Research work as curriculum work in New Zealand early childhood settings: What should be taught and learned?

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Abstract: This article draws from experiences in an ongoing study of children's narrative competence in the early years across early childhood education and school settings. Focusing on the research as it is being conducted in the early childhood context (a kindergarten), the paper inquires into what it means to do research in education settings where curriculum is constituted as everything that happens there, and principles of curriculum demand empowering, responsive and reciprocal, inclusive and holistic practices. Questions of research ethics, children's rights to assent or dissent to participate, to learn about the findings and consequences of the research, and to have the research recognised as curriculum experience are raised. Sitting at the intersection of research work and pedagogical/curriculum work the paper explores lessons from New Zealand of striving towards a fuller curriculum policy implementation and of addressing demands for ethical research practices with children who are very young.

Keywords: research ethics, children's voice, research dissemination, New Zealand, early childhood education, *Te Whāriki.*

Introduction

In this article I consider the question of what it means to do research in early childhood education settings where New Zealand's national early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki, He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna*

o Aotearoa, Early Childhood Curriculum (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1996, [hereafter *Te Whāriki*]) is being implemented. Formerly an early childhood teacher who worked with *Te Whāriki* and subsequently a teacher educator who has worked for many years with prospective and practicing teachers, the conceptions of children, curriculum, pedagogy, relationships, and learning that I built during my teaching with and about infants, toddlers, young children and their families have had enduring effects on my continued professional practices, including now as a researcher. Having recently stepped back into the field, in a 3-year research project[1] spanning early childhood and school settings, my teacher sensibilities have been rubbing up against my researcher ones. This has been making me ask questions about the research practices I should employ while working (as a researcher) in children's curriculum space in early childhood education. Sitting at the intersection of research work and teaching/curriculum work, this article engages with children's rights literature and ethical research practice to explore how research, within formal early childhood education settings, can support a fuller curriculum policy implementation and at the same time address demands for ethical research practices with children who are very young.

What does it mean to do research in early childhood settings within the curriculum context of Te Whāriki?

As a qualified teacher of young children I understood my pedagogical expertise was to be deployed in an early childhood education context where *Te Whāriki* established the grounds for curriculum as "the sum total of the experiences, activities, and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster children's learning and development" (MoE, 1996, p. 10). Understanding curriculum as many faceted and emergent (Jones & Nimmo, 1994; Jones, 2012), my teaching with children, families and colleagues was expected to be inclusive of child, teacher, and community interests and values, as well as responsive to serendipitous happenings and cultural events. Teaching decisions were an outcome of the daily work of groups of people co-existing within these early childhood education spaces which themselves were nested in local communities that held values and aspirations for young children's learning. Every practice I employed (intentional or not) was a potential learning event for children. This meant I needed to maintain a dual awareness of teaching from at least the perspectives of my own intentions as well as what, from my actions, I wanted children to learn. At its most basic level, the curriculum guided my

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[1]   see Bateman et al. (2014)

thinking and negotiation of subjectivity as a teacher. Established around an aspiration for children and four principles[2], *Te Whāriki* demanded teaching of me that was at the very least empowering, built upon responsive and reciprocal relationships, inclusive of family and community aspirations for children, and holistically minded (MoE, 1996). I believed that if I at least began here, the decisions I took when working in that early childhood space as a teacher would be consistent with the underlying principles of New Zealand early childhood curriculum. And that by teaching in this way I would be helping children to "grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society" (MoE, 1996, p. 9), the curriculum's foundational aspiration.

Now as a researcher working with children, teachers and families in early childhood and school based settings I find that my teacher sensibilities have been rubbing up against my researcher ones. Expectations I held of myself as teacher are impacting on practices I desire to employ now as a researcher. They are causing some expansion to my work (principally in terms of time-frames, consultation processes and processes of information sharing). Like others who are increasingly dissatisfied with and questioning of research *on* and involving children (Bourke & Loveridge, 2014; Dalli & Te One, 2012; Dockett, Perry, & Kearney, 2013; Harwood, 2010; Phelan & Kinsella, 2013) and puzzling over how best to be doing research *about* teaching in early childhood education, I am attending to ways in which I can conceptualise and practice research so that its impact in curriculum and within the early childhood education settings can be recognised as rich in learning opportunities, and above all conducted ethically and respectfully with those whose lives are supposed to benefit from it.

Researching ethically with young children, their families and their teachers in early childhood education.

Discussions around rights and research ethics in studies that involve children canvass many topics and debates (see for instance Te One, 2011). Once contestation over concepts such as 'child', 'childhood', 'rights' and so forth are acknowledged and perhaps even reconciled, these discussions typically centre on children's agency and their rights to supply and with-

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[2] The principles of the early childhood curriculum are: Empowerment – Whakamana, Holistic Development – Kotahitanga, Family and Community – Whānau Tangata, and Relationshps – Ngā Hononga (MOE, 1996).

draw informed consent (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010), including debates over whether children can actually provide informed consent; the provision of child assent within research (Dockett, Perry & Kearney, 2013; Phelan & Kinsella, 2013); withdrawal of assent during a project (Bourke & Loveridge, 2014; Dockett, Einarsdóttir, & Perry, 2012); and discussions of law or policy and assumptions about competence (Atwool, 2013), often centred around a researchers' views of children (Farrell, 2005; Kellett, Robinson, & Burr, 2004). Researchers are guided by the legal and policy frameworks operating in their own jurisdictions, in New Zealand by institutional procedures (for example university ethics committees), and by their own subjectivities and experiences of working within research and with children and their families (such as those I described of myself earlier).

Powell et al's (2011) study on building capacity for ethical research with children and young people revealed that although researchers perceive that children's views in research are becoming more recognised, not all researchers are able to give effect to children's participation rights, relying instead on parent or guardian consent for their children's participation. Many explanations for why children are not able to exercise participation rights are offered. For instance, research design and methods (scope, timing, consent, access issues) may impede a researcher's capacities to fully support children to understand the nature and consequence of their participation. Research funding issues, including research teams' lack of expertise in talking with children and inability to partner with those who can, coupled with insufficient time to devote to children and to provide them with multiple opportunities to revisit and rearticulate their participation rights are also cited reasons for why some researchers are prevented from supporting children to exercise rights within research.

For those prepared and able to work around such issues however, additional considerations must be factored into their work. Typically researchers would contend with how best to recognise children's rights to be regarded with respect and treated therefore respectfully (Dalli & Te One, 2012; Smith, 2011), how best to explain to children the harms and benefits of the research (Alderson & Morrow, 2011); how to manage issues of privacy, confidentiality, and representation, particularly with increasing usage of video and photographic data (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013); and the question of whether or not, or how, child participants in research should be recompensed for their involvement. Of increasing interest to researchers who work with children are questions over the extent to which children may partner in the research process, for example by acting as peer interviewers, processing

research data, responding to findings, engaging in member checks of data et cetera (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett, & Bottrell, 2015). While there is a large body of international research about children's participation rights, some of which is mentioned here, it seems that a relative under-theorisation of the ethics of *reporting research to children* exists. Mentioned only briefly in a recent and large scale international project about children's rights and research, the *Ethical Research involving Children* project (UNICEF & Graham et al., 2013), I have become puzzled about this. Confronted with going back to the field myself to work with children, their families and teachers, this is where my teacher and researcher sensibilities collide.

It seems as if once one has gained access, proceeded with care, and concluded fieldwork, that children's rights to know about the outcomes of the research they are involved in receives little attention. Given my sense that research conducted within the formal early childhood education environment in New Zealand is not only research work but pedagogical/curriculum work too, I have become intrigued at this. I am therefore working at how, a researcher operating in an early childhood education setting, I can communicate findings about the research to children at the end of the project, and also (in a longer term work such as the one I am involved in at present[3]), along the way.

The UNICEF project, *Ethical Research involving Children* launched a website and compendium for research, researchers, and others to support researcher reflexivity with respect to the decisions they make about children's involvement in research (UNICEF & Graham et al., 2013). Firmly located in relation to the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989, hereafter UNCROC), which New Zealand ratified in 1993, the resource advocates that children's competency and age are determining factors in the exercise of human rights and furthermore, that given the differing life circumstances of children across cultures and environments, that children's competence will vary according to personal circumstances. The compendium encourages researchers to "take the contexts of children's lives, their experiences and competencies into account in ensuring that children are afforded opportunities for decision-making and respect in the exercise of their rights, while being protected in accordance with their age and still evolving capacities" (UNICEF & Graham et al., 2013, p. 7). Accordingly, and in response

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also to the aforementioned curriculum imperatives of *Te Whāriki* I argue for researchers working within the New Zealand context of early childhood education to conceptualise their research also as pedagogical/curriculum work, and therefore to use *Te Whāriki* to help them develop a more extensive ethics of participation in research with children. This would mean that the activities, experiences and events introduced to the early childhood environment by the researcher and the research are accepted as part of the "sum total of events" (MoE, 1996, p. 10) constituted as curriculum by *Te Whāriki.*

I turn my attention now to describing the current project within which I am working and to how within my research practice I am striving to expand my practice of ethical research in the early childhood education context. I will show how I am working to take account of the fact that the research work I am doing with teachers, children and families is also informing the curriculum (and teaching) of the kindergarten. I advance the position that as one of the principal benefactors of this research work, children should not only be afforded the opportunity to agree to participate or not (and to change their mind), but that just as their parents, guardians, and teachers will expect, they should have opportunities to understand the work as it is happening and what it is finding out about. That is, children, just as their parents, teachers, and me, should be able to appreciate what's going on, why, and with what potential consequences.

Exploring children's narrative competence and teachers' support of this in early childhood and early schooling contexts.

Presently I am working in a study exploring children's narrative competence in the early years (Bateman et al., 2014). The research aims to explore and strengthen young children's narrative competence by looking at what teachers of young children are doing to afford children opportunities for storytelling. We (that is, myself and the research team) are working with children in kindergarten and over time, at school (the children are aged between 3-6 years and will transition from kindergarten to school during the three years of the study). Storytelling is of interest to us because we understand young children's oral vocabulary and narratives to be related to their later literacy performance in the middle childhood years (Griffin, Hemphill, Camp, & Wolf, 2004; Reese, Suggate, Long, & Schaughency, 2010), but also because storytelling and narrative competence are valuable in their own right for engaging in cognitive shifts about real and imagined social worlds and one's places within them (Early & Norton, 2012; Goodwin, 2015). The project is working in two New Zealand sites, one in the South Island and one

in the North Island. There are 12 case study participants (who, at the start of the project were beginning school within 6-12 months) and their families and teachers (at kindergarten and school). Oversight of the work in terms of ethical consent to proceed was sought and granted from the institutions within which the researchers' are employed. Informed consent for participation was sought from and granted by teachers, school principals and children's parents. A process of accessing ongoing assent to participate is in place with the case study child participants.

The project brings a team of researchers together from multiple fields and perspectives: education and psychology, qualitative and quantitative methods, and with different analytical interests, conversation analysis, narrative analysis and an analysis of the work of mediating objects within the storytelling enterprise. We are studying the opportunities for storying that exist in early years education settings. What happens in them? What contributions do story-partners make to storytelling? And how do mediating resources work to support children's storying? Using a design-based intervention methodology (Brown, 1992) we are working with teachers, children, and families to understand better the means by which the storytelling activities that occur are contributing to children's narrative competence.

I am leading the implementation of the study in one of the sites. The work involves me visiting and working with children and teachers at kindergarten (and at school). I have been observing children's every day play and learning, video-recording children in action (within free play and more structured activities) for between 1 and 3 hours (depending on context and the day), identifying storying events that occur, extracting video of these events from the free play video, and subjecting the resulting storytelling episodes to forms of narrative analysis.

The element of this work I will develop for the remainder of this article concerns the ways in which I have been conducting the project with children in the kindergarten in its first year. I include a discussion of the steps I have taken to ensure that the research, constituted by me as both a research and pedagogical/curriculum work, is being conducted in a manner that supports the implementation of the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* as well as upholding children's rights to full participation in research involving them. I exemplify this with a discussion of two processes of the study: recruitment and reporting findings to child participants.

Informing about and inviting children, families and teachers to the study.

Writing information documents and consent forms for research projects involving human subjects is every day practice for researchers working from New Zealand university settings. If the work is to take place in the dynamic space of the early childhood setting (such as the kindergarten I have been working within), multiple audiences must be addressed and informed: children, their families, teachers, and other adults who may work in the environment for instance. I began my approach to recruitment of participants to the study thinking like a teacher. How might I introduce myself, my co-researchers and this study to this early childhood community (of teachers, children, families and others)? Why would they want to agree to become involved? How best to inform them and support them to exercise their judgement over whether or not to participate? Clearly multiple versions of documents and consent / assent documents were necessary; for the children in particular, who, if their parents and teachers consented to participation, would for the next three years have their kindergarten (and later, school classrooms) visited by a strange woman with odd questions and video camera trailing behind them from time to time.

While parents' and guardians' responsibilities for decision making about their children were to be respected, my now teacher-researcher senses held that they would not alone determine whether their child's participation in the study would proceed. I wrote a child information and assent booklet for children. It began an early process of information sharing and that also extended an invitation to children to participate. Such practice is not particularly new (Dalli & Te One, 2012; Dockett, Perry & Kearney, 2013), but if teachers and parents have already consented to a child's participation in a study, sometimes children can feel compelled to say yes (Bourke & Loveridge, 2014), or may want to change their minds. It was important to me to address the children directly so they could begin to form an idea of what was being asked of them. The text would be given to children and families by the children's kindergarten teachers and thus form part of the curriculum. My teacher sense informed the design: what do I want children (and their families) to learn? I wanted them to gain an introduction to the people (research team), for them to understand that I took them and their views seriously, that I considered them capable and competent to understand the project's aims and reasons for it. I wanted children and family members to gain a good sense of the kinds of things I would ask of them, and for children to understand that they had both the ability to assent and dissent to participate. I also wanted to leave an artifact with children and families so

they could revisit the project and discuss what they'd agreed to or not from time to time. New Zealand early childhood teachers are used to writing in ways that address children as the primary audience of texts, via for instance documented narrative assessments and learning stories (for examples see, MoE, 2004/2009). It was a relatively straight forward process to developing the text (see Fig.1) however, I was to be reminded later that despite my best intentions, the interpretations of texts are varied.

Fig.1. Case study child information and assent booklet

As suggested, my attempt at recognising children's participation rights by developing the information and assent booklet was not absolutely untroubled. Within the text I took care to introduce myself and the research team and to outline the research and what we wanted to do. I invited children to participate, I described the kinds of information we would gather and how we would care for it. However, two of the child participants interpreted an image of a filing cabinet and accompanying text "we will keep information we write about you safely locked away" as 'we would be locking them (the children) away'! On reflection this made me think about children's potential experiences of the concept of 'locked away' and to reconsider the phrase. In a future circumstance I would likely change that phrase to something like 'we will keep information gathered about you safe' (my teacher sense reminds me to think – what do I want the children to learn?).

For another of the child participants, this particular artifact of the child information and assent booklet has become a prized possession. It is read often and displayed prominently at home. Humbled by the reverence with which this person has responded to the artifact, the study, and his respected place within it, I am reminded of the depth of regard with which a researcher-teacher self working in the context of New Zealand early childhood education must proceed. The principles of *Te Whāriki* echo in my mind: like other curriculum and pedagogical work, the research must also be empowering, responsive and reciprocal, inclusive, and holistic (MoE, 1996).

Reporting research to children.

The second major question I am grappling with is how best to report the findings of the research to children. For given my view that research is also pedagogical/curriculum work, reporting to children not only extends upon children's participation rights within the research, it is potentially instructive and a site of learning. As described earlier, the project engages with design-based intervention method (Brown, 1992), meaning that it involves iterative cycles of discussion, theorising, the trialing of ideas, and adaptations to the research design, by teachers, families, children and the research team. We (the research team) entered the study planning to focus on what was already happening in kindergarten in terms of storytelling practices so we could then think with participants about how opportunities for storying might be strengthened. The nature of this design lent itself to descriptive reporting of storytelling activities occurring at kindergarten. Pondering this, my teacher-researcher senses conflated again.

As previously mentioned, teachers in New Zealand early childhood settings are adept at developing texts and writing in ways that address children and inform them about learning. The child participants in our project understood me to be a kind-of-teacher-but-researcher-type-adult in their kindergarten. One who would visit regularly, who could be talked to like a teacher, and who was interested to learn about their stories and storytelling. I decided to therefore to report to children about the research through something I thought of as researcher stories, akin to group learning stories (see MOE, 2004/2009 for examples of these kinds of assessment documents), that would chronicle and report about the research (see Fig.2 for several excerpted pages from the first children's report).

As with any form of research report writing, the text must be fit-for-purpose. Joining up the dots between by teacher and researcher subjectivities has allowed for this within the present study of children's narrative competence and storytelling. In addition to my own children's research reports, the kindergarten teachers began, as a matter of course, to document the study from their perspective by writing group learning stories about the work that remain available in the kindergarten for children, families and others to read. Additionally, individual (case study) children have had teachers document episodes and sequences of valued learning from within the project which have been included within their own learning portfolios. Sometimes these have included learning stories about childrends involvement in data gathering, and photographs of me, they have represented the research and reflected what children have been learning about as they have been involved (for example, being a videographer, telling stories, welcoming newcomers to kindergarten). My account of the work is oriented differently. I have focused on developing a narrative of the study that discusses the work from my perspective and brings the account to the emergent findings and trajectories of the research. By recognising and utilising my teacher-research subjectivities, and conceptualising research within early childhood settings as also pedagogical and curriculum work, my research practices are expanding.

As mentioned earlier, the issue of reporting research to children is beginning to be taken up in the theory and literature about children's participation rights in research. The UNICEF compendium (UNICEF & Graham et al. 2013) described earlier contains useful questions and case study examples from research to assist people to work ethically with children, including reporting to them. For instance, it asks:

Children's report

Zooming in and zooming out

Literacy and narrative in the early years.

A. Bateman & M. Carr, University of Waikato
A. C. Gunn & E. Reese, University of Otago

Children's report
Design 1: January – June 2014

Visit 1 February – when no children were at kindergarten!

Visit 2 March – when we first got to use the video cameras

Visit 3 May – when Alex videoed some of the children at play

Visit 4 June – when Alex, the teachers, some children and families met to talk about the research.

Learning about storytelling at kindergarten

Kia ora tamariki mā,

I (Alex) have been vising your kindergarten and videoing children at play.

I have written this report so you can learn more about the storytelling research we are doing at your kindergarten.

Photograph of researcher with kindergarten teacher participants [removed for publication]

On my first visit to kindergarten there were no children there!

I met with some of the teachers. We talked about the research.

We want to know more about how children learn to tell stories, including stories about themselves and their learning.

I also wanted to learn about the kindergarten. I recorded some video of the inside and outside spaces.

Can you see anything odd in the picture of the playground below?

So what are we learning about storytelling at kindergarten?

What storying is happening?

During play, stories sometimes get told to other people and sometimes children tell them to themselves.

Sometimes children use 'things' to help tell stories. These things can become characters.

Children use the real and the imagined world to tell stories with, sometimes at the same time.

Teachers sometimes plan storytelling activities and this gives children a chance to practice

Who do you tell stories to?

What things do you tell stories with?

Do you?

What storytelling activities do you like?

What might our storytelling research at kindergarten focus on next?

We want to know more about how children are using objects to help storytelling.

We will talk to the teachers at kindergarten about how what they're doing helps children to tell good stories.

We will look at the things that seem to make a story get longer and more complex.

Fig. 2. Excerpts from Children's report no.1

- How will children hear about the findings of the study?
- How will you ensure children involved in the study can access, under-stand and, where appropriate, act on the findings?
- What are the key elements of how you plan to give children, community members, and stake-holders access to the study's findings? (p. 112)

In the New Zealand context, I have formed the view that by developing a text (in the form of a researcher story) that looks like and sounds like a familiar early childhood learning story that children are afforded the opportunity to be informed not only about the research and its intentions, but also about what the research is contributing to and finding out about. Conceptualising research work as pedagogical/curriculum work when it is conducted in the formal setting of early childhood education has meant that I have been able to push my own research practice towards a more extensive ethical engagement with children. In the process what I am learning is that it's in the 'doing' that children's participatory rights are actually upheld. And that the right to be informed of the results of the research is just as important a factor in conducting research ethically as ensuring that children's rights to assent and dissent to participate are upheld. While, as discussed earlier, it is not always possible or desirable to take up such practices (Powell et al, 2011), my situation, cognizant of the conflation of my teacher-researcher subjectivities, demands it.

Conclusion

Conceiving of research within early childhood education settings as also pedagogical/curriculum work means it is possible for researchers to draw from a wider range of tools to guide and develop research practices with children. Remaining cognizant of how research experiences occurring with the early childhood curriculum must remain at their most basic level, empowering, holistic, inclusive and situated in the contexts of responsive and reciprocal relationships is an important first step in operationalising ethical research practice within early childhood education in Aotearoa. Surely if we are to uphold children's participation rights in research then we must be concerned to report to children about the research process and the sense making that is coming from it. The challenge is to plan for this from the outset so that the many kinds of reasons offered up by researchers; about why they are prevented from supporting children's rights in research, can be ameliorated and surpassed.

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