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CHAPTER 1

Te Whāriki, 2017: A refreshed rallying point for the early childhood sector in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Introduction

Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996) has been "refreshed". Since it burst onto the scene in 1996, locally and globally, its conceptual, non-prescriptive framework has become a rallying point for Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood sector and one which set it apart from other curricular developments of the time (Nuttall, 2013; May & Carr, 2016). Most significantly, the concept of a whāriki, a woven mat, where theory, culture, and practice were interwoven, was located in te ao Māori—the Māori world. The ideological, educational and cultural agendas of that time led to the emergence of an idea that was, prior to the late 1980s, almost anathema to early childhood education: national curriculum guidelines. In a ground-breaking, innovative process, the curriculum guidelines were founded on an Indigenous conceptual framework, which incorporated Māori and Western principles of learning and teaching alongside views of children as rights holders—citizens in a democratic society reflecting very "Kiwi" values about childhood in a country with a great backyard.[1] This chapter describes the background context to the refresh, and considers some of the local and global influences on children, childhoods, and curriculum on the revision, including an account of the rationale and process for the update.

1 For an historical account of the original version of *Te Whāriki*, see the previous editions of this book (Nuttall, 2003; 2013) notably Chapters 1 and 2. See also May & Carr (2016), pp. 316–326.

The rationale for refreshing the 1996 edition of *Te Whāriki*

A range of factors contributed to the rationale for updating, reviewing, and refreshing the 1996 edition of *Te Whāriki*. Since the 1990s, significantly more—and younger—children have been enrolled in and attending early learning services (Ministry of Education, 2017b). Long-term plans to ensure educational success for Māori as Māori became part of the policy landscape (Ministry of Education, 2013; Education Council, n.d.) and revisions of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) included explicit links to *Te Marautanga o Aotearoa* (Ministry of Education, 2008) and Te Aho Mātua[2]—the curriculum frameworks for Māori immersion and Kura Kaupapa Māori. International and national reviews highlighted concerns about the current system's response to equity in relation to the long tail of underachievement (Action for Children and Youth Aotearoa, 2015; Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2018; Office of the Children's Commissioner & Oranga Tamariki, 2019; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016). Also, since the 2000s the demographic profile (in Auckland especially) had diversified, presenting its own set of challenges, with over 120 different languages now recorded as spoken in Aotearoa New Zealand. Furthermore, by 2017 the digital age had well and truly arrived for children and adults. Learning Stories (Carr, 2001) are now accessible online and many early years services use Facebook as a way to communicate with whānau. A rumbling backdrop to these issues was global consciousness about the impact of climate change and the importance of sustainable futures. The issues were summarised by the Ministry of Education and CORE Education (2017) for the sector as:

- higher participation in ECE
- younger children in ECE for longer
- Māori medium pathways
- ethnic and cultural diversity
- digital tools—children and adults
- global consciousness and environmental sustainability
- changes in theory and practice
- a systems challenge for equity and excellence.

Lists, however, are deceptively simple and, on closer inspection, each bullet point represents a contested space between aspiration, policy, and practice. In the next sections, we discuss the backdrop to the refresh, and the emerging global and local critique of the 2017 version of *Te Whāriki*.

2 See https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/91416/105966/79522/te-aho-matua

Backdrop to the refresh: Wicked problems facing children

Since the 1984 Labour Government adopted neoliberal economic policies in an attempt to reignite a stagnant economy and confront growing inequality, a discourse of vulnerability has emerged in social and educational policy in Aotearoa New Zealand about child wellbeing (Kelsey, 1997; Boston & Holland, 1987). An almost uncritical belief in the ability of the market to redress growing disparity led to a restructure of the public sector, including education administration and provision (Boston & Chapple, 2014; Rashbrooke, 2013). The public sector was decimated, unemployment increased, and whole communities were impacted negatively (Rashbrooke, 2013).

The effects of these policies were dramatic, polarising, and long-lasting, especially for children (see Boston & Chapple, 2014; Nairn, Higgins, & Sligo, 2012). Aotearoa New Zealand's ratings for overall child wellbeing and educational achievement have been slipping on the world stage (see Chzhen, Gromada, Gwyther, Cuesta, & Bruckauf, 2018). High rates of child abuse, a housing crisis, poverty, and concerns about inequality—so-called "wicked problems" (Cribb, Lane, Penny, van Delden & Irwin, 2011)—underpin an unprecedented interest in the critical importance of the early years of a child's life (Grimmond, 2011; Morton et al, 2015; Poulton, 2012). Māori children, Pacific children, refugee children, and children with disabilities are more likely to experience hardship than their Pākehā peers (Action for Children and Youth Aotearoa, 2015; Duncanson et al. 2017; Morton et al., 2017).

The relatively low participation rate in ECE for these target groups has been well documented (see, for example, Action for Children and Youth Aotearoa, 2015; Mitchell, 2017; Morton et al., 2017; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016). Based on research that demonstrates participation in early education of good quality can result in positive social and educational outcomes, the National-led coalition Government from 2009 to 2018 proposed a targeted funding system for early childhood services as a solution (see Mitchell, Meagher-Lundberg, Arndt, & Kara, 2016). But in a "robbing Peter to pay Paul" scenario, the injection of funds to increase participation targeting vulnerable children was undermined somewhat by removing the funding incentive to employ fully-trained and registered teachers.

So, despite a focus on child-centred policy, rigorous analyses of increases in budgets for the early childhood education sector under the National-led coalition indicated that these did not compensate for previous cutbacks and only included basic funding for the increased numbers of children participating (Child Poverty Action Group, 2014). In other words, while the government's $1b investment in early education looked impressive, after taking inflation and increased child numbers into account, funding was less than it had been in 2008. Increases between 2011 and 2015 were still lower than the recommended 1% of GDP (Action for Children and Youth Aotearoa, 2015).

In summary, issues such as hunger, lack of heating, homelessness, and poor health were seriously disruptive to a significant number of children in Aotearoa New Zealand in both the short and long-term (Office of the Children's Commissioner & Oranga Tamariki, 2019). Targeting participation rates in early learning services as a way to improve life course outcomes was not matched by an equivalent investment in known structural quality indicators such as teacher–child ratios and qualified, registered teachers, or even good pay and work conditions. This gave rise to concerns about the quality of services. Inequitable delivery of culturally appropriate, responsive ECE services to Māori and Pacific families also remains an issue of concern (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016; Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2018; Ritchie, 2018; Skerrett, 2018). Children with disabilities have their access to early childhood education restricted if they do not have specialist support workers funded and in place (Action for Children and Youth Aotearoa, 2016a, 2016b).

Underlying concerns and emerging critique of *Te Whāriki* (1996)

> We love *Te Whāriki*, we do *Te Whāriki*, and we teach courses on *Te Whāriki*. But to what extent are we really engaging with *Te Whāriki*, exploring *Te Whāriki*, debating *Te Whāriki*, confronting *Te Whāriki*, and confronting ourselves? (May, 2017, p. 5)

Curriculum documents are political instruments and serve to reinforce and promote the status quo. They are not educationally neutral. As early as 1996, and again in 2008, Cullen (1996, 2008) identified tensions between theoretical understandings and practice arising from *Te Whāriki*, something Helen May (2007, cited in Ritchie, 2018) described as an ongoing issue for teachers. Since then, many have noted the recent accumulation of critical evaluations of *Te Whāriki* (see, for example, Alvestad, Duncan, & Berge, 2009; Dalli, 2011; McLachlan, 2018; Te One, 2013). These range from pedagogical, pragmatic concerns about a disconnect between aims and content—where teachers used *Te Whāriki* to justify existing practices—to concerns that the transformational potential of *Te Whāriki*'s aspirations towards a socially just society remain unrealised (see Duhn, 2006; Farquhar, 2010; May, 2009). Dalli (2011) was one of many to observe that, despite widespread acceptance at the time, possibly tinged with relief, the 1996 version of the curriculum did not explicate aims, objectives, and measurable outcomes for learning. However, this did not "future proof" the early childhood sector against schoolification (May, 2002, cited in Gunn & Gasson, 2016). The threat of standardised measures of assessment emerged again in 2010 with the introduction of National Standards in literacy and numeracy (Gunn & Gasson, 2016). The trickle-down effect of these could be seen in early childhood service advertisements promoting special numeracy and literacy programmes as preparation for school and, as such, potentially narrowing the intent of *Te Whāriki* as an open-ended framework for learning possibilities (Alcock &

Haggerty, 2013). *Te Whāriki*'s child-centred pedagogy, with its rights-based framework (Te One, 2009), was "neither a guaranteed outcome in day-to-day practice, nor necessarily an unproblematic one" (Dalli, 2011, p. 3).

From the early 2000s, numerous Education Review Office (ERO) publications (for example, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2016) revealed "mounting evidence that the early childhood sector was struggling with implementation" (McLachlan, 2018, p. 46). More work to support effective implementation of self-review was also needed to realise the full potential of *Te Whāriki* (Education Review Office, 2009). In attending to children's social and emotional competence, 45% of services were highly effective, and the remaining 55% ranged from mostly effective (38%), through somewhat effective (14%) to ineffective (3%) (Education Review Office, 2011). The ERO (2015) review of curriculum for infants and toddlers "showed that centres with 100% qualified staff were included in the list of 'least responsive' services" (McLachlan, 2018, p. 46).

Equally concerning was an ERO review of partnership with Māori whānau in 2012 which noted that, while 78% of services had built positive relationships with whānau, only 10% had built the "effective and culturally responsive partnerships" required for meaningful dialogue and exchange (Education Review Office, 2012, p. 9). *Te Whāriki*'s status as an international "first", which gave primacy to the image of an empowered Māori child with a rich, meaningful, and relevant cultural repertoire, was contradicted by discourses that class Māori tamariki (children) as "at risk and under privileged" (May, 2009, p. 300). Dalli (personal communication, July, 2012) noted that the aim of a truly bicultural curriculum remains "a distant lodestar".

Jenny Ritchie is one scholar who has consistently raised concerns that "the non-prescriptive nature of the document allowed teachers to 'do *Te Whāriki*' without addressing bicultural aspirations" (Ritchie, 2018, p. 10, citing Ritchie, 2003). Maintaining the integrity of bicultural practices remains a challenge and, as ERO (2013) noted, despite many services including Te Tiriti o Waitangi in their philosophy statements, "often bicultural practice meant the use of basic te reo, some waiata in the programme, resources such as puzzles that depicted aspects of te ao Māori and posters and photographs that reflected aspects of Māori culture" (Education Review Office, 2013, p. 13). Ritchie (2018) comments that "moving beyond such tokenism remains a challenge for many teachers and programmes" (p. 10). Adding to the challenge and cited as a reason for reviewing *Te Whāriki* was a rapidly changing demographic:

> Over the last two decades New Zealand has become one of a small number of culturally and linguistically super diverse countries (Spoonley & Bedford 2012). Superdiversity indicates a level of cultural complexity surpassing anything previously experienced. New Zealand is now home to 160 languages, with multiethnic depth forecasted to deepen even further (Statistics New Zealand, 2011).
>
> (Royal Society of New Zealand, 2013, p. 1)

These matters did not go unnoticed by the sector, with the Early Childhood Taskforce (2011) recommending that the implementation of *Te Whāriki* be evaluated. The Advisory Group on Early Learning's report (Ministry of Education, 2015), took this even further, recommending an update because:

1. childhoods had changed since the early 1990s
2. interpreting, implementing and adhering to Kaupapa Māori and Te Tiriti o Waitangi had been subject to "drift"
3. Pasifika content, omitted in 1996, should be reinstated, particularly to support language learning
4. links between *The New Zealand Curriculum / Te Marautanga o Aotearoa* and *Te Aho Matua* required updating
5. implementing curriculum for children with special educational needs across the early years required updating (Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 15).

Matters related to *Te Whāriki* were no longer straightforward. Compounding concerns about the efficacy of *Te Whāriki* was a comprehensive ERO synthesis of its national reviews (Education Review Office, 2016). It noted:

> The depth and richness of *Te Whāriki* is internationally recognised, however, the holistic and interpretive nature of this curriculum document is both its strength and a challenge. ERO's evaluations signal the need for increased support for the early childhood sector to work with the full intent of *Te Whāriki* as part of their curriculum design and implementation. (Education Review Office, 2016, p. 44)

The synthesis identified numerous features of effective practice required to implement *Te Whāriki,* and concluded that: "Strong pedagogical leadership, curriculum knowledge and collaborative learning partnerships play a critical role in how well early learning services promote positive outcomes for all children" (Education Review Office, 2016, p. 45). None of these were new issues but, collected together in one document, and on the back of the Advisory Group's recommendations (Ministry of Education, 2015), they influenced the inevitable review of *Te Whāriki*.

Future focus: Global considerations influencing curriculum design

As noted at the beginning of the chapter, *Te Whāriki* was acclaimed internationally and showcased as one of the world's top five curriculum models (OECD, 2004). However, challenges also emerged from OECD reporting on early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand (Taguma, Litjens, & Makowiecki, 2012), with reporting suggesting that implementation of *Te Whāriki* could be strengthened by learning from other countries' approaches to:

- strengthening parental involvement in curriculum design or implementation;
- reflecting on children's agency (rights) and child-initiated play; and

- further improving the communication and leadership skills of staff for effective implementation. (p. 25)

Interestingly, a year later, in an OECD national hui in Aotearoa New Zealand (May & Carr, 2016), the open-ended principles to support mana mokopuna (children's agency) were publicly affirmed but the issues surrounding effective engagement remained on the table. Since then, ERO reports have commented, to varying degrees, on the importance of all three bullet points raised by the OECD report (Taguma, Litjens, & Makowiecki, 2012) and this has been reflected in professional development foci in the roll-out of the refreshed *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017a) where strengthening parent/whānau and community involvement in designing local curriculum has been a theme, alongside the importance of leadership to establish environments that support child-initiated play (Education Review Office, 2018).

In late 2016, the OECD was proposing to trial an international assessment of early learning. Dubbed the "preschool PISA" (Moss et al., 2016) concerns were raised which struck at the heart of curriculum development. Citing Malaguzzi, the authors argued that education is "first and foremost, a political practice, and policy is the product of politics" (Moss et al., p. 346). In a strong argument against a 'technocratic' tool, the writers mounted a case for a curriculum located in sociocultural contexts. They asked:

> What is the image (or social construction) of the child?
>
> What are the purposes of early childhood education?
>
> What are the fundamental values of early childhood education?
>
> (Moss et al., p. 346)

In Aotearoa New Zealand, leading scholars in the early childhood education sector actively rejected New Zealand's participation in the proposed trial (Carr, Mitchell, & Rameka, 2016), claiming that the philosophical premise of the OECD's planned programme undermined the intention of *Te Whāriki*.

Further international influences on what a curriculum should be can be found in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2030,[3] which raise questions to inform curriculum design and implementation by asking:

> What is possible?
>
> What is probable?
>
> What is desirable?

When we consider these goals and questions in light of the future, a gap appears between the education provided and the education needed (Bolstad & Gilbert, 2012).

3 https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs

To close or bridge that gap means thinking about how children learn and how teachers teach: this has direct relevance to curriculum design. Smith (2013) argued the need to shift curriculum design from a transmission approach towards co-constructing working theories, "creating and using knowledge … in the context of people coming together and collaborating to solve problems" (p. 10).

The report of the Advisory Group on Early Learning also referred to 21st century learning principles and, while not explored in any depth, mentions several times the importance of taking a system-wide approach to changes in the early education sector (Ministry of Education, 2015). Interestingly, at the same time, leadership scholars were commenting along similar lines. Gilbert (2015), Wenmoth (2015), and others comment that system-wide change should be networked, collaborative, and relevant to the social and cultural milieu—ideas that resonate with the themes of future-focused learning. The 2016 ERO review also observed that "If everyone in the education system works together, we can improve outcomes for our children and set them on pathways as confident and successful lifelong learners" (Education Review Office, 2016, p. 45).

Therefore, the Advisory Group recommended in its report (Ministry of Education, 2015) that *Te Whāriki* be updated, digitised, and that a comprehensive policy of professional learning and development be offered to give effect to growing concerns that the transformative potential of *Te Whāriki* remained unrealised.

The process for the refresh and consultation

The culmination of the concerns described so far led the Ministry of Education, in mid-2016, to publish a Request for Quote (RFQ) seeking three to five writers to update the English/bicultural version of *Te Whāriki.* Their role would be to update the context, curriculum implementation, and links to the curricula for school and kura sections. The Ministry sought to address significant variability in the understanding, use, and interpretation of *Te Whāriki* in early childhood settings and limited understanding of the links between *Te Whāriki* and *The New Zealand Curriculum* and *Te Marautanga o Aotearoa*. These were the issues the review aimed to address. In addition, the selected writers would be asked to review the document's learning outcomes.

What eventuated was a much more substantive review than seemed to be indicated in the initial RFQ. To aid our understanding of the refresh process, we requested comment from two writers, the Ministry of Education, and a small number of practitioners involved in the first round of Ministry contracted professional development. Their comments are woven into this section. Claire McLachlan, one of the writers, explains the apparent growth in the scope of the review:

> We weren't allowed to touch the gazetted parts of the curriculum so we didn't touch the principles, goals and strands and, basically, we looked at everything else. You couldn't update one bit without looking at everything … Because the whole document had to talk to each other, there were parts that you couldn't leave untouched. (C. McLachlan, personal communication, October, 2018)

To address the issues raised in the RFQ, the writers' group was required to be a mix of academics and practitioners.[4] Nancy Bell, Director Early Learning at the Ministry of Education and the person responsible for implementing the review, explained:

> [We needed] to retain the bicultural approach that underpinned the development of the original document ... [so we appointed] writers who could strengthen the bicultural framing and content of the language, examples and implementation advice with a focus on identity, language and culture, and on inclusion of all children. (N. Bell, personal communication, October 2018)

Helen May, Margaret Carr, and Tamati and Tilly Reedy, the original writers, were invited to be kaitiaki (caretakers) of the process and to ensure the spirit of *Te Whāriki* remained intact. The kaitiaki role was a first for the Ministry of Education and recognised the value of *Te Whāriki* as a taonga, while demonstrating high-level respect for the Te Tiriti o Waitangi principle to protect such taonga. Strategically, this provided much relief for those concerned to avoid the introduction of a top-down standards-based approach into early childhood education.

The turnaround time for this project was incredibly tight. The writers first met in August 2016 and a draft for consultation with the sector was completed by November 2016.

> Everybody worked hard ... That big rush to get everything ready and done for it to go out in November—that was tight. (C. McLachlan, personal communication, October, 2018)

Even the Ministry would have preferred a longer lead in time:

> It would have been good to have had a longer time frame from the start of the project—this would have allowed us to 'slow down to speed up' in the early stages. (N. Bell, personal communication, October 2018)

The draft was released in November 2016 for a 6-week public consultation period, ending on 16 December, 2016. The consultation process included 36 hui held across the country and an online survey. Individual and group submissions were also invited. The hui were attended by over 1,400 people, and there were almost 800

4 The personnel were Dr Helen Hedges (The University of Auckland), Professor Claire McLachlan, Associate Professor Sally Peters and Dr Lesley Rameka (University of Waikato), Brenda Soutar (Te Kōhanga Reo o Mana Tamariki) and Lealofi Kupa (Whānau Manaaki). In addition, Keri Pewhairangi was nominated by Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust to work as the liaison between the English and Māori versions.

surveys and submissions completed online. In addition, 26 substantive submissions were received via email (Ministry of Education, 2017a).

As expected, consultation feedback on the proposed changes to *Te Whāriki* was mixed and ranged from supportive to significantly critical. This variability raised some issues for the writers but care was taken by all concerned to try and represent as many perspectives in the sector as possible:

> It was ultimately an iterative and collaborative process where the writers and Ministry worked carefully with stakeholders to understand their views and find ways to reflect these in the document. At times this was challenging but ultimately very satisfying as there was a sense of consensus being achieved across a very diverse landscape. (N. Bell, personal communication, October 2018)

Significant concern was raised by the sector about the tight deadlines for both development and feedback, and the time of year chosen for consultation, particularly in relation to the subsequently limited opportunities for teaching teams to get together to discuss and debate the changes. Despite the tight timeframes, the early childhood and teacher education sectors mobilised quickly and the writers received significant feedback, both in quantity and quality. Some of those who did not provide feedback also made a decision based on the politics of the day. As one kaiako explained:

> I didn't contribute to consultation because I didn't feel that it was a good use of my time as the political climate did not seem conducive to major/visionary changes. (M. Bachmann, personal communication, October 2018)

While many bemoaned the difference between this consultation process and the lengthy process used in the development of *Te Whāriki* prior to 1996, the Ministry of Education was pleased with the response from the sector.

> We were very pleased with the quantity and quality of the feedback received. It told us *Te Whāriki* really matters to the sector and that we had more work to do. The specificity of commentary was very helpful in making the changes needed in the final document. (N. Bell, personal communication, October, 2018)

All feedback was read and considered, and a comprehensive summary was published on the Ministry of Education's website.[5] The main themes to emerge from the consultation on the draft revision were:

- learning outcomes, specifically the reduction, prominence, and focus
- how learning outcomes would impact assessment practices
- inclusiveness, including bicultural, multicultural, children with additional needs and the focus on infants and toddlers

5 The feedback was originally published on www.education.govt.nz but has since been moved to the newly developed website intended to support the implementation of *Te Whāriki*: www.tewhariki.tki.org.nz

- broadening of educational theories
- the use of the term 'kaiako'
- the level of guidance and implementation support for services
- the layout and design.
  (Ministry of Education, 2017a).

To help make sense of the feedback, the Ministry of Education appointed a small number of subject-matter experts to provide advice—particularly around infants and toddlers, the inclusion of children with additional learning needs, and assessment. The consultation document was significantly restructured as a result but still represented the thinking and ideas of the writers, while at the same time responding to many of the issues raised:

> It's not like it disappeared into the Ministry and morphed into something else. I think the sector should feel heard. (C. McLachlan, personal communication, October, 2018)

Incorporating feedback is always a matter of compromise and there were some losses for the writers. Helen Hedges (2017) bemoaned the lack of footnotes. Similarly, Claire McLachlan commented on the referencing:

> The biggest problem with the first curriculum was that there were no references[6] [in the final publication]. It's the same problem with this one. There was a reference list constructed but it didn't make it in. As a researcher, I think you should be able to identify where the ideas came from. (C McLachlan, personal communication, October 2018)

While the commentary in this chapter gives some insights into the processes and complexities of the review, they are partial and subjective, and therefore only tell part of the story. Their underpinning theme, however, is one of consultation and compromise; the review, while a step in the right direction, has perhaps not achieved all that was dreamed.

Conclusion

When first released in 1996 as the official curriculum for early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand, *Te Whāriki* gained widespread acceptance throughout the early childhood sector. At that time both sides of the political spectrum used the economic crisis of the late 1980s as a rationale for restructuring and reforming public education and that impacted early childhood education provision (see Kelsey, 1997). What was initially only going to be a reform of the nation's educational administration extended into curriculum and assessment (see Te One, 2013). The 2017 review of *Te*

6 A draft version of *Te Whāriki* was released in 1993 and included an extensive reference list. Between 1993 and its final release, there was an extensive period of consultation with the sector.

Whāriki was to be expected—after over 20 years with no change but a plethora of reports and reviews, commentaries and research, it was time. The relevance of the 1996 *Te Whāriki* was not in question, but, as when it was first released, there were enduring concerns about how effectively its aspirations, principles, and strands were being implemented.

The socioeconomic, cultural, and educational context of Aotearoa New Zealand changed significantly between 1996 and 2017, and the early years sector had experienced loss, gain, and then loss again. At the same time, the demographic profile of Aotearoa New Zealand had become 'super diverse', inequalities had worsened, and child wellbeing statistics—including educational achievement—were trending down, especially for children of Māori and Pacific origins. The original version of *Te Whāriki* reflected the idea that curricula need to be culturally and nationally appropriate. Internationally this notion has been widely recognised and supported, and *Te Whāriki* 2017 will likely remain a model curriculum because of the way it foregrounds Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations, articulates a children's rights approach, and emphasises a local curriculum that includes mana whenua, community, whānau, and family as partners in learning.

The early childhood education sector has been subjected to dramatic policy changes since *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) was first released (Mitchell, 2017; Press, Woodrow, Logan, & Mitchell, 2018). During the 1990s *Te Whāriki* created a point of solidarity in an unsympathetic and, at times, adverse political climate (see Te One & Dalli, 2010; Te One, 2013). Since then, the primacy of market-driven policies alongside a discourse of vulnerability has impacted negatively on the early childhood education sector (Smith, 2016), and as Smith observed, despite funding increases the sector is still in "catch-up" mode (A. Smith, personal communication, 2016). In 2019, the sector is awaiting the release of a new strategic plan—*He taonga te tamaiti. Every child a taonga*: *The strategic plan for early learning 2019–2029* (Ministry of Education, 2018) which, in its draft form, foregrounds the re-worded aspiration of *Te Whāriki*. To fully reify *Te Whāriki* requires multiple-level actions through integrated policy (regulations and funding), research, and ongoing education and qualifications. The systems challenge was a significant rationale for the refresh and remains so; updating a policy document will not, in and of itself, create the changes needed to ensure children can indeed reap the benefits of a fully realised and rich curriculum.

As a conceptual framework that interweaves educational theory, political standpoints, and a profound acknowledgement of the importance of culture, *Te Whāriki* remains on the educational map as an innovative model of curriculum. This claim remains unchallenged and unchanged. But other challenges remain. There are still some important questions to consider as the education landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand continues in a state of change. Given the increasingly busy and complex

lives children and families lead, will the promise of *Te Whāriki* be realised? Will all children's rights to reach their potential be taken to heart by kaiako, managers, owners, and others responsible for all children's overall wellbeing, including their rights to their language, identity, and culture, alongside their rights to be recognised as capable, competent, and actively contributing to their worlds?

To date, the response from the sector has been cautiously positive. Much depends on the outcome of the Education Conversation (Ministry of Education, 2018), a consultative forum for developing strategic directions in education in Aotearoa New Zealand over the next decade, whether or not there is cross-party political accord acknowledging that all children have the right to an education that enables them to reach their potential and enjoy a good quality of life. Cooper and Tesar (2017) note that, at the very least, the refreshed *Te Whāriki* has reclaimed prominence with teachers in early childhood centres who are curious to explore its content. Whether this exploration will lead to the promise of *Te Whāriki* being realised, only time will tell.

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