

Kia Tōtika te Haere: Exploring Unhurried Pedagogies through Child Led Inquiry Learning with Infants and Toddlers



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This paper explores how inquiry with infants and toddlers can be meaningfully enacted through slow, relational pedagogies that foreground deep listening, documentation, and sustained engagement with people, place, and materials. Drawing on narrative inquiry from two early childhood centres in Aotearoa New Zealand, we examine how kaiako create time and space for infants' and toddlers' working theories to unfold through embodied, sensory-rich experiences. We highlight three key strategies: relational practice, pedagogical documentation, and attuned listening, as foundational to inquiry with the very youngest learners. Framed through the concept of *Āta* (Pohatu, 2013), we consider how these strategies align with Māori values of respect, reflection, and reciprocity, offering a culturally grounded lens for unhurried pedagogy. We argue that in the current political climate, inquiry with infants and toddlers is both a pedagogical and political stance, affirming infants' and toddlers' rights to agency, participation, and meaningful learning from birth.

Introduction

Infants and toddlers are born with an innate drive to make sense of their world through connection, exploration, and relationship (Hedges, 2022; Lewin-Benham, 2023). In early childhood education (ECE), children's inquiry, also referred to as investigations or project work, centres children's questions, theories, and interests as the foundation for sustained, co-constructed learning (Probine et al., 2024). This approach often begins with kaiako noticing an emerging interest or pattern in play. Through cycles of observation, reflection, and responsive planning, kaiako create experiences that deepen children's engagement and allow theories to unfold. These experiences are ideally collective, grounded in shared meaning-making, and supported by pedagogical documentation. Photographs, learning stories, and artefacts help kaiako interpret learning and plan intentional next steps, ensuring inquiries evolve in relationship with the child's thinking (Denée & Cherrington, 2023).

In Aotearoa, inquiry approaches have been shaped by the philosophy of Reggio Emilia, which views infants, toddlers and

young children as capable protagonists in their learning and teachers as co-researchers (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017; Rinaldi, 2006). While widely embraced in ECE, much of the research and professional focus has centred on older children. Less attention has been given to how inquiry can be meaningfully enacted with infants and toddlers, whose ways of knowing are expressed through sensory, relational, and preverbal means (Dalli et al., 2011; Lewin-Benham, 2023). This paper draws upon our ongoing research exploring how early childhood kaiako in Aotearoa interpret and enact inquiry with infants, toddlers, and young children.

Our findings suggest that inquiry with infants and toddlers requires a distinctive pedagogical stance, one grounded in deep listening, attuned observation, and sustained relational engagement. Strategies such as multi-modal documentation, open-ended material exploration, and deliberate planning emerged as critical. Together, these support a pedagogy of slowing down, making space for infants and toddlers to revisit ideas, develop working theories, and participate meaningfully over time. This aligns with Clark's (2023) notion of slow pedagogy, an approach that values presence, connection, and deep engagement over immediacy or output.

However, given that inquiry approaches in Aotearoa have evolved primarily through Euro-Western frameworks, it is important to consider how Māori perspectives might enrich this work. Concepts such as *Āta*, described by Taia Pohatu (2013) as a practice of care, deliberation, and respectful relationships, offer a culturally grounded lens through which to reimagine inquiry. *Āta* invites kaiako to attend with integrity to timing, space, and relational context, aligning closely with the intentions of slow pedagogy.

Framed through *Āta* (Pohatu, 2013), inquiry can support the development of bicultural habits of mind, dispositions and ethical commitments that guide kaiako to think and act in ways that honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Heta-Lensen, 2025). These are cultivated through sustained engagement with Māori values and practices. In this paper, we first outline the theoretical foundations underpinning inquiry with infants and toddlers, then examine three interconnected strategies: relational engagement, attuned listening, and pedagogical documentation, before considering how the potential of *Āta* may further enrich slow, inquiry-based pedagogies in Aotearoa.

Infants and Toddlers as Capable, Communicative and Theorising Learners

Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017) positions infants and toddlers as capable, confident learners with rights to agency, dignity, and voice. This aligns with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC, 1989), which affirms all children, including infants and toddlers, have the right to express their views and have them taken seriously. Despite these commitments, pedagogical practices with infants and toddlers often emphasise care as curriculum, drawing on philosophies such as those of Pikler and Gerber (Denee, 2024). While respectful caregiving is foundational, Denee (2024) cautions that an exclusive focus on routines can obscure infants' rich capacities for inquiry and reduce kaiako to passive observers.

Cheeseman (2017) similarly critiques the dominance of attachment-based discourses, warning that overemphasis on emotional care can limit recognition of infants' intellectual and creative potential. She introduces the concept of *mind-mindedness*, highlighting infants as "mental agents" who initiate encounters, express intentions, and build theories. This view calls for pedagogical approaches that nurture inquiry dispositions from birth.

Māori perspectives offer further affirmation of infants' innate capacities. The late Rangimarie Rose Pere (1997) described mokopuna as born powerful, carrying divine potential through their inherent mana. Rameka (2022) reinforces mana as a guiding principle in kaiako–mokopuna relationships, a value also central to *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017). These understandings are echoed in neuroscience and sociocultural theory, which demonstrate infants' biological predisposition to inquire, hypothesise, and build working theories from birth (Hedges, 2022; Lewin-Benham, 2023). Supporting these capabilities calls for pedagogical approaches that centre relational engagement, sustained exploration, and co-construction. Inquiry pedagogies position kaiako as co-researchers who listen closely, revisit experiences, and support theory-building as it emerges through infants, toddlers and young children's actions, interests, and encounters.

Relational Pedagogies and the Role of the Kaiako

Ritchie (2024) frames teaching as an ethical and political act grounded in values of respect, care, and reciprocal engagement. This perspective moves the role of the kaiako beyond caregiving as maintenance toward fostering sustained, co-constructed encounters where infants and toddlers' ideas, interests, and theories are actively recognised and nurtured. Relational pedagogies such as children's inquiry position teaching and learning as fundamentally co-constructed through ongoing, ethical relationships between kaiako, children, families, and environments.

For infants and toddlers, inquiry emerges through relational engagement through deep observation, attuned listening, and revisiting experiences over time. This stance recognises relationships as the medium through which learning unfolds. In alignment with these ideas, Cheeseman (2017), drawing on Levinas's philosophy of ethical encounters, introduces the notion of response-ability. Rather than positioning the educator as the expert responsible for knowing and acting upon the infant's needs, response-ability calls kaiako to be susceptible, open, and attentive to the invitations and learning agendas initiated by infants themselves. This requires vulnerability and a willingness to set aside certainty and control, creating space for genuine co-

inquiry. Inquiry-focused pedagogy, therefore, recognises infants and toddlers as competent partners in knowledge-building, requiring kaiako to embody a relational ethic of listening, responsiveness, and shared exploration. These pedagogies have been shaped by both local cultural values and international influences, particularly the Reggio Emilia approach, which views infants and toddlers as capable protagonists and teachers as co-researchers in the learning process.

Global Influences on Children's Inquiry Pedagogies

In Aotearoa, inquiry-based pedagogies have been significantly influenced by international theories and models, particularly sociocultural and social-constructivist theories, and pedagogical ideas from Reggio Emilia (Rinaldi, 2006). While these approaches have inspired meaningful shifts in early childhood education, especially in recognising infants and toddlers as capable, curious learners, they also carry the risk of diminishing indigenous perspectives if adopted uncritically. A further issue, raised by scholars such as Ritchie (2024), Heta-Lensen (2022), and Forsyth and Kung (2007), is that the dominance of Euro-Western frameworks can obscure the culturally grounded, relational, and collective ways of knowing embedded in Māori worldviews. This highlights the need to reimagine inquiry in ways grounded in local cultural values and relationships. In response to these concerns, there is a growing recognition of the need for frameworks that are both pedagogically robust and culturally situated. One such framework is *Te Āta Takepū* (Pohatu, 2013), which offers a distinctly Māori perspective on relational, reflective, and unhurried practice.

Āta as Unhurried Pedagogy

Te Āta Takepū is a holistic model first developed by Pohatu in 2013 as an applied practice tool to guide respectful relationships in the social services field. Five elements form *Te Āta Takepū*, which Pohatu explains need to be understood individually and as part of a whole process of respectful engagement. Summarised, these elements include:

- **A focus on relationships:** Negotiating boundaries, creating and holding safe space
- **A focus on behaviour:** Appropriate engagement in relationships with people, kaupapa and environments.
- **A focus on perceptions:** These are intensified by creating quality space of time (wā) and place (wāhi). To create quality space, effort is required of the participants framed within notions of respectfulness, the spirit of reciprocity and of reflection. It is here that discipline develops as we integrate understandings of people, behaviours and spaces and our responses to them. These elements are seen as the necessary prerequisites to critical analysis.
- **A focus on transformation as part of the relationship:** Planning and strategising occurs (Pohatu, 2013, p. 15).

Āta is not a linear process but a cyclical one that is as much concerned with appropriate processes for entering into and exiting from the spaces of engagement as the relationships that occur within. Applying *Te Āta Takepū* in the early childhood context guides kaiako to become unhurried through fostering practices that entail:

- **Deliberate engagement:** Approaching interactions with infants and toddlers and whānau thoughtfully, ensuring that each engagement is meaningful and respectful.

- **Fostering deep relationships:** Building connections grounded in mutual respect and understanding, recognising the importance of each child's background and experiences.
- **Being reflective practitioners:** Continuously reflecting on our own cultural perspectives and biases to create an inclusive learning environment.

Integrating *Te Āta Takepū* as proposed by Pohatu (2013) emphasises carefulness, respect, and intentionality. This aligns closely with Clark's (2023) concept of slow pedagogy. Both advocate for practices that honour infants and toddlers and their whānau in place-based, relational, and unhurried ways. While relevant for all kaiako and children in Aotearoa, the creation of *Te Āta Takepū* was a recognition by the author of the capacity of te reo Māori to give depth of meaning to takepū Māori (Māori principles). Given that language is the precursor to understanding, Pohatu (2013) argues that te reo Māori is the precursor to deeper understandings of tikanga and mātauranga Māori knowledge. As our research has explored (Probine et al., 2024), embedding children's inquiry within the unique cultural landscape of Aotearoa requires pedagogies that centre te ao Māori values and uphold the commitments of Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

It is important to note that *Te Āta Takepū* was not an explicit framework used by the kaiako in this research. Rather, it was applied by the research team as a conceptual lens, prompted by our recognition of strong resonances between these centres' practices and the principles of *Āta*. These reflections emerged post-data collection and form part of our evolving thinking and ongoing commitment to centring mātauranga Māori within our research and writing.

Methodology

This two-phase study was situated within an interpretivist paradigm, recognising that both researchers and participants bring cultural and experiential perspectives that shape meaning-making.

The research aimed to deepen understanding about how children's inquiry is interpreted and sustained in Aotearoa early childhood settings. It focused on three questions:

- What theoretical and pedagogical influences have shaped kaiako inquiry practices?
- How do interpretations of inquiry-based learning shape pedagogy and practice?
- How does children's inquiry impact learning?

Phase one involved a national online survey of licensed ECE services, exploring how kaiako understood and enacted inquiry. Based on responses, six diverse centres were invited to participate in phase two. Data collection included semi-structured interviews with kaiako and leaders, alongside analysis of documentation such as photographs, learning stories, planning records, and reflections. In some cases, researchers also conducted direct observations. This article draws on data from two of these centres, Daisies Early Education & Care Centre and Little Doves Early Learning Centre, which had a particular focus on infants and toddlers within their inquiry-based practices.

The research was underpinned by sociocultural (Vygotsky, 1978) and bioecological theories (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As the research progressed, the ensuing analysis was also informed by Kaupapa Māori theories (Smith, 2017). Ethical approval was obtained, with all

kaiako giving informed consent. Although anonymity was offered, all centres opted to be named. Children's assent was sensitively sought through age-appropriate methods.

A narrative inquiry design supported authentic data gathering, allowing themes to emerge from lived experiences and epistemological stances (Clandinin, 2014; Mayer & Meissel, 2023). This approach foregrounded history, culture, and place, providing space for kaiako to re-story their inquiry journeys with integrity (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Data was analysed thematically through an iterative, collaborative process. Regular wānanga enabled shared reflection and interpretation, ensuring multiple perspectives were considered. The goal was not generalisation, but to illuminate rich, localised narratives that reflect the complexity of children's inquiry in Aotearoa.

Findings and Discussion

This section explores how inquiry with infants and toddlers is interpreted and enacted in two early childhood settings in Aotearoa: Daisies Early Childhood Education and Care Centre and Little Doves Early Learning Centre. Both centres participated in our research and contributed inquiry stories published in our forthcoming book (Probine et al., 2025). Drawing on these narratives, we examine three intersecting pedagogical themes: the relational dimensions of time, people, place, and materials; slowing down to listen; and the role of pedagogical documentation. These strategies align closely with both Clark's (2023) concept of slow pedagogy and Pohatu's (2013) notion of *Āta*, an Indigenous Māori theory that guides kaiako in fostering relational, respectful, and intentional inquiry practices with infants and toddlers. These strategies were found to be key in supporting deep, sustained inquiry with infants and toddlers.

At both Daisies and Little Doves, inquiry is a dynamic, co-constructed process beginning with close observation of infants' and toddlers' explorations and interactions. At Daisies, each inquiry is sparked by a centre-wide provocation developed through collective kaiako wānanga. Small groups (rōpū iti) then pursue these ideas at their own pace, supported by weekly planning meetings where documentation is analysed and interpreted. At both centres, kaiako collaboratively develop two interrelated questions: one focused on infants' and toddlers' interests and working theories, and one pedagogical question aimed at deepening their teaching practice. These questions are revisited during team meetings and inform the direction of ongoing inquiry. Kaiako view themselves as co-researchers, engaging in careful listening, responsive documentation, and intentional teaching that remains open to how infants and toddlers engage with materials and provocations. Daily rhythms are structured to protect extended periods for inquiry, enabling infants and toddlers to revisit materials, explore ideas, and engage in sustained, unhurried dialogue. These processes reflect the principles of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), and are shaped by a commitment to relational pedagogy, slow time, and connection to place.

Relationships with Time, People, Places, and Materials

At both Daisies and Little Doves, inquiry with infants and toddlers is supported by intentional pedagogies that frame time as essential for deep engagement. Rather than dividing the day into discrete routines, kaiako slow their practice to create spacious, unhurried rhythms that enable infants and toddlers to engage meaningfully with people, materials, and place. This valuing of time extends to the professional culture of both teaching teams. Each centre has spent

years developing inquiry-based approaches, supported by strong, collegial relationships. At Daisies, the team's shared inquiry focus enables collective planning and reflection, giving the team 'a shared purpose.' At Little Doves, long-standing team relationships foster trust and a shared commitment to slow, relational practice. These teams prioritise time to think together, explore uncertainty, and remain open to where inquiries may lead.



Figure 1: Explorations of how acorns move at Little Doves.

This valuing of time is embedded in the daily rhythm. Both centres encourage infants and toddlers to revisit materials and ideas across days, weeks, or months. At Little Doves, toddlers and kaiako

returned daily to an oak tree in the garden, forming an ongoing relationship with the fallen acorns beneath it. They became 'acorn researchers,' sorting, classifying, and theorising over time (Figure 1). These were not isolated moments of curiosity, but layered, evolving engagements. At Daisies, a community walk led toddlers to discover painted rocks. This experience sparked an inquiry that continued at the centre, as the toddlers painted their own rocks to place in local gardens—an act of connection and contribution (Figure 2).

This emphasis on relationships extended to materials themselves. Drawing on relational materialist perspectives (Kind, 2014), materials were viewed as active participants in the inquiry. They invited attention, prompted responses, and provided challenges. Wonder emerged through sustained engagement and opportunities to revisit materials. As the group returned, they developed new ideas and intentions; the materials' affordances shifted, supporting the development of working theories through embodied, often preverbal, engagement. Relationships transformed through repeated exposure to people, places, and materials, enriching both toddlers' experiences and kaiako pedagogical understandings (Rinaldi, 2006). Drawing on *Te Āta Takepū* developed by Pohatu (2013, p. 15), we can associate this example with the takepū, *Āta-haere*, defined as being intentional; approaching the situation reflectively, moving with respect and integrity towards the relationships they observe and their significance.



Figure 2. Painted rocks at Daisies are carefully arranged to dry.

Connection to place also shaped inquiry. Local environments were not seen as backdrops but as dynamic contributors to learning. Recurring visits, familiarity, and sensory exploration grounded these inquiries in place-based, relational knowing. Thoughtfully designed yet flexible environments enabled infants and toddlers to engage in open-ended play and inquiry (Dinkel et al., 2019). From a cultural-historical perspective, such practices allow kaiako to observe and respond to infants' and toddlers' natural movements, interests, and ways of relating. Trust in infants' capacities to lead their play supports autonomy and honours their unique ways of thinking

and doing (Cooper & Quiñones, 2020). As one kaiako from Daisies reflected, slowing down and listening to infants' cues created space for 'intimate conversations'—moments that nurtured responsive, reciprocal relationships (MoE, 2017).

Slowing Down to Listen

At both Daisies and Little Doves, slowing down to listen is an embedded pedagogical stance. Listening is understood not as passive hearing, but as a relational and ethical act that recognises infants and toddlers as capable communicators. This approach allows kaiako to become attuned to preverbal languages such as subtle cues expressed through gesture, movement, facial expression, and vocalisation, which often signal the beginnings of an inquiry.

Kaiako described how slowing down enables them to move beyond surface-level interests to uncover deeper patterns of engagement. At Little Doves, for instance, the acorn inquiry began when toddlers repeatedly returned to fallen acorns beneath an oak tree. By closely observing how they sorted, transported, and told stories about the acorns, kaiako recognised an emerging inquiry. Their documentation and collaborative reflection helped them plan meaningful provocations that extended this learning. A similar process occurred at Daisies, where toddlers discovered painted rocks during a nature walk. A rock brought back to the centre became a shared focus, and rather than rushing to act, kaiako spent time engaging with the toddlers and reflecting together. This led to the idea of creating their own painted 'Daisies rocks', affirming toddlers' ideas and sustaining their interest. Drawing on *Te Āta Takepū* (Pohatu, 2013), we can associate this example with *āta-whakamārama*, which is concerned to inform through reflective deliberation. Concern to ensure the channels of communication at spiritual, emotional, and intellectual level of the receiver (in this case, the tamariki mokopuna) are understood, respected and valued. This practice of attuned listening is tightly interwoven with reflection, which links to the takepū of *āta-whakarongo* defined by Pohatu (2013) as listening with reflective deliberation. This requires patience and gives space to "... listen and communicate to the heart, mind, soul of the speaker (insert communicator), context and environment" (Pohatu, 2013, p. 15). Pohatu (2013) emphasises conscious participation of all senses, the natural inclusion of trust, integrity and respectfulness as part of *āta-whakarongo*.

Slowing down also enabled kaiako to reflect on their own teaching. Through documentation and team dialogue, they considered how their timing, tone, and responses shaped toddlers' engagement. At Daisies, kaiako described "tossing the ball" as a metaphor for intentional pacing, allowing time for toddlers to respond before acting. These approaches echo Clark (2023), who suggests that time, rhythm, and repetition open deeper pedagogical possibilities. Daniels (2021) similarly highlights the power of collective, recurring moments of connection, through which shared meaning emerges through rhythm and movement. For preverbal learners, embodied listening creates the conditions for secure relationships and meaningful inquiry. In this way, slowing down is not passive but an intentional, ethical stance, one that honours infants' rights to be heard, to participate, and to lead their own learning. Through this care-full listening, kaiako cultivate fertile ground for inquiry, where even the smallest gestures can evolve into rich, co-constructed investigations.

Pedagogical Documentation

Pedagogical documentation plays a central role in inquiry with infants and toddlers, particularly because they are often preverbal, embodied learners. Documentation offers a means for kaiako to make visible the gestures, expressions, movements, and working theories of infants and toddlers, allowing them to trace how learning emerges and deepens over time. At Little Doves, kaiako used multi-modal group learning stories and voiced-over videos that not only showcased toddlers' ongoing inquiries but also articulated the pedagogical decisions behind them. These artefacts were shared with whānau to foster transparency and strengthen home-centre connections. In both settings, documentation was embedded in a culture of collaborative review, where regular team meetings supported collective reflection and interpretation, guided by pedagogical leaders. This process enabled a slow, thoughtful cycle of noticing and responding that sustained inquiry over time.

Documentation also helped kaiako slow down and reflect together. As Sonya from Little Doves noted, "It helps us to talk about children's learning, we are unpacking learning, we are interpreting. We've broken it down so that we can celebrate the tiny, and we're not making these great big claims." Through this lens, documentation becomes a tool for recognising subtle shifts in infants' and toddlers' learning, valuing small discoveries that may otherwise go unnoticed. It also enables infants and toddlers to revisit previous experiences, deepening connections and supporting continuity in inquiry. Importantly, documentation is never neutral. As Biffi (2019) reminds us, it reflects the values and assumptions of the kaiako who produce it. This is echoed in *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), which affirms infants' and toddlers' right to be heard and understood, and positions them as contributors to their communities. By centring infants' and toddlers' ideas and expressions, pedagogical documentation becomes a democratic and political act, one that affirms kaiako as co-researchers who listen, interpret, and plan in close relationship with children.

Together, these three interwoven pedagogical strategies: relational engagement with time, place, people, and materials; slowing down to listen; and pedagogical documentation, create the conditions in which inquiry with infants and toddlers can take root and flourish. They support kaiako to be present, responsive, and intentional, enabling them to recognise and extend working theories over time. These approaches cultivate a culture of inquiry grounded in trust, curiosity, and collaboration, positioning both infants and toddlers and kaiako as active co-constructors of knowledge. In doing so, they expand the pedagogical landscape beyond caregiving alone, foregrounding infants' and toddlers' rights to participate in rich, sustained learning encounters from birth. While these strategies strongly align with emerging frameworks of slow pedagogy, their potential must also be critically examined within broader social, cultural, and political contexts of Aotearoa.

Positioning Children's Inquiry as a Counter-Cultural Stance

In the current early childhood education landscape in Aotearoa, kaiako face increasing systemic pressures, including staffing shortages, qualification rollbacks, and heightened compliance demands (Mitchell, 2019). These pressures can prioritise efficiency, regulation, and routine at the expense of reflection, dialogue, and

presence. As a result, the experiences of infants and toddlers may become constrained by rigid routines, surveillance, and a focus on safety and control. These trends mirror broader neoliberal discourses that frame 'quality' in terms of measurable outcomes, positioning education as a service and children as future economic contributors (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Ritchie, 2024; Ritchie, 2025).

Within this context, inquiry-based pedagogies offer a meaningful counterpoint. Choosing to engage in slow, relational inquiry with infants and toddlers is both a pedagogical and political act that affirms infants' and toddlers' rights to agency, cultural identity, and meaningful participation. Ritchie (2025) argues that "the present moment calls for new old imaginaries, unknowing, unlearning, relearning ways of knowing, relating, desiring, imagining, creating, and doing" (p. 22). Pedagogies grounded in trust and connectedness invite alternative ways of being and knowing that resist the dominant logics of performance and control. Children's inquiry disrupts these narratives by positioning infants and toddlers as active, competent co-constructors of meaning. Rather than accelerating through content, slow pedagogies reclaim time for reflection, connection, and collaboration. As Clark (2023) notes, this commitment to slowness is not about doing less, it is about attending more deeply. In this way, inquiry becomes a stance that honours infants' and toddlers' rhythms and rights while challenging the logics that often undermine relational, responsive teaching.

Grounding Children's Inquiry in Bi-cultural Practice

As interest in slow pedagogies grows, it is essential to critically consider how these approaches intersect with Indigenous worldviews and temporalities. Without care, such frameworks risk replicating the silencing of Māori ethics of care and relationality. Both Pohatu (2013) and Clark (2023) offer models that emphasise deliberate attention to time, relationships, and reflection. In the settings explored in this research, kaiako privileged deep connection with people, place, and materials, enacting a relational, inquiry-driven pedagogy grounded in respect, care, and reciprocity. These practices affirm infants and toddlers as contributors to their learning communities.

Within the framework of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), both the principles of *Āta* and slow pedagogy are reflected in the curriculum's emphasis on holistic development, relationships, and the empowerment of infants and toddlers as competent learners. *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) also encourages kaiako to create learning environments that are responsive to the cultural identities and individual needs of each child. Every child in Aotearoa is the benefactor of an identity that includes recognition of Māori knowledge and language. *Āta* is an approach that creates space for kaiako and mokopuna to develop bi-cultural habits of mind by enabling opportunities to engage in ngā takepū Māori (Māori principles), deepening our understandings of some of the concepts we encounter in *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017).

Conclusion

This paper has explored how inquiry with infants and toddlers can be meaningfully enacted through slow, relational pedagogies grounded in deep listening, documentation, and sustained connection with people, place, and materials. These practices affirm infants and toddlers as capable, theory-building learners whose inquiries unfold through embodied, social, and sensory experiences. By centring infants' and toddlers' interests and ways of knowing, children's inquiry offers a pedagogical and political stance that challenges dominant narratives of efficiency and standardisation

and reclaims early childhood education as a space for critical, co-constructed learning. It affirms kaiako as co-researchers, whose thoughtful, responsive practice supports deep engagement over time. Framed through the potential of *Āta*, children's inquiry can also cultivate bi-cultural practices grounded in respect, care, and reflection, deepening our understanding of what it means to slow down and attend with integrity to the relationships at the heart of learning. *Āta* reminds us that unhurried pedagogy is not only an ethical choice, but a counter-cultural one, requiring intentional time and space to honour the relationships infants are forming with people and place.

As we continue to reflect on our findings, we believe that *Āta* offers significant potential as a conceptual and practical tool for ECE kaiako seeking to deepen their inquiry practices. While not explicitly drawn upon by participating kaiako during the research, we observed strong synergies between their unhurried, relational approaches and the principles of *Āta*. In future professional development, kaiako may find value in engaging with *Te Āta Takepū* alongside *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) and *Te Whatu Pōkeka* (MoE, 2009), particularly when considering how care, respect, and deliberation are enacted in documentation and inquiry practices. We see the concepts within *Āta* as offering a powerful frame for supporting culturally grounded pedagogies, enriching understandings of inquiry as a relational and ethical process. We encourage kaiako to explore these ideas further through dialogue, reading, and collaborative inquiry.

Kia tōtika te haere!

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For infants and toddlers, inquiry emerges through relational engagement through deep observation, attuned listening, and revisiting experiences over time. This stance recognises relationships as the medium through which learning unfolds.”

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