

# Ko Wai Au – Ko Wai Au: Expressions of Wai *Visiblising Pedagogies*

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## Abstract

As part of the international “Wash from the Start” OMEP (World Organization for Early Childhood Education) project, researchers shared time with children in three early childhood centre communities in the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand – Te Wai Pounamu. The research explored young children’s engagement with local conditions of water through fieldwork annotations and photographic visual methods. The video article presented here is a photo essay that spans the researcher teams’ experiences in their encounters with the children and teachers they had the privilege to spend time with over a sunny week in Autumn 2022.

## Keywords

visiblising pedagogies – early childhood education – visual methods – wai – water – play – place and space



**FEATURE** This article is based on the film ‘Ko Wai Au – Ko Wai Au: Expressions of Wai’, which can be viewed [here](#).

- This article is part of the special topic ‘Visiblising Pedagogies’, edited by Andrea Delaune and Toni Torepe.

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Ko te mātauranga he wai nō ruawhetū  
 Kia mahara koe i te puna inā inu koe i te wai  
 Ko wai koe?  
 Ko wai ahau  
 Ko wai ahau

MATAMUA, 2013, as cited in MIKA, 2019, p. 28

‘Māori knowledge flows from the cosmos/the stars  
 When you drink the water, remember the spring  
 Who are you  
 Who am I  
 I am water’



As part of the international “Wash from the Start” OMEP (World Organization for Early Childhood Education) project, researchers shared time with tamariki in three early childhood centre communities in the South Island of Aotearoa, New Zealand, to produce a report for OMEP, *Expressions of Wai in ECE: Te Wai Pounamu* (Williams et al., 2023). The research explored young children’s engagement with local water conditions through fieldwork annotations and photographic visual methods. The video article presented here is a photo essay that spans the researcher teams’ experiences in their encounters with the children and teachers they had the privilege to spend time with over a sunny week in Autumn 2022.

Western Norway University of Applied Science initiated the “Wash from the Start” project. The project responds to UNESCO’s goals concerning global access to safe and clean water for drinking and sanitation (see [Sustainable Development Goals – Resources for educators on www.unesco.org](https://www.unesco.org/en/sustainable-development-goals)). The research team focused on the representations of water by children through their planned and emergent curriculum experiences. Visual research methods in the project employed photography of the lived experiences of the children in the centres, lensed through playful interactions between children and water.

A successful research ethics application, which included close consultation with Ngai Tahu advisors, was submitted by the team at the University of Canterbury. Self-imposed guidelines for the researchers included maintaining the subjects’ anonymity by not showing the children’s faces. Creative constraints were employed, such as the composition of the frame, using very wide or long lenses to compose images without identifying them. These approaches afforded

a continuity of aesthetics across the different photographers. It is playful to play with composition. Doing so creates a thoughtful engagement process between the photographer and the subject. This supported reflection on the collected data and helped the narrative flow when the images were edited together. Aside from protecting the children's anonymity by not showing their faces, another uncanny affect threads into the compositions. Faces project emotion. They are the primary means we try to interpret how those we interact with are feeling. When we remove a face from action (eliminating reaction), we can contemplate that action differently and maybe concentrate on interaction in time and space differently. It was important for the research aims for the team to calibrate ourselves into an alternate mode of being with our subjects to focus on their interface with water and each other through physical interaction.

Artist, film, and photo essayist Andrew Denton was invited to join the project to work with the researchers as a guide towards establishing practice-oriented visual methods for novice photographers in the team. Together, they worked on technical and strategic means of operating the camera to narrate the children's daily lives visually. The task was to photographically capture the children's quotidian travails in the centre, focusing on their engagement with water across the various activities they normally encounter. Before engaging in fieldwork, we set a series of formal constraints on collecting and distributing the recorded materials. Part of the reason for this approach was to apply a visual structure to the photography, encapsulating the disjointed collected imagery through aesthetic continuity. The continuity in the types of images taken adds narrative cohesion to the series of photographs as a collection working together – in conversation, reflection, and contemplation. An example of this method was the choice to employ only very wide or very long lenses to convey, in the first instance, a vaster interaction with space as well as distortion of that space, in the second instance, to blur background and foreground selectively to concentrate focus on the subject in the composition and to blur the children's faces when necessary.

The research offers visual expressions of children's intense and immersed relationships with water – relationships recognised in the project's report title: *Expressions of Wai in ECE: Te Wai Pounamu*. Wai translates as water in Te Reo (the Māori language). For Māori, the indigenous people of Aotearoa, the waterways' (ngā ara wai) wellbeing is essential to their people's health, as communicated in this whakataukī (proverb): *Ko te wai te ora o ngā mea katoā* – Water is the life giver of all things. Together in these selected images, the children and the water offered stories of shared identities. This collection

of images has been curated to offer examples of the richness and vibrancy of children's play with water, rain, mud, sea, river, estuary and more.

## References

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