

The importance of knowledge in early childhood education

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The Labour-led government is currently very wisely reconsidering its role in the early childhood education (ECE) sector in Aotearoa New Zealand. The government, recognising the complexity of the sector, is also very wisely looking strategically at the ways in which it can and should notice, recognise, and respond to the knowledge that our many communities and organisations regard as important in the lives of children, whānau, the nation and the international contexts that we inhabit.

A new strategic plan for the sector offers an opportunity to continue the work begun many years ago, and that took political and societal shape in such documents as *Education to Be More, Before Five*, *Te Whāriki, Kei Tua o te Pae*, and *Nga Huarahi Arataki*. These government publications have assisted care and education providers in developing knowledge of its many roles in society, including a knowledge of:

1. The meaning of ECE
2. Who has responsibility for ECE
3. What learning and developmental experiences are to be valued
4. What teachers, leaders and whānau should know and do

The status of knowledge is then critically embedded in this complex set of interrelated expectations. In addition, the status of knowledge is highly problematic in these relationships because there is very little agreement – there are no easy solutions and at times the answers will be highly contradictory or oppositional. Take for instance knowledge of:

- a) The significance of play in learning (how children know, what children know, and how children come to know more)
- b) The significance of teacher qualifications (what knowledge of teaching and what knowledge for teaching is essential)
- c) The determinants that indicate a child should be considered ‘old enough’ to attend an ECE centre (knowledge of child development and of the impact of participation in ECE on a child)
- d) The design of the centre indoors and outdoors (knowledge of the impact of the environment on learning)

In this chapter we explore different approaches to thinking about knowledge in ECE, starting with a challenge to the idea that there is any one privileged knowledge that can and should guide education for children, families and teachers in ECE centre communities.

ECE knowledge and the postmodern condition

While there might be talk at times of consensus in each of the areas of knowledge listed above, such talk is dangerous. It presumes not only that everyone is accounted for in terms of their views on what knowledge counts, or even what knowledge is, but also that everyone has a shared understanding of what it is that is being talked about. Take for instance the relationship between care and education. These are often considered as one and the same in ECE. People ‘in the know’ talk about ‘educare’ rather than education and regard the quality of caring relationships as the platform for a child’s learning about the world. While these points seem like part of a quite simple and obvious knowledge about education, common-sense knowledge we could even call them, there’s a proliferation of research knowledge that provides evidence that such common knowledge does not translate into common practice in contemporary postmodern societies.

The term ‘postmodern’ is very relevant to a discussion of knowledge in ECE. There is no single knowledge that can be regarded as providing the truths for education and care in the view of postmodern thinkers. According to philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, there is a crisis in the legitimation of knowledge in postmodernity – and in ECE this might be seen in the problem of deciding what counts as a good-quality curriculum.¹ As already noted, there is a lot to consider when engaging with knowledge of

ECE, from the seemingly simple or straightforward to the incredibly complex. Do we have a rolling morning tea? Do we have a set and structured morning tea? Do we organise a group time with teacher-led performances and storybooks? How and why do we promote children’s engagement with the printed word? What should we be communicating with home and how should we involve the values and practices of home life in centre life? In what ways does our curriculum represent different gender identities and family structures? How do we recognise young children as social actors, with agency, and involve them in the assessment of their own learning?

Now, the idea of a crisis in legitimation is not seen as a problem if we accept diverse ways of thinking about education and care. From this position we accept that there will be many complex answers to the questions above. However, the idea of a postmodern position is seen as a problem for those who take a singular position on what counts as the ‘right’ knowledge of childhood, and the ‘right’ knowledge for children.

In Aotearoa New Zealand this problem has been somewhat addressed through the construction of a so-called bicultural curriculum. The curriculum is made up of two different curricula. That these are not interchangeable translations differentiated only by the use of English and te reo Māori is an excellent indicator of the postmodern condition – there’s more than one knowledge here and they are not interchangeable. That there is more than one knowledge in the ECE curriculum is also evident in the way that its strands and principles highlight the importance of cultural knowledge. More than this, the curriculum essentially warns the ECE sector not to look for any state-prescribed knowledge but rather to recognise the knowledge that is important within the local context. That’s fairly radical when it comes to deciding on who has a say about what children should know. Well, it’s radical when compared to other curriculum approaches in which governments clearly specify what has to be learned by the child, and also how and where they will learn.



Phoebe Pachter, Untitled (knots, tassels, silk woven placemat), 2017

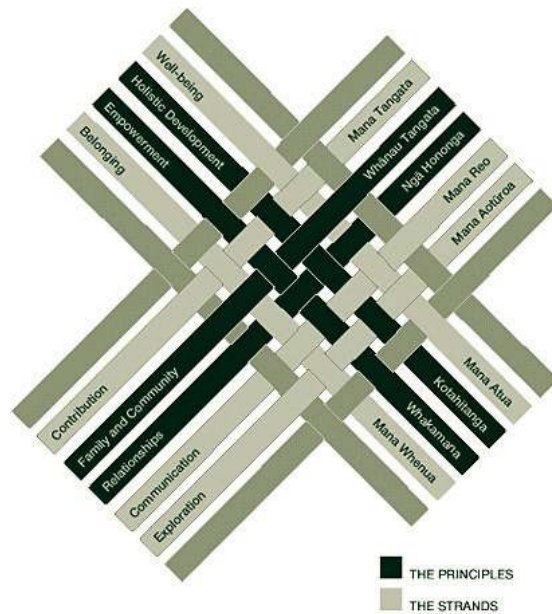
(photograph: Janita Craw)

Drilling down into the strands and principles, the curriculum also guides us that whatever knowledge is, it cannot be understood as disconnected from the child’s wholeness of experiences, embodiments, emotions, relationships and spirit. These wisdoms are particularly resonant in the work of Rangimarie Rose Pere, whose *Te Wheke* has significantly influenced ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand.² If the early educational ‘thinkers’ coming from colonial Britain had had a stronger knowledge of and commitment to different cultural knowledge regarding education and care, they may well have recognised and valued the knowledge evident in Māori educational practices. *Te Whāriki* is a curriculum with the dedicated aspiration to resolve this colonial failure, drawing upon, and fuelled by, a host of educational movements, ideologies and their attending theories of knowledge.

Pedagogical leadership and funds of knowledge

These attending, and often competing, theories of knowledge highlight another critical debate when exploring knowledge in ECE – that surrounding what (or who) is at the centre of the learning experience. *Te Whāriki* pushes thinking beyond child-centred knowledge – a social, cultural and historical approach to thinking knowledge in ECE. Work by Kate Ord et al. pushes this knowledge further through exploration of collective knowledge – a transformative mediating tool for pedagogical leadership that works with and alongside Māori leadership, and with and alongside the concept of whanaungatanga (relationship through shared experiences).³ In addition, the concept of funds of knowledge, which comes from educational researchers in Arizona, emphasises the importance in the ECE curriculum of knowing and valuing the knowledge that children experience within their many home, family and community environments. The challenge for a teacher is then not just to know each child, but to know the funds with which the child arrives at the centre. This is a significant challenge if we are at the same time to allow that a child’s knowledge of the world may at times be at odds with the knowledge valued by their family.

The 1996 image of *Te Whāriki*



One way to think about this significant challenge is to consider the idea of what we will call, following Ord et al., ‘I/we pedagogy’.⁴ This pedagogy addresses an important realisation that all knowledge is (a fund of) knowledge that both creates our uniqueness and joins us together. From this perspective, in ECE knowledge cannot ever be owned or exploited as our own and only for us. This approach is a shift away from knowledge privileges (e.g., where some children receive more knowledge benefits; or where ECE centres regard knowledge as a way of profiting from children’s learning and so actively prevent knowledge being shared with other competing ECE centres). The *i/we* pedagogy recognises that knowledge is always co-constructed and made possible in knowledge-building communities. It becomes important then, to continuously and critically consider the processes of knowledge inclusion and exclusion, those that determine the interplay of different knowledge, and why some knowledge becomes and maintains a dominant position and other knowledge becomes and remains subordinated – power and knowledge go together.⁵

Cultural historical activity theory and transdisciplinary tools

These ideas regarding knowledge in ECE are being taken further through cultural historical activity theory (CHAT). Advocates for developing this deep and broad approach to knowledge, such as Marilyn Fleer and Joce Nuttall, are concerned with how culture and/or knowledge is transmitted and passed or handed on, in particular from generation to generation.⁶ This work builds on the socio-constructivist notion of cultural tools. From this perspective, the different knowledge/s (an intentional shift from just the singular to the singular and plural) of curriculum, pedagogy, sociology, philosophy, aesthetics and child development, often perceived as different academic knowledges, can be thought of as transdisciplinary knowledges that produce and provide tools for thinking, working and playing with and in the world.

Yet within and across each different disciplinary knowledge/s, knowledge/s of different cultural practices emerge as a result – whether these be the way gardening happens or something akin to how bread is understood and/or made. Hence, the different disciplinary knowledge/s articulated in *The New Zealand Curriculum* can be thought of as funds of knowledge/s that are integral to *Te Whāriki*. Together, these curricula can be understood as something that provides a frame of shared and increasingly complex ways of thinking. Exploring known worlds, together with opening up opportunities for exploring not-yet-known/possible worlds with young children, opens up opportunities for thinking knowledge/s differently in ECE.

The CHAT approach values young children's engagement in the activities (and the people, places and things used to enact these activities) that emerge as a result of children's active engagement in the everyday social, cultural life/lives they live. CHAT challenges the reduction of children's learning to play. The purpose here is to incorporate new ways of thinking about the relationship between play, work and playfulness. Research by Avis Ridgway, Gloria Quiñones and Liang Li offers a provocation regarding the relationship between play and knowledge for children's education.⁷ They see 'pedagogical play' as having two characteristics:

1. *conceptual reciprocity*, whereby the pedagogical approach acknowledges and supports children's academic learning through joint play – or collective inquiry; and
2. *agentic imagination*, whereby the child's (or children's) imagination/motives in play experiences is/are recognised for the critical role they play

In Aotearoa New Zealand, thinking about this kind of knowledge of children's learning is also developed in the work by Margaret Carr and Wendy Lee, who apply what they call split-screen analysis to assessment.⁸ This approach activates teacher interest in analysing narratives of children's learning because it highlights the interrelationship between dispositional knowledge and content knowledge.

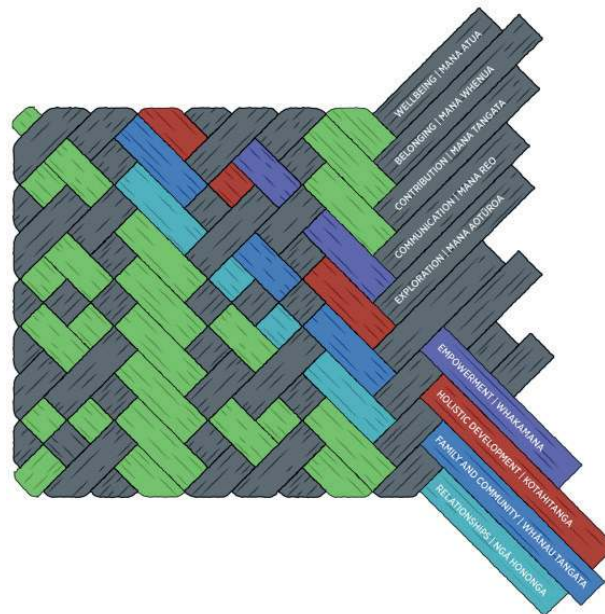
Yet both of these approaches to knowledge have a tendency to be reduced to matters concerning the mind – as something one has, owns, attains and contains through one's exploration of the world. Early childhood teachers are taught this through the work of Jean Piaget, whose take on cognitive psychology has significantly shaped a knowledge of the child as a knowledge adaptation machine. While clearly Piaget afforded the body a status in the process of learning, that status was subordinate to the mind. This knowledge has been challenged through attention to the embodiment of knowledge. For instance, Gilles Deleuze develops an equally valuable three-pronged intersecting epistemological frame for thinking the world: 1) science is understood as offering ways of knowing the world with patterns; 2) philosophy with concepts (language); and 3) art with affect.⁹

Knowledge as thought is materialised in the brain (i.e., in the body) as sensation, as dynamic movement. This interest in (bodily) thought as movement helps us to understand how we make sense of the world, and how we come up with a language for our experiences. This approach to making sense of knowledge/s is emphasised in a growing interest in *gesture*. For instance, in early childhood, exploring and understanding gesture in infancy as an energising act that is central to initiating and sustaining (playful) communication with others is offering a new knowledgeable way of thinking the very young child as an active (proactive) and reciprocal communicator in the world. This growing interest is not unlike the way that a revived and excitable interest in gesture in the art world is offering artists new ways of forming, messy or otherwise, gestural images and image-making techniques. Yet many people struggle to understand the need for this kind of knowledge in ECE.

The third spaces and knowledge trajectories

A recent interest in the ‘middle’ (or the ‘third’) space, the space that exists in between that of the mind of the child as learner and the environment, has prompted researchers (e.g., Carr, Smith, Duncan, Jones, Lee and Marshall) to consider what happens when an understanding of learning (knowledge, skills or otherwise) incorporates a shift in focus – a shift that takes the focus away from knowledge as content to one that includes the verb, the processes of coming to know(ledge) (i.e., knowing).¹⁰ From this perspective, knowing why, when, where and how to engage in the application of knowledge/s are equally valued. What becomes important then in ECE, for teachers, children, and whānau, is having the inclination, the imagination, the social and cultural capital, the opportunities to engage in connecting knowing (making connections, with people/s, places and things) and in connecting the knowing (across time, space) with the different worlds that surround us.

The 2017 image of *Te Whāriki*



These ideas of connecting knowing and connecting the knowing are reiterated in the ‘knowledge-building communities’ (or in this instance, knowledge/s) approach. Sue McDowall describes an approach that works with knowledge/s as ‘things’ that are actively and collaboratively built in communities (stored in communities, digitally or otherwise – knowing how to navigate these storage ‘houses’ then becomes important).¹¹ Here knowledge/s are valued as things that are held in a collective rather than, or as well as, in the embodied minds of individuals. Learning how to build knowledge communities, McDowall argues, involves ‘opportunities to think about, talk about, and work with knowledge in ways that are similar to those of knowledge workers’, such as those who put knowledge to work play with the possibilities it offers ‘out there’ in the world/s beyond that of the early childhood (or school setting).

These trajectories of knowledge/s in ECE highlight that the child’s knowledge/s are both a central and open driver of the curriculum. *Te Whāriki* used the terms ‘competent’ and ‘confident’ in 1996 to describe what the child will be, and in 2017 to describe what the child already is. The knowledge of the child is then not what should be taught to the child because they are participants in a planned curriculum, but rather it is what the child arrives with, and it is what the child chooses to learn. This approach recognises the kind of ‘intellectual equality’ that philosopher Jacques Rancière argues is the essential condition for emancipatory education in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.¹² Put simply, if the child’s intellectual freedom is an educational aim, then the knowledge the teacher must have is that the child is already intellectually free.

This is not to say that in all, or even many, ECE centres the interests of each child are the primary driver of the curriculum. Indeed, the very idea of an individual child’s interests is open to debate for a curriculum approach that abides largely by the idea that knowledge and learning are, and should be, socially and relationally, rather than biologically and individually, mediated (an approach that works with the idea of I/we identified above). In other words, the focus in ECE (at least guided by the approach to knowledge/s evident in the national curriculum) might be better understood as a shared intellectual freedom.

And there are no doubt many teachers and parents who reject this position. For instance, they may believe that the interests of the child or children are wonderful but at the same time not what children really need to know. One can see these beliefs in practice where ECE centres plan specifically, programmatically and prescriptively for what are often called 'little scholars' activities where children prepare for primary school, or at least a certain view of what primary school is and what the primary school curriculum expects children to know. There are quite a few points to address on this matter, but we only have space here to present a few:

1. All activities and experiences are academic and scholarly, not just reading, writing, counting, etc.
2. Children learn to count in many ways, for a large(r) number of, and increasingly more complex, different purposes.
3. Some children will learn that they are not learners on account of the way they are forced to engage in these so-called academic activities.
4. With pressure on primary schools to adopt innovative learning environments (ILE) or FLE models, the prescribed literacy and numeracy activity (which not many adults remember fondly) may soon be a thing of the past for most children.

Conclusion

Knowledge in ECE is not static, it sometimes moves in response to current social and political concerns or whims. Other times it moves in response to disciplinary knowledge/s that move too – that of pedagogy, of the child/childhood, of development and/ or other theories that inform the different discourses, sometimes dominant, that abound in ECE. These shifts in knowledges are responsive to the changing postmodern worlds. A growing mindfulness of other ways of knowing emerges, and with it new ecologies of knowledge/s. Teachers tied up in the everyday worlds they encounter are often challenged to make meaning, or sense of, these shifts in knowledge/s, the shifts in thinking that these new knowledge/s demand, and as a result the changes that might emerge are slow or non-existent. Such perceived resistance to changing ways of thinking and changing knowledges is complex.

The final point to make around knowledge/s and ECE is that the growth of ECE can be understood, playfully and seriously, as a *thing*. Thinking about ECE as a thing invites us to take seriously the different ways in which things appear to us. In John Carpenter's 1982 movie *The Thing* scientists in Antarctica are confronted by a shape-shifting alien that can assume the appearance of the people and animals it kills.¹³ Meanwhile, in the thinking of German philosopher Martin Heidegger, the thing is an essence that reveals being in the world.¹⁴ The task for the study of knowledge in ECE is to explore such radical possibilities in terms of experience. For instance, clearly identifiable (although constantly shifting) professional knowledge/s about early childhood development, curriculum, pedagogy, reflective practice, politics and more have become a defining character of the sector. More than this, such knowledge/s are employed to limit who can and cannot work in the sector, create hierarchies in terms of the ways in which adults work with children, and justify the contribution of the sector to the nation (albeit with very little recognition by the nation given the globally recognised parlous state of early childhood teacher professional status and working conditions). On one level then, professional knowledge has, like a hostile alien shapeshifter, taken on the form of the knowledge of diverse communities and then consumed those communities (consider, for instance, the case of Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust and the Waitangi Tribunal's findings in *Matua Rautia: The Report on the Kōhanga Reo Claim* regarding the failure of government to recognise and value the knowledge regarding childhood, education, care and learning that guides Te Kōhanga Reo).¹⁵ Alternatively, knowledge/s as things in ECE can excite an understanding of a rich tapestry of shared lives.

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Janita Crow is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education, Auckland University of Technology. She has completed a number of collaborative Teaching and Learning Research Initiatives (TLRI) that work with different knowledges inside/outside early childhood education: Enhancing Mathematics Teaching and Learning in Early Childhood (2005); Titiro Whakamuri, Hoki Whakamua: We are the future, the present and the past: Caring for self, others and the environment in early years' teaching and learning (2010); and, What's special about teaching and learning in the first years? Investigating the "what, hows and whys" of relational pedagogy with infants and toddlers, (2011). Currently, Crow engages an interdisciplinary research methodology that recognises art, philosophically speaking, as a site of knowledge production and engagement, learning and exchange. This methodology utilizes a co-curatorial research method that results in exhibition-making inside/outside education.

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