Navigating Parental Expectations of Children Starting School: A Review of Literature

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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 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.

Signature:

Date: July 29, 2025

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Abstract

This systematic literature review examines how early childhood educators in New Zealand respond to parental expectations that children start school at age 5. While school readiness is widely researched, limited studies focus on how educators navigate these expectations within the *Te Whāriki* framework. Addressing this gap is crucial, as parental expectations influence pedagogical approaches, curriculum implementation, and transitions to formal schooling. In a context shaped by sociocultural diversity and neoliberal policy pressures, educators must negotiate often conflicting views of what it means to be "ready for school".

The review analyses peer-reviewed research on educator strategies to differentiate developmental preparedness from culturally and socially situated expectations. Following clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, the selected literature is synthesised through thematic analysis to identify key patterns in how educators communicate, negotiate, and manage parental expectations.

Findings highlight the central role of educator–parent communication in supporting children's holistic development, ensuring smoother transitions, and maintaining alignment with *Te Whāriki* principles. The study also reveals tensions between curriculum ideals and policy drivers, as well as between professional knowledge and diverse parental beliefs. These insights suggest the need for further research into how educators engage with families across cultural contexts and how curriculum frameworks can be enacted more responsively. By examining these dynamics, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how early childhood educators balance professional responsibilities with community expectations in fostering school readiness.

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Chapter One: Introduction to literature review

This systematic literature review explores how early childhood educators[1] in New Zealand respond to diverse parental expectations regarding school readiness. The transition from early childhood education (ECE) to formal schooling is a pivotal developmental stage, shaped by cultural norms, policy frameworks, and family beliefs. McDowall et al. (2017) highlighted the fact that, in New Zealand, parents have the option to have their children start school at age 5 or at any point during that year until they become 6 is often intertwined with parental perceptions of their child's readiness, which may include expectations around academic skills, social competence, and emotional maturity.

While studies suggest that parental expectations can influence children's transition to school (Jahreie, 2023; Perry et al., 2014; Peters, 2010), these expectations are multifaceted and shaped by a range of cultural, socio-economic, and individual family contexts which, in turn, affect how this influence is expressed and experienced. These expectations may shape how early childhood educators approach their roles, often requiring them to balance developmental, play-based learning philosophies with parental concerns about academic preparedness. This balancing act is further complicated by the need to follow the pedagogical principles and curricular frameworks set out in *Te Whāriki* (Kaplun et al., 2017; Ministry of Education, 2017; Peters, 2010), which emphasise holistic development and child-led learning. Educators must therefore navigate a dynamic landscape where professional judgment, family engagement, and curriculum intersect in nuanced and context-dependent ways.

Perry et al. (2014) indicated a recurring tension between parental expectations, which often prioritise academic readiness—particularly literacy and numeracy—and educators' perspectives, which may emphasise a holistic approach to school readiness that includes social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development (Ministry of Education, 2017; Perry et al., 2014; Peters, 2010). However, other studies (Gaynor, 2017) have indicated that parental and educator perspectives on school readiness may converge, particularly when parents acknowledge the significance of play-based learning and socio-emotional development in ECE.

This systematic literature review explores how parents and educators define and understand school preparedness. While traditional perspectives such as that of Jahreie (2023) often emphasise academic competencies as central to school readiness, more contemporary viewpoints, including Cameron et al. (2022) have advocated for a broader, more holistic approach that encompasses social and emotional dimensions of development. These differing perspectives reflect a persistent tension in how readiness is understood and enacted across educational contexts. This study will explore, through the available

[1] The word "educator" here refers to both teachers and kaiako who work in Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood education settings.

literature, how early childhood educators navigate these competing expectations, particularly in light of the developmental philosophies of *Te Whāriki* and parental concerns regarding academic preparedness. Prior research has shown that many parents value literacy and numeracy skills as readiness markers, even though some educators advocate for a play-based, developmental approach (Jahreie, 2023; Peters, 2010). However, some studies suggest that certain educators also emphasise early literacy and numeracy, aligning with parental expectations, particularly in response to policy pressures and school readiness assessments (Cameron et al., 2022). This issue will be investigated in subsequent sections of this research.

Parental expectations and educators' responses highlight the diversity of some parental beliefs regarding children's transition to school (Bates, 2019, p. 13). Educators often balance these expectations with their professional judgment and the child's needs, which have been found to relate to tensions in their practice (Bates, 2019). Challenges faced by educators include managing varying parental expectations, limited resources, and the need for continual professional development. These challenges can impact some educators' ability to support children's transition to school effectively. To date, little research has examined how educators navigate these challenges within diverse ECE settings.

Collaborative approaches and best practices emphasise the significance of partnerships between parents and educators. Studies have shown that effective collaboration fosters mutual understanding and support, benefiting children's school transitions (Hatcher et al., 2012). Structured transition programmes and school–ECE alliances have been found to relate to smoother transitions and better outcomes for children (Hatcher et al., 2012). Nevertheless, some research suggests that overly structured transition programmes may inadvertently place pressure on children and families, potentially undermining the benefits of play-based learning and creating unnecessary stress during the transition to school (Bassok et al., 2016; Cameron et al., 2022).

Implications for practice and future research suggest that more research is required to understand and manage the complexities of parental expectations and school readiness. Subsequent studies can focus on developing strategies to support educators in handling these demands and enhancing collaborative practices. Furthermore, little research has examined how cultural and socioeconomic factors influence parental expectations and educators' responses. Longitudinal studies investigating the impact of different approaches to school readiness on children's educational trajectories would provide valuable insights for policy and practice.

This review highlights the importance of understanding and addressing parental expectations in ECE with educational approaches, ultimately facilitating a smooth transition for children to school. It seeks to contribute to developing effective practices that facilitate children's smooth transition to school.

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the development of effective practices that support successful transitions from ECE to primary school.

Context and the significance of the study

As a practising early childhood educator**,** my interest is in how children enter the formal educational system. This interest is rooted in my belief that supporting children's transition to school is the final and perhaps most significant act of support I can offer them before they leave the ECE setting. As a teacher, over the course of my career, I have worked with different groups, ranging from newborns to young children and have regularly supported 4-year-olds transitioning to school within the guidelines and expectations of each educational context. My background and training in ECE provide a strong foundation for conducting this study. I have been an early childhood educator for over 5 years, so I know how difficult it can be to get children from ECE to school. I have recently become a transition coordinator that has provided new insight into the many realms that influence teaching practice and processes. Thanks to my work expertise, I have valuable insights into early learning environments' pedagogical techniques, educator–parent connections, and parental expectations. One of the primary motivators for the research project is that this early shift affects a child's life, including cultivating a love of learning and success in school and beyond (Guo, 2015). My academic path, which includes working toward a Master of Education, has also improved my capacity to evaluate research critically and apply theoretical viewpoints to practical ECE issues.

The transition from ECE to school is a key stage in children's development and is influenced by different parental expectations. In New Zealand, where children generally start school at age 5 (Education Review Office, 2022), differing perspectives on school readiness emerge. Many parents prioritise academic preparedness, particularly literacy and numeracy skills (Zhang, 2015), while *Te Whāriki* advocates for a holistic, play-based approach (Jahreie, 2023; Ministry of Education, 2017; Peters, 2010).

Although *Te Whāriki* promotes a comprehensive, play-based approach to school readiness, existing literature suggests that social expectations around early academic preparation may be shaped by historical schooling practices, economic factors, and family experiences (Ministry of Education, 2017; Perry et al., 2014; Peters, 2010). This study aims to explore how such expectations intersect with early childhood educators' practices and understandings of readiness. The media reinforces these viewpoints, regularly promoting worries about literacy, numeracy, and standardised testing through news sources, parenting blogs, and social media platforms (Boereboom & Tymms, 2018). This puts more pressure on parents and educators to prioritise quantifiable academic success over more general developmental objectives (Jahreie, 2023). Meanwhile, conflicting messages about the values of education continue to exist because, whereas school reporting mechanisms and family concerns stress academic preparedness, educational regulations encourage holistic learning. Due to these divergent cultural understandings, there are persistent conflicts between professional knowledge and external demands that affect how educators handle family expectations. In the end, resolving these issues calls for candid dialogue

between educators, families, and legislators to guarantee that school transitions remain developmentally appropriate and sensitive to family concerns.

This research explores how the literature addresses diverse parental expectations regarding school readiness. Given their critical role in shaping children's early learning experiences, educators must balance professional expertise with parental concerns to facilitate a smooth transition to school. How do educators navigate these expectations while maintaining a child-centred, developmental approach? What strategies do they use to communicate with parents and align differing perspectives? By exploring these questions, this study aims to enhance educator–parent collaboration, ultimately benefiting children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development.

Existing research has established that cultural, societal, and economic factors shape parents' beliefs about school readiness (Kaplun et al., 2017). Due to the underrepresentation of early childhood educators' perspectives and experiences in research, there is a substantial knowledge gap despite their critical role in facilitating seamless transitions to school (Bierman et al., 2023).

Examining whether this gap exists and the degree to which educators' viewpoints have been disregarded (or not thoroughly investigated) is one of the main objectives of this research. Ultimately, this study aims to contribute a more comprehensive understanding of the educator's role in negotiating parental expectations by systematically evaluating the literature to identify trends, contradictions, and potential blind spots (Snyder, 2019). This study challenges the assumption that parental expectations always align with early childhood pedagogy and highlights the difficulties educators face in bridging this gap (Westbrook & Hunkin, 2020). By examining what has been written about how educators adapt to diverse expectations, what barriers they encounter, and what communication strategies prove effective, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of school readiness (Marti et al., 2018).

The findings of this study will be valuable to educators, school leaders, and policymakers, as they seek to improve transition practices and professional development programmes for early childhood educators (Clarke et al., 2021). Parents and caregivers may also benefit by gaining insights into how play-based learning supports long-term educational success (Westbrook & Hunkin, 2020). Furthermore, education researchers and curriculum developers may find this study useful in identifying areas for further investigation, particularly regarding the influence of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds on parental expectations and educators' responses (Peters, 2010).

Future studies could explore longitudinal impacts of different school readiness approaches, examining how early childhood transition experiences influence later academic and social outcomes (Peters, 2010; Timperley et al., 2003). Additionally, further research could investigate how policies and institutional frameworks support or hinder educators in aligning school-readiness practices with both *Te Whāriki* and parental expectations (Jahreie, 2023). By addressing these gaps, this study contributes to an

evolving discourse on best practices for supporting children's transition to school in a way that is developmentally appropriate and responsive to family concerns.

Research questions

This study is guided by two central research questions, which aim to explore how early childhood educators in New Zealand respond to the diverse and sometimes conflicting expectations of parents regarding school readiness:

1. In what ways do ECE educators adapt their teaching practices (curricular adjustments, communication strategies, policy alignment) to respond to parental expectations of literacy and numeracy?
2. How do studies suggest that the nature of these expectations influences educators' teaching practices?

These questions are designed to uncover the broader pedagogical and policy implications of navigating parental expectations, as well as the practical strategies educators employ within the framework of *Te Whāriki* and the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC). To understand how educators navigate parental expectations, it is essential to first examine *Te Whāriki*, the national curriculum that underpins ECE in New Zealand and shapes its approach to school readiness.

Te Whāriki and its relevance to school readiness

Te Whāriki is New Zealand's national early childhood curriculum, first introduced in 1996 to promote children's holistic development from birth to school. Meaning "the woven mat," it symbolises the interconnection of all aspects of learning and growth. Grounded in both Māori and Western worldviews, it emphasises biculturalism, multiculturalism, and a shared future (Ministry of Education, 2017). *Te Whāriki* provides a consistent framework for all ECE settings—such as kōhanga reo, playcentres, kindergartens, and education and care services—supporting diverse approaches to children's learning and wellbeing.

While *Te Whāriki* promotes a holistic, play-based, and culturally grounded approach to ECE (Ministry of Education, 2017), some researchers have highlighted that more academically oriented approaches to school readiness remain influential in certain communities and educational contexts (Leaupepe, 2011).

With its five strands—Wellbeing (*Mana Atua*); Belonging (*Mana Whenua*); Contribution (*Mana Tangata*); Communication (*Mana Reo*); and Exploration (*Mana Aotūroa*)—and four guiding principles—Empowerment; Holistic Development; Family and Community; and Relationships—*Te Whāriki* cultivates critical abilities like self-assurance, independence, social competence, cognitive development, and emotional resilience. Children gain fundamental skills via play-based learning that helps them solve problems, adjust to new situations, and build connections. This all-encompassing

strategy runs counter to certain parental expectations, which frequently prioritise early academic readiness, especially in reading and numeracy (Jahreie, 2023).

Te Whāriki highlights the significance of seamless transitions by promoting continuity in learning, integrating families, and promoting cooperation between early childhood educators and primary school teachers (Ministry of Education, 2017). This emphasis on collaboration is illustrated by the curriculum's assertion that "by working together, kaiako, teachers of new entrants, parents and whānau (and, where involved, specialist support services) can support children's learning continuity as they make this crucial transition" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 51). This statement reflects the curriculum's holistic and relational approach, underscoring the shared responsibility for supporting children's wellbeing during transitions.

The transition between ECE and formal schooling is crucial. Approximately 89% of children in New Zealand receive ECE services, demonstrating how highly appreciated this programme is even though it is not required (Education Counts, 2025). *Te Whāriki* guides these programmes, guaranteeing a nationwide high-quality and uniform early learning experience (Chan, 2019). The NZC places emphasis on structured academic learning, including formal instruction, teacher-led activities, and established routines (Ministry of Education, 2007, 2015). These features represent a shift from the exploratory, play-based and child-led approaches that characterise ECE settings (Education Counts, 2010). *Te Whāriki* play-based learning philosophy may at times contrast with some parents' expectations for more formal academic instruction as children transition to school (Zhang, 2015). However, NZC was written in 2007 to replace the 1993 framework with the intention of providing a more coherent and flexible curriculum that allows schools to design learning programmes responsive to their students and communities. As a result, *Te Whāriki* was revised with the curriculum's core skills and to support continuity from ECE and align with developmental best practices (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017).

Te Whāriki promotes a child-centred, play-based, and holistic approach to learning, focusing on social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development rather than early academic achievement (Ministry of Education, 2017). However, tensions often arise when parents prioritise academic preparedness. This literature review explores how educators navigate these conflicting expectations, balancing *Te Whāriki*'s holistic principles with parental pressures for early academic success.

The historical division between New Zealand's early childhood and primary education sectors—referring to differences in curriculum, pedagogy, teacher training, and governance structures—is another important area of tension that affects children's transitions to school (Peters, 2010). While *Te Whāriki* promotes a smooth and integrated approach to learning through its emphasis on continuity and holistic development, the transition to primary school can be complicated by differences in how schools interpret and implement the NZC. Although the NZC allows for flexibility, including play-based approaches in Years 1 and 2, in practice some schools adopt more structured, subject-based models.

This variation in pedagogical practice can create tensions for children, teachers, and parents navigating the transition (Peters, 2010). Soutter et al. (2012) argued that the NZC is intentionally broad and flexible, designed to be responsive to the unique needs of each school and its community. In this sense, the NZC could be seen as supporting, rather than hindering, a smooth and integrated approach to learning. Its adaptability leaves considerable room for continuity with *Te Whāriki*, especially in Years 1 and 2, depending on how schools and teachers choose to implement it. Therefore, the real disagreement is not an intrinsic contradiction between *Te Whāriki* and the NZC itself, but rather the sectoral division and its effect on pedagogical continuity.

With the curricular context established, the structure of this dissertation can now be outlined to show how the literature review engages with the issue of navigating parental expectations in ECE.

Structure of the dissertation

This literature review examines how early childhood educators in New Zealand respond to various family expectations regarding school preparation. It looks at the difficulties many teachers encounter, the methods they use, and the broader ramifications for ECE practice and policy. This literature review synthesises previous research to provide a comprehensive understanding of the tensions that may arise between *Te Whāriki* emphases on play-based learning philosophies and parental expectations for academic readiness. By examining these existing findings, the review contributes to ongoing conversations about school preparedness and sets the groundwork for exploring how early childhood educators in New Zealand perceive and respond to such expectations.

This dissertation begins in Chapter One with an outline of the research issue, its significance, and the research questions that guided the study. Chapter Two provides a literature review of previous research on school readiness, parental expectations, and teachers' responses, with findings organised around key themes. The methodology employed is discussed in Chapter Three, including the systematic literature review approach, search strategies, thematic analysis, and inclusion and exclusion criteria. Chapter Four presents the findings and discusses how early childhood educators respond to parental expectations and the challenges they encounter. Chapter Six outlines the implications of the study, highlighting its contributions to educational practice and policy and suggesting areas for further research. By drawing on both professional experience and scholarly evidence, this dissertation seeks to offer meaningful insights into how early childhood educators can support children's transition to school in ways that align with developmental best practices while navigating diverse parental expectations. Finally, Chapter Six outlines the implications of the study for educational policy and practice. It presents a series of policy recommendations aimed at supporting educators in managing diverse parental expectations, promoting collaborative relationships between educators and families, and ensuring alignment between home and educational environments. The chapter also emphasises the importance of culturally responsive and inclusive communication strategies, supported through targeted professional

development. In addition, it identifies key areas for future research, encouraging continued inquiry into how early childhood educators can be empowered to facilitate smooth and equitable transitions to school. By drawing on both professional experience and scholarly evidence, this dissertation seeks to offer meaningful insights into how early childhood educators can support children's transition to school in ways that align with developmental best practices while navigating diverse parental expectations.

Chapter Two: Methodology

Justification for using a systematic literature review

A systematic literature review (SLR) was used for this study, because it offers an organised, thorough, and objective synthesis of the body of research on how early childhood educators in New Zealand deal with parental expectations of school readiness. A systematic literature review (SLR) differs from traditional narrative reviews by employing a methodical, transparent, and replicable process to systematically locate, evaluate, and interpret relevant research (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020). This method is useful in education research because it provides educators, policymakers and researchers with high-quality evidence by combining data from several sources, identifying patterns, and highlighting knowledge gaps.

An SLR is beneficial to this study because it provides a systematic and comprehensive method for identifying and synthesising existing research on how teachers respond to demands for school preparedness. This rigorous approach not only consolidates current knowledge but also highlights gaps in the literature that warrant further empirical investigation. Instead of gathering fresh information from a limited sample, an SLR helps people grasp the subject in a broader range of settings (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020). Additionally, the review helps reduce prejudice and ensures impartiality and repeatability by adhering to a predetermined search method. Nevertheless, an SLR has certain drawbacks in addition to its advantages. These include the potential for publication bias, the exclusion of relevant grey literature, the time-intensive nature of the process, and the possibility of overlooking nuanced contextual or qualitative insights that may not fit rigid inclusion criteria (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020).

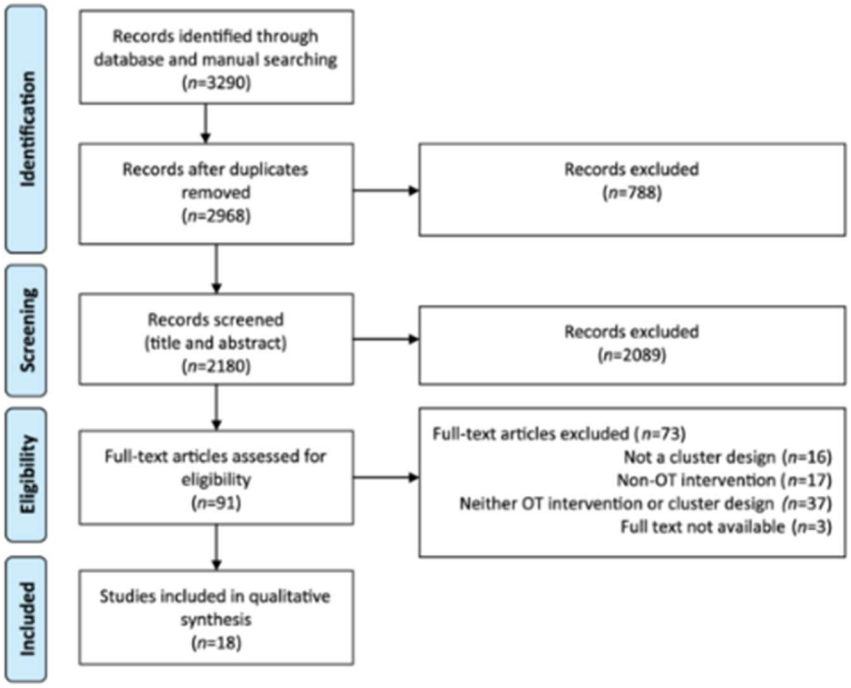
Search strategy and databases used

The review used a systematic strategy to find and evaluate pertinent research to guarantee a thorough and open selection process. The search approach comprised selecting scholarly resources, specifying keywords, and refining searches using Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT). Because of their thorough coverage of education research and inclusion of peer-reviewed sources, databases including ProQuest, JSTOR, ERIC, Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science were selected. Academic journals and dissertations were accessible through ProQuest and JSTOR; educational research was the focus of ERIC and high-calibre, frequently cited Scopus and Web of Science guaranteed articles. Using Google Scholar, cross-checking citations, and locating other sources that might not have been discovered through database searches. The study is limited to already published literature because no primary data-collection occurs. This might result in publication bias because studies with less notable or unfavourable outcomes are frequently underrepresented. Studies conducted in languages other than English may have been excluded, reducing the variety of perspectives considered in this review.

Relevant material for this study was identified through a combination of general and targeted search phrases. The review included only peer-reviewed journal articles, government documents, and books

to ensure the quality and comprehensiveness of the sources. The following section provides a detailed account of the search strategies, databases used, and inclusion and exclusion criteria. “School readiness” OR “transition to school” AND “early childhood educators” OR “teachers”, “parental expectations” AND “ECE”, and “*Te Whāriki*” AND “school readiness” were among the key search terms. Titles and abstracts were first screened as part of the search process, and then the full texts of the papers that made the shortlist were reviewed. Criteria for inclusion and exclusion were used to guarantee quality and applicability. Peer-reviewed journal publications that examined educators’ experiences and perspectives on school readiness and were published within the previous 15 years (2009–2024) were included in the review. While research conducted in New Zealand was preferred to ensure contextual relevance, studies from other countries with comparable ECE frameworks and socio-cultural contexts were also considered. Inclusion of international literature was contingent on the applicability of findings to the New Zealand context, particularly regarding curriculum frameworks, cultural diversity, and educational policies. Studies with markedly different educational settings or systems were excluded to maintain the review’s focus and relevance. Research that examined only the viewpoints of parents or children without addressing the roles of educators or that were non-peer-reviewed or opinion-based articles were excluded.

The study selection procedure was documented using a PRISMA flow diagram to manage and arrange the data gathered. To ensure rigour, abstracts and full-text articles were double-screened to confirm eligibility, and reference lists of included studies were cross-checked to identify any additional relevant literature. EndNote reference management software was used to keep track of sources, eliminate duplicates, and group research according to developing themes. Thanks to this methodical search procedure, a thorough and representative body of literature pertinent to the study issues was found for the review.



Tokolahi, E., Hocking, C., Kersten, P., & Vandal, A. C. (2016).

Data synthesis and thematic analysis approach

Thematic analysis was utilised to methodically find and classify patterns in the literature once pertinent research was chosen. This procedure was guided by the six-phase framework developed by Clarke and Braun (2016). Reading and summarising research to find recurrent themes was the first step in becoming familiar with the data. The creation of preliminary codes, which emphasised important terms and ideas about school preparedness and teachers' tactics, came next. By combining related codes into bigger categories that encompassed the most important findings, themes were discovered in the third step. After that, these themes were examined and improved to make sure they made sense and fitted the goals of the study. In the last stages, the themes were defined and given names, verified that they appropriately reflected the evaluated research, and then included in the discussion of the results in the final report.

Several important themes emerged from the preliminary analysis, including the influence of cultural and socioeconomic factors on parental beliefs and educators' responses; difficulties in managing parental expectations, which highlighted tensions between academic preparedness and play-based learning; communication and collaboration strategies, which highlighted how educators work with parents to align expectations; and educators' perspectives on school readiness, where differences between *Te Whāriki* holistic approach and parental expectations were evident.

The theme analysis technique was used because of its adaptability and suitability for qualitative research, enabling the study to spot intricate similarities in several different studies. The results were

methodically arranged and evaluated using this structured approach, offering significant and lucid insights into how New Zealand's early life educators deal with the demands of school preparation.

Data analysis

Following the selection of relevant studies, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns and themes within the literature (Tisdell et al., 2025). This process involved systematically coding the data to categorise key topics such as early childhood educators' responses to family expectations, the challenges they face, and the influence of cultural differences on school readiness. The thematic synthesis provided a comprehensive and structured understanding of the research area, highlighting critical issues and gaps that require further investigation. This analytic approach enhances the rigour of the review by ensuring findings are grounded in systematically derived evidence.

Ethical considerations

Formal ethical approval is unnecessary because the study does not include acquiring primary data. To ensure that the conclusions are supported by reputable academic research, the study instead depends on examining already published literature (Snyder, 2019).

Chapter Three: Conceptual and theoretical framework

Building on the insights presented in Chapter Two, this chapter outlines the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that underpin the study, offering the lens through which the research questions are examined. Chapter Three is organised into three key sections that provide the foundational context for the investigation. The first section explores critical perspectives relevant to ECE and school readiness, highlighting sociocultural and political influences. The second section defines the concept of school readiness, examining its various interpretations and implications. The final section focuses on *Te Whāriki* and relevant theoretical frameworks that underpin early childhood pedagogy and inform this research.

Critical and societal perspectives on early literacy and school readiness

This section includes educational philosophies and ideas that challenge the prevailing narratives around ECE, especially the neoliberal push for early academic accomplishment. These viewpoints stress developmental appropriateness, child agency, and the sociopolitical aspects of learning, challenging the notion that early literacy is only a technical ability associated with future economic success.

Neoliberal pressures and the banking model

Parental expectations regarding school preparedness and the transition to school have been greatly influenced by neoliberal influences in education which, according to Moss and Roberts-Holmes (2022), are characterised by an emphasis on accountability, standardisation, and performance results. These demands frequently result in an increased focus on quantifiable academic skills, leading parents to anticipate that ECE settings will use formalised, organised learning to get children ready for school (Sandvik et al., 2014). This reflects Paulo Freire's (2018) idea of the "banking" model of education, in which learners are treated as passive recipients of knowledge, with information deposited into them by teachers. Viewing parental expectations for early academic instruction through this lens helps illuminate the potential tensions between developmental, play-based approaches and more traditional, didactic views of learning. Instead of being a dialogic and relational activity, education under this approach turns into a one-way information transfer (Freire, 2018). The banking model is mirrored in the presumption that children must possess certain information and abilities to be considered prepared for school. This ignores the socioemotional and developmental variability of young learners and undercuts child-led, play-based pedagogies (Freire, 2018). *Te Whāriki*, the early childhood curriculum of New Zealand, places a strong emphasis on play-based learning, cultural identity, and holistic development. Nonetheless, studies have indicated that teachers frequently encounter conflict between this ideology and the demands of parents who see early reading as a crucial indicator of school preparedness (Mengnan et al., 2025). Although there is widespread support for curricular reforms, many educators

are worried about the rate of reform and the pressure to use structured literacy techniques that might not be in line with early childhood pedagogies, according to the 2024 NZCER National Survey of Primary Principals (Mengnan et al., 2025).

Building on this critique, a conceptual lens grounded in sociocultural and critical educational theories allows for a deeper understanding of how neoliberal assumptions intersect with educational practice and parental expectations particularly in shaping how early childhood educators respond to these expectations. Sociocultural and critical educational frameworks, for instance, place a strong focus on the value of connections, context, and knowledge co-construction (Crawford, 2020). The neoliberal presumption that school preparation can be uniformly defined and quantified is contested by these frameworks (Freire, 2018). Rather, they present preparation as a dynamic, mutually reinforcing process that is influenced by the interactions that take place between educators, families, and children. According to this viewpoint, early childhood educators' professional conceptions of holistic and culturally relevant teaching methods may conflict with parental expectations shaped by neoliberal rhetoric (Qi & Sterling Henward, 2025). Therefore, a key basis for investigating how educators negotiate and manage parental expectations throughout the transition to school is provided by analysing the interaction between neoliberal pressures, Freire's critique of conventional education paradigms, and modern theories of transition.

Developmentally informed and critical perspectives on ECE

While neoliberal influences shape much of the discourse around school preparedness, scholars such as Elkind (2001) provide a counterpoint by advocating for developmentally appropriate, emotionally responsive, and culturally grounded approaches. Elkind's (2001) work is particularly relevant to the transition to school, a period often marked by heightened parental anxiety about children's readiness for formal learning.

Due to cultural signals that associate early success with long-term success, parents sometimes confuse preparedness with early reading and numeracy abilities (Chan, 2012). Early childhood educators may feel pressured to use more formal, academic approaches as a result, even if they go against their professional knowledge of child development. This conflict may be seen in New Zealand in the contrast between the more regimented demands of the primary school system and the holistic, play-based concept of *Te Whāriki*. According to research by Peters (2010; Peters et al., 2015), transitions to school are more successful when early childhood and school pedagogies are aligned, and children's social and emotional readiness is prioritised. This is facilitated through "deliberate choices made to strengthen continuity at transition from ECE" (Mitchell et al., 2015, p. 7), which help ensure a smoother and more supportive experience for children. According to a 2024 NZCER research (Mengnan et al., 2025), many educators in New Zealand feel pressured by parents to start formal literacy younger than they think is developmentally appropriate. This supports Singh and Zhang's (2018) work and emphasises the

necessity of discussions between families and educators regarding what makes ECE relevant and suitable.

Defining school readiness in ECE

These conversations about what constitutes appropriate early learning naturally leads to a broader examination of how school readiness is defined and interpreted in New Zealand. School readiness used to mean waiting until a child was naturally ready—based on the belief that "children's readiness for school is based on biology, and that they will be ready 'when they are ready'—but now it includes looking at their health, communication, and learning skills (Rouse et al., 2023, p. 13).

Six is the legal age at which a child in New Zealand must begin attending school (Ministry of Education, 2024b). Although the mandatory school starting age in New Zealand is 6, it is common practice for children to begin school on or shortly after their 5th birthday, a tradition that has become a cultural rite of passage (Boereboom & Tymms, 2018; May, 2011). According to statistics from the World Bank (2025), New Zealand is a notable outlier in relation to school starting age, with children typically beginning formal education at age 5—placing the country among only 5% of nations that do so. In contrast, 81% of countries have a school starting age of 6, and a further 12% begin at age 7, making 6 the most common global entry age for formal schooling (Boereboom & Tymms, 2018; World Bank Group, 2025). However, Peters (2010) contended that, even at 6, New Zealand students are considered young when they begin school. Regardless of a child's age, the shift from the play-based, all-encompassing approach of ECE to the more structured, teacher-led atmosphere of primary school can be difficult (Blucher et al., 2018). Westbrook and Hunkin (2020) stated that the majority of children in New Zealand enter school at age 5, thus even though 6 is the official entrance age, later-starters may still encounter settings designed for younger classmates who have already adjusted. Peters (2010) emphasised that, rather than using age alone as a marker for school enrolment, it is important to take developmental preparedness and pedagogical continuity into account.

Understanding transitions in education

In order to fully understand the concept of school readiness and its implications, it is important to first consider the broader notion of transitions in education. From beginning at an ECE service to going to school, university, or the workforce, among many other settings, transitions are a regular part of life. Golan (1983) has succinctly described the idea of transitions as moving from one known and safe place to another, followed by a time of uncertainty. Children ultimately leave one educational culture and enter a completely different one when they go to school, or, by the bioecological framework, they leave one microsystem and enter a new one. In ECE, school readiness is frequently debated, especially in New Zealand, where students start formal schooling at age 5 (Ministry of Education, 2024a). Various cultural, social, and educational viewpoints influence how school readiness is defined. This

conversation examines the notion of school readiness in the context of ECE in New Zealand, considering curricular frameworks, educator viewpoints, and parental expectations.

According to *Te Pūnaha Mātauranga: Our Education System* (Ministry of Education, 2024b), the crucial transition from ECE to school can significantly impact children's long-term academic performance and mental health. It emphasises the importance of efficient transition plans that provide continuity between ECE and educational environments (Ministry of Education, 2024a). To provide a nurturing atmosphere where children may identify and expand on their current knowledge and abilities, educators from both sectors must work together. According to a 2010 report Peters (2010), children from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, including Māori and Pacific Nations children, sometimes experience elevated levels of stress and anxiety during the transition to school, particularly when transition strategies are ineffective. Children and their whānau may experience a separation between expectations at home and school when schools implement uniform policies that ignore different cultural origins, making them feel alone or alienated; this group includes refugees and immigrants (De Gioia, 2017). These learners find transition more difficult due to a reduced ability to form strong, supportive relationships in the new school environment, which can be further compounded by inconsistencies between early childhood and school settings.

There is a strong expectation for early reading abilities, as seen by the notable growth in the idea that most children should learn to read in kindergarten, from 31% in 1998 to 80% in 2010 (Education Counts, 2025). However, reading in early childhood education does not relate to formal teaching in phonics or decoding, but rather to emergent literacy, or children's growing understanding of print, symbols, and tales. Over the same period, educator agreement that preschool attendance supports the development of school readiness skills increased from 63% to 83%, reflecting a growing belief in the importance of early education for later academic success (Education Counts, 2025). The percentage of parents who feel their children should know the alphabet before kindergarten has increased from 29% to 62% (Education Counts, 2025). But it is also possible to claim that educators may teach these literacy skills by using tactics that correspond to a student's evaluated literacy level when responding in teachable moments.

According to Margetts (2014), children may experience stress from an excessive emphasis on academics, which can negatively impact their motivation, self-esteem, and attitudes toward learning, and may even "generate anger, frustration and despair and lead to behaviour problems" (Margetts, 2014, p. 77) A smooth school transition largely depends on having good ties between the home and the school (Peters, 2010). The significance of determining what parents genuinely desire from a home–school collaboration and using this knowledge to build solid, confident relationships is covered by Perry et al. (2014).

The role of *Te Whāriki*

Given the central role that relationships, pedagogy, and developmental understanding play in supporting school transitions, it is essential to consider how these elements are reflected in the early childhood curriculum framework—*Te Whāriki*.

Overarching vision of *Te Whāriki*

The early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2017) understands young children to be naturally capable and self-assured contributors who can guide their educational paths. ECE in New Zealand is guided by *Te Whāriki,* the Early Childhood Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2017).

For all important stakeholders, a smooth transition to school depends on having courteous and reciprocal relationships (Peters, 2010). The 2010 report clarifies how important these mutually beneficial interactions are, and according to Singh and Zhang (2018), home–school partnerships are the most effective means for schools to comprehend and serve the needs of diverse learners. As they note, "sufficient understanding of children's cultural backgrounds and their cultural practice at home will also further support home–school relationships and collaboration," (Singh & Zhang, 2018, p. 57) reinforcing the value of culturally responsive engagement for both educators and children.

The relationship between educator and parent whānau is very important to the child's transitions. Peters (2010) highlighted that building fair and constructive connections with all parties involved is essential for gaining a holistic understanding of the child's needs and experiences. Supporting this view, Singh and Zhang (2018) discussed the negative consequences for parents and caregivers when these bonds are not established, including increased anxiety and a sense of disconnection during the transition process. While *Te Whāriki* promotes the importance of partnerships with families as a foundational principle, these studies underscore how such relationships are crucial in practice to facilitate smooth and positive transitions. This includes encountering hostility and a lack of trust, which caused the parents to look for alternative sources of support while the educator should be offering this platform (Singh & Zhang, 2018).

According to Peters (2010), establishing trust is essential to a smooth transition. Teachers and parents/caregivers must learn to understand one another to build these mutually respectful relationships, according to Jahreie (2023), who also claimed that communication cannot strengthen educator–parent relationships unless it addresses the politics of knowledge that underlie them. *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) affirmed this by emphasising the importance of responsive and reciprocal relationships between educators, children, and families, recognising that collaborative partnerships are fundamental to supporting children's learning and wellbeing. Moving from an individual viewpoint, Bronfenbrenner's (1981) work served as the foundation for ecological views, as seen in Figure 1.

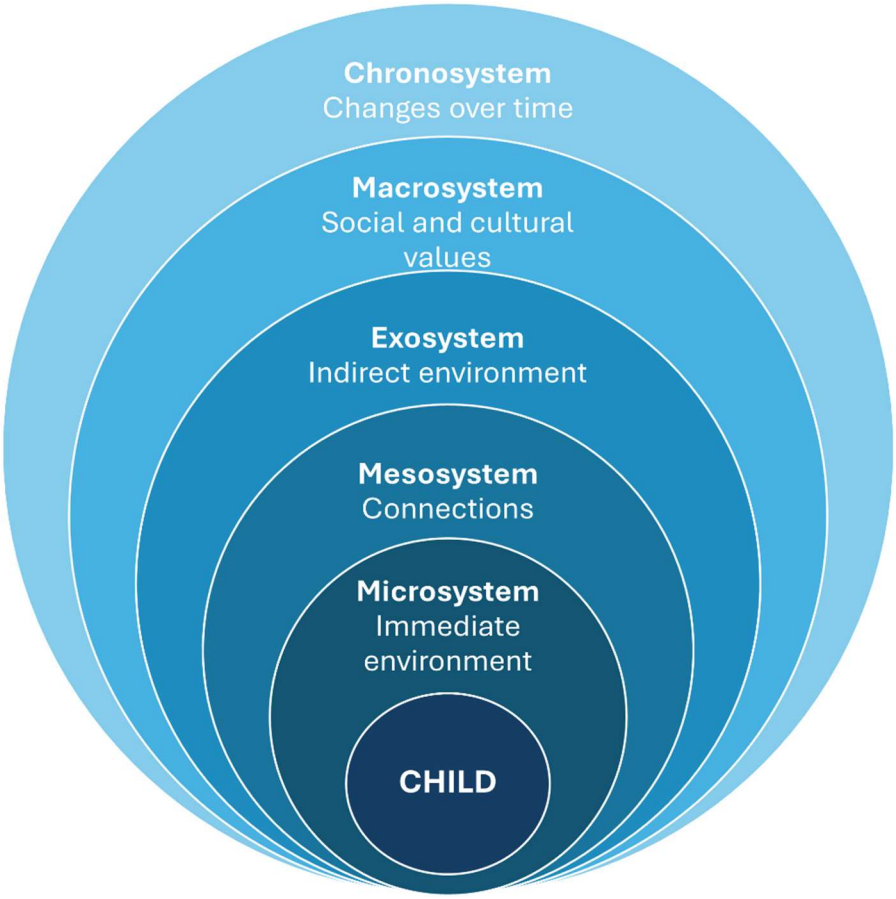


Figure 1

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory

Theories informing parental expectations and school readiness

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory

Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) integrates te ao Māori perspectives with various ideas and methodologies. The bioecological theory highlights several levels of effect on a child's learning, including connections, the family, the community, and national and international factors. These layers are connected to the concepts of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017). Teachers will "work with others within and beyond their specific ECE context to enact the curriculum", according to *Te Whāriki*, which places their job within a bioecological framework (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 60).

Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory of development (1981) provides a valuable framework for this study, as it allows for an examination of the multiple environmental factors—including relationships, settings, and broader social influences—that shape children's behaviours and school-related experiences. This study adopts Bronfenbrenner's model as a theoretical lens to analyse the complex interactions between children, families, educators, and educational contexts, moving beyond a focus on individual deficits to consider the broader systems impacting school readiness and transition.

According to the socio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1981), a child's learning and development are influenced by the interactions that occur both within and between the various environments, communities, and settings of which the child is a part (Smith et al., 2015). The necessity of mutually beneficial and cooperative connections inside and across systems is supported by socio-ecological theory (Ministry of Education, 2024a). Whether children's transitions to school are aided or impeded will depend on the character and calibre of these interactions (see Figure 1).

The child's immediate environments comprise the microsystem (Level 2), such as early childhood settings, schools, neighbourhoods, and households (Crawford, 2020). Such connections must be constructive in order to support the development of the child's emotional health. We are naturally aware that strong parent–teacher relationships are important at all times, including times of transition, because the mesosystem (Level 2) encompasses the connections and relationships between the environments that make up the microsystem. This layer highlights the importance of effective and open communication between the child's educational settings (Crawford, 2020).

In discussing the relationships between the mesosystems throughout the transition to the school era, Bierman et al. (2023) emphasised that individuals in both the home and the school microsystems form these relationships. According to Peters (2010), warm, shared, and stable relationships between preschool and school educators will be supportive of development. Peters (2010) also emphasised that open lines of communication are crucial to facilitating a positive transition to school. Additionally, this communication is essential between the educators and parents/caregivers at home and school.

Although the exosystem (Level 3) may seem less relevant to the child because it involves places the child does not attend, it is "the adults' environment as it influences their capacity to care and educate" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 19). These settings may include places the child's teacher goes to socialise, the parents' workplace, or places they attend for recreation. The exosystem influences a child's learning process through events in the lives of the adults around them.

Significant life events—such as changes in family circumstances, caregiver availability, or school environment—can alter the priorities of some adults involved in the transition. As a result, the child's circumstances may change unexpectedly, for instance, when the protective support previously surrounding them weakens or breaks down. This can happen during transition, making it a more difficult experience than it already is (Bronfenbrenner, 1981; Crawford, 2020; Ministry of Education, 1996). The ideologies, customs, laws, and cultural practices inherent in each society or community that impact a child's development are called the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). Government and school policies are part of the macro system. While they do not directly interact with children, they impact families, schools, and communities at the micro and meso levels.

The chronosystem is where changes to systems and the members within them occur over time (Crawford, 2020). One of the best examples of this is times of transition, such as the move from the

early childhood environment to primary school. The chronosystem can be a protective factor during transitions, as research and increased understanding about how to adapt the environment to support children can help ensure smoother developmental outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1981).

Sociocultural theories

Complementing the bioecological model, sociocultural theories further emphasise the importance of viewing children as active participants in the transition process. Transition strategies that acknowledge children as active participants in their learning align with sociocultural (Vygotsky, 1978) and bioecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1981) theories, which inform the analytical lens of this study. According to Perry (2014), effective transition practices must emphasise children's contributions to the classroom, rather than viewing them as passive recipients. Through this lens, schools and communities are seen as responsible for providing the experiences and resources that enable each child to experience a successful transition (Perry et al., 2014).

Instead of viewing a child's unique traits as the only factor influencing their transition, it is beneficial to take into account interactions both within and between the contexts that have an impact on the child's transition (Peters, 2014) and to put in place a collaborative process for helping children through change (Jahreie, 2023).

Both adults and other children can support children in gaining knowledge and experience that will help them interact with others in the school environment. Like bioecological theory, this viewpoint acknowledges the agency of all parties involved; just as school practices affect children, so do families, teachers, and children themselves influence school activities (Rogoff et al., 2018). Research indicates that sociocultural and bioecological theories might be helpful when considering transition. For example, Margetts (2014, p. 79) suggested that studies on transitions should consider the child's interconnected influences including the roles of family, school, and the wider community, as "children's development is strongly influenced by the relationships between the settings or contexts." According to Margetts (2014), such studies should not adopt a deficit perspective in which specific groups are considered troublesome.

Chapter Four: Parental expectations of school readiness

Building on the theoretical foundations outlined in Chapter Three, this chapter explores how parental expectations shape and are shaped by cultural norms, policy settings, and historical practices surrounding school entry in New Zealand.

Theorising early school entry in New Zealand

Although the legal school starting age in New Zealand is 6, it is customary for children to begin school at 5. This apparent paradox reflects the historical influence of the British education system, which emphasised early formal instruction as a mechanism for promoting social order and economic productivity (Baker, 1996). Over time, this practice became embedded in New Zealand's educational culture, turning the 5th birthday into a symbolic rite of passage, despite the lack of a legal mandate. This early entrance age, however, according to Baker (1996) is more than just a historical relic; it represents a broader cultural construction of childhood as a stage leading up to maturity rather than a discrete time for play, discovery, and overall growth. From a sociological standpoint, the push for early academic achievement aligns with neoliberal ideologies that position children primarily as future economic contributors. Within this framework, early educational success is seen as a predictor of later productivity, and learning is often reduced to measurable outcomes. This perspective treats children as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge as quickly as possible, reinforcing an accelerationist logic—the belief that the sooner children acquire academic skills, the better prepared they will be for future societal demands.

The research on children entering school has recently acknowledged that transitions are not an isolated experience that depends only on the transitioning children for success, but rather collaboratively created by all parties involved. Theorists including Rogoff (2003), Vygotsky (1978), and Bronfenbrenner (1981) have impacted this viewpoint as their work positions transition as a shared, relational process influenced by the collaboration between children, families, educators, and the wider community. Accordingly, researchers have looked at what parents, early childhood educators, and new teachers can do to help children make a seamless transition to school and have acknowledged the importance of friendships and social skills in assisting children in acclimating to a new environment (Peters, 2010).

The following section discusses both international and New Zealand research that compares parental perspectives of teachers in ECE and schools.

Overview of parental expectations in New Zealand and internationally

New Zealand

Although school attendance in New Zealand is legally required from age 6 to 16 (New Zealand Government, 1989), it is customary for children to begin school on or close to their 5th birthday (May, 2011). While age 6 remains the mandatory starting age, legislative changes have allowed schools to adopt cohort entry, enabling children to start school in groups twice per term, rather than individually on their 5th birthday (Education Review Office, 2022). Some schools have adopted a cohort-based entry model, in which groups of children begin school together at set times during the year, while others continue with the traditional practice of continuous admission on or near the child's 5th birthday. Although cohort-based entry is intended to support smoother transitions by allowing for structured induction processes and peer bonding, it remains too early to determine definitively whether one model results in better school readiness outcomes (Education Review Office, 2022). Current evidence is limited and inconclusive, with both models presenting advantages and challenges depending on context, implementation, and individual child needs.

Despite these options, the transition to school can still pose challenges. Longitudinal research in New Zealand found that 20% of mothers reported their children were still experiencing transitional difficulties 6 months after starting school (Morton et al., 2018). According to a study in New Zealand by Timperley and Robinson (2002), there was a significant degree of unhappiness with transition arrangements generally, and educators, despite their willingness to work together, had quite different expectations of one another. Although few educators were happy with their roles and had different expectations of one another, educators in both sectors stated that, for transitions to be effective, the sectors should share responsibilities (Timperley & Robinson, 2002). Their study also looked at assessment records, and the findings showed minimal information exchange and that school teachers were resistant to the information they were given, preferring to evaluate the students themselves (Timperley & Robinson, 2002). In New Zealand, there is no formal requirement for early childhood services to share evaluation data with schools, and this communication frequently does not take place (Cameron et al., 2022). While some primary schools found transition information useful, others perceived it as offering little insight into what knowledge children bring with them. This aligns with findings by Mitchell et al., (2015), who reported that New Entrant (NE) teachers do not consistently use or find value in the assessment data provided by early childhood educators.

The Ministry of Education employed Mitchell et al. (2015) to examine assessment procedures for learning outcomes in ECE and the early school years. According to this study, parents expected information exchange to happen but, in reality, not much was communicated (Mitchell et al., 2015). Some school instructors reported that they did not find the material beneficial, demonstrating a lack of comprehension of the information presented and an inability to analyse the information received (Mitchell et al., 2015).

International

Comparable findings have also emerged in international settings, where research has similarly explored the role of parental expectations and the emotional adjustment children experience during the transition to school. Similarly, a smaller study conducted in Scotland by Hannah et al. (2009) revealed that five out of 20 parents observed that their children—who also began school at the age of 5—had difficulty adjusting to the change. These findings suggest that for some children, the transition to school can have a temporary but significant impact on their wellbeing, with varying timeframes for children to feel settled and secure. This highlights the importance of recognising and supporting children's mental health during this critical period of adjustment.

In Norway, Thorsen et al. (2006) surveyed parents and teachers to find out what data they thought schools required. Teachers from all sectors enjoyed information exchange, and everyone felt that understanding children's specific needs and social competency was crucial. This study aimed to gather opinions on assessment record sharing, transition procedures, preparation, and obstacles. According to the findings, 81% of Icelandic school teachers engaged in the practice, while 57% of preschool instructors utilised written records as a transition activity (Thorsen et al., 2006).

Polish children typically begin formal schooling at age 7, following a longer period of ECE that prioritises play, social development, and school readiness. According to Ślusarczyk et al. (2018), unless parents apply for early admission, only 6-year-olds who have completed at least 1 year of kindergarten are eligible to start school early. It is interesting to note that Poland often outperforms New Zealand in international assessments such as PISA, particularly in reading and mathematics (Herbst & Strawiński, 2016) despite children beginning formal schooling up to 2 years later. This extended period of ECE may contribute, not only to stronger academic foundations, but also to smoother transitions, as children have more time to develop the social, emotional, and cognitive skills necessary for school readiness in a play-based, low-pressure environment (Herbst & Strawiński, 2016).

With parental consent, 76% of preschool teachers and 51% of school teachers in Australia were reported to utilise written material as a transition activity (Hopps, 2014). However, the study did not inquire how the provided knowledge was applied in the classroom. Hopps (2014) conducted focus groups and a comprehensive communication survey to learn more about Australian early childhood and school teachers' experiences communicating with the other sector. The results showed a lack of understanding and communication across the sectors, with early childhood professionals unsure of whether or not information provided to schools is used and, if so, how (Hopps, 2014).

According to the results of an Australian study done by Rouse et al. (2023) with 5,019 instructors, academic abilities were more important to school teachers than to ECE teachers, who were more focused on social-emotional preparation. There was no indication that teachers considered the school's

role in being prepared for children, despite teachers from both sectors stating that child preparation was crucial (Rouse et al., 2023). A key finding was that "'school readiness' was the perception of a differing understanding of what it means to be 'school ready', when compared with families or other professionals," highlighting the disconnect between educators' and families' views on readiness (Rouse et al., 2023, p. 190).

While educators acknowledged that social skills were still developing and would continue to be developed in the school setting, parents expected their children to possess more sophisticated social abilities. Physical, behavioural, social-emotional, language and communication, and literacy and numeracy preparedness were all deemed significant components of school readiness, according to another Tasmanian research that examined the opinions of 39 parents from underprivileged communities (Jose et al., 2020). According to these parents, it was crucial to function independently in the new school setting (Jose et al., 2020). Data from 250 ECE and NE teachers in Ireland showed that different teacher groups place varying values on preparation markers (O'kane & Hayes, 2006). ECE teachers placed more value on academic skills than NE teachers did on abilities that would help children follow the rules and routines, even though both groups of teachers believed that social skills, independence, communication skills, and the capacity to sit still, listen, and focus was important. As O'kane and Hayes (2006, p. 132) noted, the "ability of students to sit still [was seen as] useful in terms of classroom management, and the ability to listen and concentrate as being useful," reflecting shared concerns about behavioural readiness across both sectors.

Taken together, both New Zealand and international findings reveal persistent tensions between academic and holistic conceptions of school readiness. Unlike New Zealand, where school begins at age five and parental expectations often centre on early literacy and numeracy (Peters, 2010), countries such as Poland and Norway (Ślusarczyk et al., 2018) promote extended ECE experiences that emphasise social and emotional competence before formal instruction. These differing approaches suggest that a later school starting age and sustained play-based pedagogy may better support children's wellbeing and smooth transitions. Nonetheless, across all contexts, alignment between educators, parents, and policy frameworks remains essential to achieving shared understandings of what it means to be "ready" for school.

Cultural perspectives on school readiness

While teacher expectations often focus on behavioural and academic skills, growing cultural diversity in ECE settings demands a broader understanding of readiness that is responsive to the values and aspirations of different communities. The number of varied ethnic groups participating in ECE in New Zealand is increasing annually, reflecting what *Te Whāriki* describes as "our bicultural foundation, our multicultural present and the shared future we are creating" according to *Te Whāriki*, (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 2). Thus, educators working in the ECE service sector must be capable of meeting

the comprehensive learning requirements and promoting the wellbeing of children and families from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Culture significantly impacts how people act and behave; everyone has their own culture (Bredekamp, 2014). Numerous scholars, educators, scientists, and philosophers have defined culture. “Culture includes rituals, ways of interacting and communicating, and expectations for behaviours, roles, and relationships that are shared by members of a group,” according to Bredekamp (2014, p. 173). In New Zealand, high-quality ECE is prized for its contribution to giving children a strong foundation for learning and life, particularly for those who are more likely to struggle academically, such as children from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Education Review Office, 2013; Matatū Aotearoa, 2011). Although it is not required, research shows that children who receive high-quality early childhood services gain from it in a variety of ways, such as fostering healthy interpersonal relationships, communicating and expressing ideas, improving their physical and cognitive abilities, and developing the dispositions necessary for successful learning (Ministry of Education, 2008).

Children from various backgrounds interact and form strong relationships with culturally competent teachers. Children with various learning disabilities benefit from their emphasis on respectful interactions (Matatū Aotearoa, 2011). While reciprocal partnerships between parents and teachers are essential for supporting smooth transitions (Rivalland & Nuttall, 2010). differing beliefs about what constitutes school readiness can complicate these relationships. Immigrant families, many of whom come from countries where formal schooling begins significantly later than in New Zealand, may prioritise social and emotional maturity over early academic skills. Although some educational settings in New Zealand are increasingly shaped by accelerationist expectations—where earlier acquisition of academic skills is seen as advantageous—this view is not universally held. Rather, readiness expectations are shaped by a complex interplay of cultural norms, prior educational experiences, and the structure of the host education system (Rivalland & Nuttall, 2010). Parents and teachers must communicate effectively for children to have a smooth transition from home to early childhood to school (Rivalland & Nuttall, 2010). However, migrant parents often feel that teachers do not want to talk to them and hear what they have to say about their child’s education, according to Guo (2014). Such ideas may harm the establishment and upkeep of a collaboration between educators and immigrant families.

In her research, Guo (2014) discovered that Asian parents either did not wish to be actively involved in early childhood care or were unsure of how to do so. The primary reasons for the parents’ lack of engagement were their inexperience with the New Zealand educational system, their language and cultural difficulties, and their lack of confidence when collaborating with educators. Using Bourdieu’s theory of cultural reproduction, Chan (2018) found that parents primarily sent their children to mainstream early childhood programmes to bridge cultural gaps and integrate with society. More precisely, it was said that they felt less confident in their connections with educators because of language

and cultural limitations. Additionally, and in line with the respondents in Guo's studies (Guo, 2014, 2015), there were conflicting opinions on learning by play, which they perceived as contradicting their traditional Chinese teaching methods and culture.

By examining national evaluation reports and research initiatives that concentrated on the experiences of Māori and Chinese families within New Zealand early childhood services, Chan and Ritchie (2016) examined the idea of parent–teacher collaboration. In order to achieve this, they used hybridity theory and the concept of funds of knowledge to support the idea that educators must shift from the hegemonic safe spaces of traditional teacher-dominated practices to areas of fluid, dialogic engagement with families from different backgrounds.

Chan and Ritchie (2016) discovered that most educators incorporated static, primarily Western, monocultural early childhood discourses into their curricula. According to Chan and Ritchie's (2016) results, parents got more involved in the programme when teachers recognised immigrant households using culturally sensitive methods. Additionally, they discovered that teachers frequently had a narrow view of parental engagement, often assuming that parents would actively participate in centre-based activities without considering alternative cultural conceptualisations of partnership. These assumptions extended to expectations about school readiness and the value of prolonged participation in ECE. For instance, some teachers expected parents to support early academic preparation or endorse the notion that extended ECE attendance was universally beneficial, without recognising that families from different cultural or educational backgrounds might prioritise social maturity, home-based learning, or later school entry as more developmentally appropriate. Some immigrant parents, for example, had a teacher-centred perspective on education, which meant that they thought it was improper and disrespectful to interact with educators.

According to a similar conclusion throughout the research, some immigrant parents perceive educators as authoritative characters. Some parents who hold this opinion actively participate in their children's education at home rather than attending centres and schools. The aforementioned research emphasised how crucial it is for educators to be willing to start discussions with families, develop sincere bonds with them, and then modify their methods to include parents' perspectives in the curriculum.

Factors influencing parental expectations

Beyond interpersonal dynamics, the literature review has identified several systemic factors that shape parental expectations regarding children's transition to school. The significance of continuity between the ECE and primary school stages has been emphasised by transition research (González-Moreira et al., 2021; Korucu & Schmitt, 2020). According to Velten (2022), there are differences in the physical environment, curriculum, activities, teacher role, and external expectations for reading and numeracy abilities. Research has demonstrated that social and emotional skills are a crucial component of school preparedness in addition to academic development (Rademacher, 2022; Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos,

2004). In primary school, play-based activities are frequently undervalued and might be interpreted as a cultural difference between nations (Fisher, 2022). Nonetheless, a number of primary schools in New Zealand have acknowledged the pedagogical and developmental advantages of play-based learning (Education Review Office, 2011). To apply play-based learning, NE educators must understand how children learn through play, how to identify learning, and how to encourage learning in authentic play environments, according to Broström, (2005). Parents may also require assistance in comprehending the importance of play in educational settings. As Broström (2019) states, educators in both sectors should create play-based curricula that strike a balance between continuity and discontinuity, as children expect to play in school.

These days, the transition is examined from a more global perspective, considering the effects on children both within and outside of schools and the consequences for all those involved. The cognitive, academic, social, and emotional development of the child—which is necessary for him or her to successfully adjust to school—as well as the child's vision and perception, has been the subject of recent research on transition factors (Bartholo et al., 2020).

Although many parents feel pressure to prioritise early academic achievement, others express concern that the transition to school may diminish their child's enjoyment of learning. Carolan et al. (2021) noted that some families, accustomed to the play-based, joyful environment of ECE, fear that their children's positive attitudes toward learning may shift negatively once formal schooling begins. This highlights the contradictory expectations families hold—valuing both enjoyment and achievement—within the broader discourse on school readiness (Carolan et al., 2021). Furthermore, the academic variable reflects parents' views that their children need to have high levels of formal academic skills before they can start school (Cook et al., 2017; Suntheimer & Wolf, 2020).

Changes in families' lives are another aspect of this transition process. Consequently, other variables have been identified about homework (Tao et al., 2019), routine changes (Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016), and everyday organisational issues like transportation to school or parents work schedules (Hacıibrahimoğlu & Kargın, 2017). Despite these changes, families still anticipate that the school will encourage active engagement, communicate security, and maintain the bond between the home and the school (Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016; Tao et al., 2019).

According to academic studies, children's success in making the transition to formal schooling is linked to parental preparation (Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016; Hacıibrahimoğlu & Kargın, 2017). Furthermore, high-quality early childhood programmes help children from socioeconomically disadvantaged households (Carolan et al., 2021). It is crucial that the school work with families, creating communication channels that respect their expectations, because students may perceive a demanding attitude from parents who are anxious about their children's academic performance (Perry & Dockett, 2020; Tao et al., 2019).

Conflicts between parental expectations and *Te Whāriki* principles

The increasing emphasis placed by parents on early academic skills raises important questions about how well these expectations align with the aims and values of *Te Whāriki*. Zhang (2015) found that parents recognise and act upon the importance of preliteracy skills—such as writing one's name—for school preparedness, effectively translating the broad, flexible learning goals of *Te Whāriki* into concrete, contextually relevant expectations for their children. Early childhood educators in New Zealand have shifted from developmental to emergent literacy models since implementing the country's national ECE curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (McLachlan & Arrow, 2011; Ministry of Education, 2017). Teachers' approaches to school readiness (Norling, 2014; Sandvik et al., 2014) and children's literacy performance (McLachlan & Arrow, 2011) have been extensively studied. However, little is known about parents' approaches to school readiness and whether or not they align with nationally required curricula.

Given *Te Whāriki* and its sociocultural focus, assessing how effectively New Zealand parents align with the national curriculum's emergent literacy approach is critical. Understanding parents' perspectives is the first step in the sociocultural viewpoint, which recommends that teachers, parents, and children co-create locally placed emergent literacy programmes. *Te Whāriki* is a sociocultural oriented curriculum that encourages a holistic approach to literacy instruction and learning, where programmes must be inclusive and accommodate children from various backgrounds (Education Review Office, 2011).

Ritchie, (2025) argued that *Te Whāriki*, grounded in a bicultural recognition of the cultural and linguistic resources of Māori tamariki and whānau, actively challenges the notion of a single, standardised developmental pathway for all children. Instead of measuring children against narrow school readiness benchmarks, the curriculum foregrounds their strengths, identities, and cultural contexts. Expanding on this perspective, Chan and Ritchie (2020) highlighted how the concept of a "local curriculum" within *Te Whāriki* (2017) empowers educators to implement the framework flexibly and responsively, tailoring learning experiences to the specific needs and aspirations of their communities. Together, these studies position *Te Whāriki* (2017) not merely as a curriculum document, but as a pedagogical approach that resists universalised definitions of readiness and embraces relational, culturally grounded learning. Chan and Ritchie (2020) went on to say that *Te Whāriki* (2017) has given a platform for diverse groups to coexist. However, it depends on educators to carry out their goals meaningfully and contextually appropriately so that their pledges to diversity and/or super-diversity are not just words but deeds. Chan and Ritchie (2020) maintained that to create a programme that is genuinely responsive to families' needs, educators must collaborate with them in decision-making. Immigrant parents' knowledge and behaviours are frequently evaluated against mainstream standards in ECE and are viewed as inferior to professional knowledge, according to research (Chan, 2019; Chan & Ritchie, 2020).

The ECE curriculum document, on the other hand, has evolved into a platform for articulating content, coherence, and control within modern policy frameworks. This aligns preschool and compulsory

education policies and guarantees that children meet educational and school readiness goals, supporting longer-term sociopolitical and economic objectives (Chan & Ritchie, 2020). The underlying policy drivers dictate that programmes must show returns on investment through positive outcomes that are visible over the long term; even though ECE is viewed as a right, a developmental need, and a positive benefit for children, families, and communities, and a means of learning (Chan & Ritchie, 2020). Bates (2019) analyses policy-centred forms of educational play and contends that these drivers have confused discipline-specific notions in curricular frameworks, such as reading and numeracy, with domain-specific ones, such as social, emotional, cognitive, and physical.

Chapter Five: Educators' responses to parental expectations

How ECE educators navigate diverse expectations

Chapter Five marks a shift from macro-level policy discourse to the micro-level realities of practice, focusing on how early childhood educators and families engage with, and respond to, diverse expectations surrounding children's school readiness. Understanding educators' responses begins with recognising the foundational role families play in shaping children's attitudes toward learning, as well as the environments in which early readiness is nurtured. Families are crucial in helping children prepare for school, creating nurturing connections, and creating stimulating home environments. Family surroundings provide the foundation for children's mental attitudes about school and their attempts to study, and they can play a significant role in the acquisition of skills, information, or learning (Jose et al., 2022; Marti et al., 2018, p. 9). A child's intellectual capacity, the means available to attain success, their expectations of society, and their opinions on society are frequently determined by their parental environment.

Parents frequently have expectations that centre on developing social and intellectual abilities to prepare their children for school. Parents often expect early childhood educators to provide structured, school-like learning experiences—particularly in literacy and numeracy—that they believe will prepare their children for the academic demands of primary school (Boereboom & Tymms, 2018). Teaching fundamental literacy and numeracy abilities, such as reading, numbers, shapes, and colours, is part of this. Additionally, some parents stress the need for social skills development, expecting educators to assist their children in forming friendships, gaining confidence, and learning constructive peer interactions (Chan, 2019). Moreover, parents anticipate that schools will offer a secure and nurturing atmosphere that promotes their children's general growth and wellbeing (Bierman et al., 2023).

Although they frequently stress the value of early independence and play-based learning, which are essential elements of the New Zealand early childhood curriculum (2017), educators typically respect the varying perspectives of parents (Chan & Ritchie, 2016; Guo, 2015). They realise that some parents appreciate reading and numeracy abilities, but they also highlight the relevance of social and emotional development. If parents' expectations seem to go against the curriculum's tenets, some teachers may disregard them (González-Moreira et al., 2025; Guo, 2015). This top-down, us-and-them mentality may hamper collaboration with parents. Nonetheless, some teachers actively discuss expectations with parents to learn about them and include them in the curriculum (Peters, 2010). Educators think that a balanced approach that incorporates play-based learning and the development of social skills is essential for children's success in primary education (González-Moreira et al., 2025).

Teachers use various methods to interact with parents, including casual discussions, parent–teacher conferences, and written correspondence like aspiration sheets completed at the time of registration

(Chan & Ritchie, 2016). By asking parents directly about their goals for their children and implementing this knowledge into the curriculum, some educators consciously try to understand the beliefs and expectations of families. Open, nonjudgmental listening and allowing parents to express their expectations and expertise are essential to effective communication (Chan & Ritchie, 2016). Also, this collaboration aims to reduce parental anxiety and foster a shared understanding of what school readiness entails (González-Moreira et al., 2025).

Educators may resolve conflicting expectations by embracing a critical multicultural approach that recognises and considers the many cultural origins of families (Chan, 2019; González-Moreira et al., 2025). This entails having sincere conversations with parents, acknowledging the flux of identity and culture, and confronting their preconceptions and prejudices. By establishing connections based on mutual trust and integrating families' knowledge bases into the curriculum, educators may create real, respectful, and stereotype-free practices (Chan, 2019). This strategy ensures that all cultural groups feel included and appreciated while addressing power disparities. In order to ensure that expectations are discussed and met in the context of diversity, schools must cultivate connections that respect cultural differences and include families in the transition process (González-Moreira et al., 2025).

Strategies used to align parental expectations with *Te Whāriki*

In addition to culturally responsive engagement, educators also use curriculum-based strategies grounded in *Te Whāriki* to navigate and align parental expectations with early learning practices.

Navigating expectations through *Te Whāriki*

According to Pennells (2018), sociocultural evaluation methods are crucial for comprehending how children develop about their family and society. Teachers record and reflect on children's learning experiences using learning stories, a narrative-evaluation method incorporating parent input and perspectives. In order to provide a more inclusive and culturally sensitive curriculum, educators incorporate the information and skills that families contribute into the classroom (Timperley & Robinson, 2002). Strong ties between the home and the service are associated with better performance, according to the Education Review Office (2013), emphasising the value of a collaborative approach. The idea of communities of learning—where educators, parents, and children collaborate to improve learning outcomes via shared objectives, reciprocal involvement, and cooperative interactions—is emphasised.

Face-to-face contact, casual discussions, and organised sessions are all essential forms of effective two-way communication between educators and parents (Timperley et al., 2003). To inform teaching practices, educators provide parents with chances to express their expertise and viewpoints. Parents are encouraged to participate in the learning and growth of their children, which is documented in profile books available to both parents and children (Ministry of Education, 2017). Nevertheless, Pennells (2018) discovered that this was not always carried out successfully. According to Pennells (2018), using

parent-friendly language and avoiding academic jargon that might impede comprehension and involvement is critical. Various communication channels are used to ensure that parents participate in ways that work with their schedules and preferences, such as emails, visual displays, and online portfolios (Hatcher et al., 2012).

Pennells (2018) discovered that parents and educators had different perspectives on the curriculum, which impacted how well they worked together. Teachers sometimes felt under pressure from internal and external demands, occasionally preventing them from forming a genuine relationship with parents. Fisher (2022) urged constant reflection and practice change to ensure that parent engagement is significant and in line with *Te Whāriki*. Pennells (2018) emphasised how crucial it is for parents and teachers to establish solid, mutually beneficial connections to assist children's development per *Te Whāriki* views.

This theme directly addresses research question 1 by illustrating how educators in New Zealand respond to diverse parental expectations through collaborative communication and inclusive partnership practices. It also relates to research question 2 by showing that differing parental perspectives and external pressures influence educators' teaching practices and their ability to sustain genuine parent–teacher relationships.

Whānau perspectives within *Te Whāriki* framework

The importance of strong educator–parent relationships is embedded within the very origins of *Te Whāriki*, which was developed through extensive consultation with whānau and diverse communities across New Zealand. The first national curriculum paper for ECE in New Zealand was called *Te Whāriki*. It was created for ECE settings that used Māori and English as the primary language of instruction. *Te Whāriki* was embraced by early childhood teachers and swiftly spread throughout the New Zealand ECE sector as a whole, in part, or possibly in large part, because of extensive consultation, fruitful collaborations, and the meaningful inclusion of various cultural and interest groups throughout the curriculum's development (Ritchie, 2025).

However, in New Zealand, ECE settings that use English as the primary language do not always acknowledge or completely implement Māori understandings, ambitions, commitments, and the interests of other marginalised groups in society (Ritchie, 2025). *Te Whāriki* is subject to several interpretations, much like other curricular materials and pedagogical techniques. As such, it is a venue where knowledge, values, and pedagogy are challenged and, if acknowledged, may be negotiated. Individuals implementing the curriculum's social, cultural, and political positioning impact interpretations and professional practice (Peters, 2010).

Te Whāriki (2017) includes declarations that firmly advocate for inclusion and conveys the need and expectation that educators will respect and be receptive to various student groups, their families, and the larger community. Due to potential issues with these words, there is no universally accepted

definition of *family participation*. According to Jahreie (2023), there are many other terminologies for engagement, such as parent involvement, engagement, participation, and partnerships. Hopps (2014) also stated that *home–school partnerships* are another term for family engagement.

Partnerships are made possible for whānau when their opinions are sought out, respected, valued, and valued within the programme (Education Review Office, 2013). However, the Education Review Office also noted that meeting with whānau and conversing over tea are not partnerships (Education Review Office, 2013). As a result, this argument emphasises that early childhood educators should aim to transform these connections into productive and culturally sensitive collaborations. Hatcher et al. (2012) noted that, in the early childhood sector, partnerships with families arise when parents and teachers possess the skills and knowledge required to provide each child with the best education possible during transitions. This theme addresses research question 1 by illustrating how New Zealand educators respond to diverse parental expectations through culturally grounded, partnership-based approaches under *Te Whāriki*.

Collaborative approaches to managing expectation gaps

Moving beyond culturally respectful engagement with whānau, broader collaborative strategies that include teachers, parents, and children are essential for addressing mismatched expectations during the transition to school. The opinions and expectations of children, parents, and teachers around the 3-year school transition were examined in Australian research by Dockett and Perry (2001). Relationships that are responsive and positive are essential for effective transitions, according to Dockett and Perry (2001). They contended that how transition is handled lays the groundwork for children's academic performance and how they will react to changes in the future. One of their study's main findings was that children's priorities differed significantly from those of parents and teachers (Dockett & Perry, 2001).

Peters (2000) highlighted the need to consider sectoral differences when attempting to connect learning outside of school. Any attempt to draw linkages between early childhood services and education, according to Sandvik et al. (2014) must consider the structural inequalities across sectors and how they might hinder the development of relationships. Historically, separate curricular conceptual frameworks and theoretical stances have guided the operations of the two sectors (Perry et al., 2014). Due to this circumstance, teachers may have differing opinions on what it means to teach and, consequently, what it means to learn (Perry et al., 2014). This discrepancy could be what make it more difficult for the sectors to communicate.

Timperley et al. (2003) have written about sector differences' impact on teacher priorities for children's learning. Timperley et al. (2003) suggested there may be obstacles to forming cross-sector partnerships depending on the language educators utilise from each industry. Teachers may employ identical language when discussing educational practices, but each sector has its own interpretation that is

defined inside the curriculum's paradigm. These discourse disparities are difficult to overcome and need a longer-term commitment to continuous engagement (Timperley et al., 2003). According to Perry et al. (2014), educators are crucial in giving consistent classroom instruction to children. It is important for teachers to be aware of their students' current learning styles and to teach in a way that allows them to incorporate their learning styles, as well as their knowledge of (and proficiency with) language, into class activities. In order to get to know a child in this way, primary teachers must engage with families/whanāu, the child, and their early childhood environment before school (Perry et al., 2014).

Timperley et al. (2003) suggested that sharing information about individual children during a transition is a quality contact between sectors that could improve transition arrangements and improve children's continuity. However, Morton et al. (2018) argued that relying on sharing information about children between sectors to resolve differences in teacher expectations and to contribute to continuity is problematic because, in addition to the unreliable sharing process, the documented assessment practices in early childhood are also very different from those adopted in schools.

This theme addresses research question 2 by demonstrating that educators' practices are shaped by the structural and communicative barriers between ECE and school sectors, which influence how they negotiate continuity and shared understanding.

Challenges faced by educators

Conflicting priorities: Parents' views and curriculum implementation

In practice, early childhood and primary educators must navigate a complex set of priorities—balancing play-based pedagogies with academic pressures influenced by both parents and policy discourses. By incorporating play as a temporary activity in early schooling, Broström (2005) provided an alternate strategy for reducing the conflict between curriculum and parental expectations for children throughout transition via continuity. According to a recent study from New Zealand, play-based pedagogy supports continuity with ECE pedagogy in some classes for new students (Blucher et al., 2018). On the other hand, ready and neoliberal discourses' expectations for formal teaching in reading, writing, and mathematics may clash with play-based discourses that encourage learning via trial, inquiry, and child-centred discovery (Blucher et al., 2018; Moss & Roberts-Holmes, 2022). However, since enrolling as many children as possible supports the school's financial viability in the competitive market, the neoliberal educational context of New Zealand may increase the perceived strategic importance of school leaders' roles in welcoming new families and children into the school environment (Moss & Roberts-Holmes, 2022).

The NZC exhibits a discourse of continuity, arguing that early childhood learning and experiences should be built upon and connected to schools to build on the learning experiences that children bring (Mitchell et al., 2015). According to continuity discourses, children are positioned as carrying a wealth of information, experiences, and cultural understandings with them when they go to school (Souness et

al., 2023). This implies that a child's identity at ECE differs from that in a classroom setting, as they transition from being a big child in ECE to a little child in school.

Another point of pressure stated by Alcock and Haggerty (2013) between parental expectations and the curriculum is the "schoolification" of early childhood, or the pushdown of academic learning and formal environments into the ECE sector, is an alternative transition construction within a continuity discourse. This issue is connected to developing policies in New Zealand (Alcock & Haggerty, 2013). Another pressure is the necessity of preparing early children for English-medium education is emphasised in readiness discourses, which place a high value on English language proficiency so that children may participate in school-approved reading activities (Mitchell et al., 2015). Inherent presumptions that use English as the standard for evaluating children's proficiency support persistent, monolingual, and monocultural conceptions of language and literacy (Mitchell et al., 2015).

This theme contributes to research question 1 by illustrating how educators respond to competing parental and policy-driven expectations through balancing play-based and academic approaches. It also informs research question 2 by revealing how systemic and ideological pressures—particularly neoliberal and linguistic assumptions—shape educators' practices and the curriculum implementation process in early learning environments.

Workplace constraints and their influence on educator–whānau relationships

While ideological pressures such as schoolification and English language expectations influence pedagogical approaches, educators' effectiveness in supporting transitions is also shaped by their own working conditions and emotional wellbeing. Since early childhood educators are experts in their industry and possess the knowledge and abilities to promote children's growth and learning, they play a crucial role in establishing a top-notch childcare setting (Tebben et al., 2021). The sensitive, perceptive, and responsive caregiving that young children require to flourish can be given by teachers who have received sufficient training and are socially and emotionally well (Buettner et al., 2016). In contrast, undertrained teachers under stress and pressure cannot provide this care (Jeon et al., 2016). According to earlier research, factors like excessive workload and demands, a lack of control, low social support from administrators and colleagues, high teacher turnover within the programme, complex relationships with the parents of the children, and insufficient compensation all play a part (Tebben et al., 2021).

The next section explores the multifaceted tensions early childhood educators encounter in navigating ideological pressures and practical challenges within the New Zealand ECE context.

Tensions between academic demands and Te Whāriki holistic approach

Boyle (2021) criticised methods like primary school checklists, which place ECE hierarchically with families as the sender and the school as the recipient. Methods such as readiness checklists draw attention to differences in curriculum, expectations, and philosophy across different sectors (Boyle,

2021). By emphasising each child's unique talents, *Te Whāriki* opposes the idea of a single path to learning, the idea of measurable school readiness (Jacobs et al., 2021). *Te Whāriki* is a sociocultural oriented curriculum that encourages a holistic approach to literacy instruction and learning, where programmes must be inclusive and accommodate children from various backgrounds (Education Review Office, 2011). ECE LOs in *Te Whāriki* emphasised children's learning dispositions and working conceptions about the world and themselves more than particular abilities, such as literacy (Ministry of Education, 2017). *Te Whāriki* is not a one-size-fits-all curriculum due to its sociocultural perspective, which the text makes implicitly clear. *Te Whāriki* emphasises that parents and other caregivers have "a wealth of valuable information and understanding regarding their children" and "the critical role of socially and culturally mediated learning" (Chan & Ritchie, 2016, pp. 9, 30). As a result, the sociocultural approach highlights the necessity of locally relevant academic programmes jointly developed by ECE service providers, parents, and students (Zhang, 2015).

As the child's first teacher, the parent's emphasis on preliteracy abilities for school readiness—which is not included in *Te Whāriki*—reflects their feeling of agency ((Zhang, 2015). The parents' emphasis on preliteracy abilities should be seen as tangible, practical, and localised meanings of having a lot of book experience and liking writing. In this way, the parents operationalised, localised, and concretised the generically, loosely, and vaguely defined *Te Whāriki* LOs by emphasising specific preliteracy abilities for school preparation (Zhang, 2015). Therefore, there are links between the *Te Whāriki* LOs and the pre-emergent talents that the parents highlight.

This discussion directly contributes to research question 2 by showing how such expectations influence teaching practices, prompting educators to balance parental aspirations with curriculum integrity.

Navigating conflicting expectations in early childhood settings

These parental interpretations of learning outcomes highlight the need to explore how expectations are negotiated collectively within early childhood environments, especially during the critical transition to school. Moving to school is one of the most significant transformations in early life (Education Counts, 2010). This shift, a crucial developmental and transactional process, involves interactions with children, families, educators, schools, and the community (Rouse et al., 2023). The best results are obtained when parents, teachers, and children work as equal partners in the transition to school, according to the theories of Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner, 1981; Chan & Ritchie, 2016). There is also tangible evidence that transition-to-school programmes are successful when they connect the home, ECE, and primary school settings (Education Counts, 2010) and when parents, teachers, and children provide input (Dockett & Perry, 2014).

A study done in Hong Kong about the critical skills of children for primary school emphasises social and emotional aspects of school readiness rather than pre-academic skills, which are seen as important for teachers (Chan, 2012). Pre-academic abilities have been proven more important to parents (Chan,

2012). According to Chan (2012), more agreement is required to ensure that parents understand exactly what teachers can (and cannot) do at school, enabling them to better support their children in adjusting to school. As discussed, parents and teachers frequently have different opinions about the factors that moderate the transition to school and the best pedagogical approaches to use (Guo, 2015). Chan's study concludes that while some parents said that primary school teachers should place less academic and disciplinary demands on students during the first semester of school, other teachers believed that parents should help children more during the transition and put more effort into getting them ready for it (Chan, 2012).

Impact on teaching practices and curriculum implementation

Adapting teaching practices to meet parental expectations

As international research highlights the mismatch between teacher and parent expectations, it becomes increasingly important to consider how such misalignment affects educators' daily practice and how curriculum is adapted to meet these varying demands. Parents have long been involved in public and their children's education. As governments and educational institutions worldwide have changed, so too have the expectations placed on them and how this position is conceptualised. Little is known about how New Zealand parents, teachers, and students define parental involvement in their children's learning, which might lead to conflicts and miscommunications in the home–school interaction. This emphasis on the interaction between families and schools was established in England in 1998 when the School Standards and Framework Act was passed into law. This act required all schools to establish home–school agreements with the parents of each student enrolled in their programme (School Standards and Framework Act 1998, 2017).

An Educate America Act established in 1994, partners with parents as an optional aim to assist schools in developing and putting into place mechanisms for boosting parental involvement in the educational process, marking the beginning of the focus on parental involvement in American law (What is Goals 2000: The Educate America Act, 1994). With the implementation of a series of changes known as Tomorrow's Schools in 1989, parental participation in education gained significance in New Zealand. These changes encouraged the growth of home–school relationships and offered parents a more official involvement in school administration through the Board of Trustees (New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2016). Successful home–school relationships (Bull et al., 2008), published by the Ministry of Education in 2008, urged schools to forge closer links with families and communities to improve their children's lives.

Since their prescriptive and one-size-fits-all character was acknowledged as restricting rather than fostering fruitful home–school relationships, home–school agreements were eliminated from UK law in January 2016 (Council, 2017). This policy change recognised that schools must have the freedom to

create and carry out initiatives that boost “parental engagement in learning” in a way that is sensitive to the needs of their local community (Council, 2017).

In New Zealand, the Education Review Office now advocates for educationally powerful connections that are centred on student learning and success rather than on home–school partnerships (Bull et al., 2008; Education Review Office, 2015). Bull et al. (2008) found that the most significant factors influencing a child’s academic achievement were the relationships between the educators and the student and the teacher and the family. Since they have no control over students’ family lives, this perspective casts educators in a non-agentic role where they cannot positively affect that child. Therefore, educators will be more equipped to handle the difficulties and obstacles that may arise while working with parents and families if they value parental engagement and identify when good change has happened.

Some important topics about the change from ECE to primary school are highlighted in the evaluated literature. There are several consequences from this corpus of research that need to be carefully considered. These ramifications might influence practice, policy, and future studies, especially when it comes to sector-to-sector communication, culturally sensitive transition tactics, and curriculum consistency.

Chapter Six: Implications for policy and practice

Building on the findings of the literature review, this chapter outlines the implications for policy and practice, beginning with recommendations to support educators in managing parental expectations within an increasingly globalised and neoliberal educational context.

1. Policy recommendations for supporting educators in managing parental expectations

Policies addressing parental expectations in ECE

Since being reframed as crucial to a competitive information economy, educational systems have gained value on a global scale (OECD, 2006). This is a neoliberal perspective on education as a private human capital and a service for creating human capital, as highlighted by Moss and Roberts-Holmes (2022). The governments of 30 democracies collaborated in the 2006 (OECD) special forum, to solve the economic, social, and environmental issues globalisation brings (OECD, 2006). Parents' positive attitudes toward more active and creative learning materials and processes, continuity between children's learning at home and in the early childhood centres, information and referrals to other support services, and community involvement in early education and care matters are just a few advantages of Korea's OECD (2006) review proactive programme, which involves parents in the day-to-day operations of the centres.

Parental engagement is a topic heavily discussed in Finland's government resolution for national early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy (OECD, 2006). To guarantee that services are responsive to the needs and interests of children, parents are assigned a key role. The curricular requirements also place much emphasis on parent engagement. The goal of national initiatives like the Educational Partnership (2003–05) and Early Assist (2004–05) in Finland is to address the needs of parents (OECD, 2006). The former aims to do this by educating personnel to assist parents and parenting better, while the latter aims to develop the role of parents in early intervention (OECD, 2006).

Ideas concerning children, education, the economy, labour force participation, and the state's role are all reflected in ECEC policy (Mitchell, 2015). After Iceland, New Zealand was the second nation in the world to formally combine all of its ECEC programmes under a single education administration in 1986 (Mitchell, 2015). One example of integration Mitchell (2015) mentioned is seen in *Te Whāriki*, a bicultural curriculum for young children from birth to school age. Teachers, students, parents, whānau, and the community must weave their curricular mat for everyone to stand on since it is logically complicated (Rivalland & Nuttall, 2010).

Adapting policy to balance parental demands

While curriculum integration and bicultural principles provide a strong foundation, effectively meeting diverse parental expectations also requires adaptable policy approaches that balance universal access with targeted support. New Zealand has implemented two distinct ECE policy initiatives over the past 15 years. One may be roughly described as a universal approach in which ECE is considered a young citizen's right (Gambaro & Stewart, 2014). The second perspective, which may be roughly characterised as social interventionist (Gambaro & Stewart, 2014; Penn, 2011), holds that vulnerable children from priority families benefit most from ECE and that the state's responsibility is to step in and give assistance when families are unable to do so. Evidence from studies on the impact of various policy approaches on ECE participation in New Zealand suggests that both universal and tailored approaches are linked to higher participation rates (Gambaro & Stewart, 2014). Māori and Pasifika families showed further increases in engagement in 2012 and 2013, which according to Gambaro and Stewart (2014) were likely brought about by the targeted engagement programme. ECE services must be relevant to families in their local community to promote involvement. Culturally sensitive and providing possibilities for family support and participation, successful ECE programmes have pushed priority families to get involved (Penn, 2011).

Policy solutions to educators' challenges with parental expectations

Having examined how policy has expanded access to ECE, this section considers how policy can further support educators in managing the complexities of parental engagement and expectation-setting in early childhood contexts. A meta-analysis of parental involvement with kindergarten through secondary school children was conducted by Castro et al. (2015). The findings indicate that the kind and degree of engagement matter, with some forms of involvement being more strongly linked to better academic accomplishment. Overall, the results suggest favourable outcomes for all children as these findings highlight that parental engagement contributes not only to academic success but also to children's emotional and social development across schooling levels. (Castro et al., 2015). Parental participation rhetoric and reality differ due to several variables that hinder the development of successful parental involvement, according to Hornby and Lafaele (2011). These include societal, child, parent-teacher, and parent–family variables. To improve parental engagement, educators must be aware of these obstacles and assist parents in overcoming them.

According to Wildmon et al. (2014), establishing an atmosphere that supports a child's growth involves encouraging openness, comprehension, and respect for one another. Educators should support a cooperative partnership between parents and schools, with the mutual objective of improving the academic and socioemotional development of the child. In order to enable parents to make a constructive contribution to their child's educational journey, educators should also support and offer them resources, assistance, and direction.

Wildmon et al. (2024) also urged teachers to inspire, motivate, and encourage parents to be involved in their children's education. In 2002, the 10-year strategy plan for ECE, *Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki (2002)*, included a variety of additional policy measures with the goals of improving quality, raising participation, and fostering cooperative connections. The initiatives decreased specific income-level-related disparities among families and increased access to ECE. They allowed educators to interact with theory and have pedagogical conversations with parents and other stakeholders.

Fostering school readiness together

Beyond institutional initiatives, the family context remains a key determinant of a child's readiness for school. Understanding parental influence is therefore essential to developing effective transition strategies. A family and home environment are frequently positioned as the primary context for facilitating a child's transition to school in transition to school research and documentation (Education Review Office, 2015). According to research by Correia and Marques-Pinto (2016), a child's transition to school is always primarily influenced by their familial environment. A child's experience of entering school can be positively impacted by preparation and support at home (Dockett & Perry, 2001). Parents are the child's primary supports during the school transition, according to literature (Chan & Ritchie, 2016; Chan, 2012; Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016; Education Review Office, 2015; Jacobs et al., 2021; Zhang, 2015). According to Chan (2012), families may find it more challenging to adjust to school if there are significant discrepancies between their values, beliefs, and practices and those of the school. Schools can better understand families' experiences and create transition strategies that promote continued involvement and support by establishing a relationship with families early in the process.

Since they are responsible for fostering strong relationships with all of the families of all children, schools must make an effort to collaborate with educators and families to work on the transition process jointly (Education Review Office, 2018). The balance can only be restored, and healthy home–school relationships can be established by allowing families to participate in their child's transition and being open to families and communities (Education Review Office, 2015) while maintaining an open line of communication and support. This is particularly crucial when the transition process is just getting started. It may be even more crucial for NE teachers to establish relationships with new families during the transfer to school to facilitate their integration into the school community (Education Review Office, 2018).

2. Strengthening educator–parent partnerships

To further explore how educator–parent partnerships can be strengthened, this section draws on a framework that identifies key factors influencing parental involvement, including family, educator, child, and broader societal considerations.

Foundations for parent–educator collaboration

Parent-family factors

Parents' opinions and views about invitations might be directly influenced by their schools (Chan & Ritchie, 2016). They can accomplish this by asking parents directly to participate in activities that encourage parent participation and by explaining and illustrating that education is a collaboration between parents and schools. Bates (2019) stated that thorough intervention studies, including those of parents from low-income families, have demonstrated that significant and targeted efforts may enhance children's readiness for school.

Parent–teacher factors

According to Hornby and Lafaele (2011), parents' and educators' perceptions of parent involvement might diverge in three ways, which can act as obstacles in education: divergent objectives and aims for education; disparate perspectives on education and schools; and disparate terminology used in discussions of education. Early childhood educators address these factors by keeping lines of communication open on their educational objectives, acknowledge and honour the aspirations of their parents, and ensure that both their parents and their schools are aware of the language used when discussing parent's participation (Ministry of Education, 2017). These can be covered through parent–teacher conferences, other school functions, and routine correspondence provided to parents.

Child factor

Four child characteristics—age, learning challenges and difficulties, gifts and skills, and behavioural issues—were found by Hornby and Lafaele (2011) to be potential obstacles to parent involvement. Parental involvement tends to decline as children get older (Hatcher et al., 2012). Of the three remaining factors—learning disabilities and difficulties, gifts and talents, and behavioural issues—learning impairments and disabilities tend to enhance parent engagement (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). In contrast, gifts, talents, and behavioural issues diminish it. For instance, as families look for ways to support their child's learning and access resources, learning disabilities or difficulties frequently lead to increased parental engagement. Parents of talented or behaviourally challenged children, on the other hand, could become less involved because they feel that their children don't need as much help or because they find communication between the home and the school frustrating and stressful. Depending on how well parents and schools work together, learning disabilities, skills, and talents can have the opposite impact (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). If there is consensus on the concerns addressed, the following three variables provide the most significant possibility for parent–teacher or parent–school engagement, promoting parent involvement (González-Moreira et al., 2021; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

Societal factors

Family-specific concerns, including parents' working hours, transportation, both parents working, and divorces resulting in single-parenting problems, are examples of societal variables (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Schools can help parents by providing a range of communication channels. The importance of proactive parent participation, which does not necessitate parents physically attending school or helping teachers in the classroom all year long, was acknowledged by both parents and educators (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

Building trust: communication and cultural understanding

The OECD's (2017) Starting Strong V report stated that several activities involving direct interaction between educators, parents, and children are part of high-quality transitions. According to the research, schools should contact families and stay in touch once classes begin. Research also supports a more proactive approach from the school (Kaplun et al., 2017). Early in the transition process, the New Zealand Education Review Office (2015) advised schools to establish a two-way collaboration with families. This allowed schools to ask parents about their family's unique requirements during their transition to the school community and give them information to help them get ready.

Based on their beliefs, values, and expectations, family members and educators bring their interpretations of a partnership; however, they may not align with, or be feasible for, schools. According to Tao et al. (2019), parents are players in various life circumstances. As such, their knowledge and experience of the educational system may not be up to date or comprehensive, leaving them ill-prepared for the ongoing difficulties that arise once their child enters school. The curriculum and school culture also impact educators' personal pedagogical views. According to Dockett and Perry (2014) and Correia and Marques-Pinto (2016), parents and teachers each contribute their roles, values, and beliefs to their relationship throughout the transition process.

Aligning expectations through parent engagement

A strong argument for preschools to try to boost parent involvement comes from Barger et al. (2019) meta-analysis of the benefits of parent participation and involvement in early life. The results show that parent participation favours children's development and typically improves students' academic and social success. Additionally, Barger et al. (2019) emphasised the value of parental participation in promoting children's social and academic wellbeing and propose that its advantages can be seen at different degrees of involvement.

More policies encourage parent engagement in school and home activities in schools that invest more in teacher professional development (Jeynes, 2005). More initiatives to encourage parents to assist their children with homework and learning at home correlate with more excellent educators in these schools. Good teachers can influence how schools prioritise and fund parent participation for all students.

3. Professional development for educators on communication strategies

Professional development for effective and inclusive communication

Carr et al. (2010) argued that the components of the original *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) and the core skills of the NZC were in alignment. Nonetheless, research conducted in New Zealand has shown how the essential abilities correspond with dispositions evaluated in ECE that relate to the *Te Whāriki* strands (Peters et al., 2015). This experiment, which included a case study of a single child, illustrated how the dispositions displayed by the child in kindergarten may be connected to the curriculum's core competencies (Davis, 2015). According to Peters, curriculum alignment can only help students if educators from both sectors try to build a bridge (Peters et al., 2015) that makes the possible alignment of important competences and strands a reality. New Zealand is still working to improve curricular consistency.

Teachers from both sectors must be conversant with the school and ECE curriculum documents and understand their connections if a bridge is to be built (Ministry of Education, 2024a). A small New Zealand town project involving ECE and NE teachers demonstrates how teachers may collaborate as a community to improve transition procedures (Bond et al., 2019). Teachers become more comfortable using both documents to analyse learning due to professional development. By cooperating, teachers better understood the curriculum and pedagogical practices utilised in different sectors.

Professional development that helps teachers in both sectors comprehend and use suitable strategies to improve communication may be beneficial (Boyle, 2021). This necessitates additional professional development opportunities for educators to deepen their knowledge of school transition. Educators can modify their methods to better assist children and families throughout school transitions with the support of this kind of professional development (Boyle, 2021). By reviewing the current research on school transition, teachers can also gain an awareness of the complexities of transition. Reading transition literature can also increase educators' understanding of effective transition support techniques.

According to Peter's (2010) assessment, all educators and family members acknowledged the need to communicate with each other in person and over the phone to provide information regarding children's learning. Parents stated that they found verbal communication to be the most beneficial. Two-way communication promoted shared accountability for children's education in classrooms with more approachable and transparent instructors. The results emphasise how important ECE programmes and schools are for interacting with families to foster a sense of connection and belonging (Peters, 2010). Children's transitions depend on these factors (González-Moreira et al., 2025).

Professional growth for evolving parent needs

Given the relational nature of transitions, the educator's role in scaffolding adjustment processes is crucial. This highlights the need for targeted professional development to equip teachers with the tools to support both children and families during these formative experiences. Children who have a happy school transition are more likely to report higher academic success and a greater love for school, according to empirical research (Dockett & Perry, 2014; Education Review Office, 2018) that has validated the long-term importance of a smooth school transition in children's future school lives. However, negative experiences, including academic difficulty, antisocial conduct, and school dropout, are predicted by maladjustment during the school transfer (Gaynor, 2017). Children and their surroundings, including families and schools, are crucial in assisting them in adjusting, considering the need for a smooth transition (González-Moreira et al., 2021). This assertion that learning and development are socially mediated processes reflects Vygotsky's theory (Vygotsky, 1967). According to the ZPD and the principles of sociocultural theory, children's effective adjustment throughout changes relies on scaffolded assistance from adults in their immediate surroundings (Vygotsky, 1967).

4. Future research directions

With the primary research question addressed through a systematic analysis of existing literature, this chapter draws together the main conclusions, considers their practical implications, and identifies areas where further research is needed. So far, the first research question of "What does the existing literature reveal about how early childhood educators in New Zealand respond to diverse parental expectations for children starting school at age 5?" has been addressed. Diverse parental expectations regarding school preparedness have been the focus of this study. This last chapter summarises the main conclusions, discusses their practical consequences, acknowledges the research's limits, and offers recommendations for more research. Data gathered from the literature are used in this last chapter. This study is based on two research topics.

1. What does the existing literature reveal about how early childhood educators in New Zealand respond to diverse parental expectations for children starting school at age 5?
2. How do studies suggest that the nature of these expectations influences educators' teaching practices?

The study's backdrop was the school change. I looked at some teachers' difficulties, such as juggling conflicting parental expectations, few resources, and the requirement for ongoing professional development. The present analysis identifies several topics that need more research. Notably, there are few longitudinal studies examining the long-term effects of educator–parent collaborations on children's academic paths. Future research should examine how these connections affect learning outcomes during early infancy, especially when students enter primary school.

Furthermore, even though communication was a significant subject, further study is required to assess how well the different tactics teachers employ to control parental expectations work. A deeper understanding of these behaviours may be possible using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method techniques, such as surveys, interviews, and longitudinal case studies. Comparative research across various cultural and socioeconomic contexts might show how differing values and beliefs influence educators' reactions and parental expectations, as cultural heterogeneity is still understudied. Additionally, there is much room for research into the expanding significance of digital platforms and technology-mediated communication in educator–parent interactions. Future studies should examine the effects of digital technologies on the frequency, quality, and results of contact between families and educators, especially in contexts with a varied population.

Conclusion

As this literature review shows, school readiness in New Zealand is a contentious and culturally mediated area moulded by a variety of expectations rather than a term that is widely understood or accepted. One of the main conclusions is the ongoing discrepancy between the holistic, play-based, child-led philosophy of *Te Whāriki*, which places an emphasis on social-emotional development, cultural identity, and relationship-based learning, and parental expectations, which are frequently centred on early academic competencies like literacy and numeracy.

This study contributes uniquely by synthesising New Zealand-based perspectives on parental expectations, highlighting the underexplored educator viewpoint, and situating it within *Te Whāriki*'s holistic philosophy.

Cultural background, social class, and prior experiences with educational institutions all have a substantial impact on parental expectations. The emergent and sociocultural learning paradigm that is advocated in New Zealand ECE may clash with the educational presumptions of immigrant and minority families, who may enter with a focus on academic achievement. For educators, these competing expectations present possibilities as well as obstacles.

To promote mutual understanding and control expectations for school preparedness, educators use a range of techniques to navigate these disparities, including learning tales, ambition sheets, and casual discussions. However, structural problems including time constraints, institutional pressures, and a lack of focused professional growth often hinder their ability to do so. Additionally, the gap between the early childhood and primary school sectors is a major obstacle to attaining continuity in learning. Disparities in curricular terminology, evaluation procedures, and educational goals can lead to disjointed transitions and the underutilisation of important data that are shared across contexts.

The literature also emphasised how crucial it is for educators and families to form sincere, mutually beneficial connections. More than just parent participation is needed for successful transitions; co-constructed conceptions of preparation that respect curriculum ideas and family knowledge are also necessary.

There are still several gaps in the literature despite these revelations. Research on how varied families, especially those from migrant and minority cultures, understand and interact with *Te Whāriki* is scarce. The long-term impacts of early parental expectations and the effectiveness of teacher training in preparing teachers to resolve expectation disputes and promote culturally sensitive practice are not well examined in research. Longitudinal studies are required to investigate the long-term effects of early transition experiences on children's social and intellectual performance.

In conclusion, the research urges a change from dichotomous discussions of academic and holistic preparedness to a more inclusive, dialogic approach that considers the sociocultural realities of families and educators. To ensure fair, developmentally appropriate transitions that respect *Te Whāriki* goals and values in both practice and policy, it will be crucial to address these issues.

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