspirations of *Te Whāriki*. It is to be hoped that these have helped teachers to develop responsive relationships and provide quality experiences.

• Equally possible that *Te Whāriki* has been ineffective.

• Indeed, it could be argued that *Te Whāriki* has resulted in a decline in the quality of ECE. The research evidence is insufficient to support or challenge the effectiveness of *Te Whāriki*. 
Te Whāriki

While the research evidence is lacking, there are concerns about the structure and content of *Te Whāriki*.

Lack of attention to subject content, together with varying amounts of subject content and pedagogy in ECE teacher education programmes, may result in neglect of key learning areas in ECE centres.

The assessment technique designed for *Te Whāriki*, Learning Stories, is an unproven approach to documenting and enhancing learning.

When a vague and amorphous approach to curriculum is coupled with a vague and amorphous approach to assessment, there is potential for real problems.
A Perfect Storm

Factors that may, or may not, contribute to low quality Early Childhood Education in NZ:

- A curriculum with high ideals but little guidance.
- Near exclusive use of Learning Stories, an unproven approach, for assessment.
- Rapid growth in numbers of centres and teacher education providers.
- Large role of private industry providers – profit motive.
- Variable teacher education.
- Self-congratulatory beliefs that NZ “leads the world” in ECE.
- Lack of research evidence to support current approaches.
Need to remain open to learning from international research and curriculum innovations in ECE

Examples of ECE curriculum with more comprehensive guidelines.

- California Preschool Learning Foundations and Curriculum Framework. (see [www.cde.ca.gov](http://www.cde.ca.gov))
- Detailed information on age-related patterns of learning and development in key areas along with strategies for teachers on how to facilitate learning and development. Aligns with assessment of key areas.
Another example of a more comprehensive ECE curriculum: Early Years Foundation Stage – UK

- Currently being reviewed.

- Latest proposals are for

- Three Prime Areas of Learning and Development
  - Personal, Social and Emotional Development
  - Physical Development
  - Communication and Language

- Four Specific Areas of Learning and Development
  - Literacy
  - Mathematics
  - Understanding the World
  - Expressive Arts and Design
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“for children to grow up as competent and confident communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging, and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9).

Achieving such aspirations requires NZ to be more open to learning from international research and experience in ECE. A greater focus on children’s learning in key areas does not mean that there is any less focus on the importance of relationships and well-being of the child and whanau. Rather, it can add to this.
References


