

Disrupting the disrupters: The potential of children's inquiry approaches in early childhood education

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Abstract

Children's inquiry is an approach where tamariki explore and research their own questions and curiosities over sustained periods of time with the support of their kaiako. This article explores findings from research examining how this approach has been interpreted and enacted by early childhood kaiako in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The article examines the state of the early childhood sector, which is currently facing many challenges, and juxtaposes this with narratives from the research that demonstrate how children's inquiry approaches can provide a focus for early childhood communities to develop rich, authentic cultures of learning.

Introduction

Tamariki are born with an innate curiosity to inquire about their world, and early childhood is a critical period during which they develop a sense of identity about who they are and how they learn (Mitchell, 2019). It is therefore concerning that there appears to be a growing disparity between how tamariki, kaiako, and partnerships with whānau are valued in the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki—He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2017), and the current realities of early childhood education (ECE) in Aotearoa New Zealand (see Table 1 for a glossary of te reo Māori terms as used in this article). Research suggests that the early childhood sector is under significant stress, and, in some cases, this is impacting the capacity of kaiako to provide rich, contextualised curriculum (Neuwelt-Kearns & Ritchie, 2020). In

contrast, our research exploring children’s inquiry approaches in Aotearoa New Zealand presents quite a different story. In this article, we examine the impact of disrupters such as contemporary ECE policy and the current social and economic climate on early childhood settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. We then juxtapose this with the findings from our current research and examine the potential of children’s inquiry approaches to position rich, experiential learning at the centre of ECE.

Table 1. Te reo Māori terms as used in this article

ako	a Māori pedagogical concept related to reciprocal teaching and learning
atua Māori	Māori gods
kaiako	teacher
kaupapa	topic
kotahitanga	unity
manaakitanga	hospitality
mātauranga Māori	Māori knowledge, understanding
rangatiratanga	self-determination
tamaiti	child
tamariki	children
te ao Māori	the Māori world (view)
whānau	family

Commented [JH1]: NZCER Press policy is that te reo Māori is an official New Zealand language and as such is only parenthetically glossed in the text itself if used in a specific technical sense. I've added this table to assist readers who are unfamiliar with these words.

Children's inquiry approaches

Children's inquiry¹ is an approach where tamariki lead their own learning as they explore and discover answers to their own questions through exploration and dialogue (Stacey, 2019).

Tamariki work collaboratively with their peers and kaiako, often utilising the arts to represent and adapt their ideas as they co-construct new understandings. This approach is valued for its potential to foster the curiosity and engagement of tamariki in their learning (Probine & Perry, 2021). Children's inquiry has also been recognised for its potential to develop many of the skills, knowledge, and dispositions identified as critical for learners as we move further into the 21st century (Johnson et al., 2019).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, various theoretical and pedagogical ideas have influenced how kaiako engage in children's inquiry. One of the most significant international influences has been the Reggio Emilia approach. A prominent aspect of this socioconstructivist approach is children's collaborative inquiry-based projects (Fernández & Torruella, 2017; Moss, 2018). While the pedagogical ideas of Reggio Emilia have been explored and reinterpreted by early childhood kaiako in this country for several decades, it has been argued that transplanting pedagogical ideas from one context to another without deep examination about what these ideas mean for the new context can be problematic (Miller & Pound, 2010; Pohio, 2009). Further, Alcock and Ritchie (2018) ask if looking further afield for pedagogical inspiration could potentially overshadow localised theories, philosophies, and approaches, in particular, the commitment to bicultural practice and rich local kaupapa drawn from te ao Māori and mātauranga Māori. Given the paucity of research into this topic in Aotearoa New Zealand, this study aimed to better understand these issues in our local context by focusing on how early childhood kaiako in the Aotearoa New Zealand context have engaged with the international and local theories and pedagogical ideas related to this approach.

¹ The term *children's inquiry* was developed by the researchers to encompass the range of ways this approach is described. The terms "investigations", "project work", or simply "inquiry" are also used to describe this work. The researchers initially used the working term "Inquiry-based project learning" (IBPL) but have refined this to "children's inquiry" to differentiate this from Teacher as Inquiry (TAI).

Introducing the research

The research is a collaborative project involving seven initial teacher educators from several institutes in Aotearoa New Zealand. The study sought to understand more about the range of influences shaping how kaiako work with children's inquiry approaches, and what aspects have been most impactful. The research also examined how differing interpretations of children's inquiry play out in the classroom and what this means for the learning of tamariki.

The project is positioned in an interpretivist qualitative paradigm and is underpinned by bioecological and sociocultural theories (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Vygotsky, 1962). These theories suggest knowledge is constructed and is influenced by a complex web of contextual influences including relationships and interactions, cultural beliefs, and history. The methodological framework drew upon narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2014) which supports the value we hold for the stories of the early childhood kaiako and communities collaborating in this research.

Phase one of the study comprised a questionnaire being sent to all early childhood centres registered on the New Zealand Data base of Early Childhood Settings (Ministry of Education, June 2022). Sixty-three early childhood settings that use inquiry-based approaches responded. This modest response rate suggests that children's inquiry may not be a common approach used within the sector. Responses were thematically analysed collaboratively by the research team who identified similarities and differences and noted the depth and comprehensive nature of some responses (Liao & Hitchcock, 2018).

Phase two involved working with six purposively selected services across Aotearoa New Zealand with the aim of capturing diverse cultural and pedagogical perspectives. At each setting, the researchers conducted a semistructured interview with the teaching team about their pedagogical approaches and observed a current inquiry with tamariki. A collaborative approach was employed for analysis which ensured multiple perspectives were applied to the data (Liao & Hitchcock, 2018). Through shared discussion over several months, initial codes and generative themes were developed and evaluated inductively. Ethical approval was granted by the lead researcher's institute's Ethics Committee. In phase one, participants' identities were protected, but in phase two, five of the six settings gave permission to be identified in the research; the sixth has been allocated a pseudonym.

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ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand

The New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki—He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1996) became world renowned due to its bicultural framework which voices commitment to upholding the rights, culture, and language of Māori tamariki and their families as tangata whenua, as well as acknowledging the cultures and identities of all tamariki (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017). It is recognised for its non-prescriptive approach that provides principles for curriculum development and makes space for a range of philosophical, cultural, and theoretical lenses to inform teaching and learning as each setting weaves its own curriculum. Since its publication, Aotearoa New Zealand has been acclaimed as an example of high-quality education for tamariki (Giardiello et al., 2019). The social, political, and environmental landscapes of Aotearoa New Zealand have, however, fundamentally shifted over the past three decades. Next, we examine how these changes have impacted the sector and, in some cases, disrupted early childhood teachers' wellbeing and practice. We then compare this with our research findings which suggest that children's inquiry has the potential to disrupt, to some degree, the impacts of these issues.

The impact of the current sociopolitical climate on the experiences of kaiako, tamariki, and whānau in ECE

One of the most enduring statements in *Te Whāriki* is that “children are competent and confident learners, healthy in mind, body, spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 5). This statement reflects a particular view of the tamaiti as agentic and powerful, understood through their relationships with whānau, kaiako, place, and history. To create an environment that recognises tamariki as *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) describes, kaiako need to be equipped with sufficient resources, support, and knowledge to be able to focus on tamariki and really listen.

However, throughout the past two decades, the early childhood sector has become increasingly unsettled. According to the Office of Early Childhood Education (OECE, 2024) confidence survey, 74% of respondents expressed concern about government decisions, and

78% doubted improvement in the following 12 months. Respondents cited diminishing numbers of qualified teachers, challenges in providing “quality” ECE, and inequities surrounding pay parity (OECE, 2024). These issues can be traced back to policy decisions made almost two decades ago. For example, *Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki* (Ministry of Education, 2002), the 10-year strategic plan for ECE, promised improved participation, quality, and a commitment to collaboration. However, these aspirations were not realised due to the 2008 government change, which discontinued several initiatives to focus primarily on participation. Although the number of centres, which were predominantly privately owned “for profit” settings, increased, quality decreased, particularly in impoverished regions (Everiss et al., 2017). This resulted in stark inequities for children and their families (Neuwelt & Ritchie, 2020).

Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 59) values kaiako as “the key resource in any ECE service”; however, the 2010 decision to relinquish the goal of having 100% qualified early childhood kaiako has had significant implications (Everiss et al., 2017). Qualified teachers are better equipped to support children’s learning and create culturally responsive curriculum due to their pedagogical and theoretical knowledge (Neuwelt & Ritchie, 2020). Cameron (2022) argues that unqualified teachers may lack understanding of sociocultural planning and assessment practices. Cameron’s (2022) research found learning stories often document participation rather than planning for future learning. Kaiako tended to use informal assessment tools such as photographs, often writing learning stories many days later, without written observations to support their memories of these events. These practices raise questions of validity and authenticity (Wanoa & Johnston, 2019).

More broadly, the global impacts of continued economic and environmental crises are a reality, and these issues weigh heavily on kaiako, whānau, and, to a degree, tamariki. The continuing impacts of the pandemic and the resultant cost of living crisis have created further inequities regarding access to ECE provision as families experience substantial financial stress (Harris, 2024). The emphasis on relationships in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) also has implications for both kaiako and ECE leaders who must be constantly emotionally available to their learning communities which impacts on mental wellbeing (Radford, 2020). This is significant as *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) identifies that the wellbeing of kaiako is inextricably linked with the experiences of tamariki; however,

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Bates (2018) argues that kaiako wellbeing is inadequately addressed in policy, despite the daily challenges they face, such as strenuous physical work, exposure to children's illnesses, and the stressful nature of "emotional labour" (p. 32). These issues can lead to high staff turnover rates which can impact tamariki who may have established trusting relationships with departing teachers (Andres et al., 2022; Grant et al., 2019). Kaiako may also experience burnout which may mean they struggle to empathise with others (Bates, 2018). Penney et al. (2019) argue that maintaining the mental health of kaiako is crucial for supporting children's wellbeing. These complex issues can significantly disrupt the capacity of kaiako to engage in thoughtful and intentional pedagogy.

Findings from our research

While the literature reveals the complex issues that, in some cases, are disrupting the potential for kaiako to engage collaboratively in thoughtful and intentional pedagogy, our research findings paint quite a different picture. Next, through findings focused on kaiako, tamariki, whānau, and centre community, we explore how children's inquiry is a pedagogical approach that facilitates the contribution and active engagement of the whole centre community, and, as a result, negates some of the impact of these disruptors.

Kaiako

The phase one questionnaire revealed that kaiako using children's inquiry view themselves as researchers who work in partnership with tamariki. They carefully listen and observe, reflect and discuss learning with other kaiako, and recognise that tamariki bring rich ideas and theories to their inquiries. The capacity for inquiry to foster relationships between and with tamariki and among teaching teams is deeply valued. Kaiako described how this approach fosters collegiality, opportunities for working in a community of learners, collaboration, and ako:

Kaiako are able to engage in deep meaningful professional dialogue which in turn gets passed through to the tamariki in their planning of the investigation. They are able to share resources and ideas as each kaiako is not 'siloed' in their own planning.
(Participant response)

During phase two, Sarah, centre manager at Little Doves, a private ECE centre in Auckland, explained that the values of curiosity and exploration are as important for kaiako as they are for tamariki, noting “teachers also want to stay curious, stay interested, be learning, be open to new ideas and new perspectives”. For this setting, the collaborative nature of children’s inquiry enables a culture of curiosity and research to be fostered among the teaching team. This was also reflected in the collaborative planning and assessment practices of several teaching teams discussed during phase two. For example, at Daisies ECE and care centre in Wellington, each teaching team supporting an investigation group has time each week to collaboratively reflect and plan for their inquiry with the support of a member of the educational leadership team. They value how these opportunities foster connection and collegiality and serve to keep kaiako deeply engaged in the process.

The importance of pedagogical documentation was another shared value held by teaching teams. Significant time is taken to carefully document children’s responses and ideas throughout an inquiry, and at some settings, to document the possible directions of an inquiry before it begins. For example, at Little Doves, the team has developed a set of documents that support teaching teams to ask critical questions as they embark on an inquiry, and to systematically record and analyse children’s and teachers’ thinking as an inquiry progresses. Documentation is also used extensively with children to support them to revisit previous learning and to share inquiries and the intentions of kaiako with whānau.

In contrast with reports of high staff turnover in the sector (Andres et al., 2022), most kaiako in these teams have worked together for several years. Consequently, their practices have been developed over significant periods of time. Professional learning and adopting an attitude of being learners alongside children is a further shared value. These findings highlight that adopting images of tamariki and kaiako that align with children’s inquiry which position both as powerful intellectuals enhances and creates a shared focus and purpose to their work.

Tamariki

The questionnaire responses from phase one of our research revealed clear links between how participant kaiako value tamariki as learners within inquiry and the image of tamariki portrayed in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017). When asked about the benefits of this

approach, kaiako shared their understanding of the unique identity of each tamaiti. They talked about how inquiry supports them to explore the rich funds of knowledge they bring to their learning and provides opportunities for them to teach their peers and kaiako. Kaiako wrote about how they value tamariki as researchers and social learners, and how inquiry supports tamariki to work respectfully with others. Further, they indicated that children's inquiry has the capacity to foster a love of learning, as tamariki develop understanding of their strengths, interests, and passions and their ability to work with others and appreciate diverse perspectives:

Investigations in a group naturally prompt the building and learning of social concepts including turn-taking, sharing but also manaakitanga, kotahitanga and rangatiratanga. Tamariki are able to shine as an investigation flows down a path they direct and kaiako are there to support them to delve deeper into their thinking and the working theories they come up with. (Participant response)

At all six settings that participated in phase two, the theories, ideas, and interpretations of tamariki are deeply valued by kaiako and these drive the inquiry process. For instance, at Little Doves, the 2-year-olds were exploring the cleverness of acorns. The centre has a large oak tree, and the tamariki spent many weeks investigating acorns and developing strategies for manipulating them to move in different ways. Each new discovery was deeply valued by the kaiako who carefully documented this. Kaiako Sonya explained, "we've broken it down so that we can celebrate the tiny ... we really need to be equipped, and ready to recognise and celebrate, and to share, and to respond to every single tiny something that happens along the way".

Another example is from Li'l Pumpkins, a semirural setting in Hamilton. Kaiako, Michelle, explained that their inquiry was focused on outer space, and we observed an experience involving six tamariki aged 3–4 years old, exploring different materials representing the moon, asteroids, moon dust, and craters. The tamariki explained they were making the moon. One of the kaiako asked, "What happens if we drop this on the moon?" One tamaiti replied, "This is an asteroid, and it makes big holes." Kaiako use open-ended questions to provoke thinking as well as making connections to some complex conceptual and scientific ideas as tamariki delighted in experimentation. The kaiako at this setting reflected on how such experiences provide opportunities to develop new vocabulary and foster tuakana-teina

relationships. These responses highlight how children’s inquiry is an approach that values children’s theorising as springboards for inquiry and that when these are explored in collaborative contexts, children can develop many of the skills, knowledge, and dispositions valued in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Whānau

In phase one, kaiako indicated that children’s inquiry can create opportunities to engage with whānau and foster meaningful partnerships with families. For example, as an inquiry progresses, kaiako will invite members of the community, including whānau, to share their expertise to deepen the understanding of tamariki and are valued as a resource who can support the inquiry.

Kaiako at several of the settings involved in phase two indicated that whānau were very much valued within their inquiries. For example, at Toi Ohomai early childhood centre in Tauranga, the ongoing inquiry focus was on atua. The kaiako and tamariki had created an atua song with accompanying actions. Kaiako shared a video of a tamaiti spontaneously teaching his grandmother the song when she visited the centre. His kaiako, Kim, expressed her belief that inquiry can foster connections with whānau and many parents arrive with questions following discussions at home with tamariki.

At Daisies, the learning community was embarking on an inquiry centred around the notion of community. At this setting, the beginning of the inquiry is an intensive process, and significant time is taken to decide the focus of the inquiry, focus questions, and the potential inquiry pathways. As part of the initial stage, Zoom hui were organised so that whānau could share their perspectives on community where they were asked questions such as, “What does a centre community mean to you?” and, “What communities do you and your family belong to?” These findings highlight how this approach fosters shared understandings about children’s learning, creating opportunities for whānau to contribute to curriculum development.

The potential for inquiry to create a shared focus for the whole learning community

Another significant finding was how deeply focused both kaiako and tamariki were as they worked together on inquiries. An example is at Pakuranga Baptist Kindergarten where they have been inquiring into their local environment for several years. The kindergarten has an established active explorer's programme and, during the data-collection period, tamariki were theorising about the creatures that might live in the nearby estuary. Kaiako shared the legend of Te Moko Ika A Hikuwaru, a taniwha who fell in love with Te Kopua Kai-a-Hiku, the local lagoon. One tamaiti suggested creating this taniwha. His kaiako, Jacqui, and a group of curious participants worked intensely to realise their plan, pausing regularly to discuss any challenges. Next, the same tamaiti proposed they recreate the pūrākau using stop motion. Stop motion was new for Jacqui. She and the tamariki worked collaboratively to problem solve and bring the film to fruition. Later, she expressed the importance of making visible to tamariki that she, too, is a learner, and to role model the strategies she uses when experiencing new challenges.

Discussion

The early childhood sector in Aotearoa New Zealand has faced a myriad of challenges over the past few decades and these are impacting the day-to-day experiences of kaiako and tamariki (Everiss et al., 2017; Haggerty & Alcock, 2016; Marriott & Sim, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2020; Neuwelt-Kearns & Ritchie, 2020). It is, therefore, significant that many responses from phase one, and narratives collected during phase two, presented such positive views of the benefits of children's inquiry and its impact on all members of their learning communities. *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) advocates for each setting weaving a local curriculum that reflects its own distinctive character and values. The centres involved in this research have chosen to weave children's inquiry as a key aspect of their curriculum. In choosing this approach, which requires kaiako to listen carefully to children's ideas, to collaborate and plan together, to actively engage groups of tamariki, and to seek whānau and community involvement to support children's research, they have disrupted, to some degree, some of the micro-level impacts of the broader issues affecting the sector. We noticed that this was particularly impactful regarding the overall wellbeing of these communities as we had opportunities to observe kaiako and tamariki deeply engaged in their inquiries together.

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Children's inquiry is an approach built on the understanding that learning occurs through collaborative relationships and co-construction in a classroom culture where tamariki and kaiako are equally valued as active contributors (Fernández & Torruella, 2017; Moss, 2018; Stacey, 2019). We theorise that the emphasis this approach places on relationships and collaborative learning is a key factor in supporting these settings to focus on quality practice, giving time to collaborative discussion and planning and the wellbeing of everyone. An enabling factor is leadership. Denee (2018) argues that it is positional leaders who ultimately make decisions about how time, resources, and space are distributed and who make decisions about accessing professional learning. The leaders of these settings all hold deep value for this approach, and consequently advocate for and prioritise time for kaiako to work collaboratively, to develop their pedagogical knowledge, and to work for sustained periods of time with tamariki.

Conclusion

Children's inquiry provides both a shared focus and sense of purpose that every member of the learning community can contribute to each day. This is significant given the complex challenges both families and the early childhood sector are currently facing. These narratives demonstrate that, through adopting children's inquiry approaches, kaiako prioritise unhurried time for tamariki to explore and develop working theories, observe closely, and respond sensitively to the ideas of tamariki and with the support of their centre leaders, make time to work collaboratively to recognise and respond to children's learning. Kaiako think deeply about how to create space for authentic partnerships with families, tamariki, other kaiako, and whānau. This shared focus has the potential to create a culture of sustained focus, wellbeing, and empowerment.

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