

More Than Care: Reframing Infant Pedagogy in ECE Contexts within Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

Within Aotearoa New Zealand, *Te Whāriki*, the national early childhood education (ECE) curriculum, promotes an image of infants as confident, capable learners from birth. This document highlights infant agency and capacity to contribute as active participants in their own learning journeys. Despite this positioning, infant pedagogy remains under-researched and under-represented in national and international scholarship. Infant pedagogy reflects the reciprocal relationship between teaching and learning through kaiako (teacher/s) and pēpi (infants from birth to approximately two-years-old) interactions. Despite this positioning, research often privileges developmental outcomes over pedagogical and relational dimensions. Responding to this tension, this study asks *what conditions within Aotearoa New Zealand's ECE sector impact how infant pedagogy is enacted?* Undertaking both a critical literature review and autoethnographic narrative reflections, this dissertation examines the everyday complexities of how infant pedagogy is understood and enacted within contemporary ECE settings. Focusing on the Aotearoa New Zealand context enables examination of how the relational aspirations of *Te Whāriki* are experienced within the realities of contemporary ECE provision. Combining a critical literature review with narrative autoethnographic reflection provides insight not only into dominant theories and expectations surrounding infant pedagogy, but also into how these are negotiated, challenged, and enacted within everyday practice. Together, these approaches illuminate the often-overlooked conditions that shape possibilities for responsive and relational infant pedagogy.

The findings suggest that while relational pedagogy provides a crucial foundation for recognising infants as active participants in learning, its enactment is often constrained by organisational culture, structural conditions, and expectations placed upon kaiako. The study argues that meaningful infant pedagogy depends not only on responsive relationships, but also on the conditions that enable those relationships to flourish, including teacher wellbeing, reflective practice, and pedagogical responsiveness. Rather than proposing an alternative pedagogy, this dissertation calls for a reframing of infant learning that recognises the interconnected influence of relational, organisational, and structural factors. These insights contribute to ongoing conversations about infant pedagogy in Aotearoa New Zealand and offer implications for

researchers, practicing kaiako, teacher educators, and educational leaders seeking to strengthen relationally responsive learning environments for pēpi.

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Attestation of Authorship

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

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Introducing Infant Pedagogy: An Inquiry with Aotearoa New Zealand

Introduction

This dissertation seeks to explore how infant pedagogy is understood and enacted within contemporary early childhood education (ECE) settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. I was prompted to investigate this topic because my own understanding of infant pedagogy has undergone a significant transformation over the course of my career to date. When I first began working with pēpi (infants from birth to approximately two-years-old) as a first-year tauira kaiako (student teacher), I held the assumption that infant teaching was less engaging and complex than teaching older children. However, through my experiences as both a tauira kaiako and having opportunities to observe skilled and responsive infant teachers, these beliefs were challenged. I came to recognise the depth, intentionality, and relational nature of infant teaching, and the profound impact that strong, responsive relationships have on the learning of pēpi, including their wellbeing and development. During this time, I became increasingly aware of the tensions between pedagogical ideals and the realities of contemporary ECE settings. While many kaiako (teacher/s) strive to provide pēpi with attentive, individualised, and relationship-based care, organisational and structural conditions, such as staffing, group sizes, ratios, and institutional expectations, can limit opportunities for the one-on-one interactions that support pēpi to thrive. These experiences led me to question not whether relational approaches were valuable, but whether the conditions surrounding contemporary ECE practice consistently enable these approaches to be realised. While relational pedagogy is widely valued within infant education, I became increasingly aware of a gap between what pēpi are understood to need and the conditions available for kaiako to provide it.

Infant Pedagogy Within Aotearoa New Zealand

While *Te Whāriki*, Aotearoa New Zealand's national ECE curriculum, provides a clear curriculum vision for teaching and learning with pēpi, questions remain about how this vision is understood and enacted within contemporary ECE settings. Within this context, a relational understanding of infant pedagogy is reflected in the curriculum, which positions infants as

competent and confident learners, while emphasising responsive, reciprocal relationships as central to learning and development (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017). Although these principles provide an important pedagogical foundation, research increasingly questions the extent to which they can be consistently realised within contemporary ECE settings. This is because a growing body of research suggests a persistent misalignment between the relational aspirations of infant pedagogy and the realities of practice within contemporary ECE settings across Aotearoa New Zealand (Aspden et al., 2021; Dalli et al., 2011; Davis & Dunn, 2019; Delgaard et al., 2022; Gath et al., 2023; Gibbons et al., 2017; Guard, 2025; McLaughlin et al., 2015).

Researchers have identified a range of challenges that can constrain the enactment of relationship-based infant pedagogy, including large group sizes, high workloads, staffing pressures, and increasing organisational demands (Aspden et al., 2017; Gath et al., 2023; McLaughlin et al., 2015). These conditions can limit opportunities for sustained one-on-one interactions and responsive engagement between kaiako and pēpi, despite widespread recognition of their importance for learning, wellbeing, and development (Dalli et al., 2017; Davis & Dunn, 2019). Consequently, infant kaiako may experience tensions between the pedagogical ideals prompted within *Te Whāriki* and the practical realities of contemporary ECE environments. This misalignment raises critical questions about how infant pedagogy is currently understood, interpreted, and enacted by kaiako, highlighting the need for further research in this area.

This incongruence between the aspirational ideals of *Te Whāriki* and the realities of contemporary ECE practice has important implications for how pēpi experience their rights, wellbeing, and learning (Aspden et al., 2017; Dalli et al., 2017; Davis & Dun, 2019; MoE, 2017). Research consistently suggests that infants prosper within responsive, reciprocal, and relationship-based pedagogies (Aspden et al., 2017; Dalli et al., 2017; Davis & Dun, 2019; MoE, 2017; Gibbons et al., 2017; Guard, 2025). However, the structural conditions that characterise many contemporary ECE settings do not always support the sustained interactions and relational continuity identified within the literature as central to high-quality infant pedagogy. As a result, pēpi may have fewer opportunities to experience the responsive and unique relationships that underpin their learning, wellbeing, and sense of belonging. Understanding how kaiako interpret

and enact infant pedagogy within these conditions is therefore crucial for identifying ways to better support the rights, wellbeing, and learning of pēpi within contemporary ECE settings.

Research Questions

This disconnect, between evidence supporting responsive, reciprocal, and relationship-based understanding of quality infant pedagogy, and the realities of practice informed the development of the following research question:

What conditions within Aotearoa New Zealand's ECE sector impact how infant pedagogy is enacted?

Rather than proposing an alternative pedagogy, this dissertation argues for a reframing of infant pedagogy by recognising that responsive relationships are not produced through kaiako knowledge, intentions, or relational practices alone. Instead, they are shaped by the organisational, structural, and professional conditions within which teaching and caregiving occur. This reframing shifts attention beyond idealised accounts of relational pedagogy to examine how factors such as organisational culture, working conditions, and professional expectations influence what responsive infant pedagogy can become in practice.

To investigate this research question, I bring theory into dialogue with my lived professional experience as an infant teacher. In doing so, this study offers a more nuanced exploration of infant pedagogy and the conditions required to sustain responsive practice within contemporary ECE settings across Aotearoa New Zealand by sharing the complexities of everyday experiences that literature can omit. By bringing together theoretical analysis and autoethnographic reflection, it offers a more nuanced account of the possibilities and limitations of sustaining responsive relationships within contemporary ECE settings in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The Methodology: Combining a Critical Literature Review and Narrative Autoethnography

This study adopts a qualitative approach that combines a critical literature review with narrative autoethnography to investigate the research question. A critical literature review enables existing understandings of infant pedagogy to be examined, compared, and questioned, identifying both

areas of consensus and the assumptions, tensions, and disconnect that shape current knowledge of high-quality infant pedagogy (Thomas & Harden, 2008). This approach is particularly suited to the research question because it allows relational and intersubjective theories of infant learning to be critically explored alongside literature addressing the organisational, structural, and professional conditions that influence their enactment within and beyond Aotearoa New Zealand ECE contexts.

Narrative autoethnography extends this investigation by bringing these theoretical discussions into dialogue with lived professional experience. As Chang (2008) argues, autoethnographic writing positions the researcher's experience as a legitimate site of inquiry while maintaining a commitment to critical analysis and theoretical interpretation. Rather than presenting a single personal account, the use of fictionalised narratives allows multiple experiences and recurring patterns of practice to be explored, attending to the complexities, ambiguities, and contradictions of everyday infant teaching, while protecting the identities of those I have previously observed and worked alongside. This approach enables the study to examine how broader organisational and structural conditions are encountered, negotiated, and made meaningful within everyday pedagogical practice.

Together, these approaches of critical literature review and autoethnography allow theory and lived experience to inform one another. When paired, each generates a more nuanced understanding of the possibilities and constraints of responsive infant pedagogy. Hence, they directly address the research question of how infant learning might be reframed beyond current pedagogical approaches within the literature alone.

Following discussions with AUT's Ethics Committee, a formal ethics approval was deemed unnecessary because this dissertation does not involve human participants or the collection of data from identifiable individuals and observations. Although this study draws upon my professional experiences as an infant teacher, it does not report observations of specific pēpi, whānau (families), kaiako, or ECE settings. Instead, the narratives presented throughout this dissertation are fictionalised accounts that synthesise experiences across my practice. This approach protects the privacy, confidentiality, and dignity of those I have worked alongside, ensuring that no individual, family, or organisation can be identified. The use of fictitious narratives written in the first-person perspective allowed me to explore the research question in

an ethically responsible manner, illuminating broader structural and pedagogical issues within Aotearoa New Zealand ECE infant settings without risking the identification or misrepresentation of individual pēpi, whānau, kaiako, or organisations.

Dissertation Overview

Chapter 1 has introduced this study by outlining the context, rationale, and significance of investigating infant pedagogy within contemporary ECE settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. It has explored the growing tension between research-informed understandings of relational pedagogy and the structural realities that shape everyday practice, highlighting the need to critically examine how infant learning is understood and enacted. The chapter has also presented the research question guiding this inquiry and provided an overview of the methodological approaches adopted to investigate it.

Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature relating to infant pedagogy, relational approaches to learning, and the structural conditions influencing practice in ECE settings, establishing theoretical foundations for this study. The chapter is organised around a series of key tensions identified within the literature. Each tension is explored through a dedicated section that synthesises relevant research, identifies key insights, and considers the implications for infant pedagogy and practice. Following this exploration, key insights and implications are outlined, demonstrating how these tensions contribute to ongoing debates about what constitutes quality infant pedagogy in Aotearoa New Zealand. Together, these discussions provide the theoretical framework for exploring possibilities for reframing infant learning beyond current pedagogical approaches.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach adopted throughout this study. Situated within an autoethnographic framework, the chapter explores my positionality as a researcher and the ways in which my experiences as a kaiako working with pēpi have shaped this inquiry. This chapter also discusses the bicultural responsiveness underpinning the study, alongside the reflexive practices used throughout the review in Chapter 2, explaining how key tensions, insights, and implications were identified and analysed. Finally, ethical considerations are addressed, including the use of fictitious narratives as a means of exploring practice-based

experiences while maintaining confidentiality and protecting identities of pēpi, whānau, and kaiako.

Chapter 4 presents the autoethnographic component of this study through three fictitious narratives informed by my experiences as a taura kaiako and qualified kaiako working with pēpi in Aotearoa New Zealand ECE settings. Written in a first-person voice, each narrative has been intentionally constructed to illuminate a key tension identified within the literature review in Chapter 2. While fictitious in form, the narratives are grounded in the realities, complexities, and contradictions encountered within infant teaching practice. Following each narrative, a critical discussion connects the experiences portrayed to the relevant literature, highlighting how broader pedagogical, relational, and structural factors shape the enactment of infant pedagogy. Through this process, the chapter provides insight into the ways these tensions are experienced in practice and examines their implications for the learning, wellbeing, and rights of pēpi across the ECE sector.

Finally, Chapter 5 synthesises the findings from both the literature and narratives, discussing their implications for infant pedagogy and for reimagining infant learning in Aotearoa New Zealand ECE settings. Through bringing these strands together, the chapter considers what the findings reveal about the possibilities for reframing infant learning beyond current pedagogy and argues that relational practice cannot be understood separately from the conditions through which it is enacted.

Literature Review: Contingencies and Tensions of Infant Pedagogy

Introduction

The previous chapter introduced this study as an inquiry into the tensions between relational aspirations and the everyday realities of infant teaching, seeking to better understand how to respond to the complexities of responsive pedagogy within contemporary ECE settings. Examining how the literature responds to this tension, this chapter reviews empirical studies that have shared findings about how infant pedagogy is conceptualised, supported, and constrained within and beyond Aotearoa New Zealand ECE contexts. To do so, this literature review examines infant pedagogy within Aotearoa New Zealand across six sections, beginning with an outline of theoretical understandings of relational pedagogy and intersubjectivity for pēpi learning. This body of literature provides the conceptual foundation for understanding how pedagogical ideals intersect with the professional, organisational, and structural realities of infant teaching. The review then examines how these pedagogical approaches place demands on infant teachers and their pedagogy. Following this, the structural and organisational conditions within ECE settings are explored before considering the role of organisational culture in shaping pedagogical enactment for pēpi. The examined literature then turns to teacher wellbeing and professional identity, highlighting how these are shaped by, and intertwined with, broader systemic conditions. Within this context, the review then considers primary caregiving as a practice framework designed to support relational pedagogy. Finally, a synthesis of these strands suggests/argues/contends that infant pedagogy must be understood not only as a pedagogical approach, but as a practice inherently shaped by the conditions in which it is enacted within and beyond Aotearoa New Zealand ECE contexts.

The literature included in this review was identified through a structured search of academic databases and scholarly search engines, including AUT Library Search, Google Scholar, ERIC, ProQuest, SpringerLink, and Taylor & Francis Online. Searches were undertaken using combinations of keywords relating to infant pedagogy, early childhood education, relational

pedagogy, intersubjectivity, primary caregiving, teacher wellbeing, professional identity, and children under two years of age. Each search was further refined to focus on Aotearoa New Zealand contexts. In addition, key texts were identified through reference lists of relevant publications, recommendations from previous coursework, and foundational books within the field of infant pedagogy and ECE teaching.

A funnel approach was used to determine the relevance and inclusion of literature. Initial searches were intentionally broad to develop an understanding of the existing research landscape, before progressively narrowing the selection according to relevance to the research question, publication recency, theoretical contribution, and applicability to infant pedagogy within ECE contexts. Priority was given to contemporary literature published within approximately the last decade, with particular emphasis on research published following the release of the updated *Te Whāriki*, to ensure alignment with current understandings of infant learning and pedagogy in Aotearoa New Zealand. However, formative theoretical works and foundational texts were retained where they provided important conceptual foundations for understanding relational pedagogy, intersubjectivity, and infant development. Literature was selected according to its relevance to the research question: *What conditions within Aotearoa New Zealand's ECE sector impact how infant pedagogy is enacted?* Particular emphasis was placed on studies examining infant pedagogy, relational teaching, teacher practice, wellbeing, and the structural and organisational conditions influencing teaching and learning for infants in ECE.

Given the relatively limited body of research specific to infants and infant teaching in Aotearoa New Zealand, international literature was also included where it provided theoretical, empirical, or policy insights relevant to the New Zealand context. Similarly, literature focusing exclusively on older children or educational contexts outside of the ECE field was excluded unless it offered important conceptual perspectives that informed the discussion.

Relational, Infant Pedagogy and Intersubjectivity

Infant pedagogy is fundamentally relational and intersubjective in theory, but its enactment is contingent upon the intersecting conditions of teacher wellbeing, professional identity, organisational culture, and structural constraints (Dalli et al., 2011; Gath et al., 2023; Gibbons et al., 2017; Guard, 2025; McLaughlin et al., 2015).

A substantial body of research conceptualises infant pedagogy as relational in nature, with learning emerging through ongoing and attuned exchanges between infants and teachers (Dalli et al., 2011; Gath et al., 2023; Hammond, 2009; McLaughlin et al., 2015). Central to this relational understanding of infant pedagogy is the concept of intersubjectivity. First proposed by Trevarthen (1974a, 1979a), the theory of intersubjectivity describes infants as being born with an innate capacity to engage in shared social and emotional interactions with others (Trevarthen, 1998). As such, intersubjectivity highlights the relational nature of learning and underscores the importance of responsive, attuned caregiving within ECE contexts. In practice, this is reflected in the ways teachers interpret and respond to infants' cues, gestures, and emotional expressions as meaningful forms of communication (Dalli et al., 2011; McLaughlin et al., 2015).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, relational and intersubjective understandings of infant pedagogy are strongly reflected in *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), which constructs infants as competent learners engaged in reciprocal relationships. However, this positioning operates as an aspirational curriculum vision rather than a guarantee of practice. Research within Aotearoa New Zealand ECE settings highlights significant variability in the extent to which relational pedagogy is enacted, often shaped by structural conditions, staffing stability, and organisational priorities (Dalli et al., 2011; Education Review Office, 2015). This tension between theoretical understandings and practical enactment creates space to reconsider how infant learning might be reframed beyond existing pedagogical assumptions within ECE contexts. As such, rather than simply aligning with relational theory, the New Zealand context reveals how these pedagogical ideals are mediated through systemic constraints, raising questions as to whether intersubjectivity can be consistently supported within everyday practice.

Interactional Synchrony and Infant Pedagogy

Reciprocal exchanges between teachers and infants are central to infant learning, underpinning emotional connection and early development through processes often described as 'interactional synchrony' (Dalli et al., 2011). Interactional synchrony refers to the process through which infants and teachers become emotionally and behaviourally attuned during interactions, responding to one another's cues through shared rhythms of communication, movement, and affect. Rather than representing a single moment of connection, interactional synchrony develops

through repeated and sustained exchanges where infants and teachers gradually learn to recognise and respond to each other's ways of communicating (Dalli et al., 2011). This concept emphasises the importance of temporal coordination, in which infants and teachers become attuned to each other's rhythms, gestures, and emotional expressions over time (Dalli et al., 2011). These understandings position infants as active participants in relational exchanges, rather than passive recipients of care (Hammond, 2009). As a result, pedagogy with infants is not located in planned activities or outcomes, but in the quality of moment-to-moment interactions that unfold within daily routines (Gath et al., 2023). This emphasis on relational practice is echoed within Aotearoa New Zealand ECE research, which highlights that relationships are enacted through the everyday actions and interactions through which kaiako establish trust, continuity, and connection over time (McLaughlin et al., 2015). Such research suggests that while kaiako often recognise relationships as central to practice, particularly in infant ECE contexts, the specific actions that sustain these relationships require ongoing reflection, articulation, and intentional attention.

Responding to these unique interactional cues requires a high level of relational attunement, emotional presence, responsiveness, and the ability to interpret subtle, often preverbal forms of communication. Interactional synchrony further emphasises the importance of temporal coordination, in which infants and teachers become attuned to each other's rhythms, gestures, and emotional expressions over time (Dalli et al., 2011). Such notions highlight that effective infant pedagogy requires teachers to be emotionally present, responsive, and able to interpret subtle, often preverbal forms of communication. Responding to these unique interactional cues requires a high level of relational attunement, involving continuously adjusting their responses in relation to the infant's cues, intentions, and affective states (Dalli et al., 2011; Gath et al., 2023). In this way, infant teaching involves complex, embodied, and relational forms of knowledge that extend beyond traditional understandings of instruction or curriculum delivery.

However, while relational and interaction-based approaches are widely recognised within theory, there remains limited attention to how these practices are sustained within the realities of ECE settings. These relational concepts are reflected in *Te Whāriki* which emphasises responsive, reciprocal relationships and the importance of continuity and attunement in infants' learning. However, while these principles align with the notions of interactional synchrony, the practical

conditions required to sustain such moment-to-moment attunement remain unevenly supported. This disjuncture highlights the need to reconsider how infant learning is conceptualised in practice, creating possibilities for reframing pedagogy beyond a sole focus on relational ideals toward the conditions that enable or disrupt interactional synchrony. A tension that reinforces the need to reconsider how infant pedagogy might be reframed within contemporary ECE settings within and beyond Aotearoa New Zealand. Emerging research on relational pedagogy highlights the complexity of enacting these interactional ideals in practice (Aspden et al., 2021; Dalli et al., 2011; Gibbons et al., 2017; McLaughlin et al., 2015).

Adagio Interactions: Slow Infant Pedagogy

Slow infant pedagogy is sustained through relationally guided, responsive interactions rather than isolated techniques (Degotardi, 2017; Flanagan, 2026; Guard, 2025; Hruska, 2017; Sorrells & Madrid, 2024). Drawing on the concept of *adagio* interactions, Guard (2025) emphasises the importance of slowing down pedagogical encounters to create space for sustained, meaningful engagement between infants and teachers. Grounded in theories of intersubjectivity and communicative musicality, *adagio* interactions describe the rhythmic, back-and-forth exchanges through which infants and adults co-construct connection. These interactions often occur through subtle gestures, vocalisations, and shared attention (Guard, 2025). Such exchanges require teachers to be fully present, emotionally available, and attuned to the temporal flow of the encounter. Similarly, Flanagan (2026) describes this slow, relational pedagogy as “*presence, attentiveness and relational engagement*” (p.4) enacted through everyday interactions.

Guard (2025) further conceptualises these encounters through the PRIME framework, which foregrounds elements such as presence, intentionality, multimodal communication, and a sense of relational ease. Together, the dimensions of the PRIME framework highlight that meaningful infant-teacher interactions are not produced through isolated techniques but emerge through the quality, rhythm, and responsiveness of the relationship itself. This claim reinforces that meaningful interactions with infants are intentional rather than incidental, requiring emotional availability and sustained attention. This further highlights the tension between the relational ideals of infant pedagogy and the structural conditions that often limit teachers’ capacity to enact them in practice. This provides a basis for reframing infant learning beyond abstract relational

ideals, highlighting the structural and temporal conditions necessary for meaningful pedagogical encounters.

This conceptualisation of *adagio* interactions is reinforced across broader scholarship on infant pedagogy. Hrsuka (2017) argues that learning emerges through reciprocal exchanges between children, adults, materials, and their environment, positioning interaction as a process of relational co-construction rather than one-way teaching. Within infant contexts, Degotardi (2017) further explains that these reciprocal encounters are enacted through moments of joint attention, where infants and teachers develop shared understanding through mutual gaze, gestures, vocalisations, and sustained engagement. Such interactions provide the intersubjective foundation through which language, thinking, and relationships develop over time. Extending this perspective, Sorrells and Madrid (2024) contend that meaningful care depends on slow, relational temporalities, in which emotional presence and acknowledgement take precedence over efficiency or task completion. Likewise, Flanagan (2026) argues that relational orientation is not a pedagogical strategy to be implemented but a way of being characterised by ongoing presence, attentiveness, and relational engagement within everyday practice. Collectively, these perspectives strengthen Guard's (2025) argument that *adagio* interactions are not isolated pedagogical techniques but sustained relational processes that require time, emotional availability, and shared attention to support infants' learning and development.

Within an Aotearoa New Zealand context, these relational and temporal dimensions of slow *adagio* pēpi pedagogy are reflected in *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017). The curriculum does so by emphasising the importance of responsive, reciprocal relationships and the continuity of care for infants. However, while the curriculum foregrounds the value of sustained, attuned engagement, the realities of ECE practice in Aotearoa New Zealand may limit the time and conditions required for such *adagio* interactions to unfold. This reinforces the need to reconsider how infant pedagogy might be meaningfully enacted within contemporary settings.

Research also highlights that slow *adagio* moments are often difficult to sustain within the fast-paced, routine-driven realities of ECE settings, where organisational demands and time pressures can disrupt or take priority over opportunities for deep relational engagement (Guard, 2025). Guard (2025) states that a true *adagio* interaction cannot occur when teachers experience

feelings of guilt or pressure from external workforce duties. Guard's (2025) literature also argues that these significant interactions can only be achieved when teachers feel that their team 'has their back', meaning they work within an organisational culture where colleagues actively support one another. Such environments and workplace cultures enable kaiako to prioritise responsive and uninterrupted interactions with pēpi. These findings reinforce the idea that while intersubjective, interaction-based pedagogy is well established in theory, its enactment is contingent on conditions that allow teachers the time, space, and support to 'be with' infants in unhurried and responsive ways.

Relational Pedagogy: Insights and Implications

Collectively, this body of literature suggests that relational and intersubjective pedagogy cannot be understood as a set of practices that teachers simply or innately choose to enact. Rather, it emerges within a complex interplay of temporal, structural, and relational conditions that either enable or constrain the possibility of meaningful connection. In this way, concepts such as *adagio* interactions expose a critical misalignment between pedagogical ideals and the realities of practice, challenging assumptions that high-quality infant pedagogy can be achieved without sustained attention to the conditions that make relational engagement possible. Consequently, reframing infant pedagogy requires not only a commitment to relational approaches in theory, but a fundamental reconsideration of how time, care, and interaction are valued and supported within infant ECE settings. This suggests that any attempt to reframe infant learning must move beyond pedagogical ideals alone and toward a critical examination of the systems and conditions that shape what is possible within daily practice. In Aotearoa New Zealand, these findings underscore the need to critically examine how the relational aspirations of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) are translated into practice, and how the conditions of ECE settings may both enable and constrain possibilities for reframing infant learning.

Care as Invisible Pedagogical Labour

Reframing infant learning requires reconsidering what is recognised as pedagogy within ECE. Dominant understandings of teaching have historically privileged intentional activities, observable learning outcomes, and planned experiences (Dalggaard et al., 2022; Hounsell, 1997).

However, for pēpi, learning is deeply embedded within the everyday relational moments of care that occur throughout the day (Dalli et al., 2011; Degotardi, 2017; Guard, 2025; Hruska, 2017). Within infant pedagogy, many of the practices through which learning occurs are embedded within everyday acts of care, including comfort, feeding, changing, settling, and responding to infants' emotional cues (Aspden et al., 2021; Dalli et al., 2011; Gibbons et al., 2017; Guard, 2025; Hammond, 2009; McLaughlin et al., 2015). These interactions are not separate from pedagogy; rather, they are the relational foundations through which infants experience belonging, security and connection. However, because these practices often occur within routine moments rather than planned learning experiences, they can remain undervalued within dominant understandings of teaching. Within Aotearoa New Zealand, this understanding aligns with the relational aspirations of *Te Whāriki*, which positions learning as occurring through responsive and reciprocal relationships between infants, whānau, and kaiako (MoE, 2017). However, despite the centrality of relationships within the curriculum, the pedagogical labour involved in sustaining these relationships can remain overlooked. As Warren (2019) suggests, care continues to be taken for granted and rendered 'invisible', despite being central to pedagogical work.

This invisibility has significant implications for how infant pedagogy is understood and supported. When care is positioned as an intuitive or natural aspect of working with infants, the specialised relational knowledge, emotional labour, and professional judgement required of kaiako can be overlooked (Warren, 2019). Research examining early childhood care work highlights that the emotional and ethical demands involved in sustaining relationships with young children remain hidden, despite shaping the everyday realities of teachers' work (Tadeu & Lopes, 2025). Consequently, pedagogical practices such as comforting, listening, soothing, and maintaining emotional availability may be interpreted as simple acts of care, rather than recognised as complex professional practices requiring expertise, reflection, and support (Aspden et al., 2021; McLaughlin et al., 2015; Tadeu & Lopes, 2025; Probine et al., 2025). Rather than focusing on structured activities, pedagogy for pēpi is increasingly understood as emerging through daily movements of care, connection, and communication (Dalli et al., 2011; Gath et al., 2023; Hammond, 2009; McLaughlin et al., 2015). Therefore, recognising care as a pedagogical labour requires a reframing of infant teaching beyond traditional understandings of curriculum delivery, towards an appreciation of the relational and emotional work that underpins infants'

learning and wellbeing. However, if this labour remains ‘invisible’ (Warren, 2019), the conditions required to sustain it may also remain insufficiently acknowledged.

Approaches such as Resources for Infant Educators (RIE) emphasise the importance of treating infants as *people*, and not objects (Hammond, 2009). Through practices such as maintaining eye contact, engaging in gentle communication, and responding to subtle verbal and non-verbal cues, caregivers demonstrate sensitivity and responsiveness to the infant’s communicative attempts. An example of this is informing infants of what is about to happen, as opposed to just picking them up with no warning or time to process (Hammond, 2009). Such practices require teachers to move more slowly and intentionally, positioning infants as active participants in their own care and learning. This highlights that relational approaches offer possibilities for reframing infant learning beyond activity-driven pedagogy, their enactment depends on conditions that enable attunement. The tension arises when these conditions may not always be present in infant ECE settings.

Within a New Zealand context, *Te Whāriki* reinforces this relational view of learning, particularly through the saying ‘*ā tōna wā*’ (*in its own time*) (MoE, 2017). This saying acknowledges infants as unique learners whose development cannot be separated from their relationships, experiences, and social contexts. However, the realities of ECE provision raise questions about whether such attuned practice can be consistently realised. While curriculum aspirations position infants as active participants within reciprocal relationships, structural conditions within ECE settings may constrain teachers’ ability to enact these commitments.

Infants’ Wellbeing Rights

Research suggests that care is foundational to infant pedagogy, providing the relational context through which infants experience safety, trust, belonging, and learning opportunities (Dalli et al., 2011; Gibbons, 2020; Guard, 2025). Rather than treating care and education as separate, EduCare conceptualises them as inseparable processes (Smith, 1996). Originated from Emmi Pikler (1946), EduCare was designed to create a physically safe, cognitively challenging, and emotionally nurturing environment in which infants in orphanages could be cared for respectfully, actively participate in caregiving, and develop secure relationships and autonomy

(Hammond, 2021). In the hands of Magda Gerber, this approach moved from Pikler's orphanage context into ECE, as she described herself as a bridge between Dr Pikler and American society. Gerber used the Resource for Infant Educators (RIE) approach as a tool to train parents and infant care teachers (Hammond, 2021).

Care has long been recognised as central to early childhood education. However, the concept of care, and what constitutes high-quality care, has remained subject to ongoing debate. Care within infant pedagogy is complex, contested, and socially constructed, rather than a fixed or neutral practice. This complexity challenges simplified understandings of care, suggesting the need to reconsider how infant learning is framed within relational and material contexts.

Researchers such as Banghart et al (2020) argue that access to high-quality care in ECE contexts is shaped by factors including reasonable availability, affordability, the extent to which services meet familial needs, and the capacity of programmes to support children's development. From a posthumanist perspective, Warren (2019) argues that care cannot be understood as a simple, individual act, but rather as a dynamic and relational process shaped by entanglements among people, environments, materials, and institutional expectations. Conceptualising care as a "wicked problem", Warren highlights that caring practices are not fixed or universally defined but are continuously negotiated within the daily realities of early childhood settings. Positioned within these tensions, care emerges as a concept that requires critical reconsideration within infant pedagogy.

Rather than viewing care as a stable or secondary component of teaching, both Gibbons (2020) and Warren (2019) highlight that care is deeply contested, socially constructed, and embedded within broader power relations. This suggests that the enactment of care in ECE cannot be assumed to be inherently meaningful or sufficient but must instead be understood as shaped by competing discourses of professionalism, education, and value. In this way, care emerges not as a neutral practice, but as a complex and politically situated aspect of pedagogy that directly influences how infants' experiences and wellbeing are understood and supported in practice. These insights raise important questions about what is prioritised within early childhood settings, and how differing conceptualisations of care may align with or contradict broader understandings of wellbeing.

Infant wellbeing is positioned as a fundamental right within ECE. However, the role of care in supporting this wellbeing remains contested and frequently marginalised within pedagogical discourse. The positioning of care as subordinate to education reflects deeper hierarchies within early childhood discourse, where teaching is often privileged over caregiving. Drawing on a deconstructive lens inspired by Derrida's work, researchers challenge these distinctions (Fairchild & Mikuska, 2021; Gibbons, 2020). Gibbons (2020) argues that the dismissal of caregiving as "babysitting" contributes to a narrowing of what is recognised as legitimate teaching practice. In this way, care becomes both essential and marginalised, simultaneously underpinning pedagogy while being devalued within professional and public narratives. Similarly, Fairchild and Mikuska (2021) and Langford et al., (2022) argue that the challenges faced by ECE teachers have been amplified by limitations-based views which frame early years teaching as 'low-skilled' and 'designed for women', while others refer to professionals as 'glorified babysitters' (Langford et al., 2022).

This marginalisation of care is further problematised when considering its inherent complexity. Based in Ontario, Canada, Harwood & Tukonic (2016) illustrate how ECE remains shaped by a historically fragmented split between care and education. These tensions raise critical questions about how care is conceptualised within ECE, and how infant learning might be reframed beyond dominant distinctions between education and caregiving. Within Aotearoa New Zealand, *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) foregrounds holistic wellbeing and relational learning, yet the positioning of care within practice may not fully reflect these intentions.

UNCROC Right to Care and Education

A rights-based perspective positions infants as competent rights holders whose wellbeing, development, and participation are fundamental entitlements rather than outcomes that depend solely on educational provision (Gibbons et al., 2017; Mackey & Hill-Denee, 2021; Te One, 2011; Salamon & Palaiologou, 2022). Within ECE, this perspective recognises that children's rights extend beyond protection from harm to include access to responsive relationships, nurturing care, and environments that support their holistic development. From this perspective, care is not separate from education but constitutes an essential condition through which infants' rights to wellbeing, development, and participation can be realised.

This understanding is further reinforced through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC), which identifies children's wellbeing, development, and best interests as fundamental rights, placing responsibility on education systems to create the conditions necessary for these rights to be upheld (United Nations Human Rights, 1989). Rather than positioning care as an optional or supplementary aspect of ECE, the UNCROC implicitly recognises responsive care as integral to supporting infants' holistic wellbeing and development. However, as previously discussed, the structural realities of many ECE environments may limit the extent to which these rights can be fully realised in practice. This tension is further complicated by broader societal discourses that position care as secondary to education (Gibbons, 2020), creating a disconnect between the rights-based aspirations of early childhood policy and the everyday conditions within which infant pedagogy is enacted.

This research is particularly significant in infant contexts, where care is often positioned as the primary mode of interaction, yet may simultaneously be devalued or constrained within institutional settings. This tension is clearly illustrated in research exploring the temporal and relational dynamics of everyday interactions within infant settings. This complexity not only challenges simplified understandings of care but also opens possibilities for reframing infant learning beyond static or individualised conceptions toward more relational and contextually situated understandings.

Gibbons et al. (2017) further contribute to this discussion by distinguishing between differing conceptualisations of wellbeing. A hedonic perspective emphasises the fulfilment of individual needs and the promotion of comfort, often positioning infants as dependent on adult provision. In contrast, a eudaimonic perspective situates wellbeing within a broader, relational and sociocultural context, recognising infants as active participants whose development is shaped through engagement with others, environments, and cultural practices. This latter perspective aligns closely with intersubjective and relational approaches to pedagogy, where learning and wellbeing emerge through shared interactions and mutual engagement. Although not explicitly expressed, Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017) seems to follow a eudaimonic perspective on wellbeing. The curriculum foregrounds a holistic and relational conception of development, where wellbeing is understood as emerging through interconnected domains, responsive and reciprocal relationships, and children's active participation in socially and culturally situated learning

experiences. This perspective aligns with the te ao Māori concept of ako, which is used to describe the reciprocal relationship between learners and teachers (Marshall, 2013).

Despite this growing recognition of the complexity of infant pedagogy, ongoing tensions remain regarding the professional status and preparation of those working with infants. Research highlights that infant teachers often experience lower professional recognition, limited access to specialised training, and reduced visibility within the wider education sector (Davis & Dunn, 2019). These conditions have significant implications for practice, as the capacity to engage in sustained, responsive, and attuned interactions is closely tied to teachers' professional knowledge, confidence, and sense of identity (Penman & Redder, 2023). Where such support is lacking, the relational depth for intersubjective engagement may be difficult to maintain. Taken together, these findings reinforce that the enactment of relational and intersubjective pedagogy is not solely determined by structural, professional, and policy conditions. While theoretical frameworks and curriculum documents advocate for responsive, relationship-based approaches, the extent to which these can be realised in practice remains contingent on the environments in which teachers and infants are situated. In this way, intersubjectivity is not simply an inherent capacity of the infant, but a relational process that must be actively enabled, supported, and sustained within the conditions of ECE. As a result, the enactment of relational pedagogy becomes not solely a matter of teacher knowledge or intention, but one that is deeply shaped by broader systemic and institutional factors. Consequently, reframing infant learning requires not only a commitment to relational approaches in theory, but a systemic reconsideration of the conditions that support teacher capability, professional recognition, and sustained relational engagement. In Aotearoa New Zealand, this calls for a critical examination of how structural and professional conditions shape possibilities for supporting infant wellbeing.

Rights to Wellbeing: Insights and Implications

These findings highlight the need to reframe infant learning beyond idealised relational interactions toward a more critical understanding of the conditions required to sustain them. Returning to the concept of *adagio* interactions, Guard (2025) argues that meaningful, attuned connections between infants and teachers are shaped by the pace and rhythm of practice. Drawing on intersubjective theory and the notion of communicative exchanges through which

infants and teachers become synchronised in shared rhythms of communication. Sorrells and Madrid (2024) similarly argue that attuned, reciprocal engagements depend on relationally guided temporalities that are increasingly constrained by efficiency-driven ECE routines. Empirical findings suggest that these conditions are frequently undermined in practice, with interactions described as hurried, fragmented, and shaped by competing organisational demands (Sorrells & Madrid, 2024). Consequently, routine caregiving moments are often characterised by urgency and task orientation, limiting opportunities for sustained relational engagement.

This reflects what has been described as ‘competing tensions’, where professional responsibilities and institutional expectations intersect with, and undermine, the enactment of relational pedagogy. Collectively, these findings reinforce the argument that while relational pedagogy is widely promoted within theory and curriculum, its enactment in practice is far more complex. Within the Aotearoa New Zealand context, these tensions are significant given *Te Whāriki* emphasis on responsive, sustained relationships. However, the time and conditions required for such interactions to occur may not be consistently supported in practice, highlighting further challenges for enacting relational pedagogy.

The capacity to engage in slow, attuned, and meaningful interactions is not simply a matter of teaching intention, but is deeply shaped by structural conditions, temporal pressures, and organisational priorities. In this way, the possibilities for “being with” infants in relationally meaningful ways are both enabled and constrained within the realities of ECE practice. In this way, infants are positioned not as passive recipients of care but as active contributors to their own learning, aligning closely with eudaimonic perspectives that emphasise relational engagement, agency, and participation. This further suggests that reframing infant learning requires moving beyond individualised notions of wellbeing toward relational and sociocultural perspectives that recognise infants as active participants within dynamic learning environments.

Overall, this body of research highlights that high-quality infant pedagogy cannot be understood in isolation from the conditions in which it is enacted. While intersubjectivity positions infants as inherently capable of engaging in shared meaning-making, the extent to which this potential is realised is shaped by the relational, structural, and professional contexts of ECE settings. The primary caregiving framework offers a critical foundation for supporting these processes,

enabling sustained, attuned interactions that underpin both learning and wellbeing. However, when structural constraints, limited professional recognition, and insufficient support for teachers intersect, the relational conditions necessary for this pedagogy are compromised. Consequently, advancing infant pedagogy requires not only a commitment to relationship-based approaches in theory, but also systemic investment in the conditions that enable these approaches to be meaningfully sustained in practice.

Primary Caregiving as a Mode of Infant Pedagogy

Primary caregiving, as a theory-derived practice, can be understood as a key pedagogical approach in relation to infant pedagogy. Primary caregiving is defined as a practice in which a caregiver is in a specialised relationship with a small group of infants, typically three to four, through which mutual trust and understanding are developed over time (Kovach & Da Ros-Voseles, 2008; Ebbeck et al., 2015, White et al., 2015). In this pedagogical act, one caregiver assumes primary responsibility for meeting the care and educational needs of this group, becoming deeply responsive to each infant's cues, preferences, and emotional expressions.

The primary caregiving theory has developed from a broader body of research emphasising the significance of early relationships for infant development, particularly within attachment theory (Ebbeck et al., 2015; White et al., 2015). Drawing on the foundational work of Bowlby, attachment is understood as a strong and enduring emotional bond that is fundamental to infants' overall development and well-being. While attachment theory has been highly influential in shaping understandings of early relationships and informing frameworks such as primary caregiving, it has not been immune to critique. Early formulations by Bowlby (1956, 1969, 1982) positioned caregiving as a biologically driven behavioural system, closely linked to infants' attachment behaviours. However, scholars such as Bell and Richard (2000) have argued that attachment theory may oversimplify the complexity of caregiving, particularly by failing to fully account for the motivations underpinning caregiving behaviour and the broader contextual factors that shape it.

Cassidy (2000) responds to these critiques by emphasising that the caregiving system is not merely reactive to infant distress, but is consciously active and influenced by multiple,

interacting factors. From this perspective, caregiving is understood as dynamic, variable, and contextually mediated, rather than a fixed or instinctive response. These critiques are significant within ECE contexts, as they challenge assumptions that responsive caregiving can be reduced to simple attunement or natural inclination. Instead, they reinforce the idea that caregiving is a complex and relational practice that is shaped by both individual and structural conditions, aligning with broader arguments that the enactment of primary caregiving is contingent rather than automatic.

However, these critiques also invite consideration of the cultural assumptions underpinning attachment-informed approaches to caregiving. Emerging largely from Western psychological traditions, attachment theory has historically privileged the mother-infant dyad and the formation of a primary attachment relationship as central to infant development (Cassidy, 2000; Warren, 2019). While these understandings have contributed significantly to recognising the importance of responsive relationships, they may not fully account for culturally situated understandings of caregiving. Within Māori and Pacific contexts, infant development is often understood through relational and collective frameworks, where pēpi are embedded within networks of whānau, whakapapa, and intergenerational relationships rather than developing primarily through a singular caregiver relationship (Rameka & Glasgow, 2015). Research with Māori and Pacific ECE services highlights that relational caregiving, home-language use, intergenerational involvement, and tuākana-tēina relationships are central practices that support pēpi wellbeing and belonging (Glasgow & Rameka, 2017; Ritchie & Rau, 2008). These perspectives challenge individualised Western constructions of caregiving by emphasising that responsive relationships can be distributed across communities and strengthened through collective responsibility. This approach aligns with *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), which emphasises responsive, reciprocal relationships as central to learning. However, its enactment remained dependent on staffing stability and relational continuity within ECE settings across Aotearoa New Zealand.

Simultaneously, primary caregiving operates within a collaborative team approach. While one caregiver takes the lead, other teachers work alongside them to ensure continuity of care, allowing infants to form secure relationships with their secondary caregivers when needed (Ebbeck et al., 2015). This team-based approach relies on cooperation, mutual support, and staff stability to maintain consistent and emotionally secure environments for infants (Ebbeck et al.,

2015). From the perspective of the research question, this perspective suggests that reframing infant learning beyond current pedagogical approaches may be achieved through structural reorganisation of relationships, rather than changes in activity-based curriculum. However, the effectiveness of this approach is contingent on stable staffing, manageable ratios, and collaborative team structures that support continuity. While *Te Whāriki* emphasises relational learning and continuity of care, the structural realities of ECE provision often challenge the consistent implementation of primary caregiving models across services.

Primary caregiving must also be understood as culturally and historically situated, with implications for how care and relational pedagogy are conceptualised in ECE. Critiques of attachment theory highlight the grounding in Western, dyadic constructions of caregiving, often centred on mother-child relationships (Warren, 2019). These perspectives are linked to broader maternalist discourses in which care is framed as selfless, feminised, and relationally exclusive. While primary caregiving builds on these foundations, it risks reproducing culturally specific assumptions about what caregiving should look like, particularly in diverse early childhood contexts. These critiques suggest that primary caregiving cannot simply be understood as a straightforward enactment of relational pedagogy but requires critical reconsideration within diverse and contextually situated ECE environments. This theoretical grounding has informed the development of primary caregiving as a relationship-centred approach to organising care in group settings. This suggests that reframing infant learning beyond current pedagogical approaches requires not only structural and relational change, but also critical examination of culturally specific and gendered assumptions of caregiving. In Aotearoa New Zealand, this understanding is particularly significant given the curriculum's bicultural foundations and culturally responsive intent. *Te Whāriki* calls for pedagogical approaches to be adaptable across diverse whānau, cultural identities, and caregiving practices (MoE, 2017).

Intersubjective and Interaction-Pedagogy and Primary Caregiving

Intersubjective and interaction-focused pedagogy interweaves primary caregiving by enabling sustained reciprocal exchanges between infants and teachers over time. International research indicates that when primary caregiving is implemented effectively, it strengthens teachers' capacity to interpret infants' preverbal communication and respond with greater sensitivity and

emotional attunement (Lee et al., 2016; Dalli et al., 2011). Research conducted by Lee et al., (2016) examined how student teachers experience primary caregiving practices. Findings of this research suggest benefits that the primary caregiving system has on both infants and teachers, and what effects the framework has on infant teachers in training. Despite initial challenges, the student teachers reported that primary caregiving fostered deeper relationships with their key infants and strengthened their confidence in developing meaningful partnerships with families (Lee et al., 2016).

Primary Caregiving: Insights and Implications

These findings reinforce that sustained, connections enable teachers to develop a deeper understanding of infants' cues and communicative behaviours (Dalli et al, 2011; McLaughlin et al, 2015). Through enacting the primary caregiving framework, the teachers believed that this system acted as a vehicle for learning about infant development, capability, care and education, working with families, working within a team, and working for emotional reward. These collective findings suggest that primary caregiving functions as more than an organisational approach to care. It provides a mechanism through which relational and intersubjective pedagogy can be enacted. In relation to the research question, this indicates that possibilities for reframing infant learning beyond current pedagogical approaches may lie in prioritising continuity, responsiveness, and sustained relationships as the foundation of learning. These findings closely align with *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) and its emphasis on responsive and reciprocal relationships. However, the extent to which these relational ideals are realised remains contingent on the conditions that enable teachers to sustain meaningful connections with infants over time.

Primary caregiving operates through the deliberate organisation of relational responsibility, where a designated teacher maintains ongoing, sustained engagement with a small group of infants (Lee et al., 2016). This implementation of the framework aims to support both care routines and learning interactions. This close relational knowledge enables infants to communicate their needs effectively, and to develop trust in their caregiver as a consistent and emotionally available presence (Lee et al., 2016). Central to the framework is the emphasis on continuity and depth of connection. The primary caregiver is usually the main responder to the

infant's needs while acting as the key point of communication between the ECE setting and the infant's family (Ebbeck et al., 2015).

Structural Constraints and Infant Pedagogy

Although attuned caregiving practices underpin relational pedagogy, they are difficult to sustain within structurally constrained ECE environments. Structural conditions significantly constrain the ability of teachers to enact relational, intersubjective pedagogy in practice. Research indicates that factors such as adult-child ratios, group size, and organisational demands directly impact teachers' ability to engage in sustained, meaningful interactions (Aspden et al., 2021; Dalgaard et al., 2022; Dalli et al., 2011; Gath et al., 2023; Gibbons et al., 2017). Dalgaard et al. (2022) found that in large group settings, teachers were more likely to adopt observational or supervisory roles, with time prioritised toward routine management and safety. This often resulted in fewer opportunities for individual engagement, with some children becoming effectively "invisible" within the group. While this study is not specific to infant settings, it provides valuable insight into how structural conditions shape interactional possibilities across ECE contexts.

These findings are particularly significant within infant contexts, where consistent, responsive adult engagement is critical for emotional wellbeing, and its absence may contribute to stress in infants (Dalli et al., 2011). These constraints highlight that reframing infant learning beyond current pedagogy is not only a conceptual task but a structural one. Even when relational pedagogy is valued, the conditions required to sustain it may be absent. As a result, the possibility of its enactment becomes limited. In Aotearoa New Zealand curricula and primary caregiving frameworks promote responsive, relationship-based approaches. However, structural realities within ECE settings create a disconnect between these aspirations and everyday practice. This raises important questions about how such pedagogical ideals can be realised within these existing systems.

Structural conditions limit interactional synchrony, undermining the relational foundations necessary for infant learning and wellbeing. Relational pedagogy relies on sustained, attuned exchanges, which are compromised when teachers cannot respond to infants' cues (Dalli et al., 2011; Gath et al., 2023; McLaughlin et al., 2015). Dalgaard et al. (2022) found that in large

group settings, teachers were more likely to adopt observational or supervisory roles, with time prioritised toward routine management and safety. This often resulted in fewer opportunities for individual engagement, with some children becoming effectively “invisible” within the group. While this study is not specific to infant settings, it provides valuable insight into how structural conditions shape interactional possibilities across ECE contexts. These findings are reinforced by infant-focused research, which highlights that consistent, responsive adult engagement is critical for emotional wellbeing, and that its absence may contribute to stress in infants (Dalli et al., 2011). These findings suggest that reframing infant learning requires recognising relational conditions such as time, continuity, and attentiveness as central to pedagogy. Without these conditions, intersubjective learning cannot be meaningfully sustained. This is particularly significant in the New Zealand context, where relational pedagogy is central to curriculum expectations. However, when structural conditions prevent interactional synchrony, the intent of *Te Whāriki* is difficult to achieve in practice, highlighting a critical misalignment between policy and lived experience in infant ECE settings.

Structural Constraints: Insights and Implications

Structural conditions must be understood as central determinants of pedagogical quality and infant wellbeing. A wide range of structural elements including group size, ratios, staff qualifications, noise levels, warm atmosphere, access to a range of interesting and age-appropriate resources, child autonomy, physical layout, consistent communication, access to pro-social behaviour, and whānau involvement of the environment have been found to directly affect the quality of education and care that infants and toddlers in ECE services are experiencing (Aspden et al., 2021; Dalli et al., 2011; Dalli, 2025; Farquhar, 1993; Penman et al., 2026; Slot, 2018; Winslow et al., 2025; Wylie & Thompson, 2003).

Internationally, concerns about increasing group sizes are reflected in movements such as Denmark’s “*Hvor er der en voksen?*” (Is there an adult somewhere?) and Sweden’s “*förskoleupproret*” (The Preschool Rebellion) (Dalgaard et al., 2022). These movements argue that larger groups undermine relational care. Across studies, smaller group sizes are consistently linked to more meaningful interactions and stronger teacher-child relationships, while larger groups promote task-oriented care. This reinforces that any reframing of infant learning must

extend beyond pedagogy to include structural reform. Without addressing these systemic factors, relational approaches risk remaining theoretical rather than transformative. As participation in ECE increases in Aotearoa New Zealand, centres become key relational spaces for infants (Dalli, 2025; Gibbons et al., 2017). This places greater responsibility on the system to ensure conditions that support wellbeing and relational learning. Consequently, structural conditions must be positioned as integral to the quality of infant pedagogy in New Zealand.

These insights suggest that reframing infant learning requires more than introducing new pedagogical approaches. It requires questioning the systems within which pedagogy occurs. In Aotearoa New Zealand, where infants increasingly spend significant portions of their lives within ECE settings, centres have become important relational environments (Dalli, 2025; Gibbons et al., 2017). Consequently, ensuring relational pedagogy is possible requires structural conditions that support teachers' ability to notice, respond, and maintain emotionally available to infants. Without addressing these systemic factors, relational approaches risk remaining aspirational rather than transformative. Structural reform must therefore be considered central to any reconceptualisation of infant pedagogy.

Organisational Culture and Infant pedagogy

Organisational culture plays a critical role in shaping how relational and intersubjective pedagogy is understood and enacted in ECE settings. Organisational culture extends beyond observational practices, encompassing the shared beliefs, values, and assumptions that guide how teaching and care are understood and enacted over time (Schein, 2016). These cultural constructions are not neutral and may reflect broader societal discourses about care and professionalism. Warren (2019) highlights that maternalistic assumptions about caring continue to exist in tension with competing discourses of professionalism, including technical, relational, and culturally responsive approaches. Such tensions influence how teachers interpret their roles and prioritise care, influencing whether caregiving is positioned as relational and pedagogical or procedural and task-oriented.

Different organisational orientations significantly influence whether relational pedagogy is enabled or constrained in practice. ECE settings can be understood as complex organisations

shaped by competing priorities (Ortenblad & Putnam, 2016). When centres operate with a ‘machine-like’ orientation focused on routines, outputs, and efficiency, caregiving may become procedural, limiting opportunities for sustained interactions. In contrast, conceptualising ECE settings as ‘cultures’ or ‘organisms’ emphasises relationships, adaptability, and holistic development. Additionally, variation can exist within centres, where individual rooms develop distinct sub-cultures that reflect differing values and practices. This socially constructed nature of organisations is reflected across several organisational theories. For example, Bolman and Deal (2017) argue that organisations can be understood through four complementary frames, each offering a different way of interpreting organisational life. A structural orientation prioritises efficiency, clearly defined roles, and rational decision-making, whereas the human resource frame foregrounds relationships and the needs of people. In contrast, the political frame highlights the influence of competing interests and power, while the symbolic frame positions shared values, rituals, and culture as central to organisational functioning. Rather than viewing one frame as inherently superior, Bolman and Deal (2017) suggest that organisational practice reflects the interaction of these different perspectives.

Research in Aotearoa New Zealand shows variability in how relational pedagogy is enacted across services, often reflecting differences in organisational priorities and shared understandings (Dalli et al., 2011; Education Review Office, 2015). These differences highlight that possibilities for reframing infant learning are unevenly distributed across contexts and may require organisational models that prioritise relationships, adaptability, and holistic development rather than efficiency-driven approaches. While relational pedagogy may be achievable in some settings, others may structurally and culturally limit its enactment. Although *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) promotes holistic and relational learning, the variability across New Zealand ECE services demonstrates that these ideals are interpreted and implemented differently, depending on organisational culture.

Altering Pedagogical Beliefs

Teachers’ pedagogical responses are influenced not only by their own beliefs about learning and care but also by the organisational cultures within which they work (Bolman & Deal, 2017). In some instances, tensions emerge when organisational expectations conflict with teachers’ deeply

held pedagogical values, leading teachers to negotiate, resist, or even leave particular settings rather than compromise their beliefs. Organisational culture develops through shared assumptions, values, and practices that evolve over time under the influence of leadership and become embedded in the everyday routines and identities of a workplace (Schein, 2016). Rather than simply directing behaviour, these shared understandings shape how teachers interpret situations and determine what constitutes appropriate pedagogical responses.

Teachers' moment-to-moment decision-making is informed by internalised beliefs, developed through participation in a specific organisational context (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Concepts such as organisational 'frames' and 'rapid cognition' (Gladwell, 2005) further illustrate how these embedded beliefs influence whether teacher responses are attuned and relational, or oriented toward efficiency. This suggests that possibilities for reframing infant learning extend beyond individual teacher capability and require attention to the organisational cultures that shape how infants, learning, and care are understood within ECE settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. Without addressing these underlying beliefs, relational approaches may continue to be constrained by dominant discourses that prioritise efficiency over attunement. The extent to which the ideals of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) can be enacted depends on whether organisational cultures support or marginalise relational ways of working, highlighting a tension between curriculum intent and daily practices.

These organisational influences are particularly evident in the rapid, intuitive decisions teachers make throughout the day. Gladwell (2005) describes this process as "blink", which is the largely unconscious ability to quickly interpret situational cues by drawing on deeply internalised mental frameworks. Although these judgements occur almost instantaneously and often feel intuitive, they are learned over time through repeated experiences rather than arising independently (Bolman and Deal, 2017). Consequently, the organisational cultures described by Schein (2016), Bolman and Deal (2017), and Morgan (2011) become embedded within teachers' habitual ways of noticing, interpreting, and responding to infants. In this way, culture operates at both explicit and implicit levels, shaping whether pedagogical responses privilege relational attunement or prioritise efficiency and task completion.

A similar argument is advanced by Morgan (2011), whose influential use of organisational metaphors likewise challenges singular understandings of organisations. As Ortenblad and Putnam (2016) explain, Morgan conceptualises organisations as machines, organisms, brains, cultures, political systems, and other interconnected forms, each revealing different dimensions of organisational life while obscuring others. Together, these perspectives reinforce the idea that organisations are socially constructed, multidimensional phenomena whose cultures shape how individuals make sense of their work. From this perspective, teachers' pedagogical responses are not only informed by professional knowledge but are continually interpreted through the cultural meanings, priorities, and assumptions embedded within their organisational context.

The influence of organisational culture becomes particularly evident when considering how different environments prioritise competing demands. For example, where a centre's culture privileges efficiency, routines, and task completion, caregiving may become procedural, limiting opportunities for sustained, attuned interactions. In contrast, cultures that emphasise relationships and emotional connection are more likely to support the kinds of responsive and reciprocal exchanges that underpin intersubjectivity. Importantly, these differences are not simply a matter of individual teacher preference but reflect deeper organisational priorities that shape what is valued, expected, and made possible in practice.

Organisational Culture: Insights and Implications

These perspectives suggest that possibilities for reframing infant learning extend beyond changing individual teacher behaviours and require critical attention to the organisational beliefs shaping how infants, learning, and care are understood in contemporary ECE settings. When organisational cultures prioritise relational engagement, teachers may be more capable of viewing caregiving encounters as pedagogical opportunities for meaning-making and connection. Within the Aotearoa New Zealand context, this highlights the importance of organisational cultures that support the relational aspirations of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), enabling infant learning to be understood as an intersubjective and relational process.

In addition to shaping beliefs and structures, organisational culture is also shaped through team dynamics, leadership practices, and cultural norms that influence what is prioritised and enacted in everyday infant pedagogy. Research suggests that when teachers feel supported within

cohesive, collaborative teams, they are more able to engage in responsive and reciprocal interactions, drawing on shared understandings of practice and collective responsibility for children's wellbeing (Davis & Dunn, 2019; Guard, 2025). In contrast, fragmented or isolating environments can reduce teachers' confidence and relational availability, contributing to more task-oriented approaches to care.

Roponen (2026) argues that leadership plays a central role in shaping these conditions. Pedagogical leaders have the power to influence how relational pedagogy is interpreted, prioritised, and enacted within teams, including the extent to which time is protected for meaningful interaction, reflection, and collaboration. Where leadership actively supports relationship-based approaches, teachers are more likely to feel empowered to slow down, engage deeply with infants, and align their practice with intersubjective principles. Conversely, where leadership prioritises efficiency, compliance, or routine management, relational pedagogy may become secondary to operational demands. This reinforces the idea that the enactment of infant pedagogy is not solely dependent on individual teacher knowledge or intention but is mediated through the leadership and organisational structures that shape everyday practice.

Additionally, organisational culture also operates through taken-for-granted norms that influence what is perceived as 'good' or 'appropriate' practice. This highlights the limitations of approaches that focus primarily on individual teacher capability, overlooking the broader organisational contexts that shape what is valued, prioritised, and made possible in daily practice. Consequently, strengthening infant pedagogy requires not only enhancing teacher knowledge and skill, but also critically examining and intentionally reshaping the organisational cultures that underpin pedagogical work. These structural conditions are closely intertwined with structural factors such as ratios, group size, and workload, which further shape the possibilities for relational engagement in practice. Within Aotearoa New Zealand, this is particularly significant given that *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) promotes relational, responsive approaches to learning. However, the extent to which these ideals are realised in practice is contingent on the cultural, relational, and leadership conditions within ECE settings.

Infant Teacher Wellbeing and Professional Identity

Teacher wellbeing and professional identity are critical conditions for the enactment of relational and intersubjective pedagogy in infant ECE settings. Studies show that teachers' ability to sustain the level of relational engagement required for infant learning is compromised by prolonged, unsupported, high-stress environments (Dalli, 2025; Dalli et al., 2011; Davis & Dunn, 2019; Kwon et al., 2022). These findings highlight that the effectiveness of primary caregiving is dependent not only on its theoretical foundations but also on the relational and emotional capacity of teachers to implement in practice. These factors shape teachers' capacity to sustain the emotional, relational, and pedagogical demands of practice. In this way, primary caregiving can be considered a pedagogical mechanism that enables the enactment of intersubjectivity through mutually responsive interactions.

Primary caregiving provides continuity of care and fosters deep relational knowledge between infants and teachers. These conditions support sustained reciprocal engagement, where back-and-forth exchanges enable shared meaning-making for early learning. In this way, primary caregiving extends beyond an organisational strategy, positioning it as a foundational approach for enacting interaction-focused pedagogy in infant ECE contexts. This suggests that any reframing of infant learning beyond current pedagogy must account for the conditions that enable sustained intersubjective engagement, rather than focusing solely on pedagogical frameworks. Within Aotearoa New Zealand, *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) acknowledges wellbeing as fundamental. Yet, the curriculum provides limited explicit attention to kaiako wellbeing. In this way, kaiako wellbeing is positioned relationally rather than as a directly supported condition for practice.

However, despite this positioning, there remains a need to critically examine how teacher wellbeing is understood and supported within ECE contexts. The National ECE curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, refers to “wellbeing” extensively, with the term appearing 49 times throughout the document; however, kaiako wellbeing is only explicitly referenced twice (MoE, 2017). Where it is acknowledged, it is positioned relationally, with the curriculum stating within the principle of Mana Tangata (Family and Community) that “*the wellbeing of each child is interdependent with the wellbeing of their kaiako, parents and whānau*” (MoE, 2017, p20). Additionally, kaiako are

framed as “*role models for practices that support their own health and wellbeing and that of others*” (MoE, 2017, p59). While these references recognise the interconnected nature of wellbeing, they offer limited guidance regarding how teacher wellbeing is to be actively supported within practice. Similarly, within the recently updated *Our Code, Our Standards* (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2026), the term “wellbeing” appears sparsely and is not explicitly framed in relation to teacher wellbeing. Instead, references to wellbeing are predominantly oriented towards learners, the profession, or broader societal outcomes.

Confidence, Support/Demands and Teacher Wellbeing

Confidence is another contributing factor that directly affects the wellbeing of infant teachers. This issue is further intensified by research suggesting that teachers are often underprepared to work in infant-specific contexts, both in terms of specialised knowledge and qualifications (Dalli et al., 2011; Gibbons et al., 2017; Penman & Redder, 2023). This lack of preparation can undermine teacher confidence and contribute to feelings of uncertainty in practice, placing additional emotional and cognitive demands on teachers working in already complex environments.

Structural factors further complicate this confidence and wellbeing positioning. Policy and organisational conditions such as staffing ratios, high staff turnover, and qualification requirements have been identified as directly influencing teachers’ capacity to provide consistent, responsive, high-quality care (Aspden et al., 2021; Dalli et al., 2011; Gibbons et al., 2017; White & Dalli, 2017). These conditions not only shape the quality of interactions with infants, but also contribute to teachers’ workload, stress levels, and overall professional wellbeing. In this way, teacher wellbeing is not simply an individual experience, but one shaped by structural and policy contexts. This is particularly significant given the specialised nature of infant pedagogy, which requires teachers to engage in complex forms of emotional attunement, interpret preverbal communication, and meet intensive physical care needs (Dalli et al., 2011).

These demands place heightened relational and emotional expectations on teachers, further emphasising the importance of wellbeing as a condition for effective practice. The significant amount of time infants spend in ECE settings further intensifies these demands, with the rapidly increasing rate that infants are spending prolonged hours in group care environments (Aspden et

al., 2021; Dalli et al., 2011; Dalli, 2025; Davis & Dunn, 2019; Gibbons et al., 2017). This positions teachers as central relational figures in infants' daily lives, increasing both the responsibility and emotional investment required for the role. As previously discussed, engaging in intersubjective, attuned, and reciprocal interactions requires sustained emotional presence, responsiveness, and relational availability from teachers (Guard, 2025).

This has significant implications when considered alongside the relational demands of infant pedagogy. Rather than viewing infant learning solely through pedagogical frameworks, these findings suggest that possibilities for reframing infant learning must also consider the wellbeing, preparation, and structural support required for teachers to sustain relational and intersubjective engagement. These findings reinforce the argument that infant teacher wellbeing is not simply an added extra to teaching, but a crucial aspect for effective teaching to occur. Without sufficient recognition and support, the capacity for teachers to engage in the kinds of sustained, meaningful interactions that underpin infant learning may be compromised. As a result, relational pedagogy becomes increasingly difficult to maintain, not due to a lack of teacher knowledge or intention, but because of the conditions within which practice is situated. Within the Aotearoa New Zealand context, this highlights a potential disconnect between the relationship-based vision of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) and the workforce and policy conditions that influence how infant pedagogy is truly enacted in practice.

Davis and Dunn (2019) argue that although research increasingly recognises the importance of the first three years for lifelong learning, there remains limited consideration of what constitutes a 'well-qualified infant teacher' and how this professional identity is constructed and supported. They highlight that working with infants is shaped by multiple and often competing discourses of professionalism, including tensions between care-oriented, maternalist assumptions and more formalised understandings of specialised pedagogical knowledge. Within this context, infant teachers frequently report low professional status, limited recognition of their expertise, and experiences of professional isolation, despite demonstrating complex and highly skilled pedagogical decision-making in practice (Davis & Dunn, 2019). These findings suggest that teacher wellbeing cannot be separated from how professional identity is constructed, valued, and supported within the sector.

In turn, this suggests that possibilities for reframing infant learning beyond current pedagogical approaches require greater recognition of infant teaching as a specialised and professionally complex form of pedagogical work. Where infant teachers are positioned primarily through discourses of care rather than expertise, the relational and intersubjective dimensions of their practice risk being undervalued or rendered invisible. Within the Aotearoa New Zealand context, this highlights the need to strengthen professional recognition of infant teachers' specialised knowledge and relational capabilities. Identifying this tension may lead to ensuring that the aspirations of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) and principles of the teaching standards (Education Council, 2017; Teaching Council New Zealand, 2026) are supported not only through curriculum expectations but also through professional structures that value and sustain infant pedagogy. Through this work, infant kaiako can be positioned as skilled professionals whose relational work is central to early learning.

Infant Teacher Wellbeing and Professional Identity: Insight and Implications

When curriculum visions are not matched by adequate structural and professional support, a disconnect emerges between pedagogical ideals and the realities of practice. This lack of sustained attention to teacher wellbeing is closely linked to broader issues of professional identity within ECE contexts. These conditions also intersect with how infant teachers understand and experience their professional identity within the sector.

While teacher wellbeing is implicitly recognised as crucial to pedagogical quality, there is limited attention to how it is supported in ways that enable sustained relational and intersubjective engagement with infants. In this way, teacher wellbeing risks being constructed as an individual responsibility, rather than a shared, structural, and organisational concern. This absence of explicit attention to teacher wellbeing within key policy frameworks becomes particularly significant when considering the professional demands of infant pedagogy in practice. These findings suggest that any possibilities for reframing infant learning beyond current pedagogical approaches require greater recognition of teacher wellbeing as a foundational condition for relational and intersubjective engagement, rather than a peripheral consideration. Within the Aotearoa New Zealand context, this highlights a potential disjuncture

between the relational aspirations of national documents and the limited policy attention given to the wellbeing conditions that enable kaiako to sustain responsive, relationship-based pedagogy with infants.

Summary

This review critically argued that while infant pedagogy is widely understood through intersubjective and relational theoretical frameworks, its enactment is contingent upon structural, organisational, and professional conditions that can either enable or significantly constrain practice. Factors such as staffing ratios, group size, workload, organisational culture, leadership, and teacher wellbeing shape the extent to which teachers can engage in sustained, responsive, and emotionally attuned interactions with infants. This raises critical questions about the extent to which relational pedagogy can be meaningfully enacted within existing ECE structures. In Aotearoa New Zealand, these tensions are particularly significant within a mixed-market ECE system characterised by high participation rates, increasing privatisation, and ongoing workforce pressures. These conditions raise critical questions about the extent to which the relational aspirations of *Te Whāriki* can be meaningfully enacted within the structural realities of contemporary ECE provision. These tensions highlight the need for research that moves beyond examining infant pedagogy as an abstract theoretical aspiration or structural concern and towards exploring how these complexities are lived and negotiated within everyday practice. In particular, within Aotearoa New Zealand, where *Te Whāriki* positions relationships, belonging, and holistic wellbeing as central to learning (MoE, 2017). Understanding the lived encounters of kaiako provides valuable insight into the tensions between curriculum aspirations and the realities of enacting responsive pedagogy. The following autoethnographic narratives therefore contribute a situated perspective by illuminating how relational commitments, professional identities, and structural conditions intersect within the everyday experiences of infant teaching.

The use of a critical literature review enables the identification of key themes and tensions across national and international research relating to infant pedagogy (Thomas & Harden, 2008). This includes relational practice, teacher knowledge, wellbeing, and structural conditions within ECE settings. Given the limited scope of localised research, international literature is drawn upon comparatively to extend and inform understandings within the Aotearoa New Zealand context.

Key policy documents such as *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), *Our Code, Our Standards* (Education Council, 2017), and the updated document, *Introducing the 2026 Standards for the Teaching Profession* (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2026) are also engaged to situate the analysis within its bicultural and curricular context.

Entering the Autoethnographic Methodology

Introduction

The previous chapter examined how infant pedagogy is conceptualised within scholarly research, offering insights into the tensions between relational pedagogical aspirations and the structural, organisational, and professional conditions that shape their enactment. Responding to this misalignment in understanding how infant pedagogy is experienced and enacted in practice, this chapter introduces an autoethnographic methodology as a means of exploring the lived, embodied and relational experiences that underpin infant teaching practice. As a qualitative research methodology, autoethnography enables in-depth examinations of the relational, pedagogical, and structural dimensions that shape teaching and learning with pēpi, allowing the researcher to critically examine how broader educational discourses and conditions are experienced, negotiated, and embodied within everyday practice (Bochner & Ellis, 2022; Chang, 2008). This approach is particularly relevant for infant pedagogy, where the quality of teaching is deeply embedded within everyday relational encounters, emotional attunement, and embodied interactions that are difficult to capture through detached forms of inquiry.

This study brings together a critical literature review and narrative autoethnography to examine the relationship between established understandings of infant pedagogy and the lived realities of its enactment. While the literature review provides insight into theoretical, policy, and empirical understandings of relational infant pedagogy, narrative autoethnography provides a means of examining how these ideas are experienced, negotiated, and sometimes constrained within everyday practice. This methodological approach responds directly to a key tension identified within the existing literature by integrating scholarly knowledge with embodied professional experience as an infant kaiako. While there is a limited body of infant-specific research in Aotearoa New Zealand, there is even less that captures the lived, relational realities of teaching in infant settings.

Together, the critical literature review and narrative autoethnographic approach create a methodological framework capable of addressing the central research question: *What conditions within Aotearoa New Zealand's ECE sector impact how infant pedagogy is enacted?* The

literature review establishes what is currently known about infant pedagogy and explores possibilities for reframing infant teaching as a specialised pedagogical endeavour rather than a practice understood primarily through the lens of care. Together, these approaches enable a critical examination of the tensions between pedagogical ideals and the lived realities of daily experiences in infant ECE settings in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Autoethnographic Researcher Positionality

My positionality as an infant kaiako in Aotearoa New Zealand provides a unique lens through which to examine infant pedagogy. Having worked in infant settings as both a tauira kaiako and qualified kaiako, I bring firsthand experience of the relational, pedagogical, and structural complexities that shape everyday practice. This position provides a situated perspective from which I critically engage with both the theoretical understandings of infant pedagogy presented within the literature and the realities of their enactment within ECE infant settings.

Autoethnography has been suggested to allow readers to connect on a more interpersonal level with the author than other methods of writing (Chang, 2008), highlighting the importance of researcher positionality and the relationships between personal experience, interpretation, and knowledge production. My experiences have provided insight into the specialised nature of working with pēpi, including the importance of emotional attunement, responsive relationships, primary caregiving practices, and the influence of structural conditions such as staffing ratios, teacher wellbeing, and organisational expectations. Importantly, this positionality enables me to identify and critically examine tensions between the relational ideals promoted within policy, curricula, and research and the realities of daily practice. The use of autoethnographic writing allows the researcher to position personal experiences as a site of inquiry (Bochner & Ellis, 2022). As such, my professional experiences are not viewed as separate from the research process but as a valuable source of knowledge that contributes to a deeper understanding of infant pedagogy within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand.

A Relational Autoethnographic Entreaty

Autoethnography was selected because the research question extends beyond what infant pedagogy is understood to be within the literature. The research question also seeks to explore how these understandings are enacted, negotiated, and at times, constrained within everyday practice in infant ECE settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. Following Chang's (2008) framework for autoethnography, personal narratives are critically examined alongside existing scholarship rather than being treated as standalone reflections. This approach requires moving beyond description to engage in analysis, interpretation, and critique, connecting individual experiences to broader structural, cultural, and pedagogical conditions. Consequently, the study positions lived experience as a legitimate source of knowledge capable of generating insights into the realities of infant teaching within Aotearoa New Zealand. This aligns with an autoethnographic approach, where personal experience is used as a means of examining wider cultural, professional, and institutional contexts (Chang, 2008).

Importantly, autoethnography challenges the assumption that researchers should separate themselves from the research process. As Bochner and Ellis (2022) argue, autoethnography refuses to exclude the "I" from scholarly inquiry, recognising that researchers inevitably bring their own experiences, values, and perspectives to the questions they ask and the interpretations they make. Rather than viewing subjectivity as a limitation, autoethnography acknowledges lived experience as a valuable source of knowledge capable of contributing to broader understandings of cultural and professional phenomena. This is particularly relevant within the context of infant pedagogy, where much of the work is relational, embodied, and emotionally situated within everyday interactions with pēpi, whānau, and colleagues.

This selection of autoethnography is also particularly relevant to the field of ECE, a profession fundamentally grounded in human relationships. Chang (2008) suggests that autoethnography can be a powerful methodology for researchers and practitioners working within relational professions due to its ability to enable deeper understanding of both self and others. Through critical self-reflection and self-examination, practitioners can interrogate how their experiences, assumptions, and professional identities have been shaped by the contexts in which they work. In

this sense, the process of examining personal experience becomes a means of understanding broader professional and cultural realities.

Furthermore, autoethnography provides direct access to a primary source of knowledge: the researcher's own lived experience (Chang, 2008). As an infant kaiako in Aotearoa New Zealand, my experiences provide valuable insight into aspects of infant pedagogy that may not be fully visible within policy documents, curriculum frameworks, or empirical studies alone. These include the emotional labour associated with responsive caregiving, the complexities of relational practice, and the daily negotiations required to balance pedagogical ideals with structural realities. The narratives, therefore, function as a bridge between theoretical understandings of infant pedagogy and the lived realities of practice.

Bicultural Responsiveness

I acknowledge that my positionality as a New Zealand European (Pākehā) researcher also shapes how I interpret and engage with infant pedagogy within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand. As a tangata Tiriti (person of the treaty), my understanding of teaching and learning is informed by my own cultural background and located within a bicultural national framework grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi. I recognise my place in Aotearoa New Zealand as grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi, carrying both the privilege of belonging and the responsibility to uphold equitable, culturally responsive, and relational practice alongside tangata whenua (people of the land). This positioning requires an ongoing commitment to reflexivity, particularly in recognising the ways in which dominant Western perspectives can influence assumptions about pedagogy, care, and knowledge.

Within this research, I am mindful of the need to critically examine how my own perspectives may both illuminate and limit my interpretations. Engaging with kaupapa Māori perspectives, alongside wider theoretical and pedagogical literature, is essential in ensuring that this study does not produce narrow or culturally sustaining and relationally grounded practices within ECE. This reflexive stance also involves recognising issues of power, representation, and voice. While this research draws on my own experience as a kaiako, it does not claim to represent the experiences of others, particularly those from cultural backgrounds that differ from my own. Rather, it positions my perspective as one situated account within a broader and diverse professional

landscape. Through this awareness, I aim to engage respectfully and critically with the complexities of infant pedagogy, remaining open to multiple ways of knowing and being within early childhood contexts. In this way, positionality is understood not as a limitation, but as an integral component of the research process. By making my standpoint visible, this study strengthens its transparency and contributes to a more critically informed and contextually grounded exploration of infant pedagogy in Aotearoa New Zealand.

My interpretation of infant pedagogy is also shaped by dominant Western educational traditions that have historically influenced ECE theory and practice. As highlighted by Rameka and Glasgow (2015), Western models of infant development have often privileged individualised understandings of children and caregiving, whereas Māori and Pacific perspectives foreground relational, collective, and intergenerational approaches. Therefore, engaging in autoethnography requires ongoing reflexivity regarding how my own cultural positioning influences what I recognise as pedagogically significant. This consideration is particularly important within Aotearoa New Zealand, where *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) positions learning as occurring through reciprocal relationships between pēpi, tamariki, whānau, kaiako, and communities. Consequently, my experiences as an individual kaiako cannot be interpreted as isolated personal accounts but must be understood within wider cultural and relational contexts.

Reflexive, Thematic Narrative Analysis

A narrative analysis was informed by the principles of reflexive themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Through a cyclical process of reading, reflection, and engagement with the literature, recurring patterns of meaning were identified across both the scholarly literature and autoethnographic narratives. Rather than seeking objective truths, this narrative approach recognises the active role of the researcher in interpreting meaning and generating understanding across a multitude of storied, lived experiences. Themes for these narratives were developed through ongoing movement between the literature, professional experiences, and emerging interpretations. This process of narrative autoethnography enabled a deeper examination of the relational, pedagogical, and structural dimensions of infant teaching.

Throughout the study, reflexivity remained central to the process of developing the narratives and the discussions they fostered in conversation with the literature and my lived experiences as an infant teacher. As both a researcher and practitioner, I acknowledge that my experiences, assumptions, values, and professional commitments inevitably influence how I interpret the literature and construct meaning from my experiences. Rather than attempting to eliminate this subjectivity, autoethnography recognises it as a key source of insight (Chang, 2008). Reflexive engagement enabled me to critically examine not only my experiences within infant settings, but also the assumptions underpinning my interpretations of those collective experiences. This process supported a more nuanced understanding of infant pedagogy and helped ensure that personal experience was continually situated within broader professional, cultural, and structural contexts.

Ethical Consideration

The narratives in this dissertation are autoethnographic composites, constructed from my lived experiences across multiple infant settings throughout my professional journey as both a tauira kaiako and qualified kaiako. They are not intended as singular or objective accounts, but as interpretive narratives that trace how my positionality and practice developed over time. The use of composite narratives is particularly important within autoethnography, as it allows experiences to be represented in ways that illuminate broader patterns of practice rather than recounting isolated incidents. I claim that this approach enables reflection on experiences that extend beyond a singular event, highlighting how everyday practice is shaped by wider organisational, pedagogical, and policy contexts.

In accordance with AUT's ethical guidelines and following consultation with the AUT Ethics Committee, formal ethics approval was not required for this study because it does not involve the collection of new data or identifiable information from participants. The guidance provided by the Ethics Committee informed the methodological design of the study, particularly the autoethnographic component. Rather than recounting identifiable events or describing specific centres, children, families, or colleagues, the reflective narratives are presented as anonymised, composite accounts informed by the researcher's professional experiences. This approach preserves confidentiality while enabling critical reflection on broader pedagogical, relational, and

structural issues within infant education. Throughout this study, the reflective accounts are offered as composite fictional narratives drawn from experiences across a range of ECE settings throughout my career to date, with careful attention has been given to protecting the identities of individuals and organisations so that no person or setting can be recognised.

Summary

This chapter has outlined the methodological approach underpinning this dissertation, positioning narrative autoethnography as a means of examining the lived, relational, and situated realities of infant pedagogy within Aotearoa New Zealand ECE contexts. By bringing together a critical literature review and autoethnographic inquiry, this study seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical understandings of infant pedagogy and the everyday experiences through which such pedagogical approaches are enacted, negotiated, and constrained. Throughout the chapter, attention has been given to researcher positionality, bicultural responsiveness, reflexivity, and ethical responsibility, recognising that knowledge production is shaped by cultural, professional, and relational contexts. The use of composite narratives and reflexive thematic analysis enables personal experiences to be critically examined alongside wider pedagogical, structural, and institutional conditions. The following chapter presents these autoethnographic narratives, exploring how the tensions identified within the literature are experienced within the everyday realities of teaching and learning with pēpi.

Stories from Practice: An Autoethnographic Expression

Introduction

The previous chapter argued that an autoethnographic methodology enables exploration of the lived, relational, and embodied realities of infant teaching by positioning professional experience as a legitimate source of knowledge. In this chapter, I aspire to provide readers with insight into the daily life of infant kaiako in Aotearoa New Zealand, whilst remaining ethically responsible for protecting infants' rights to privacy. The following chapter aims to reflect the intent of autoethnography, without revealing or representing identifiable individuals or events, through the use of composite, fictionalised narratives that preserve the confidentiality of all children, families, colleagues, and centres. Throughout this chapter will be several fictitious narratives drawn from the daily environment of an infant room. While presented as singular moments, these accounts are not drawn from one isolated incident but rather illustrate the daily realities of infant pedagogy within ECE settings. These accounts are drawn from my many experiences in infant rooms as both a taura kaiako and a qualified kaiako. Through these accounts, I aim for the reader to feel the emotional weight, structural constraints, and personal responsibility that I and other infant teachers alike experience daily.

The Fragility of Responsiveness

The narratives that follow provide a lens through which to explore how infant pedagogy is enacted, negotiated, and at times, constrained within everyday practice. However, they also create space to consider possibilities for reframing infant learning beyond current pedagogical understandings in contemporary ECE settings across Aotearoa New Zealand. In line with narrative autoethnography, this account moves beyond personal experience to critically examine how such moments are shaped by, and reflective of, broader structural and pedagogical conditions.

It is early morning, a transitional period marked by arrivals, departures, and the gradual building of the day's rhythm. One pēpi is visibly unsettled; irritable, overtired, their cries intensifying as they struggle to regulate independently. I shift

my attention toward them, aware that they need to be settled for sleep. Yet, relocating to the sleep space risks leaving the room outside the legal ratio required for teaching infants. This situation requires constant negotiation between responding to the infant's immediate need or maintaining compliance with structural requirements. I take a deep breath, attempting to soothe the infant in the busy environment, gently rocking and offering comfort as my eyes move constantly around the room. I observe my coworkers greet whānau at the door, balancing warm relational exchanges with the urgency of settling newly arrived infants. A parent lingers, seeking reassurance from the teaching team as they drop off their baby, tears welling in the infant's eyes in response to the separation. My eyes scan downward to see a non-walking infant crawl toward a provocation; their eyes light up as they inch closer. My ears perk as another infant creates sounds of frustration, unable to lift a toy off a shelf. Within this moment, attention is fragmented. My focus moves rapidly between the sleepy infant in my arms, the frustrated child across the room, the colleague navigating their conversation with a parent, and the quiet but constant awareness of ratios and responsibilities. The emotional weight I feel is palpable.

This narrative describes the emotions and thought processes while working in a busy infant room in Aotearoa New Zealand. As expressed through literature, infants express their needs through cries, gestures, and movement as they seek connection, comfort, and responsiveness from kaiako who work to meet these needs within conditions that require prioritisation, delay, and, at times, compromise (Dalli et al., 2011; Davis & Dunn, 2019; Ebbeck et al., 2015; Gath et al., 2023; Gibbons et al., 2017; Guard, 2025; Lee et al., 2016). For pēpi, this manifests as waiting. For myself, and other ECE teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand, it is experienced as a tension between intention and capacity; a desire to be fully present, responsive, and relational, alongside the cognitive and emotional load of navigating competing demands.

The tensions expressed in this fictitious narrative, between responsiveness and regulation, to relational intent and structural constraint, can be understood as situated within the regulatory frameworks, staffing ratios, and institutional expectations that affect practice. While I cannot

make claims for other infant kaiako, I recognise that my experiences with pēpi may be shared with others across Aotearoa New Zealand. In an article, newly graduated infant kaiako, Rose, discusses in an article that she feels her quality of work is often compromised by working conditions and expectations (Tesar & Farquhar, 2015). In this excerpt, Rose sees her ITE as “*idyllic*” in terms of teacher advocacy. Although over a decade old, this article is telling of the workforce pressures many infant kaiako in Aotearoa New Zealand feel. As declared in the narrative, I recognise the same emotional pull between responding relationally to one pēpi while remaining accountable to the wider demands of the room. While I cannot claim that all infant kaiako experience these tensions, the recurrence of similar accounts across the literature, together with my own professional experiences, suggests that the conditions constraining relational pedagogy have shifted little despite an expanding body of knowledge on the requirements needed for high-quality infant practices.

Wellbeing is one of the five strands in *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), which discusses infants and children’s right to have their wellbeing protected. However, as previously mentioned, the wellbeing strand appears to gloss over kaiako wellbeing, ultimately seeming less prioritised. While providing reflective questions for kaiako, the curriculum provides little to no guidance for kaiako experiencing workforce pressures. This leads me to agree with Rose’s “*idyllic*” terminology for ITE, where relational, responsive, and infant-centred pedagogy is often presented as both desirable and achievable. While these aspirations align closely with the vision of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), the curriculum offers limited guidance regarding how kaiako might sustain such practices when faced with staffing shortages, ratio requirements, competing responsibilities, and increasing workforce demands. Consequently, responsibility for maintaining high-quality relational practice can appear to rest largely with individual teachers rather than being understood as a shared organisational and structural responsibility.

Returning to the fictitious account, the fragmented tension described is not simply a consequence of an individual’s inability to be sufficiently responsive. Rather, it reflects the broader conditions within which infant pedagogy is enacted. The desire to comfort one pēpi, support another’s exploration, respond to whānau, and maintain the safety and wellbeing of the wider group existed simultaneously. However, the structural organisation of the infant room required these relational responsibilities to be continually negotiated. This highlights that responsive pedagogy

is not only dependent upon the intentions, knowledge, or dispositions of individual kaiako, but also upon the environments and systems that enable such intentions to be realised.

This tension is reflected in the chosen literature, suggesting that supporting infant pedagogy requires more than teacher commitment alone. Practices such as primary caregiving, continuity of care, reflective supervision, and opportunities for collaborative professional reflection have been identified as important conditions that enable kaiako to engage in sustained, responsive relationships with pēpi (Dalli et al., 2011; Davis & Dunn, 2019; Gath et al., 2023). Similarly, research highlights the importance of organisational cultures that value relational work and provide adequate time, staffing, and support for kaiako to enact pedagogical intentions (Kwon et al., 2022; Rockel, 2014). However, while these approaches are frequently advocated within the literature, they are not consistently embedded within policy or practice across Aotearoa New Zealand. This creates a disconnect between the relational aspirations articulated in *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) and the structural conditions within which infant kaiako are expected to realise them. As a result, the complexities of infant teaching risk being individualised as matters of teacher competence or resilience, rather than recognised as pedagogical work requiring systemic support. To further investigate these findings, future research may find value in written reflections from new graduates and experienced kaiako to compare workforce pressures across multiple levels of experience.

Reflecting on the above narrative, I am left questioning what responsive infant pedagogy can realistically look like within environments characterised by competing demands. Aligned with Guard's (2025) *adagio* interaction ideals, I entered the profession with the expectation that relational practice involved being fully present for each infant. However, moments such as these reveal the impossibility of sustaining this ideal at all times. Rather than a lack of commitment, the fragmentation of my attention reflects the realities of working within a group-care setting where multiple needs emerge simultaneously. This tension remains unresolved. I continue to strive for the responsive, reciprocal relationships envisioned within national documentation, yet I am increasingly aware that such aspirations are shaped not only by my intentions as kaiako, but also by the structural conditions within which I work. In this sense, the challenge of infant pedagogy is not simply learning how to be relational but learning how to navigate the complexities that constrain relational possibilities.

Building on this tension, the narrative further illustrates how the organisational demand to maintain (often minimum, 1:5) ratios commonly disrupts the intention to provide responsive and attuned care. This conflict is widely documented in ECE research, where scholars argue that the structural conditions of early childhood settings significantly shape the nature and quality of teacher-infant interactions (Aspden et al., 2021; Dalli et al., 2011; Dalli, 2025; Davis & Dunn, 2019; Gibbons et al., 2017). This collective research highlights how the relational and emotional demands of working with pēpi are intensified within environments characterised by competing priorities, time constraints, and regulatory requirements. Infant pedagogy is inherently specialised, requiring kaiako to engage in complex processes of emotional attunement, interpret preverbal communication, and respond to intensive physical care needs (Dalli et al., 2011). However, as illustrated by the scene above, the capacity to enact these relational practices is frequently mediated by the structural realities of the setting. In this context, the notion of ‘slowing down’ interactions, as advocated by Guard (2025), becomes particularly complex.

While pedagogical ideals emphasise unhurried, responsive engagement, the daily conditions of practice often necessitate a rapid shifting of attention between multiple infants and responsibilities. The act of being fully present with one infant is therefore not simply a pedagogical choice, but one that is constrained by the presence and needs of others within the shared environment. This results in a form of relational engagement that is necessarily distributed, where attentiveness is extended across the group rather than concentrated within sustained one-to-one interactions.

Idealised Theory and the Daily Realities of Infant Pedagogy

While the previous narrative highlights how structural conditions can fragment relational attention, it also raises questions about the approaches intended to support more sustained and responsive relationships with infants. Within Aotearoa New Zealand ECE settings, primary caregiving is frequently promoted as one such approach. By assigning responsibility for a small group of infants to a designated kaiako, the framework seeks to foster relational continuity through opportunities for attuned interactions that build familiarity and trust over time.

Throughout my experiences as both a tauira kaiako and a qualified kaiako, primary caregiving has often been presented as a means of addressing some of the relational challenges associated

with group care. However, my numerous experiences have also prompted me to question the extent to which relational connections can be intentionally structured through designated caregiving relationships. The following narrative explores one such moment, where the realities of infant relationship formation challenged my assumptions on the implementation of the primary caregiving framework:

I arrive for my shift in the infant room, having prepared for our new pēpi and their arrival the day before. I have everything organised and readily available: an introductory booklet for the whānau, a small selection of provocations for the eight-month-old, and a mental list of questions to support a smooth transition into the space. As they arrive, I greet them warmly with a “Mōrena!” and introduce myself as their primary caregiver. I invite them into the learning space, guiding them through the environment. I notice that the infant is settled in their parents’ arms, expressing calm curiosity.

As the time comes for the parent to leave, the emotional atmosphere shifts. The infant’s expression changes. Their body stiffens, and soft wails begin to call from their mouth. Following the principles of primary caregiving, I move closer and gently reach out to provide comfort as their parent provides a soft kiss goodbye. As I do so, the infant turns away from me and stretches their arms toward another kaiako working nearby.

For a moment, I hesitate. I am aware that, as the designated primary caregiver, I am expected to be the infant’s primary source of comfort and security. Yet their actions suggest that their comfort may lie elsewhere. A sense of self-doubt briefly surfaces as I question whether I should persist in attempting to settle them myself. However, the infant’s cues are clear. I follow my instinct and hand the infant to my colleague. As the pēpi begins to settle in their arms, their cries slowly subside. I remain nearby, offering reassurance and support. Although the transition is ultimately successful, it unfolds differently from the expectations embedded within the primary caregiving framework. Rather than the designated

caregiver providing comfort, the infant appears to form an immediate connection with another member of the teaching team.

In this moment, I become aware of the distinction between relational intention and relational reality. I observe throughout the day as the infant shows signs of security and safety with my colleague. Their responses remind me that relationships are not produced through designation alone, but emerge through ongoing interactions that cannot always be predicted or controlled.

Within the selected literature, primary caregiving is frequently positioned as a key pedagogical approach for supporting relational depth and continuity in infant settings. Drawing on my own experiences, primary caregiving, at times, has provided a structure through which more sustained and meaningful interactions can occur.

I have observed positive effects of the primary caregiving framework in smaller group settings where staffing is more stable, and ratios allow for greater flexibility. In such environments, infants often settle more readily when supported by their primary caregiver, and the familiarity of the relationship appears to facilitate a sense of security (Dalli et al., 2011; Ebbeck et al., 2015; McLaughlin et al., 2015). However, when considered alongside the structural conditions described in the second narrative, the enactment of primary caregiving becomes more complex. In my combined experiences, infants who demonstrate a strong attachment to their primary caregiver may become unsettled when that teacher is unavailable. Whether due to ratios, breaks, absences or competing responsibilities in the room, the relational security fostered through primary caregiving can be challenged. In these moments, infants must navigate interactions with other kaiako while their primary caregiver is elsewhere.

This highlights a critical tension within the implementation of primary caregiving. While the model seeks to promote relational depth, it operates within environments where care must remain distributed and shared. The emotions described in the narrative sit at the centre of my growing awareness that relational security cannot be assumed through assigned caregiving roles alone. In this fictitious moment, I am aware of the theoretical work and expectations as a primary caregiver, yet I am confronted by an infant whose response does not align with that positioning.

This can manifest as a sense of professional discomfort, where the inability to act in alignment with relational intentions produces feelings of guilt and unease. Moments such as these can instill uncertainty in myself, and possibly other infant kaiako. How are you *supposed* to respond when reality conflicts with theoretical understandings of relational and intersubjective pedagogy? This narrative exposes how pedagogical intentions can be unsettled by infants' active role in shaping relational attachments. The expectation that kaiako can provide consistent, attuned care to a small group of infants sits alongside the practical necessity to respond to the needs of the wider group. This suggests that, rather than functioning as a direct solution, primary caregiving must be understood as a contingent practice; one that is mediated by the same structural and organisational conditions that shape all aspects of infant pedagogy.

Learning to Learn Again: Repositioning Myself as a Novice

The following experience explores how my response as a learner was shaped not only by the guidance I received but by my own emotional state in moments of uncertainty. As I reflected on this encounter, I began to recognise parallels with the way I have responded, and continue to respond, to infants within my own practice. Rather than simply considering what effective support looks like, this experience prompted me to question how my emotional responses influence my capacity to receive guidance and, in turn, how infants may similarly experience my attempts to support them.

Kennelly and Oke (2024) describe reflection as a critical tool for supporting continuous professional development. For me, reflection is not a process removed from practice, but one that emerges through lived experience, shaping how I interpret relational encounters and informing how I respond in future moments. Through reflecting on this experience, I was able to reconsider my own assumptions about support, responsiveness, and learning.

I offer this account as a provocation for other infant kaiako to reflect on how they respond to infants when uncertainty arises, and how their emotions, assumptions, and expectations may shape those interactions. In this sense, reflection becomes a means of noticing the relational dynamics that influence our capacity for attunement and responsiveness in everyday practice.

After a long week, my fiancé and I decide to spend some time together. We drive to Snowplanet, a space where he has spent hours mastering the skill of snowboarding. I nervously walk inside for the first time, put on my snow gear, and open the doors. My heart pounds as I ride the ski lift to the top of the slope. Part of me wants to disembark as I reflect on the confidence from my childhood. *“I wish I had learned this when I was younger”*, I think to myself. He straps my feet into the snowboard, showing me how to maneuver my body. He asks if I am ready, and I anxiously nod. My first few runs are slow, but steady, and I begin thinking, *“I can do this; what was I afraid of?”*. Hours pass, and my confidence steadily increases. I now feel capable of going down the hill alone. My fiancé encourages me, informing me he will stay below to watch.

I reach the top of the slope, standing back and waiting for a break in the crowd. I clip my feet into the snowboard, take a deep breath, and push forward. I feel on top of the world. Suddenly, my board wobbles. My body becomes stiff, and my mind fills with doubt. I cannot remember how to counter this – I begin to panic. The tip of my board buries itself under a mound of snow, causing me to fall. I look up, seeking reassurance and support from my fiancé. He watches me, encouraging me to stand up. Embarrassment fills my body and tears well in my eyes as I sit in the snow. The distance between us does not allow him to see that my confidence has dissipated. I finally make my way to the bottom of the slope, where I ask why he did not come to help me. He explains that he thought I was okay, as my confidence appeared strong. In this moment, I realise he was unable to hear my inner thoughts and unaware of how quickly my confidence shifted into panic. He apologises, and I am left reflecting on my assumption that emotional states are always readable to others. How was he to know?

A useful way to further understand the significance of attuned, unhurried interaction is to consider how intersubjectivity can emerge in everyday relational contexts outside of ECE settings. In this narrative, as a novice learner navigating unfamiliar physical movements,

moments of imbalance, and repeated falls, he supported me in learning a skill he had long mastered.

In this context, I became aware of how different forms of support and responsiveness shaped my emotional and physical experience of learning. At times, I required reassurance, encouragement, and acknowledgement of effort in order to persist through difficult moments. In contrast, some of the guidance I received was oriented more toward independence and persistence through challenge, showcasing an assumption that encouragement through directness or minimal intervention would support progress. This interaction prompted reflection on how relational responsiveness is not uniform but is instead interpreted and enacted differently depending on assumptions about what support is most effective in moments of difficulty. Importantly, my experience of learning highlighted how affective responsiveness, such as fear, frustration, or uncertainty, can influence the kind of relational support that is needed in order to re-engage with a task or environment.

I reflect on this moment in relation to my practice as a kaiako, and recognise parallels in how I respond when infants experience distress. For example F when infants fall when learning to walk or climb, encounter unexpected sensory input, or become overwhelmed within the environment. In some instances, I have noticed a tendency to prioritise encouraging independence or resilience, rather than first fully attuning to the infant's immediate need for reassurance and co-regulation. This reflection has highlighted how pedagogical responses are often shaped by ingrained assumptions about what constitutes 'appropriate' support in moments of distress. However, this experience also reinforces that intersubjective engagement requires sensitivity to the emotional and relational state of the other person in that moment, rather than relying on a fixed or generalised approach to support.

As with infants in ECE settings, responsiveness is not simply about the provision of guidance, but about recognising when connection, reassurance, and shared regulation are necessary to restore a sense of safety and readiness for engagement (Dalli et al., 2011; Gath et al., 2023; Guard, 2025; McLaughlin et al., 2015). In this way, my experience makes visible how relational pedagogy extends beyond the ECE context and how attentiveness to emotional cues, timing, and responsiveness is central to both learning and connection. It also highlights how easily relational

responses can become patterned or defaulted rather than attuned to the specific needs of the individual in that moment.

What emerges across these experiences is a growing awareness that relational pedagogy is not simply a matter of intention, knowledge, or individual capability. Rather, it is something continually shaped within the conditions in which practice takes place. In both ECE and non-ECE contexts, I find myself noticing how quickly responsiveness can shift depending on the emotional states, environmental pressures, and how situations are interpreted in the moment. Simultaneously, I am aware of my own tendency to respond in patterned ways, particularly when navigating uncertainty or perceived need for independence. The snowboarding experience, in particular, made visible how easily internal states can be misread or remain unseen by others, and how this shapes relational responses. In reflecting across these moments, I am left holding a more complex understanding of attunement, one that is not constant or idealised, but negotiated, partial and situated.

Summary

Rather than arriving at a fixed conclusion, this reflection reinforces for me that relational pedagogy is an ongoing process of noticing, adjusting, and questioning how I am responding within the moment. In this way, the experiences presented throughout this section highlight the complexity and situated nature of relational work with infants. Across these narratives, I have come to recognise that infant pedagogy cannot be understood solely through the quality of interactions between kaiako and pēpi. Instead, the wider conditions that influence those interactions, including organisational expectations, structural constraints, and the emotional labour required of kaiako must also be considered. It is within this ongoing tension, between structure and responsiveness, intention and interpretation, that my understanding of infant pedagogy continues to develop. These reflections have challenged me to reconsider the assumption that relational practice is simply a matter of knowing what infants need and having the capacity to respond accordingly. Rather, responsive pedagogy is made possible through conditions that recognise infants' rights to connection and wellbeing while also sustaining the wellbeing and professional agency of those who care for them.

I offer this account not as a prescriptive conclusion, but as a provocation for other infant kaiako to sit with their own experiences of uncertainty and misalignment between practice and theory. Ultimately, relational pedagogy emerges here as a situated and continually negotiated practice shaped through the interplay of emotional, relational, and structural conditions, rather than a stable or universally achievable ideal. Reframing infant learning therefore requires not only reconsidering how we understand infants as learners, but also questioning the environments, systems, and assumptions that shape what forms of learning and relationships are possible.

Concluding upon Contemporary Tensions of Infant Pedagogy

Introduction

This dissertation examined what possibilities exist for reframing infant learning in ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand beyond current pedagogy. It responded to the tension between relational and intersubjective understandings of infant pedagogy and the organisational, structural, and professional realities that shape how these approaches are enacted in everyday practice. The findings suggest that reframing infant learning does not require replacing relational pedagogy. Instead, it requires recognising that responsive relationships are inseparable from the conditions that enable or constrain them. By bringing a critical literature review into dialogue with narrative autoethnography, this dissertation contributes a more contextualised understanding of infant pedagogy that foregrounds the relationship between pedagogical ideals and the realities of practice. This chapter synthesises the key findings of the dissertation in relation to the research question, before discussing the study's contributions to knowledge, acknowledging its limitations, and considering implications for policy, practice, and future research.

Responding to the Research Question

This dissertation asked, *what possibilities exist for reframing infant learning in ECE contexts across Aotearoa New Zealand beyond current pedagogy?* The findings from the critical literature review and autoethnographic writing suggest that reframing infant learning requires more than adopting new pedagogical strategies or redefining the role of kaiako within interactions with pēpi (Dalli et al., 2011; Davis & Dunn, 2019; Ebbeck et al., 2015; Guard, 2025). Instead, it requires a deeper reconsideration of the conditions that shape how infant pedagogy is understood and experienced in practice (Aspden et al., 2021; Dalgaard et al., 2022; Davis & Dunn, 2019; Gath et al., 2023). Rather than viewing infant pedagogy as something that occurs only through individual kaiako practices, this dissertation argued that responsive relationships are also shaped by the environments and conditions in which teaching takes place.

Taken together, the literature review and autoethnographic findings suggest that reframing infant learning involves shifting attention from pedagogy as something that occurs solely within pēpi-kaiako interactions to pedagogy as a relational system shaped by wider structural conditions. Across both the literature review and autoethnographic narratives, relational pedagogy emerged not as a guaranteed outcome of particular pedagogical approaches but as a contingent practice dependent upon relational, structural, organisational, and professional conditions. Therefore, the possibilities for reimagining infant learning in Aotearoa New Zealand lie not in replacing existing relational approaches but in recognising and addressing the conditions that enable these approaches to be meaningfully enacted. The following sections discuss how these findings contribute to existing understandings of infant pedagogy, methodological knowledge, and future directions for research and practice.

Contributions: Insights within the Literature

The literature review highlighted the significance of certain forms of pedagogy for infant teachers, whilst also identifying enduring tensions with working conditions (Dalli et al., 2011; Gath et al., 2023; McLaughlin et al., 2015). Concepts such as interactional synchrony, *adagio* interactions, and intersubjectivity emphasised the importance of responsive, reciprocal, and emotionally attuned relationships for infant learning (Guard, 2025; Trevarthen, 1998). However, the literature also identified ongoing tensions surrounding workforce conditions, kaiako wellbeing, continuity of care, and structural factors such as pēpi-kaiako ratios and group size (Aspden et al., 2021; Dalgaard et al., 2022; Davis & Dunn, 2019). Research examining primary caregiving further suggested that sustained relationships depend upon staffing stability and organisational support rather than kaiako intention alone (Ebbeck et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2016). These tensions suggest that relational pedagogies cannot be fully understood in isolation from the contexts in which they occur.

When examined in greater detail, the first contribution of this research is the reconceptualisation of relational pedagogy as dependent upon, rather than separate from, the conditions surrounding practice. The literature examined throughout this dissertation demonstrates the importance of intersubjectivity, interactional synchrony, and responsive caregiving in recognising infants as active participants in learning. Research by Trevarthen (1998), Dalli et al. (2011), and Guard (2025) highlighted that pēpi learning emerges through sustained, reciprocal exchanges in which

kaiako and pēpi become attuned to one another's cues, rhythms, and intentions. However, studies examining structural conditions found that opportunities for such interactions are often influenced by staffing arrangements, group size, workload demands, organisational culture, and continuity of care (Aspden et al., 2021; Dalgaard et al., 2022; Dalli et al., 2011). The literature further demonstrated that practices such as primary caregiving provide a practical mechanism for supporting relational continuity and intersubjective engagement, but only where staffing stability and organisational support make such approaches sustainable (Ebbeck et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2016). When contemplated in situ, these tensioned findings suggest that reframing infant learning requires moving beyond an understanding of pedagogy as located solely within moments of interaction between kaiako and pēpi.

A second contribution is the reconsideration of how responsibility for relational pedagogy is distributed. Contemporary discourses surrounding infant pedagogy can unintentionally position responsiveness as an individual kaiako attribute, emphasising kaiako knowledge, emotional availability, and commitment while overlooking the environments within which these practices occur. This finding is reflected within literature on kaiako wellbeing and professional identity, which suggests that kaiako are frequently expected to sustain high levels of emotional availability and responsiveness despite experiencing workload pressures, limited professional recognition, and increasing workplace demands (Davis & Dunn, 2019; Kwon et al., 2022; Penman & Redder, 2023). Similarly, studies examining care as pedagogical labour argue that caregiving practices are often rendered invisible despite requiring significant professional judgement, emotional labour, and relational expertise (Tadeu & Lopes, 2025; Warren, 2019). In this way, responsiveness can become not only a pedagogical expectation but also a moral responsibility placed upon individual kaiako, where failure to enact idealised relationships may be interpreted as a deficit in kaiako capability rather than an indication of constrained conditions. Each of these tensions were elucidated in the autoethnography that can better attend to the everyday complexities and nuances of infant pedagogy.

Narrative Autoethnographic Insights

The autoethnographic narratives extended these findings by illustrating how the tensions identified within the literature are encountered, negotiated, and embodied within everyday infant teaching practice. While kaiako may hold strong commitments to relational pedagogy, their

capacity to enact these commitments is often influenced by factors such as staffing stability, available time, organisational expectations, and emotional labour. For example, the narrative *The Fragility of Responsiveness* illustrated how kaiako attention could be simultaneously drawn between settling a tired pēpi, supporting a frustrated infant, maintaining ratio requirements, and engaging with whānau. This moment revealed that responsiveness is often fragmented by competing responsibilities rather than limited by a lack of pedagogical commitment. Similarly, the narrative exploring primary caregiving demonstrated that pēpi do not necessarily form attachments according to organisationally assigned roles. Instead, relational connections emerged in ways that were unpredictable and shaped by the infants' own agency. Finally, the snowboarding narrative highlighted how responsiveness depends not only on providing guidance but also on recognising emotional states that may not be immediately visible, reinforcing the importance of attunement and co-regulation within pedagogical relationships. These narratives revealed that relational pedagogy is not simply a matter of individual kaiako capability or intention but emerges through complex interactions between kaiako, pēpi, settings, and systems.

The narratives presented in this dissertation complicate this assumption by illustrating how committed and reflective kaiako may still encounter moments where their pedagogical intentions exceed what structural conditions allow. Across the narratives, responsiveness emerged as something continually negotiated rather than consistently achievable. In *The Fragility of Responsiveness*, relational intentions were constrained by competing responsibilities and ratio requirements. In *Idealised Theory and the Daily Realities of Infant Pedagogy*, assumptions about primary caregiving were disrupted when one pēpi sought comfort from a kaiako other than their designated primary caregiver. In *Learning to Learn Again*, reflection on my own experience as a novice learner highlighted the importance of recognising emotional vulnerability and the limits of assuming that another person's needs are always available. Together, these narratives revealed that sustaining relational pedagogy within everyday practice involves navigating complex and sometimes unpredictable conditions. This finding suggests that improving infant pedagogy requires not only supporting teacher capability but also examining the systems that enable or constrain kaiako capacity to respond.

The autoethnographic narratives revealed that these relational aspirations are not enacted within isolated moments of interaction. Within *The Fragility of Responsiveness*, relational practice was

shown to be continually negotiated as attention shifted between multiple pēpi, whānau interactions, safety responsibilities, and ratio requirements. Rather than demonstrating a failure of relational pedagogy, this narrative highlighted how the possibility of interactional synchrony is shaped by the conditions surrounding practice. The narrative, therefore, reinforced the literature's argument that pedagogy cannot be separated from the structures through which it is enacted. Relational interactions are shaped by time, continuity, staffing stability, organisational culture, leadership, and teacher wellbeing. Consequently, this dissertation argues that these conditions make relational pedagogy possible. This reframing challenges a persistent assumption that pedagogy begins at the moment of interaction between pēpi and kaiako. Instead, it suggests that every interaction is already shaped by the relational, organisational, and structural environments surrounding it.

The emotional availability of kaiako, the continuity of relationships, and the time available for sustained engagement are not simply resources that support pedagogical practice. Instead, they participate in producing the possibilities and limitations of that practice. The relationship between pedagogical intentions and the conditions that shape their enactment was particularly evident within the first narrative, where feelings of emotional responsibility emerged despite the impossibility of simultaneously meeting every infant's immediate needs. The narrative highlighted how kaiako may internalise responsibility for relational disruptions that are, in reality, produced by wider conditions. This finding reflects concerns raised within the literature regarding the individualisation of responsibility for relational practice, particularly where kaiako wellbeing and structural constraints are overlooked (Davis & Dunn, 2019; Warren, 2019). As a result, moments of perceived pedagogical inadequacy may reflect system-level constraints rather than individual deficits in practice. Similarly, the primary caregiving narrative illustrated that relational connections are not always produced through designated caregiving roles, despite kaiako efforts to enact recommended practice. This further suggests that relational outcomes cannot be solely understood as indicators of kaiako competence but must be considered within the wider relational and organisational contexts in which they occur.

Gaps Within *Te Whāriki*

A third contribution this dissertation signals relates to understanding the curriculum-to-practice gap within Aotearoa New Zealand. *Te Whāriki* provides a powerful vision of infants as capable

learners embedded within reciprocal relationships and communities (MoE, 2017). If relationality, belonging, and wellbeing are central principles of pēpi learning, then the conditions experienced by kaiako must also become part of conversations about quality provision.

The findings of this dissertation suggest that there remains a tension between the relational aspirations articulated within *Te Whāriki* and the realities of everyday infant pedagogy. The literature reviewed throughout this study identified significant barriers to the enactment of these aspirations, including increasing group sizes, staffing instability, workload pressures, and organisational priorities that may privilege efficiency over relational engagement (Aspden et al., 2021; Dalgaard et al., 2022; Guard, 2025). The autoethnographic narratives further illustrated how these tensions are experienced in practice. In *The Fragility of Responsiveness*, the aspiration to be fully present for a distressed pēpi became difficult to realise while simultaneously maintaining ratio requirements, supporting other pēpi, and engaging meaningfully with whānau. Likewise, *Idealised Theory and the Daily Realities of Infant Pedagogy* demonstrated that although primary caregiving is promoted as a framework for relational continuity, relationships do not always develop according to designated caregiving structures. These experiences suggest that the enactment of relational pedagogy is often more complex and contingent than curriculum aspirations alone may imply.

This dissertation is not an argument against *Te Whāriki* or its relational vision. Rather, it highlights the importance of recognising that curriculum aspirations cannot be separated from the structural and organisational conditions through which they are enacted. While *Te Whāriki* promotes responsive, reciprocal relationships, continuity, belonging, and holistic wellbeing (MoE, 2017), this study suggests that achieving these aspirations depends upon the availability of conditions that support kaiako to enact them. Supporting pēpi therefore requires attention not only to their experiences within relationships, but also to the relational conditions surrounding those who teach and care for them. This study, therefore, does not aim to diminish the significance of relational approaches, supported by *Te Whāriki*, such as primary caregiving, intersubjectivity, or interaction-focused pedagogy. Alternatively, it suggests that these approaches require critical examination of the assumptions surrounding their implementation. This dissertation is situated within a particular professional and cultural context and therefore offers a partial rather than comprehensive account of infant pedagogy. The fictionalised

narratives used within the autoethnographic component are intentionally bounded by ethical considerations surrounding infant privacy and representation.

Methodological Insights

The use of narrative writing within an autoethnographic approach was central to addressing the research question because it enabled examination of infant pedagogy as lived, embodied, and emotionally complex practice. As Chang (2008) argues, autoethnography positions personal experience as a site of inquiry while connecting individual experiences to broader cultural, professional, and institutional contexts. Similarly, Bochner and Ellis (2022) highlight the value of autoethnography in examining aspects of human experience that may be difficult to access through more detached forms of inquiry.

While the critical literature review identified dominant theories, expectations, and structural challenges, the fictitious narratives illuminated how these tensions are encountered and negotiated within everyday teaching. In particular, the narratives revealed dimensions of infant pedagogy that are often difficult to capture through policy documents or theoretical discussions alone, including feelings of uncertainty, professional guilt, emotional labour, relational ambiguity, and the ongoing negotiation between pedagogical intention and practical reality. These insights demonstrate that responsive pedagogy is not only shaped by what kaiako know or value, but also by the conditions that influence their capacity to enact those values. The autoethnographic approach, therefore, contributed to answering the research question by revealing that possibilities for reframing infant learning extend beyond pedagogical interactions alone. Instead, reframing requires attention to the organisational, structural, and professional conditions that shape how relational pedagogy becomes possible within ECE settings.

A Subjective Researcher

Positioning myself as a researcher required ongoing reflexivity regarding my own assumptions, professional identity, and interpretations of infant pedagogy. This dissertation does not claim to provide a definitive account of infant pedagogy in Aotearoa New Zealand, nor does the autoethnographic component seek to represent the experiences of all kaiako working with pēpi. Rather, the narratives presented are situated within my own professional, cultural, and relational positioning as kaiako and a researcher. The purpose of these situated accounts is not to produce

generalisable findings, but to illuminate how broader pedagogical, organisational, and structural conditions are experienced within everyday practice. As Chang (2008) argues, autoethnography requires personal experiences to be critically examined and interpreted within their wider sociocultural contexts. Similarly, Bochner and Ellis (2022) highlight the importance of retaining the researcher's voice within autoethnographic inquiry, recognising that personal narratives can create opportunities for connection, reflection, and deeper understanding. Through this approach, the narratives provide insight into the tensions and complexities of infant pedagogy that may remain less visible within broader theoretical discussions. Recognising the partial and situated nature of this account is therefore not a limitation to be overcome, but an important feature of an autoethnographic methodology, where knowledge emerges through particular experiences, relationships, and contexts.

As a researcher who is also positioned within the profession being examined, my understandings of infant pedagogy were shaped by my experiences as a *taura kaiako* and qualified *kaiako*, my relationships with *pēpi* and *whānau*, and my engagement with the wider discourses surrounding quality practice in ECE. This positioning influenced my research question and the interpretations I brought to the fictitious narratives. Rather than attempting to separate myself from the study, narrative autoethnographic recognises that knowledge is produced through relationships, experiences, and situated perspectives (Bochner & Ellis, 2022; Chang, 2008). My position as both insider and researcher enabled attention to the emotional, ethical, and embodied dimensions of infant pedagogy that may be less visible through detached observation alone. However, this position also required ongoing reflexivity regarding my assumptions about what constitutes responsive practice, how I interpreted moments of tension, and how my own professional values shaped the narratives constructed within this dissertation.

Disrupting Narratives: Assumptions of Relational Pedagogy

Engaging with these narratives disrupted my own assumptions about relational pedagogy. Prior to this inquiry, I understood responsiveness primarily as a matter of *kaiako* intention, attentiveness, and ethical commitment. However, examining my own lived encounters revealed the fragility of this understanding. Responsiveness emerged not as an individual quality possessed by *kaiako* but as something continually negotiated between people, environments, and circumstances. The narratives repeatedly challenged assumptions that responsive practice can be

achieved through intention alone. For example, primary caregiving was revealed as a contingent rather than guaranteed pathway to relational connection, while the snowboarding narrative demonstrated that attunement requires ongoing interpretation of emotional cues rather than reliance on predetermined responses. These experiences reinforced the understanding of relational pedagogy as dynamic, uncertain, and shaped by contexts in which it occurs.

My position as a kaiako-researcher was, therefore, both a resource and a responsibility. Autoethnography requires personal experience to be critically examined in relation to wider cultural, professional, and institutional contexts rather than treated as an isolated account (Chang, 2008). Similarly, Bochner and Ellis (2022) emphasise that autoethnographic inquiry does not seek to remove the researcher's voice but instead recognises how subjectivity shapes the process of knowledge production. Hence, reflexivity was essential, not as an attempt to eliminate my influence on the research, but as a process of recognising how my experiences, assumptions, and interpretations contributed to the knowledge generated through this inquiry. This reflexive approach enabled a more critical examination of both the possibilities and limitations of my own understandings of infant pedagogy.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that it did not extend into the field through empirical methods such as interviews, surveys, or case studies with infant kaiako, educational leaders, or whānau. While the narrative autoethnographic approach enabled a close examination of the lived and embodied complexities of infant pedagogy, it necessarily reflects a situated account shaped by my own professional experiences and interpretations. Engaging with a wider range of perspectives may provide further insight into how relational pedagogy is experienced, negotiated, and enacted across diverse ECE settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. The reflexive process undertaken throughout this inquiry reinforced the value of recognising multiple perspectives in understanding infant pedagogy. Just as my own assumptions about responsiveness were challenged through examining my experiences, the inclusion of additional voices that may reveal alternative understandings, tensions, and possibilities that remain beyond the scope of a single account.

Further Research

These situated insights open possibilities for further exploration of how different kaiako, whānau, and communities experience and interpret the relationship between curriculum aspirations and the structural realities of ECE provision. While this dissertation offers a situated account of infant pedagogy through my own experiences as a kaiako-researcher, further research could build upon these findings through approaches that foreground the voices of those directly involved in infant ECE settings. Exploring the perspectives of kaiako, educational leaders, whānau, and potentially pēpi experiences may provide richer insight into how relational pedagogy is understood, negotiated, and experienced across diverse contexts in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The autoethnographic narratives highlighted that experiences of relational pedagogy are shaped by individual perspectives, relationships, and circumstances. Tensions surrounding responsiveness, primary caregiving, and relational continuity were not experienced in isolation but emerged through particular interactions and contexts. As such, future research could examine how organisational cultures, leadership practices, and everyday conditions influence the possibilities available for sustaining relational infant pedagogy. Situated case studies may provide valuable insight into how curriculum aspirations are interpreted and enacted within different ECE environments, including the conditions that enable or constrain sustained, emotionally attuned relationships with pēpi.

Further research may also continue to examine how wider policy and structural systems shape the enactment of infant pedagogy. Recent and ongoing discussions within the ECE policy landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand regarding funding, workforce retention, teacher shortages, qualification requirements, regulatory expectations, and kaiako wellbeing highlight the need to critically examine how funding models, workforce policies, and accountability structures shape the possibilities for relational infant pedagogy (Aspden et al., 2021; Davis & Dunn, 2019; Dalli et al., 2011; Gibbons et al., 2017, Ministry for Regulation, 2026; Ministry of Education, 2026). Given the findings of the dissertation, future investigation into funding models, workforce policies, and accountability structures may provide greater understanding of how staffing stability, continuity of care, professional recognition, and opportunities for sustained interaction shape infant learning experiences.

Beyond future research, this dissertation seeks to open conversations among kaiako, educational leaders, and policymakers regarding the conditions in which infant pedagogy is currently enacted. While relational approaches have become central to understandings of quality infant practice, the findings of this study suggest that the ability to enact these approaches is fundamentally shaped by the environments in which kaiako work. Therefore, improving infant pedagogy requires attention not only to kaiako knowledge and professional capability but also to the structural conditions that enable sustained relational practice.

In particular, child-to-teacher ratios, group size, staffing stability, and opportunities for relational continuity emerged throughout the literature as significant considerations influencing kaiako capacity to provide interactional synchrony, sustain *adagio* interactions, and enact primary caregiving approaches (Aspden et al., 2021; Dalgaard et al., 2022; Dalli et al., 2011; Guard, 2025). These findings suggest that structural conditions are not merely contextual influences upon pedagogy but active contributors to the quality of pēpi learning experiences. This dissertation invites further examination of whether current structural provisions within ECE settings adequately support the relational aspirations embedded within *Te Whāriki* and encourages ongoing dialogue about what conditions are necessary for pēpi, whānau, and kiako to truly thrive.

Concluding Thoughts

Ultimately, this dissertation argues that reframing pēpi learning requires more than developing new pedagogical approaches. It requires a reconsideration of the systems, cultures, and assumptions that determine what kinds of relationships are possible within infant ECE settings. The literature demonstrated that concepts such as intersubjectivity, interactional synchrony, *adagio* interactions, primary caregiving, and relational wellbeing remain central to understandings of high-quality infant pedagogy. However, this study has shown that these approaches can only be meaningfully enacted when supported by conditions that enable continuity, emotional availability, professional recognition, and relational engagement. Pēpi are not simply learners who require responsive kaiako. They are participants within relational systems that must themselves be responsive.

The autoethnographic narratives demonstrated that these relational systems are often characterised by tension and complexity. Moments of fragmented attention revealed how ratio requirements and competing responsibilities can limit opportunities for sustained engagement. Experiences with primary caregiving illustrated that meaningful relationships cannot be guaranteed through organisational structures alone, but emerge through dynamic and unpredictable encounters between pēpi and kaiako. Reflections on learning as a novice further highlighted that responsiveness depends upon recognising emotional needs that may not always be immediately visible. Together, these narratives suggest that infant pedagogy is not simply enacted through isolated moments of interaction, but through ongoing negotiations between people, relationships, environments, and systems. For kaiako to engage in sustained, reciprocal, and emotionally attuned interactions envisioned within *Te Whāriki*, the conditions surrounding infant pedagogy must also be transformed.

Reframing infant learning therefore involves not only asking how we teach infants differently but how we create environments where pēpi, whānau, and kaiako can genuinely belong, connect, and learn together. Therefore, the future of infant pedagogy in Aotearoa New Zealand depends not simply on asking how kaiako can better respond to pēpi, but on creating the conditions in which meaningful relationships can be sustained, valued, and made possible.

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