

# Teachers and Curriculum



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

KAIAKO ME TE MARAUTANGA

VOLUME 16, ISSUE 2, 2016



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Special Section: The sigmoid curve

Rosemary Hipkins and Bronwen Cowie

General Section

Kerry Earl and Bill Ussher

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## About the Journal

Teachers and Curriculum is an online peer-reviewed publication supported by Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research (WMIER), Faculty of Education, The University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand. It is directed towards a professional audience and focuses on contemporary issues and research relating to curriculum pedagogy and assessment.

ISSN 2382-0349

## Notes for Contributors

Teachers and Curriculum welcomes

- innovative practice papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words, and up to five keywords;
- research informed papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words, and up to five keywords;
- thinkpieces with a maximum of 1500 words; and
- book or resource reviews with a maximum of 1000 words.

## Focus

Teachers and Curriculum provides an avenue for the publication of papers that

- raise important issues to do with the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment;
- reports on research in the areas of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment;
- provides examples of innovative curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practice; and

- review books and other resources that have a curriculum, pedagogy and assessment focus.

### **Submitting articles for publication**

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### **Layout and number of copies**

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### **Foot/End Notes**

These should be **avoided where possible**; the journal preference is for footnotes rather than endnotes.

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References must be useful, targeted and appropriate. The Editorial preference is APA style; see *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (Sixth Edition). Please check all citations in the article are included in your references list, if in reference list they are cited in document, and formatted in the correct APA style. All doi numbers **must** be added to all references where required. Refer: <http://www.crossref.org/>

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### **Acknowledgement of Reviewers**

Thank you to the reviewers for their contribution to the process and quality of this issue. Many thanks to those who also helped with a review but the paper did not make it to this issue.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Special Section

<i>The sigmoid curve as a metaphor for growth and change</i> Rosemary Hipkins and Bronwen Cowie	3
<i>How can innovative learning environments promote the diffusion of innovation?</i> Mark Osborne	11
<i>The changing landscape of one primary school's mathematics curriculum</i> Wendy Dent and Jane McChesney	19
<i>Staying on the journey: Maintaining a change momentum with PB4L School-Wide</i> Sally Boyd	27
<i>Planning for sustainability from the outset</i> Janet Bourne	37

### General Section

<i>Introduction: General Section</i> Kerry Earl and Bill Ussher	45
<i>Reflective Practice AND Inquiry: Let's talk more about inquiry</i> Kerry Earl	47
<i>Listening to the voices of struggling students: A literature review</i> Janet Blaauw	55
<i>ThinkPiece: "Tell me, where do the children play?" Encouraging cross-sector conversations</i> Jeanette Clarkin-Phillips	61
<i>Thinkpiece 'We need something different to make a difference': Applying for the Teacher Led Innovation Fund</i> Rachel Allan	65

## THINKPIECE: “TELL ME, WHERE DO THE CHILDREN PLAY?” ENCOURAGING CROSS-SECTOR CONVERSATIONS

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Those of us old enough to know Cat Stevens (or those who just like good music) will be familiar with the title phrase and Cat’s plea to not let technology and progress take away spaces for children. My reason for using this phrase is slightly different in that my ‘where’ of children’s play has an education focus. Although there are complex reasons why young children’s play may be at risk, for the purposes of this Thinkpiece I am drawing attention to how encouraging conversations between early childhood and school teachers could provide opportunities for play.

Children love to play and as Vygotsky contended: “In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behaviour. In play it is as though he were a head taller than himself” (1978, p. 102). This conjures up an image of the child in control, the child being whom he / she wishes to be and ‘dancing to the tune’ that is in his / her head, negotiating rules and rituals with peers to achieve their outcomes. Those of us privileged to teach in early childhood settings, and spend our days interacting with children as they play, appreciate the rich learning that occurs during play. Much of this learning would be identified in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (NZC) as key competencies: relating to others, thinking, managing self, using language symbols and texts and participating and contributing in ways not necessarily seen in other aspects of the curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007).

Another significant aspect of children’s play is the richness of oral language and communication skills (both verbal and non-verbal) that can develop. A variety of studies have shown that in play children’s oral language is far more sophisticated than the language they are so often reduced to as they follow instructions and learn the technical skills of reading and writing (Dockett & Flear, 2003; Smith, 2013). Opportunities for young children to tell complex stories can be limited when they are required to think of a story to ‘write’ (possibly a sentence that will take them a significant amount of time to get down on paper) when they may be buzzing with all sorts of creative ideas. The provision of a range of open-ended resources such as paints, collage, blocks, and sand enables children to express themselves in what Malaguzzi, the founder of Reggio Emilia centres calls “the hundred languages of children” (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998) and tell their complex stories through their play.

The introduction of National Standards and the pressure placed on school teachers to ensure that children are meeting the standards, couples with an OECD initiative for six countries (New Zealand is a contender) to trial an international assessment of children’s early learning (Moss et al., 2016) indicates that ‘where do the children play?’ will also become ‘when do the children play?’. Such initiatives mean that there can be a strong emphasis on young children acquiring formal literacy and numeracy skills in order to ‘succeed’ and meet standards. The ‘push down’ affect, as parents and families stress about their child’s education, leads to younger and younger children being encouraged or even required to stop ‘playing’ and start ‘learning’. Overseas research in countries that have adopted competitive models based on national standards and testing show that opportunities for young children to play and explore in a relaxed and uninterrupted manner can be restricted (Alexander, 2010; Moss, 2014).

In 2015, I was appointed to a ministerial advisory group on early learning. One of the terms of reference for this group was: to provide advice to the Minister on practical ways to align curriculum planning, implementation and evaluation across early learning services and the early years of school and kura (Indigenous Māori language schools). One of the recommendations of the Advisory group to support children’s continuity of learning and mitigate some of the obligations to engage children in formal learning on school entry was that primary schools give consideration to the establishment of

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ISSN: 2382-0349

Pages 61–63

reception classes for five-year-old children, with curriculum planning, assessment and evaluation based on the national early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki*<sup>i</sup> (Ministry of Education, 1996). Such an initiative should provide opportunities for dialogue between the sectors as teachers grappled with understanding each other's curricula, explored the similarities and implemented programmes based on the commonalities of the curricula. It would also advocate that young children should be able to spend more of their childhood playing and exploring in an environment that values a range of expressive media rather than a narrow focus on the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills.

Another development that has the potential to restrict children's opportunities for unstructured and sustained self-initiated play is the current Education (Update) Amendment Bill (New Zealand Government, 2016). This Bill, which has passed its first reading in Parliament and is going through a six month Select Committee process, proposes that, if a school chooses, children start school in cohorts at the beginning of the term that a child turns five. This, of course means should the amendments be adopted that there will four year olds starting formal schooling. The legal age for starting school is six years old, yet there is more of an appetite to have children start school at an earlier age rather than enforce the six year old mandate. If we are interested in achieving better PISA results (and I am not advocating that these measures take on any further significance) then we should be influenced by the starting age of formal schooling in those countries that do well in OECD assessments. This Education (Update) Amendment Bill is exactly what the Ministerial Advisory Group hoped to avoid by recommending that present legislation be amended to enable schools to enrol five-year-old children in cohorts.

There are a number of schools across the country implementing a play-based curriculum in New Entrant classrooms. Recently I was in a school where the New Entrant teachers are making changes to their programme by creating different spaces for teaching and learning including a significant amount of time for children to choose activities and essentially, play. As I observed children during this time I saw a wide range of key competencies being enacted and children taking on roles or using skills and dispositions that were far less evident during 'formal' teaching times. A Northern Ireland study researching a play-based curriculum in primary schools (Walsh, McGuinness, Sproule, & Trew, 2010) found that a more informal approach to teaching increased teacher's interactions and discussions with their Year 1 students and provided better opportunities for assessing children's learning needs. The article highlights the tensions faced by primary teachers in making pedagogical shifts to adapt to a play-based environment.

I am concerned that, despite these local initiatives, there is still misconception, mistrust, professional jealousy and sector bias between early childhood education (ECE) and primary schooling in Aotearoa New Zealand. While it has been mandatory for ECE centres to have written transition to school policies this is not the same for schools. The development of a transition to school policy has required ECE centres to engage with schools, have some knowledge of the *New Zealand Curriculum* and to know about the transition policies and practices of the schools in their area. On the other hand, the *NZC* provides ample prompting for schools to engage with the ECE curriculum. The diagram on page 42 of the *NZC* outlining the strands of *Te Whāriki* and the corresponding key competencies of the *NZC* clearly demonstrates the connections between the two curricula but how many school teachers know what is contained in the strands of *Te Whāriki* that align with the key competencies? Many schools are still exploring the identification and assessment of the key competencies and would find it valuable to have a conversation with early childhood teachers about the ways in which the strands and learning dispositions are assessed in ECE.

How, then, can teachers of children in their early years (0–7) 'push back' against some of the policies and initiatives that are looming internationally and nationally such as the OECD early learning assessment and the Education (Update) Amendment Bill and advocate for children to have their entitled childhood? My suggestion is that we begin (where we haven't already) conversations between early childhood and school teachers, particularly those who work in the junior classroom. We have much to learn from one another and as we learn about each other's values and beliefs about teaching

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<sup>i</sup> *Te Whāriki* means a woven mat for all to stand on. The metaphor encapsulates the weaving of curriculum strands and principles.

and learning we will be better equipped to support children's transition from one setting to another and provide opportunities for children to play and explore. Perhaps it needs someone in a school or ECE centre to pick up the phone and say: "Would you like to come and have a conversation with us about teaching and learning in your context?"

Yes, there may be constraints around time and other factors but a mutual interest and commitment to the holistic learning and development of children should be motivation enough.

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