



A Pedagogy of Presence: Material Encounters with Infants and Toddlers

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Received: 26 November 2025 / Accepted: 16 June 2026
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Abstract

This article introduces a *Pedagogy of Presence* framework developed through a qualitative case study exploring visual arts pedagogy with infants and toddlers in four early childhood education (ECE) settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. The study examined how teachers design and facilitate meaningful material encounters with infants and toddlers, emphasising relational pedagogy, material exploration, and teachers' image of the child. Drawing on interviews, observations, and pedagogical documentation, we found that teachers engaged in a responsive 'dance' of listening, echoing, and provoking new ideas and thinking, underpinned by a foundation of attuned care. Organisational structures and thoughtfully designed environments enabled sustained engagement, while teachers' inquiries and collaborative dialogue supported ongoing pedagogical growth. The *Pedagogy of Presence* framework offers ECE teachers and leaders insight into effective practices for supporting and engaging with infants and toddlers in material exploration and inquiry. This research foregrounds infants and toddlers as capable participants in artistic and cultural life, and positions visual arts not as peripheral, but as central to early learning, identity, and wellbeing.

Keywords Infants and toddlers · Early childhood education · Materials · Visual arts · Pedagogy · Intentional teaching

Introduction

Visual arts experiences in early childhood education (ECE) are widely recognised as important for expression, communication, and identity formation. However, for infants and toddlers, such experiences are often underdeveloped, inconsistently offered, or excluded from curriculum planning (Danko-McGhee, 2023; Denée, 2024; Probine & Denée, 2025; Visser, 2013). Despite growing recognition of infants and toddlers as capable, agentic learners (Dalli et al., 2011; Degotardi & Han, 2022; Recchia et al., 2019; Salamon & Harrison, 2015), early childhood education for infants and toddlers has often prioritised care and social-emotional

development over opportunities for cognitive engagement and knowledge construction (Degotardi & Han, 2022). At the same time, increasing participation rates of infants and toddlers in early childhood education highlight the significance of these settings as important sites for learning and development (Dalli, 2017). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child positions even the youngest children as having the right to participate in, seek, and share knowledge, emphasising early childhood settings as contexts for communication and meaning-making (Degotardi & Han, 2022). Within this framing Degotardi and Han (2022) position infants and toddlers as cognitive agents, or “knowers”, who actively construct, hold, and communicate knowledge about their world through both verbal and non-verbal means. Learning, in this sense, is inherently relational and co-constructed, emerging through reciprocal interactions between infants and those around them (Degotardi & Han, 2022). Early childhood education for infants and toddlers is therefore not just a context for care, but a specialised pedagogical space requiring approaches that are attuned to infants' ways of being, knowing, and communicating (Dalli, 2017).

A growing body of research positions infants' and toddlers' learning as fundamentally embodied and sensory,

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emerging through active engagement with materials, movement, and the environment. Such experiences play a critical role in shaping early cognitive development and ways of knowing (Lewin-Benham, 2023; Quinones, 2025). However, less attention has been paid to the pedagogical approaches that support sustained and meaningful visual arts experiences in everyday early childhood settings (Danko-McGee, 2024; Denee, 2024; Visser, 2013). In particular, little is known about how teachers intentionally design, enact, and respond to visual arts encounters with infants and toddlers in ways that extend their thinking and participation. This study aims to contribute to understandings of visual arts pedagogy with infants and toddlers by examining how teachers design, enact, and respond to visual arts encounters in early childhood settings.

This article introduces the concept of a *Pedagogy of Presence* as a relational, responsive, and intentional approach to visual arts education with infants and toddlers. This framework is grounded in research conducted across four high-quality ECE settings in Aotearoa New Zealand, each demonstrating a strong commitment to the arts and to infant and toddler pedagogy (Probine & Denee, 2025). The concept of a *Pedagogy of Presence* emerged through iterative engagement with the study data, including observations, pedagogical documentation, and teacher reflections across the case study sites, and is informed by existing work on relational pedagogies and material engagement in early childhood education, which emphasise attunement, responsiveness, and the co-construction of meaning through relationships with people and materials. Drawing on a case study approach (Tisdell et al., 2025; Yin, 2018), the study explored how teachers designed, facilitated, and reflected on visual arts encounters with infants and toddlers. We paid close attention to the role of the teacher¹, the material and spatial environment, and the pedagogical values underpinning everyday practice.

The notion of ‘presence’ emerged strongly through the data as being attuned, available, respectful, and responsive to the rhythms and inquiries of infants and toddlers (Sorrells & Madrid Akpovo, 2024; Recchia & Fincham, 2019). Rather than a fixed method, a Pedagogy of Presence reflects a way of being with infants and toddlers that is grounded in attunement, observation, and responsive pedagogical decision-making.

¹ In the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, early childhood educators are known as ‘teachers’ and ‘kaiako’ (the Māori word for teacher or educator). The word ‘teacher’ recognises the professionalisation of qualified and certificated early childhood educators in our context. The word ‘kaiako’ honours the indigenous language of this place, and the nuanced understanding of the role of the educator through a Māori worldview. For the purpose of this international journal, we are using the word ‘teacher’ throughout.

Relational pedagogies have been widely recognised as central to early childhood education, particularly in infant and toddler contexts where learning, belonging, and wellbeing emerge through relationships (Dalli et al., 2011; Rockel, 2009; Recchia & Fincham, 2019). Dalli et al. (2011) argue that high-quality education for under-twos is inseparable from strong, secure relationships. Cliffe and Solvason (2023) describe relationships as the cornerstone of infant and toddler pedagogy, requiring reciprocity, responsiveness, and ethical attention to the interconnections between people, materials, and environments. Similarly, Rockel (2009) argues that teaching with infants and toddlers should involve relational intentionality and theoretical reflection in order to move beyond routines toward pedagogical engagement grounded in reciprocity. Recchia and Fincham (2019) describe this as a relational stance of wonder and dialogue. They argue, “learning within relationships involves developing dialogue and reciprocity... teachers must have a true desire to get to know the children in their care” (p. 201). Within material exploration, this involves being present with both children and materials, recognising that the encounter with materials is not separate from the encounter with people. Through such shared and responsive engagements, meaning is co-constructed in the lived, relational triad between teacher, child, and material world (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2024).

Research on visual arts in early childhood education has largely focused on older preschool children, demonstrating the role of the visual arts as a medium for thinking, meaning-making, and communication, and highlighting the importance of teacher pedagogy, materials, and context in shaping children’s experiences, insights that inform the focus of the present study (e.g., Brooks, 2022; Lindsay, 2017; Richards, 2017; Ruscoe, 2022). However, research focused specifically on infants and toddlers is less extensive, particularly within early childhood education settings. Where such studies do exist, they have examined parent–child experiences in museum or community environments (Danko-McGhee, 2023; Palmer et al., 2021). Other scholars have illuminated infants’ and toddlers’ aesthetic and material engagements (Kind, 2014; Kind et al., 2019; Lewin-Benham, 2023; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2024; Plows, 2015; Visser, 2013; Vist, 2019), emphasising the sensory, relational, and creative capacities of very young children.

Our earlier work (Denee, 2022; Denee et al., 2024; Probine, 2020) found that many teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand lacked confidence or clarity around visual arts pedagogy for children under three. In the absence of shared professional knowledge or explicit guidance within the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), visual arts experiences were often marginalised within infant and toddler programmes, frequently

overshadowed by care routines or avoided due to perceived risk, mess, or complexity (Denée, 2024). The present study examines how visual arts can be intentionally embedded within infant and toddler pedagogy. The *Pedagogy of Presence* framework proposed here centres on three interrelated practices identified in this study: *Listening* (observing and holding space for children's rhythms and thinking), *Echoing* (mirroring and affirming children's actions and discoveries), and *Provoking* (offering invitations, materials, and teacher responses that extend and enrich inquiry). These practices are underpinned by *Attuned Care* (remaining fully present, emotionally available, and responsive to each child's individual cues).

Sociocultural Pedagogy for Infants and Toddlers

Care has become a dominant pedagogical model for infants and toddlers, influenced by philosophies such as RIE and Pikler (Bussey & Hill, 2016; Recchia et al., 2019; Rockel, 2009; Sorrells & Madrid Akpovo, 2024). At the same time, over the past 30 years, sociocultural theories have become widely accepted as the theoretical foundation of early childhood education and care in New Zealand and internationally (Clarkin-Phillips, 2012). Sociocultural theories recognise the important role of the teacher as a co-constructor of learning, and an active participant in the teaching and learning dynamic (Brooks, 2022; Clarkin-Phillips, 2012; Denée & Cherrington, 2023; Edwards, 2017; Vygotsky, 1978).

To respond meaningfully to infants and toddlers in visual arts and material exploration, teachers must engage in pedagogical actions that are responsive, embodied, and dialogic. Here, *dialogic* signals more than simple back-and-forth interaction; it refers to pedagogical encounters in which understanding emerges through ongoing exchanges between teacher, child, and in this research, materials (Dahlberg 2012; Rinaldi, 2006; Vist, 2019; Vygotsky, 1978). As White and Redder (2017) argue, infant–teacher interactions are relational events in which communication gains significance through the ways partners attune and respond to one another. From this perspective, infants' gestures, sounds, and movements invite teachers into reciprocal exchanges through which meaning and identity are shaped (Vist, 2019). A sociocultural view positions teachers not as passive facilitators but as active participants who shape experiences through their presence, decisions, and relationships (Denée & Cherrington, 2023; Probine, 2020; Probine et al., 2025a; Vist, 2019; Vygotsky, 1978). This shift, from viewing infant and toddler teachers as observers to co-constructors, resonates with broader theoretical perspectives that frame teaching as a relational and reflective act (Dahlberg

2012; Vist, 2019). Such perspectives foreground the role of the teacher as an active participant in shaping relational and meaning-making encounters, pointing to the value of further developing understanding of pedagogical practice in visual arts and material exploration.

Infants and Toddlers' Material Exploration

In this study, we use the term *material exploration* to describe infants' and toddlers' sensory, process-based engagement with a wide range of visual arts materials. The term distinguishes this work from representational or product-oriented notions of visual arts. For infants and toddlers, visual arts experiences are not about creating finished artworks but are about exploring relationships, between bodies, materials, spaces, and people. In these early encounters, meaning is generated through movement, repetition, and transformation rather than representation (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2024; Vist 2019).

Infants are biologically primed to engage in aesthetic and investigative encounters with the world, using their senses and bodies to generate and test hypotheses (Recchia et al., 2019; Vist 2019). Research from neuroscience and arts education affirms the potential of material engagement to support neural growth, communication, and identity formation (Danko-McGhee, 2023; Gopnik, 2009; Kind, 2014; Lewin-Benham, 2023). During the first three years, the brain is rapidly wiring itself through experience; every encounter with people, materials, and environments shapes neural pathways that underpin later thinking, language, and creativity (Danko-McGee, 2023; Dehaene, 2020). Lewin-Benham (2023) explains that when infants manipulate materials, for example, grasping, squeezing, or pressing, they are not just exploring, they are building the neuronal networks that link movement, perception, and cognition. The coordination of hand and eye activates systems for attention, planning, and problem-solving, while repeated encounters with materials strengthen synaptic connections and consolidate learning over time (Lewin-Benham, 2023). Opportunities to explore and experiment with visual arts materials therefore offer rich contexts for inquiry-based learning, where meaning and understanding emerge through sensory exploration and relational exchange.

These experiences also lay the foundation for early communication. Through movement, gesture, and visual languages, infants and toddlers express ideas and emotions long before spoken language develops (Visser, 2013; Vist, 2019). As teachers describe and respond to these encounters, they nurture oral language and extend shared meaning-making (Degotardi & Han, 2022; Vist, 2019). Materials such as clay, charcoal, or paint invite curiosity and sustained attention, supporting scientific thinking (e.g., experimenting with

texture, transformation, and cause-and-effect), collaboration (through shared engagement and turn-taking), and physical coordination (through fine motor and sensory exploration) (Danko-McGhee, 2023; Richards & Terreni, 2022; Denée, 2022). Together, these sensory experiences and relational exchanges illustrate how learning emerges through dynamic interactions among children, materials, and their environments, a view central to contemporary theories of materiality (Lenz Taguchi, 2010). Material exploration can therefore be understood as a powerful context for learning that integrates sensory, relational, and cognitive processes.

Materiality and Relational Ontologies

Emerging scholarship on materiality invites us to look again at materials themselves as active participants in children's lives and learning. Drawing on the work of Lenz Taguchi (2010), Kind (2014) and Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2024), materials are understood not as passive objects within children's inquiries but as relational agents in learning. Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2024) describe early childhood environments as "vibrant social-ecological-material-affective-discursive ecologies in which humans and more-than-humans are always in relation" (p. 2). Within such ecologies, materials and young children live entangled lives, continually shaping one another through affective, sensory, and cultural encounters. This shift in thinking moves attention from what materials might *offer* children to how teachers and children *think with* and *correspond with* them (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2024; Ingold, 2013). Grounded in Lenz Taguchi's (2010) notion of intra-active pedagogy, Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2024) argue that material encounters are mutual and transformative rather than one-directional, linking the human, material, and discursive dimensions of education. From this view, visual arts materials become co-participants in meaning-making, agents through which identities and understandings are continually formed and re-formed (Kind et al., 2019; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2024). Materiality perspectives therefore position visual arts encounters as relational processes in which meaning emerges through ongoing interactions between children, materials, and their environments.

Cultural Identity, Relationality, and Joy

Material exploration also has the potential to nurture cultural identity. Every culture holds distinctive aesthetic traditions and symbolic languages, and children begin developing visual literacy from infancy (Heta-Lensen & Wrightson, 2019; Visser, 2013). Material exploration can

also support a sense of belonging and cultural identity when infants and toddlers engage with materials that hold meaning within their cultural communities, such as natural fibres, clay, woods, or textiles (Heta-Lensen & Wrightson, 2019; Visser, 2013). At the same time, encounters with materials are inherently collaborative. Through shared engagement, infants and toddlers co-construct understanding, with peers, teachers, and materials, developing emotional attunement, social connection, and collective meaning-making (Denée, 2024; Probine et al., 2025a; Kind, 2014; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2024). As Kind et al. (2019) describe, the studio or any material-rich space can be imagined as "a space of collective inquiry that affords both children and educators time to dwell with materials, linger in artistic processes, and work together on particular ideas and propositions" (p. 67). In this way, material exploration becomes a relational practice of co-creating, making, and composing understanding with others. Equally important is the sense of wonder and delight that accompanies these experiences. Infants and toddlers find joy in the sensory, aesthetic, and often surprising nature of materials. As Lindsay et al. (2025) argue, creative expression is a human right, and participation in the arts brings meaning, pleasure, and belonging to young children's lives. Together, these perspectives highlight material exploration as a culturally situated, relational, and affective practice that supports identity, belonging, and shared meaning-making. Such understandings foreground the importance of pedagogical approaches that recognise and sustain the cultural, relational, and emotional dimensions of young children's engagement with the visual arts.

Limits of Existing Arts Pedagogy for Under-Threes

Despite growing recognition of the value of material exploration for infants and toddlers' learning and wellbeing, the visual arts remain marginal in many infants and toddlers settings (Denée, 2024; Denée et al., 2024; Probine, 2020). One contributing factor is the ambiguity surrounding the role of teachers in visual arts with this age group. For example, in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), teachers are encouraged to support creative exploration "but not interfere," especially with toddlers (p. 48). This framing may inadvertently downplay the teacher's active, intentional role, and reinforce a hands-off approach that leaves teachers uncertain about how, when, or whether to intervene.

Previous research in Aotearoa New Zealand has found that many teachers expressed limited confidence in engaging infants and toddlers in visual arts (Denée, 2024; Plows, 2013; Visser, 2013). For example, in Denée's (2024) mixed-methods research on ECE teachers' visual arts professional

learning, survey respondents described art experiences for infants and toddlers as “tricky” or “messy.” Teachers also reported concerns about safety, appropriate materials, or not knowing how to scaffold learning in this domain. As a consequence, visual arts were sometimes offered only occasionally or omitted entirely from the curriculum. There remains a need for research that centres teacher practice and clarifies what intentional, responsive visual arts pedagogy can look like with the youngest learners. While previous research has noted that infants and toddlers often have limited access to visual arts experiences in early childhood settings (Danko-McGhee, 2023; Denée, 2024; Richards & Terreni, 2022), this project has sought counter narratives. We focused on teachers and ECE communities who have developed rich, purposeful visual arts pedagogies with infants and toddlers, where art is understood not as decoration but as a language of learning, a site of belonging, and a space for relational meaning-making. These findings resonate with international research highlighting similar challenges in visual arts pedagogy for young children, reinforcing the need for further investigation across diverse early childhood contexts.

Taken together, this body of research highlights the importance of understanding how visual arts pedagogy can be intentionally enacted with infants and toddlers, particularly in ways that support relational, material, and meaning-making processes in everyday early childhood practice.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative multiple case study approach (Yin, 2018) to investigate meaningful and effective visual arts pedagogy for infants and toddlers across four early childhood education (ECE) settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. The research design and analysis were framed within an interpretivist paradigm, informed by a social constructivist theoretical perspective (Tisdell et al., 2025; Vygotsky, 1978). Social constructivism is the predominant theoretical framing in New Zealand ECE (Ministry of Education, 2017), and therefore connects the research methodology to the educational context. Qualitative case study methodology is well suited to examining complex pedagogical practices in naturalistic environments, enabling rich, situated understandings of how teachers engage young children through the visual arts. It also supports deep contextualisation and allows multiple perspectives to be explored across diverse sites (Stake, 1995; Tisdell et al., 2025).

Settings were purposefully selected (Creswell & Poth, 2023) based on their demonstrated commitment to high-quality infant and toddler pedagogy and strong engagement with the visual arts. The four participating settings, located in Auckland and Wellington, represented a mix of

community-based, privately owned, and non-profit centres (Table 1). Centres were identified through our professional networks as teacher educators working within initial teacher education programmes and were recognised within their communities for innovative visual arts practice.

Ethical considerations for this study were complex, particularly due to the very young age of the children. Ethical approval was granted by Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee (application #HE000239). Research information and consent forms were provided for the organisation, the teachers and leaders, and parents on behalf of the children. Participation by individuals within the organisations was optional, and only teachers who gave consent and children whose families had given consent on their behalf were included in observed experiences. As researchers, we also made moment-by-moment ethical decisions in the field, choosing not to record or stepping back when infants signalled discomfort or withdrew engagement. Our relational stance was grounded in respectful partnership with participating centres, supported by our prior experience in early childhood education, which enabled dialogic and collaborative engagement with teachers (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020). These practices were underpinned by the ethical principles of beneficence and non-maleficence (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019). Non-maleficence was enacted through efforts to minimise disruption to teachers’ work and children’s experiences, including being as unobtrusive as possible during observations, working in collaboration with teachers to determine appropriate times and contexts for engagement, and remaining highly responsive to infants’ cues, withdrawing immediately if any discomfort was signalled. Beneficence was enacted through reciprocal engagement with participating centres, including the co-construction of an exhibition, presentation, and art materials event for teachers and families within the centre communities.

Table 1 Participating ECE settings

ECE service name	Location	Licensed number of children and number of infants and toddlers for each setting	Number of teacher and leader participants
Little Doves Early Learning Centre	Auckland	75 children in total, including 25 children aged 0–2.	6
Real Kids Early Learning Centre	Auckland	130 children in total, including 40 children aged 0–2.	6
Hill Street Early Childhood Centre	Wellington	25 children in total, including 8 children aged 0–2.	2
Daisies Early Education & Care Centre	Wellington	60 children in total, including 18 children aged 0–2.	5

We sought to balance the protection of participants' confidentiality with recognition of educators and leaders as knowledge-makers (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020). When given the option of attribution or anonymity, all participating centres chose to be named, and teachers' and leaders' first names are used with their consent. All participants, including the families of the children involved, provided permission for photographs and video clips to be used in resulting publications and presentations. Some families consented to non-identifiable images only (e.g., images showing hands engaged with materials or photographs taken from behind the children). For the purposes of this article, no images have been included.

Data collection involved three methods: semi-structured interviews, naturalistic observations, and document analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Yin, 2018). Interviews with teachers and centre leaders explored understandings of visual arts pedagogy, planning and decision-making, team collaboration, and reflections on practice. All interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Observations took place during planned visual arts experiences and focused on children's engagement with materials, teacher practices, and spatial and team dynamics. These were documented through field notes, video clips, and photographs with appropriate consent. Document collection included centre philosophy statements, wall documentation and internal documentation. These texts provided further insight into the values, language, and pedagogical thinking that shaped visual arts engagement in each setting.

Following data collection, the research team curated a community exhibition in collaboration with teacher participants, to share preliminary findings and provoke further dialogue. Separate events were held for teachers and families, featuring photographic documentation, artefacts, and short narratives from each site. An anonymous feedback survey gathered attendee reflections; while not reported in this article, these responses informed the project's broader dissemination and professional learning goals.

Data were coded inductively using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Themes were generated through repeated cycles of close reading and collaborative discussion across cases. As Braun and Clarke (2019) argue, an interpretivist and reflexive lens means that we acknowledge the influence of our prior knowledge and experience, our assumptions, and our theoretical positioning, in the generation of themes. From this view, the interpretation of the data can be seen as a kind of intellectual and creative storytelling, rather than claiming to be an uncovering of truth (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020). Analysis was guided by our central research questions: *What does meaningful and effective visual arts pedagogy look like for infants and toddlers, and how do teachers describe and*

enact their pedagogical roles? As two researchers working in collaboration, we were able to use the power of critical dialogue to interrogate our assumptions as we grappled with these patterns, seeking to "develop a richer, more nuanced reading of the data, rather than seeking a consensus on meaning" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). The methodology of this study was not designed to produce generalisable claims; our analysis aimed to illuminate rich stories of practice that provoke reflection and offer generative possibilities for arts-based pedagogy with infants and toddlers.

Throughout analysis, particular attention was given to the interplay between relationships, materiality, teacher intentionality, and organisational conditions. To generate initial themes, we looked for recurring pedagogical practices across the different settings. We were curious about aspects that were unique to infant and toddler pedagogy and to nurturing material exploration. Our overarching socio-cultural theoretical lens informed where we looked in the data and what we delved into most deeply; for example, we were very interested in strategies for sustained interaction, and signs of co-construction between children and adults. Braun and Clarke (2019) explain that in reflexive thematic analysis, themes are "patterns of shared meaning underpinned or united by a core concept," (p. 593). Through iterative comparison and critical dialogue, recurring pedagogical actions were progressively grouped and refined. Listening, Echoing, and Provoking were developed as concepts that captured the ways teachers observed, responded to, and extended children's material inquiries, while Attuned Care was identified as the relational foundation underpinning these practices. The conceptual model was then developed to represent the interwoven and responsive nature of these practices, rather than a fixed or sequential process.

Findings: A Pedagogy of Presence

This section presents the findings generated in response to our research questions concerning what meaningful and effective visual arts pedagogy looks like for infants and toddlers, and how teachers describe and enact their pedagogical roles. Through cross-case analysis, we identified recurring patterns in how teachers responded to children, engaged with materials, and made moment-by-moment pedagogical decisions. These patterns informed the development of the Pedagogy of Presence framework. Grounded in Attuned Care, the framework comprises three interwoven practices: Listening, Echoing, and Provoking. Across all four centres, these practices shaped how teachers facilitated visual arts experiences and positioned infants and toddlers as artists, researchers, and communicators. What emerged was a subtle, embodied "dance," as teachers moved fluidly among these practices in response to children's emotional

cues, material inquiries, and the momentum of the shared encounter.

Claire (*Pedagogical lead, Hill Street*) explained:

"It's like a dance you constantly play - this holistic way of working with the child, knowing their emotional well-being at the time, the relationship with you, their engagement. Wondering what's their agenda for their exploration? It's so different from what it could have been the day before or it might be the same. Can we extend on what was happening yesterday? That is the complexity of teaching, we're looking at the holistic growth of each child and taking all of those elements into consideration when we're engaging with them."

Our focus was on the pedagogical actions that supported meaningful, sustained engagement with visual arts materials. Teachers sometimes stepped forward to guide, sometimes stepped back to observe, and sometimes echoed children's actions, offering non-verbal affirmation that these were seen and valued. This intentional, responsive way of working is conceptualised as a *Pedagogy of Presence*.

To illustrate the interconnected nature of the strategies we observed, we developed a model of these pedagogical practices (Figure 1), all grounded in a foundation of attuned care. Attuned Care is positioned as the foundation of the framework because it shaped how teachers enacted each of the three pedagogical practices. Listening, Echoing, and Provoking are represented as interwoven because teachers moved fluidly among them in response to children's cues, the unfolding inquiry, and the affordances of materials. Rather than isolated actions, these practices unfolded

together as teachers responded to children's engagement with materials, ideas, and one another. Anita (Teacher, Real Kids) described this dynamic:

"When I'm there, I'm acting as a tool; I feel I'm part of the social environment. They can come to talk with me, and I'm watching what they're doing. I can use materials at the same time, they might ask what I'm doing or they want to try what I'm doing. And sometimes, when they have enough experience, I feel I need to remove myself from that space, to give them more freedom but they can still come to me, but I'm sitting a little bit away to see what's happening while they work by themselves."

Attuned Care

Attuned Care refers to the emotional and relational foundation of teachers' engagement with infants and toddlers. Teachers demonstrated deep attentiveness to each child's cues, rhythms, and states of being.

For example, during our time at Little Doves, we spent time with Jaime (Teacher, Little Doves) and a small group of four curious infants exploring how paint could be pushed, moved, and spread across a range of surfaces. These were new experiences for the group, and Jaime, who was attuned to each child's non-verbal cues, listened and watched closely.

When she noticed moments of hesitation or signs of discomfort, she opened her arms and gently welcomed children to sit with her, offering physical reassurance and a strong sense of emotional safety. As children relaxed into her comforting presence, we noticed shoulders relax and curiosity and engagement re-ignite. Feeling secure, they leaned back into exploration, testing out the possibilities of the paint. Jaime explained her sense of responsibility to stay attuned to the children during visual arts experiences:

"I really needed to fully immerse myself with the children. So, not sitting back. I need to be an active participant in it. I need to be responding and having reciprocal responses with the children, so acknowledging and mimicking their movements, and just being right there."

For the teachers in this study, attuned care was not simply preparation for learning; it *constituted* learning itself. Through relational gestures and responsive presence, infants develop a sense of trust, belonging, and emotional security, conditions that enable them to take creative risks, persist

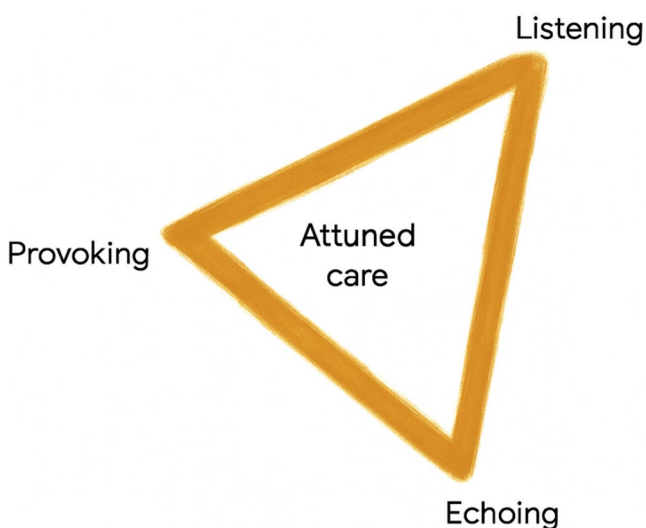


Fig. 1 Pedagogy of Presence' framework for infants and toddlers' material exploration

with challenging materials, and engage deeply with emerging ideas. In this way, attuned care forms the pedagogical ground from which visual arts inquiry can grow.

Listening

Within visual arts exploration, teachers offered infants and toddlers space, time, and trust. Rather than directing the experience, they observed with intention, allowing children's rhythms and discoveries to lead. As Sinead (Teacher, Hill Street) reflected:

"We're positioning ourselves so we can really observe, not just manage. That means putting ourselves where we can see their faces, their hands, and their interactions with each other, because the small details matter, the way a child holds a brush, or the way they look at a peer before trying something new. Those moments tell you so much about their thinking."

This kind of pedagogical listening meant being fully present, resisting the urge to speak or suggest at times. Winoa (Teacher, Real Kids) noted, *"Your silence can sometimes be so powerful, just being present and observing what the children are doing."* In these quieter moments, teachers created environments of possibility where children's gestures, choices, and inquiries were treated as meaningful acts of communication.

During our visit to Daisies, we observed Hannah working alongside two infants in the outdoor art space. She watched closely as the children stamped and swirled thick acrylic paint across large sheets of paper. After some time, she gently offered, "Would you like a new piece of paper?" One child immediately replied, "No." Hannah smiled and followed their lead: "Okay, you'd like to keep going with this one?" The child nodded and continued layering paint with clear intention.

In this quiet exchange, Hannah's attentive listening was evident. Rather than redirecting the experience, she followed the child's lead, recognising the persistence and intention within their response. Her willingness to pause, ask, and honour the child's choice reflected a pedagogy grounded in respect and deep listening.

Echoing

The third pedagogical practice observed was *Echoing*: mirroring children's gestures, vocalisations, or material rhythms as a way of affirming their actions and sustaining engagement. Often, doing the same action ignited joy and created an atmosphere of warmth, connection, and curiosity.

At times, a repeated gesture drew in the whole group, creating shared attention and collective momentum. These micro-interactions built confidence and encouraged children to persist. Mieke (teacher, Little Doves) explained:

"...we imitate a lot of what they do in response to their involvement and interactions, placing value on it, maybe trying to keep that flow going so that it becomes that reciprocal dance where you make them eager to share more. Saying: "I can see you. I see what you're doing, and it's exciting to me. Can you do this? Can you show me more?"

At Real Kids, Anita worked with a small group of children at a sand-filled trough where teachers and children traced patterns together. One child drew a pattern with a small stick, and Anita quietly echoed it by creating her own pattern alongside. When another child called out "Rainbow!," Anita replied, "You saw a rainbow? I will make a rainbow," tracing an arched shape in the sand with a stick and then with her hand. The child responded by making their own arched mark. "Ah, it's on my rainbow," Anita smiled, meeting the child's gaze in a moment of shared delight. Her subtle echoing and verbal affirmation invited shared meaning-making through gesture, language, and material exploration.

As a pedagogical practice, echoing required teachers to work from a place of shared curiosity and responsiveness, not directing children toward predetermined outcomes, but staying with the unfolding moment and offering subtle encouragement to go further in their material exploration.

Provoking

Teachers in this study were observed introducing new materials, ideas, or techniques to the children to support deeper engagement or complexity. While listening required a quiet presence, *Provoking* involved teachers taking action in various ways. These provocations were intentional and responsive, designed to expand rather than direct children's inquiry. Planning was dynamic, blending observation with the courage to offer new "languages" of expression. Sarah (leader, Little Doves) explained, *"Part is the children's interests, but also making intentional decisions to introduce new experiences and languages... together we formulate great inquiries."* Ruby (Teacher, Little Doves) described how even micro-gestures can subtly extend exploration:

"And I think it's also our role to extend when we can, so if they've done this thing, then maybe I do that as well for a bit, and maybe I change it to being a bigger

motion of my thumb instead of my index finger. And of course, the children can't have any opportunities with the visual arts if we don't supply them."

Teachers also enriched these experiences through intentional language. As they worked alongside infants and toddlers, teachers narrated the unfolding moments, naming actions, materials, and relationships. This narration appeared to help children make sense of what they and others were doing, and fostered their social awareness, communication, and collaboration. As Mary (atelierista, Real Kids) explained, "*teachers also add narrative, kind of expressing what everybody is doing so that they are aware of others and what they are doing, and how your actions can collaborate with others or your actions can affect others.*"

At Hill Street Sinead, who is also an opera singer, brought her love of music into her work with infants and toddlers. She introduced the children to Ravel's Boléro, inviting them into the visual arts space as the rhythmic and dramatic beat began to play. Offering each child a piece of charcoal, she demonstrated how it could move across the paper in time with the music, tracing long, sweeping gestures with her own charcoal stick. The children watched attentively, then began to create their own marks, their movements guided by the rhythm and energy of the sound. Both the music and Sinead's actions provoked new ways of engaging with materials, blending sound, movement, and mark-making into a shared creative experience. In this moment, Sinead's embodied provocation revealed how teachers' artistic passions can open new sensory and expressive opportunities for infants and toddlers' material exploration.

Provoking, therefore, functioned as an inquiry-rich pedagogical act, one that opened new possibilities, invited creative risk-taking, and scaffolded infants' and toddlers' participation in expanding forms of expression.

Discussion

This study contributes to a growing body of literature affirming the importance of aesthetic and material exploration in infant and toddler education (Lewin-Benham, 2023; Kind, 2014; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2024; Vist, 2019). It builds on this work by offering a model of Pedagogy of Presence grounded in relational pedagogy and intentional teaching practice. The findings reveal how teachers enact complex pedagogical roles that are active, interpretive, and deeply responsive to the cues of both children and materials. This extends existing literature on relational and material pedagogies by articulating how these theoretical perspectives are enacted through everyday teacher practice with infants and toddlers.

At the heart of this model is attuned care, a pedagogical stance that is relational, emotional, and embodied. This aligns with Cliffe and Solvason's (2023) framing of relational pedagogy as a practice that positions relationships as central to learning, wellbeing, and identity. The findings show how teachers work from a foundation of emotional connection, creating conditions of safety, trust, and reciprocity that enable meaningful artistic engagement. As Dalli et al. (2011) and Salamon and Harrison (2015) argue, relational environments that prioritise mutual responsiveness support very young children to participate as active contributors in their learning. When teachers recognise and respond to infants' and toddlers' communicative cues, they create contexts in which agency and shared meaning-making can flourish (Degotardi & Han, 2022). In this way, attuned care can be understood not only as a relational condition for learning, but as an ongoing pedagogical practice through which learning is enacted.

This study demonstrates that teachers enact an active and intentional pedagogical role in co-constructing material exploration with infants and toddlers. While *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) values open-ended exploration, its emphasis on non-interference may obscure the pedagogical work required to sustain meaningful inquiry. These findings support earlier critiques (Denée, 2024; Lindsay et al., 2025; Richards & Terreni, 2022) that call for greater conceptual clarity and professional support to help teachers understand their role as facilitators, co-learners, and researchers in the visual arts. In alignment with these ideas, the findings challenge interpretations of non-interference by reframing pedagogy as a dialogic and relational process, consistent with sociocultural understandings of learning as co-constructed through interaction.

The pedagogical actions outlined in the *Pedagogy of Presence* framework makes visible the relational and intentional work involved in sustaining material exploration with infants and toddlers. Listening, echoing and provoking operated as responsive practices grounded in attentiveness to children's cues and to the affordances of the materials being explored. As Kind et al. (2019) remind us, such attunement is "generated through sustained and learned attention... sensitivity to children's processes and to movements and encounters with materials is not something immediately attained. It is cultivated over time" (p. 68). In doing so the framework extends sociocultural and materiality perspectives by showing how co-construction is enacted in practice through embodied, moment-by-moment pedagogical decisions among teachers, children and materials.

Beyond the specific contexts of visual arts and infant and toddler education, the Pedagogy of Presence framework contributes to broader early childhood education literature by offering a language for understanding intentional

teaching as relational, responsive, and attuned to context. The interwoven practices of listening, echoing, and provoking make visible the moment-by-moment pedagogical judgements through which teachers support children's agency and participate actively in their learning. The framework brings together dimensions of early childhood pedagogy that are often discussed separately, such as care and education, children's and teachers' contributions, and observation and pedagogical action. Although developed through material encounters with infants and toddlers, its principles have relevance across early childhood contexts where teachers seek to remain attuned to children's ideas while intentionally supporting and extending inquiry.

Listening and the Ethics of Time

The practice of listening, as described by teachers in this study, resonates with Salamon and Harrison's (2015) argument that infant pedagogy requires a skilful balance of attentiveness, autonomy, and emotional presence. Teachers did not listen merely to assess or plan; they listened *to be with*, to hold space for children's exploration without imposing outcomes. Teachers described pausing, resisting the pace of routines, and allowing children's processes to set the rhythm of the encounter (Clark, 2023). In these unhurried moments, listening became both relational and temporal, an attunement to the pace, pauses, and repetitions through which meaning emerged. In this way, listening can be understood as a core practice within the Pedagogy of Presence, where attentiveness to time and rhythm enables teachers to engage relationally and responsively with children's inquiry.

Across settings, such attentiveness enabled infants and toddlers to remain deeply engaged for extended periods, often beyond conventional expectations. Sustained engagement was not accidental; it was made possible by teachers who were present, patient, and willing to stay with the moment. Listening also unfolded across longer timescales, over days and weeks as children returned to familiar materials and ideas, and across years as teachers refined their practice through ongoing collegial dialogue. These findings build on existing work on relational and slow pedagogies by illustrating how temporal attunement operates as a pedagogical process which supports sustained inquiry.

Recent scholarship on slow pedagogy (Clark, 2023; Sorrells & Madrid Akpovo, 2024) provides a useful lens for understanding these temporal dimensions. Here, slowness is not inactivity but an ethical and pedagogical stance, a "tempo giusto," or right tempo, that resists the neoliberal rhythms of efficiency and productivity. Slowing down becomes an act of professional and ethical resistance, enabling teachers to dwell with children's thinking and encounter their gestures, rhythms, and material engagements with sensitivity

and reciprocity. This framing aligns with Probine et al.'s (2025a; 2025b) argument that creating time for infants and toddlers to linger, explore, and wonder nurtures connection with others, materials, and ideas. Listening, in this sense, is cultivated through sustained observation, documentation, and reflection. As Rinaldi (2006) reminds us, truly listening requires openness to the unfamiliar and the unspoken.

By treating time as a pedagogical value rather than a constraint, teachers in this study created the conditions for sustained material inquiry and relational depth. Listening, then, is not an endpoint but an opening, a way of making space for dialogue and transformation. This conceptualisation positions listening as both an ethical stance and a pedagogical action, extending sociocultural understandings of dialogue by foregrounding the temporal and embodied conditions through which meaning is co-constructed (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2024). From this space arises the next pedagogical action: echoing, where teachers respond to what has been heard and sensed, amplifying children's ideas through relational exchange.

Echoing as a Relational Act

In this study, *Echoing* emerged as a key pedagogical practice across all settings, one of several actions that unfolded simultaneously during material encounters. We chose the term echoing to describe the way teachers repeated or responded to children's gestures, marks, and ideas in ways that validated their contributions and invited further exploration. Echoing highlights how communication and meaning-making extend beyond verbal language, unfolding through embodied, relational exchanges between children, teachers, and materials.

Cheeseman (2017) connects the practice of repeating infants' gestures, often described as mirroring, to the notion of attunement and faithfully matching an infant's affect or movement. While acknowledging its relational importance, Cheeseman (2017) critiques mirroring when seen solely as an adult practice, arguing that it can risk positioning the adult as the knowledgeable other, overlooking the infant as a protagonist with their own agenda for engagement. In our observations, the echoing was sometimes initiated by children and sometimes by adults; when children initiated an echoing exchange, the role of the teacher appeared to be affirmation through smiles and eye contact, continuation by repeating the action, and fostering connection by showing the action to other children in the group and sometimes drawing more children into the echoing interaction. These findings extend Cheeseman's critique by illustrating how echoing can operate as a reciprocal and child-initiated process, repositioning both child and teacher as active participants in relational exchange.

Recchia and Fincham (2019) similarly contend that infant and toddler pedagogy should create “shared intersubjective spaces” (p. 207) where meaning is co-constructed through playful, reciprocal encounters. Kind et al. (2019) further conceptualise this as an intra-active process, a gestural attunement in which teachers follow the rhythm of children’s movements, sometimes repeating and sometimes varying them to extend their inquiries. From this perspective, echoing is not imitation for its own sake but a relational act of recognition that treats children’s gestures as communicative, thoughtful, and intentional. Echoing offers a way of understanding how intersubjectivity and intra-action are enacted in practice through embodied, moment-to-moment pedagogical responses (Recchia & Fincham, 2019; Kind et al., 2019).

Our use of the term echoing aims to capture this wider constellation of relational, embodied, and co-constructed meaning-making. Teachers in this study used echoing to signal to children that they were listening closely, and that infants’ and toddlers’ contributions were valued as much as their own. These acts of echoing affirmed identity, strengthened belonging, and created momentum through sustained exchanges. In many instances, we observed children respond with delight, returning teachers’ gestures and deepening their engagement with materials. Our findings suggest that echoing can function as a powerful sociocultural pedagogical tool, one that sustains connection, amplifies children’s ideas, and supports ongoing material inquiry. In doing so, it extends sociocultural understandings of co-construction by foregrounding the embodied and relational processes through which meaning is negotiated with and through materials.

Provoking to Enrich and Expand

The third pedagogical action within the *Pedagogy of Presence* framework, *Provoking*, extends current understandings of infant and toddler pedagogy by illustrating how intentional teacher action can enrich and expand children’s material inquiry. While dominant discourses in infant and toddler education often emphasise non-interference, care-as-curriculum, and child-led exploration (Bussey & Hill, 2016; Degotardi & Han, 2022; Rockel, 2009), the findings of this study indicate that infants’ and toddlers’ learning can be deepened through carefully considered provocations introduced by teachers. These provocations were not directives or predetermined instructional activities; they emerged from pedagogical noticing, relational attunement, and ongoing dialogue among colleagues. In this way, teachers acted as co-participants and co-researchers, joining children as partners in shared inquiry (Kind et al., 2019). These findings extend existing literature by making visible how intentional

pedagogical action can coexist with, and indeed support, children’s agency within inquiry-based learning.

Provoking, as observed in this study, was grounded in professional knowledge, relational sensitivity, and collaborative meaning-making. Teachers drew on their understanding of each child, their knowledge of materials, and their shared pedagogical vision to make nuanced judgements about *when* and *how* to introduce something new, a suggestion, a shift in environment, or an additional material, to extend children’s thinking. These actions align with conceptions of intentional teaching that frame the teacher’s role as thoughtful, deliberate, and informed by both pedagogical knowledge and contextual responsiveness (Clarkin-Phillips, 2012; Denée & Cherrington, 2023; Probine et al., 2025b; Epstein, 2007). Teachers positioned themselves neither above the child as expert, nor below as passive observer. As Kind et al. (2019) reflect, “lingering in the studio and becoming sensitive to children’s process and languages prompted a deeper realization... that, as educators, we are to become researchers alongside children” (p.75). This is reflected in our findings, where, when teachers were genuinely alongside children, listening, attuned, and open, they participated in inquiry in ways that invited, rather than directed, new possibilities. In this way, provoking can be understood as a dialogic and relational practice, where pedagogical decisions emerge through ongoing engagement with children’s ideas, rather than being imposed in advance.

This stance challenges binary distinctions between teacher-led and child-led learning, reframing pedagogy as a fluid, dialogic process shaped through reciprocal exchanges between teachers, children, and materials (White & Redder, 2017; Vist, 2019). Binaries such as teacher-directed versus child-initiated have long been critiqued for obscuring the dynamic and co-constitutive nature of learning in early childhood settings (Clarkin-Phillips, 2012; Edwards, 2017; Kind et al., 2019; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2024). The findings of this study support these critiques, demonstrating that provocations enacted within a relational and ethical frame can honour children’s agency and rights while extending the scope and complexity of their inquiry. This reframing further develops this line of critique by illustrating how pedagogy can move beyond binary positions toward more integrated, relational understandings of teaching and learning.

Central to this process was the role of the teacher as researcher (Kind et al., 2019; Lindsay et al., 2025; Probine et al., 2025b). Across all four sites, teachers engaged in iterative cycles of pedagogical documentation, reflective dialogue, and inquiry-focused planning. These practices resonate with literature positioning teacher inquiry as fundamental to high-quality early childhood pedagogy (Probine et al., 2025a; Kind et al., 2019). Through documentation, teachers revisited children’s encounters,

identified emerging ideas, and collaboratively theorised potential next steps. This shared inquiry created coherence across teaching teams and enabled teachers to provoke thinking with care and intentionality, grounded in deep knowledge of each child and of the affordances of the materials at hand. Together, these practices position provoking as a key mechanism through which inquiry is sustained and extended, highlighting the role of the teacher as an active participant in shaping the conditions for ongoing meaning-making.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the relational, responsive, and intentional nature of visual arts pedagogy with infants and toddlers and has demonstrated that rich artistic encounters depend not only on materials, environments, or planning, but on the quality of presence that teachers bring to their interactions. The *Pedagogy of Presence* framework conceptualises this work as unfolding through attuned care and the interwoven practices of listening, echoing, and provoking, enacted through relational sensitivity and a deep respect for infants' and toddlers' communicative capacities. In doing so, it challenges assumptions that teaching with very young children should be largely non-interfering and affirms instead an active, dialogic role for teachers in co-constructing meaning (Degotardi & Han, 2022; Recchia & Fincham, 2019).

Our framework contributes to international scholarship by offering language to describe relational teaching practices that support deep material exploration. By documenting pedagogical practices across four high-quality ECE settings in Aotearoa New Zealand, we offer a real-world account of what meaningful visual arts experiences can look like for children under three. The *Pedagogy of Presence* framework foregrounds the teacher as researcher, listener, provocateur, and co-creator. This is a particularly significant shift for infants and toddlers, whose ECE provision tends to be framed more predominantly through care rather than through curiosity and creativity (Cheeseman, 2017; Degotardi & Han, 2022; Dence, 2024; Salamon & Harrison, 2015). As Degotardi & Han (2022) argue, infants have the right and capability to express and construct knowledge, but this right is dependent on the opportunities they are offered by adults.

The scope of this research design necessarily brings limitations. The cases included four ECE settings in the two major cities of Aotearoa New Zealand; for practical reasons, centres in rural areas or small towns were not included, limiting the diversity of service types and community contexts. The time available for data collection was also constrained

by the researchers' professional commitments; future studies might include multiple days of observation to examine how such learning unfolds over time. This research was designed to focus on pedagogy, and therefore data collection and analysis were primarily centred on adults' interactions with children and materials. Through an intra-active theoretical lens (Lenz Taguchi, 2010), future research might give more equal consideration to the affects of children, adults, and materials within this three-way interaction. Further, research could extend this work by examining how teacher education programmes and professional learning communities might nurture the attunement, interpretive skills, and collaborative inquiry evident in this pedagogical approach. The framework also offers opportunities to explore material-rich approaches in greater depth, including how infants and toddlers themselves experience and respond to these practices.

Ultimately, the *Pedagogy of Presence* framework invites early childhood communities to reimagine material exploration not as an optional enhancement but as an essential human language, one through which the youngest children encounter the world and make meaning. This study affirms that when teachers are fully present, infants and toddlers are recognised not only as learners but as creators, collaborators, and citizens from the very beginning.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions. The research leading to these results received partial funding from Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington and Auckland University of Technology.

Declarations

Ethics This study was approved by the Human Research Ethics committee of Te Herenga Waka Victoria university of Wellington (Ethics approval number: HE000239).

Informed Consent All individuals in this study (and parents/caregivers on behalf of children) gave informed consent to participate and for publication of results. This included the use of video and images.

Competing Interests The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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