
How do teachers build strong relationships?

A study of teaching practices to support child learning and social–emotional competence

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Relationships lie at the heart of early childhood education principles, curriculum, and pedagogy. Building strong relationships is taken for granted as a capacity all teachers possess; yet this might be an area of practice in which teachers need support and professional guidance. In this article, we examine and discuss what teachers do to build strong positive relationships with other teachers, children, families, whānau, and the wider community. Teaching practices identified are findings from a collaborative research project with kindergarten teachers and early childhood stakeholders. The resulting list of practices demonstrates the commitment of early childhood teachers to building strong relationships.

Ask any teacher in early childhood education (ECE) and they will tell you that relationships are at the heart of their pedagogy. Relationships are one of four key principles in the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). The curriculum highlights that children learn through relationships and interactions. For teachers, their role involves not only supporting the relationships that children are developing, but also the professional and personal relationships they are building with colleagues, families and whānau, and children that are central to their daily work.

The important role of teacher–child relationships and teacher–family relationships has long been understood and established as a priority by teachers and researchers in early childhood (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Hamre & Pianta, 2001); moreover, recent brain-development research has reiterated the importance

of teachers building caring, responsive, and nurturing relationships with children that involve close and meaningful connections with families and home life (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2009; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2007) noted “the essence of quality in early childhood services is embodied in the expertise and skills of the staff and in their capacity to build positive relationships with young children” (p. 13). Of particular note in this statement is a focus on staff capacity and skill. Research has shown that teacher–child relationships can be strengthened with interventions that focus on supporting teachers’ daily interactions with children (Whittaker & Harden, 2010; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011).

Much of the research on identifying specific teaching practices that help strengthen teacher–child relationships has been conducted internationally. Frameworks such

as the United States-based Incredible Years Pyramid (Webster-Stratton, 1999) support the consideration of key aspects of pedagogy, and they outline specific teaching practices to strengthen areas such as teacher–child relationships or social–emotional coaching. Frameworks are often used to promote the use of teaching practices shown to be effective for supporting positive outcomes for children. The teaching practices identified are often referred to as evidence-based or recommended practices.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, a recent Education Review Office (2013) report highlighted the need to support and assist early childhood services to implement teaching practices and pedagogical tools that are consistent with *Tē Whāriki* and responsive to all children at their service. Current initiatives of the Ministry of Education to support teachers with teaching practices include the introduction of the Incredible Years Teacher (IYT) program (Webster-Stratton, 1999). This programme has positive teacher–child relationships as a core principle and has a substantial evidence base for improving teacher capacity and confidence as well as improving child outcomes for learning and social–emotional competence in education settings in the United States (Webster-Stratton, 2011). Preliminary and ongoing work to evaluate this programme in New Zealand has shown a good uptake of practices, positive teacher reports, and positive outcomes for children (Fergusson, Horwood, & Stanley, 2013; Boyd, Dingle, & Herdina, 2014). Preliminary and ongoing work has also shown that not all practices in the IY framework and training are viewed as appropriate in ECE in New Zealand, nor is the United States-based framework universally accepted by ECE teachers given contextual, pedagogical, and cultural differences between the two countries (Wooller, 2015).

To better understand the teaching practices that are valued, relevant, and important for promoting children’s learning and social–emotional competence in ECE in New Zealand, we have completed the early phases of a multiphase study referred to as the Teaching Practices project. The aim of the project is to develop a New Zealand-based list of teaching practices that promote children’s learning and social–emotional competence in early childhood settings. The project has been influenced by two key trends in ECE: intentional teaching and evidence-based practice.

Intentional teaching

Increasingly, the phrase intentional teaching is being used in ECE to emphasise the importance of teachers using planned and purposeful actions to organise learning experiences for young children (Epstein, 2014). Although intentional teaching is getting some uptake in New Zealand (see Duncan, 2009), our anecdotal observations of dominant trends in the ECE sector reveal a hesitance to communicate the important role of the teacher and teaching to promote children’s learning. Popular trends emphasise the child, children’s learning, and viewing children as competent and confident learners who direct their own learning. These are important aspects of early childhood practice; yet, these areas have been overemphasised in current rhetoric while the role of the teacher and teaching for supporting children’s learning have been underemphasised. For example, in a recent encounter with an early childhood teacher, the teacher provided an excellent written observation of the rich teaching and learning going on in the setting. The description ended with a statement that said, “No visible teaching was observed”. Although there is good reason to highlight differences between the didactic and directive instructional methods often used in other educational settings and the rich play-based and routines-based teaching and learning provided in ECE in New Zealand, teachers should not hide their teaching practice, nor be afraid to claim what they do as teaching. As noted by Siraj-Blatchford (2009), “teaching should be considered a legitimate aspect of early childhood professional practice” (p. 155).

Moreover, pedagogical conversations are more often theoretical, aspirational or principle-driven rather than practical or focused on teacher practice (i.e., actions and interactions with children). The important role of theory, aspirations, and principles that underpin and ground practice should not be devalued; yet, there is also a need to translate how teachers move from key principles such as empowerment, holistic development, family and community, and relationships into actionable behaviours that enact these core principles in meaningful ways that support children’s learning. As noted by Smith (1996) in a discussion of pedagogy for the early childhood curriculum, “there is a need for a pedagogy which acknowledges the awesome power of the teacher in affecting children’s development” (p. 62).

Evidence-based practice

Evidence-based practices in education are often considered those with empirical research evidence to support their use (i.e., effective for producing intended outcomes). These are also referred to as scientifically valid practices or practices with the best available evidence. Yet, increasingly, this one-dimensional focus on empirical evidence, which relates exclusively to the question of “does it work?” is seen as incomplete. Building off work conducted in health sciences, education researchers and practitioners are focusing on a dynamic model for evidence-based practice that encourages the integration of three interrelated sources of evidence to inform decision-making for teaching and learning (Snyder, 2006). The sources of evidence include: a) evidence from teachers’ professional knowledge, experience, and background; b) evidence from the children, families, and communities involved, ensuring values and preferences are incorporated; and c) evidence from empirical research about the practice and related outcomes (Bourke & Loveridge, 2013; Snyder, 2006). From this perspective, evidence-based practice is a dynamic process that teachers engage in on a daily basis to integrate these three sources of knowledge to determine what might work, for whom, under what conditions, and whether it is socially valid and then apply their ideas to the benefit of children and families. Each source of evidence is valued and valuable to the decision-making process using this type of evidence-based practice approach.

Teaching Practice project

Given the need to clearly articulate the teaching practice of New Zealand ECE and the importance of teachers’ professional knowledge, experience, and background to inform evidence-based practice, the aim of the Teaching Practice project is to develop a New Zealand-based list of teaching practices that promote children’s learning and social–emotional competence in early childhood settings. To date, the project has focused on identifying a teacher-validated list of teaching practices intended to help New Zealand teachers identify and articulate the teaching practice aspect of their pedagogy, consistent with *Tē Whāriki*, to support children’s learning and social–emotional competence. Owing to practical constraints, early phases of the research were conducted in one type of teacher-led centre-based education service—

kindergartens, typically serving children ages 3 through 5 years old.

Methodology

The initial phase of the study comprised a small field study with 24 participating teachers from ten different kindergartens within our local kindergarten association. In Part 1 of the field study, interviews and observations were undertaken to gather information about the teaching practices typically used and valued by teachers to support learning and social-emotional competence. Interviews were designed to engage teachers in conversations about their everyday interactions with children and observations were designed for the researchers to observe everyday activities and take notes about teachers' practices. Researchers used an iterative process to review information gathered and code interview transcripts and observation notes. Each transcript was read in its entirety by one of the researchers who coded teacher talk with specific teaching practices. For example, a teacher said, "I knelt down to speak with him, he was crying, so I put out my arms out for a cuddle". From this description, the researcher might have coded two teaching practices: engage with children at their eye level and use physical comfort and affection. A second researcher then read each transcript both to confirm practices identified and to identify possible additional practices. All codes were copied into lists and a process of sorting, condensing, and categorising was used to develop an initial list of teaching practices.

In Part 2 of the field study, the initial list of teaching practices was compared to practices associated with existing frameworks, whether international (e.g., *Incredible Years*; Webster-Stratton, 2011) or national (e.g., *Tātaiako*; Ministry of Education, 2011). Teaching practices that were listed on existing frameworks which were not included on the initial teaching practice list, but were likely to be valued by teachers were identified and incorporated into the initial list with a notation for later teacher review and confirmation. In Part 3 of the field study, we engaged the teachers in a second round of interviews and observations to confirm and critique the initial list, support further refinement and revision, and explore teachers' perspectives about other potential practices from existing frameworks that were added to the list. Following teacher feedback, further refinements were made to the practice list.

The next phase of the study involved stakeholder review. We identified and invited key stakeholders to review the practice list and provide feedback and input. Stakeholders were engaged in face-to-face meetings, phone calls, or email and written correspondence. To date, further revisions incorporating the feedback and input from two cultural advisors (Māori and Pasifika), four professional development personnel, fourteen additional teachers from five kindergartens, and six tertiary staff have been addressed. Throughout, stakeholders have recommended additional frameworks for review, offered their input on specific practice areas, and provided guidance about the positioning of the study in the early childhood context.

Findings

The practice list

The current version of the practice list is organised into five broad areas: (1) relationships; (2) environment; (3) social-emotional teaching; (4) intentional teaching; and (5) competent and confident learners. Within each area there are additional sections (a total of 26 sections) that are defined by an overarching teaching practice. Within each section there is a selection of key teaching practices that have been identified from the multistep process.

In this article, we explore findings for the area of relationships. Findings consist of the practices that were observed and reported across kindergarten settings and then reviewed and confirmed by teachers and stakeholders as relevant, valued, and appropriate. Before examining the identified practices, there are five key features to note about the form and format of the practice list.

First, for each section there is an overarching teaching practice shown on the left. This overarching practice is intended to embody the core of what a teacher is aiming to achieve. Each section and overarching practice is provided in English and te reo Māori. We have worked with our Māori cultural advisor and a university Maori linguist to frame the practices in te reo Māori.

Second, the specific teaching practices, shown on the right, are the actions teachers might implement to help them achieve the overarching practice. The specific teaching practices are not exhaustive of all practices that might be used to help build positive relationships, nor are they intended to be appropriate in every situation for all teachers, children, and settings. Rather, they represent the most salient practices identified

through the research process. The blank space at the end of each area is an invitation for teams to identify additional practices relevant and effective for their setting.

Third, practices intentionally start with the word teachers followed by a verb to convey an action. This is intended to provide teaching practices that are identified as actionable behaviours. For each practice, teachers and teams can ask themselves questions such as: do we do this?; how often?; with which children?; and what does this look like at our centre when we do this? This type of questioning about the actionable behaviours on the list might support professional dialogue and reflection. Moreover, actionable behaviours might also be observed by others or self-observed through video reflection (see Cherrington, 2012; Tripp & Rich, 2012). Thus, the practice list can act as a tool to support teachers to identify areas of practice for professional reflection, learning, and research to strengthen their own capacity and confidence.

Fourth, the practices discussed in this article focus on those that we have grouped under the Relationships/Whanaungatanga heading. The complete practice list identifies practices that are closely related or interwoven with building relationships but have been grouped under a different section. For example, many of the practices in the Social Skills and Friendship section closely relate to practices in the Between Children section. Another example is the practices related to relationships with children are expanded on in the Competent and Confident Learners section. The intention of the headings is not to draw false boundaries between inter-related aspects of pedagogy, but rather to provide a system that organises the practices in a way that helps make them accessible for review and discussion. In some ways, the practices presented in the relationships section might be viewed as the foundational practices for establishing relationships that are then deepened through practices on the broader list.

Fifth, the teaching practices identified are not new to the early childhood sector, and many teachers will be familiar with the practices listed. Familiarity with the practices is desirable and intended. Yet, compiling them in one place and naming them as New Zealand teacher-endorsed teaching practices (i.e., endorsed as relevant to our project phases) is the innovation around the practice list. The practices represent ways of teaching that have been identified specifically for New Zealand ECE, by New Zealand early childhood teachers.

Relationships/Whanaungatanga

In analysing the teaching practices reported and observed, the area of relationships was organised into six key sections: (1) relationships among teams; (2) relationships with families; (3) relationships with community and culture; (4) relationships with Māori; (5) relationships between children; and (6) relationships with children. Each section is detailed in turn.

Relationships among teams. ECE settings use a team-based model to provide services for children. The teachers noted that when a team works well together and shares a common philosophy and vision, experiences for children are better coordinated, planning and assessment are done collectively, there is shared understanding of expectations for children's behaviour, and communication with parents is more consistent. The nature of relationships among team members varies between settings, possibly due to the personalities of teachers or related to particular contextual issues, yet the practices identified show there are important actions that teachers can take to build, strengthen, and maintain positive team relationships.

Team / Mahi a-Rōpū	
The teaching team works together to support children, families, and each other. Ka mahi tahi te rōpū kaiako hei tautoko i ngā tamariki, i ngā whānau me rātou anō.	1. Teachers have positive and respectful interpersonal interactions with each other.
	2. Teachers plan for and engage in social interactions with all members of the team (e.g., teachers, support workers, administrative staff, regular relievers) to build a sense of community.
	3. Teachers plan for and coordinate roles and responsibilities to provide continuity for children or to address challenging behaviour as needed.
	4. Teachers communicate to ensure a consistent approach to learning and behaviour is used with children across teachers.
	5. Teachers care for self and each other's wellbeing to be able to better support children.
	6. Teachers reflect on and share their own cultural positioning / perspective to encourage open discussion of and respect for multiple world views and experiences.
	7. Teachers have open and honest communications about personal and professional issues or challenges to ensure concerns are addressed in a timely fashion.
	8. Teachers reflect on and share their personal and professional journey of bicultural practice with other teachers to create an open, learning-focused climate and a shared understanding of bicultural practice.
	9. Teachers share information about children's learning and behaviour and knowledge about families frequently during informal and formal discussions (e.g., on the go, beginning and end of the day).
	10. Teachers, in collaboration with the community, establish a shared vision for the centre that is enacted in practice.

Relationships with families. The key principle of family and community is described in *Te Whāriki* as “the wider world of family and community is an integral part of the early childhood curriculum” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 14). Moreover, early childhood has a long history of viewing parents and family members as partners in education settings. Teaching practices identified represent some of the important ways teachers engage with families to build and maintain strong relationships that are supportive of children's learning and family aspirations. Consistent with recommendations in the research literature (Biddulph, Biddulph & Biddulph, 2003; Children's Commissioner, 2013; Clarkin-Phillips & Carr, 2012; Mitchell, Haggerty, Hampton & Pairman, 2006) the practices highlight teachers' commitment to building individualised, mutually responsive relationships with families that support continuity between home and centre and provide a deeper knowledge of the child that enhances responsive teaching.

Families / Ngā Whānau	
Teachers build partnerships with families to support them and their child. Ka hāpai ngā kaiako i te whanaungatanga hei tautoko i ngā whānau me ā rātou tamariki.	1. Teachers show respect to families and welcome them in the centre.
	2. Teachers get to know families personally, use their names, and develop meaningful connections.
	3. Teachers actively invite and involve families in children's learning and the activities of the centre.
	4. Teachers learn families' aspirations for their child and child's learning and re-visit these with families periodically.
	5. Teachers recognise and appreciate difference between teacher's and family's aspirations and values for a child.
	6. Teachers seek information and knowledge about the child, family, daily life, life events, and culture using a variety of strategies.
	7. Teachers learn about and reflect families' lives, experiences, and culture in the activities, displays, and events that occur in the centre.
	8. Teachers share information with families about their child's learning and daily activities and provide ideas for continuing the learning at home.
	9. Teachers gain information from families about learning at home to continue the learning at the centre.
	10. Teachers make themselves available, offer guidance, share information and connect families with resources and services (as appropriate) to support them and their child.

Relationships with community and culture. The practices identified in this section reflect teachers' understanding of the diversity of children and families in their local communities, the importance of gaining a deep understanding of every child and family's culture, and the need to make meaningful connections within the community. Teachers positioned the early childhood setting as part of a wider community, both social and cultural. This process begins with the families (as indicated in the above section), but widens to include the aspirations, contribution, and richness of the community that surrounds the kindergarten. The practices identified affirm the sociocultural perspective that is central to *Te Whāriki*, in which teaching and learning are seen as socially mediated, shaped by the values, customs, and aspirations of each family and community (Smith, 1996). Identified practices focus on ensuring cultural competence and embedding children's culture within the learning environment as a way of respecting and valuing families' funds of knowledge to promote children's learning.

Community and Culture / Hapori me te Ahurea	
Teachers create an atmosphere that promotes diversity of community and culture as an integral part of children's learning. Ka whakarite ngā kaiako kia hāpai o tēnā hapori me tēnā, me tēnā ahurea hei tino wāhanga o te ako a ngā tamariki.	1. Teachers connect with local community members and community organisations to support children's learning (e.g., inviting community members into the centre and taking children into the community for learning).
	2. Teachers support exploration, appreciation, and celebration of different cultures and languages with children.
	3. Teachers display pictures of children and families, with permission, in the centre with connections to their origins (where they come from) and culture.
	4. Teachers use the different languages of children and families to the extent they can and try to learn key words and phrases in these languages as appropriate.
	5. Teachers use a variety of resources to support children and families who have limited English.
	6. Teachers support family preference for their child to use/learn their home language or English in the centre.
	7. Teachers work towards supporting the correct pronunciation of all languages used in the centre.
	8. Teachers support children to take care of and show respect for others and their environment (centre, local community, and wider environment).
	9. Teachers learn about cultural and community values and beliefs of the children and families in the setting, in order to implement teaching practices in culturally relevant and respectful ways, recognising individual differences in communities and cultural groups.
	10. Teachers use a child and family's cultural capital/funds of knowledge to support the child's learning and the learning of others.

Relationships with Māori. Practices identified in this section focus on the ways teachers build and strengthen their knowledge of the Treaty of Waitangi (te tiriti) and how they build relationships with local iwi, hapū, and whānau. Stakeholders emphasised the important role of mana whenua (those with local authority) to advise on practice within the kindergarten. This included helping teachers build on local knowledge and ensure appropriate tikanga is enacted within individual centres. Building from *Te Whāriki* as a bicultural curriculum, as well as key Ministry of Education initiatives such as *Ka Hikitia* (Ministry of Education, 2012) and *Tātaiako* (Ministry of Education, 2011), teachers described the important role of te tiriti-based practice to support Māori children and to provide all children with meaningful bicultural learning experiences. In addition to the practices identified in this specific section, practices that might be considered te tiriti-based are included throughout and within each of the areas and sections. Teachers and stakeholders noted this is reflective of the strong, growing commitment to bicultural practice in ECE. As researchers, we continue to seek guidance from cultural advisors, teachers, and stakeholders to strengthen how te ao Māori is reflected throughout the practice list.

Connections with Māori / Ngā Tūhonohono ki te Iwi Māori	
Teachers make Māori culture and language a visible, vibrant, and everyday part of children's learning.	1. Teachers reflect on and are able articulate their practice in relation to the principles and articles of the Treaty of Waitangi.
	2. Teachers consult with mana whenua (those with local tribal or subtribal authority) around collective aspirations for children.
	3. Teachers work with mana whenua to identify appropriate Māori cultural advisors for the centre.
	4. Teachers work with mana whenua and cultural advisors to ensure tikanga established for the centre and use of Māori resources is respectful and reflective of local iwi, hapū, whānau, and community.
Ka whakarite ngā kaiako kia hāpai i te reo me ona tikanga kia hihiko kia kitea hoki ia rā, ia rā.	5. Teachers work with mana whenua and cultural advisors to ensure translation and pronunciation of te reo Māori is reflective of the dialect used by local iwi, hapū, wānau, and community.
	6. Teachers work towards supporting the correct pronunciation of te reo Māori used in the centre.
	7. Teachers create environments that acknowledge, promote, and honour te ao Māori and actively use materials, resources, and activities to teach, show, and make the bi-cultural heritage of Aotearoa New Zealand a living, vibrant, part of children's experience in the centre.
	8. Teachers engage children and families in Māori cultural activities and events as advised by mana whenua and cultural advisors to make connections between children and families and whakapapa.

Relationships between children. Teachers play an active and important facilitative role in the relationships that develop between children. Practices identified in this section focus on relationships between children that support a culture of respect and care for each other, and affirm the

importance of the social milieu of the setting. Practices that support the development of acceptance, respect, and empathy among peers and an understanding of what it means to be part of a group were identified by teachers and stakeholders as foundational. Additional practices related to social interaction, friendships, peer supported learning, tuakana–teina relationships and other aspects of children's social experiences are included in other areas and sections of the practice list.

Between Children / Ko Ngāi Tamariki	
Teachers support children to take care of and show respect for each other. Ka tautoko ngŌ kaiako i ngŌ tamariki kia manaaki, kia whai ngŌkau tŌtehi ki tŌtehi.	1. Teachers work with children to create a centre climate that promotes a safe, supportive, and caring learning environment for all children.
	2. Teachers structure activities and routines so there are frequent opportunities for social interaction, cooperative play and peers to work together throughout the day.
	3. Teachers point out children's strengths to other children and encourage positive talk and kind words among peers.
	4. Teachers encourage children to greet each other and make other children feel welcome.
	5. Teachers support children to understand and take responsibility for their own actions.
	6. Teachers look out for patterns of hurtful behaviour that are repeated and targeted to address potential bullying occurrences.
	7. Teachers help children take care of each other, show empathy and kindness and stand up for other children when needed.
	8. Teachers help children to be aware of the needs of the group, take responsibility for group behaviour and see their contribution to making a shared learning community.
	9. Teachers show children how to be defenders and supporters of other children who might need their help.
	10. Teachers help children to learn from each other and support children to share their knowledge and ideas with peers.

Relationships with children. As noted in many studies both nationally and internationally, positive teacher–child relationships are essential for supporting positive outcomes for children when children attend ECE settings (Mitchell, Wylie & Carr, 2008; Wylie, 2001). Consistent with *Te Whāriki*, teachers noted strong teacher–child relationships as the core of their practice. When asked, “how do you form close relationships with children?”, teachers were often initially lost for words to describe the teaching practices (everyday actions) they use to form strong relationships. Yet, the stories they told when asked to describe what they do when a new child joins the centre were rich with examples of specific actions and intentions to get to know children, develop a sense of trust, and establish strong relationships over time. The practices in this section of the list reflect the everyday actions and interactions that teachers have with children which build the foundation for children to feel connected, safe, and secure so they can be competent and confident learners.

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With Children / Me ngā Tamariki	
Teachers establish secure, caring, and trusting relationships with children. Ka whakarite ngā kaiako kia tika, kia atawhai, kia pono te whanaungatanga me ngā tamariki.	1. Teachers ask questions about children's home lives and experiences and make connections between centre life and home life.
	2. Teachers get to know children's interests, strengths, and needs using a variety of strategies.
	3. Teachers interact with children at their level and make eye contact as appropriate.
	4. Teachers greet each child everyday.
	5. Teachers use children's names and help children learn each other's names.
	6. Teachers know something unique about each child and recognise strengths in every child.
	7. Teachers give physical and verbal comfort and affection to soothe children when they are upset or unsettled.
	8. Teachers share information about themselves and their interests and experiences.
	9. Teachers look out for children who are not likely to seek teacher time or attention and take care to connect with each child throughout the day.
	10. Teachers use a variety of strategies to celebrate children's accomplishments and proud moments (e.g., high-fives, hugs, praise, showing other teachers and children, sending information home to families).
	11. Teachers are aware of sensitive times for children (e.g., morning transition from home to centre) and work closely and responsively to ensure a sense of safety and security.
	12. Teachers are aware of children's connections to different staff and prepare and support children (and families) when there are temporary or longer term changes in staff.
	13. Teachers attentively listen to children's ideas and communications; if busy, teachers respond to children and let them know they will connect with them at a later point.
	14. Teachers keep commitments and promises to children and apologise if broken or amended.
	15. Teachers join children in play and have sustained conversations and interactions.
	16. Teachers have fun and can be playful with children.
	17. Teachers give children positive attention and communicate warm positive feelings toward children (for no particular reason other than to be with them).
	18. Teachers make sure departure is a pleasant experience for children and families (e.g., not rushed, hugs, good-bye, time to share).
	19. Teachers uphold children's sense of self and mana in all interactions.

Discussion

To date, teachers and stakeholders who have contributed to the development of the practice list have acknowledged its importance and possibilities. They have also asked important questions about purpose, alignment, and processes. These discussions and questions were welcomed as they are central to ensuring a relevant and valued list of practices that teachers and teams find useful for supporting their everyday practice.

What is the purpose of the practice list?

As noted earlier, the innovation of the practice list lies in compiling the everyday practices of New Zealand early childhood teachers. This is in contrast to using practice lists and frameworks imported from overseas. The list is intended to reflect the practices that are contextually, pedagogically, and culturally valued and salient. The list might be used

in different ways for supporting preservice teachers, practising teachers, or related stakeholders (e.g., administrators, specialist staff, or teacher educators). A logical extension is to use the practice list for professional learning and development, but other uses may be valid as well. An important note is that the list is not exhaustive, nor are practices listed appropriate for all settings or occasions. Moreover, guided by evidence-based practice, the practice list represents one source of evidence—teachers' professional knowledge about potential practices. Teachers should also consider and incorporate family and whānau perspectives as well as best available empirical research evidence for making educational decisions and using the practices in appropriate ways.

How does the practice list align with *Te Whāriki*?

The early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, is recognised as the core of ECE in New Zealand. The focus on holistic development and the articulation of core principles grounds the pedagogy of practising teachers. Teachers and stakeholders who have contributed to this project are New Zealand teachers enacting the New Zealand curriculum, thus practices identified should support teachers to enact the values and goals identified in *Te Whāriki*. Yet, consistent with *Te Whāriki*, we note the importance of local consideration of the practices to align with the distinctive patterns of different communities, programmes, structures, and environments.

What about the practices described in *Te Whāriki*?

The curriculum is intended “to describe 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). *Te Whāriki* accomplishes this by providing goals, learning outcomes, questions for reflection, and example experiences to help children meet outcomes. Woven within and inherent in these messages are possible ways of teaching intended to support child learning; yet this approach to describing practices can hide the teaching that supports the learning. As noted by the Education Review Office, “*Te Whāriki* as a curriculum document ... does not provide the sector with clear standards of practice for high quality curriculum implementation” (2013, p. 2). The report goes on to describe the challenges of “having a non-prescriptive curriculum that is reliant on the professional knowledge of those who implement it” (p. 2). For teachers who need support to strengthen their professional knowledge and skills, the teaching practices described in the current project can be a source of information to guide professional learning.

Where to from here?

Teachers and teams might use the practice list to support professional learning and development or as a guide to inform possible actionable behaviours that help them support children's learning and social-emotional competence. The practice list is intended to be an evolving document, reflective of valued and salient practices used by teachers, although not exhaustive of all teaching practices that might be used in early childhood settings. Many of the practices (or a variant of the practices) on the current draft of the teaching practice list are associated with empirical evidence for supporting their use in early childhood settings. Much of this evidence is from research conducted internationally. Although this research can be informative, as noted by Joy Cullen in her 2008 Jean Herbison lecture,

international evidence of effective practices does not negate the need for New Zealand-based research studies examining these practices and the outcomes for children in New Zealand early childhood settings. Relevant and rigorous outcomes-focused research is needed in ECE to move the sector from a theoretical approach to teaching and learning to teaching that is grounded in community values, professional principles, and evidence of children's learning (Cullen, 2008). Thus, the larger aim of the Teaching Practices project is to engage in an ongoing programme of research to understand the teaching practices that are valued, relevant, and effective for promoting children's learning and social-emotional competence in ECE in New Zealand. This will include examination of practices in other service settings and with younger children, as well as examination of the practices in relation to other sources of evidence in an evidence-based practice framework.

Conclusion

Our project and the practice list are a work in progress. The practices listed are not definitive nor superior to others; rather they are the salient practices that were identified in conversations with early childhood teachers and stakeholders in the context of this project. Building positive relationships emerged as an essential practice area that was further sorted into the six areas for positive relationships. The interconnection among these different types of relationships is at the heart of the positive experiences and interactions that children, families, and whānau have every day with the teachers and teams that support them in early childhood settings. Teachers' capacity and confidence to form these relationships and support relationships between children is essential in ECE. The list of teaching practices suggests that there are active and intentional actions that teachers can take to build and strengthen their relationships. The practices provide guidance for ways that teachers can build positive and lasting relationships. We offer the practices identified in the Teaching Practices project under the area of relationships as one source of professional knowledge for consideration, discussion, and reflection to support meaningful relationships in ECE.

In this article, we have emphasised a greater acknowledgement and identification of the active, intentional role of teachers and teaching in contrast to trends observed in the sector. Yet, we conclude with acknowledging the importance of the concept of ako. Teaching and learning are interwoven processes that support each other. They are not separate entities, nor should one supersede the other. In this process, both teachers and children engage in the teaching and in the learning. We have learned much through this research and from the teachers and stakeholders who have contributed, and hope that the practices identified and described will support quality teaching and learning in early childhood settings.

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