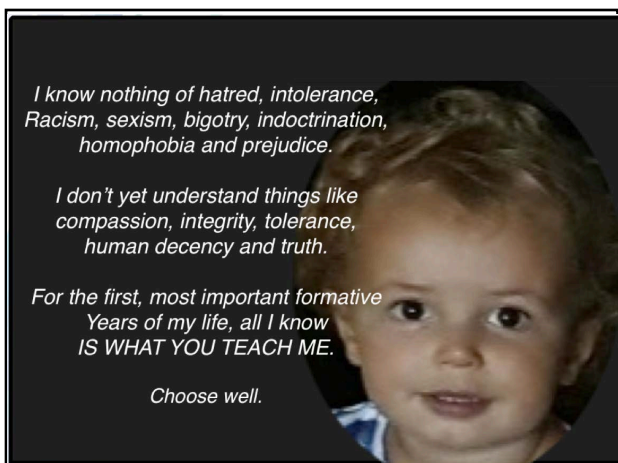


***Learner Identity: The ways we contribute to shaping this through the messages we share.***

*Growing an awareness of the impact of our everyday ways of being and doing.*



**Author: Marianne MacPherson**



*I know nothing of hatred, intolerance, Racism, sexism, bigotry, indoctrination, homophobia and prejudice.*

*I don't yet understand things like compassion, integrity, tolerance, human decency and truth.*

*For the first, most important formative Years of my life, all I know IS WHAT YOU TEACH ME.*

*Choose well.*

This quote was put up on our website a little while ago - I am not sure who wrote it. But it struck a chord with me immediately in the way it shares the importance of our role as early childhood teachers. The impact of our relationships in shaping the values that are important to us, to families, to communities and to society.

As I thought about this another quote came to mind; "We are enculturing whether we recognise it or not, so we may as well take heed and enculture what we want" Tishman, Jay and Perkins (1994). This quote speaks of the importance of intentional inquiry into how we enculture our values in our learning environments and teaching practice. Are we giving thought to this as a teaching team or are we leaving this to chance?

There are many ways we share messages with children and families in our learning environment that gives powerful feedback to children contributing to the building of their learner identity.

Are we aware of the messages and values we are shaping for or to children through our everyday ways of being and doing?

ERO's review 'Priorities for Children's Learning in Early Childhood Services' (2013) looked at how well services identify and respond to their priorities for children's learning. The findings highlighted the importance of self-review - intentional research or inquiry, in determining how well their practices were responsive to their identified priorities or values. It also highlighted that this was an area to be strengthened in particular "... in relation to the responsiveness of their curriculum to the aspirations of parents and whānau, and to the service's priorities and emphasis - the learning that is valued in their service". P.22

To begin making connections between what we value for children's learning and how we align this with the way we are sharing messages with children through our teaching practice we first need to be clear as a team what our shared values are. Ken Robinson (2014) in the video clip, 'Can Creativity be Taught?', shares the importance of identifying what we mean by values. He then goes on to share that he values creativity and an "expansive and rich conception of what teaching is and how it works". And he aligns this vision with teaching then being a process of "... enabling, giving opportunity, giving encouragement, inspiration and mentoring". Our aspirational statement from Te Whāriki shares a rich and expansive vision for children:

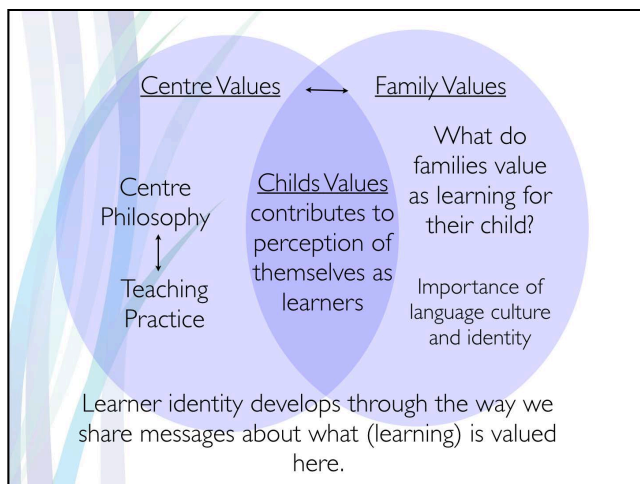
*"The curriculum is founded on the following aspirations for children. To grow up as*

*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.”*

*Te Whāriki p.9*

How do our everyday messages we are sharing in our teaching practice and in our physical learning spaces reflect an expansive and rich learning environment? And how are working to align these with our Philosophy and our families values and aspirations for their children?

Learner identity develops through the way we share messages about what (learning) is valued here. And it is further enhanced when we work alongside families with shared values founded on respectful and responsive relationships.




Let's think about an example of what this might look like in our everyday practice. The example that comes to mind for me, and one that I began to consider in my own practice, was what happens in our centre when it rains. Here is quote from our centre philosophy that shares our some of our values:

*“We recognise that each child is individual and unique and encourage all children to be involved in their own research and investigations involving a wide range of challenging and enriching experiences,*

*making their own learning choices and discoveries, problem solving, observing and exploring at their own pace with the support and guidance of teachers, parents/whanau and their peers.”*

My thinking was ... if I am working to align my practice with our values as expressed in our Philosophy why do we call the children in when it rains? How does this share and shape messages that we value the learning choice of the child who wants to research investigate, explore, observe and discover in the rain?



Let's think about this in practice ...  
“What is allowed, acceptable, expected.  
The culture of your place conditions how people (children and adults) think, feel and behave; and like Guy Claxton says, children will be watching us for the clues and cues of what happens here, what is ‘permissible’ and what teachers give permission for.”

Robinson, K. (2009) The element. How finding your passion changes everything. London: Penguin.

**WHAT HAPPENS IN YOUR CENTRE WHEN IT RAINS?**  
Do teaching practices align with what is valued in your setting?  
What is permissible?

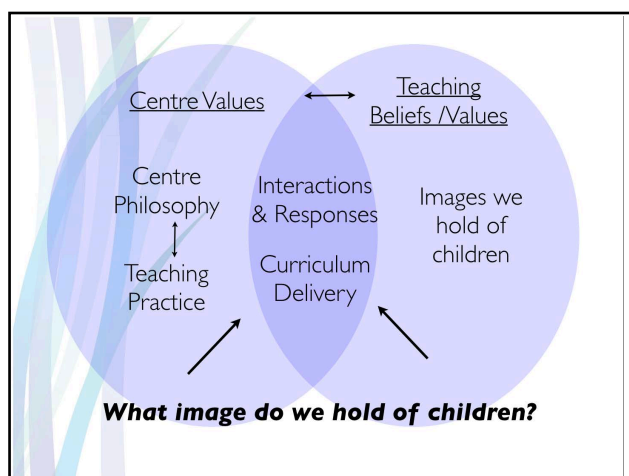
What happens in your centre when it rains? What is permissible?

### Why is learner identity important?

Brain research sheds light on understanding the importance of learner identity and the influence the early years setting has in the foundation for children's learning (and life) success. Neuroscience educator Nathan Mikaere Wallis (2014) shares in a Radio NZ talk the importance of the child's perception of themselves as a learner, how they feel about themselves as learners. He explains “How the child feels about themselves as a learner forms the basis for how they're going to do when they are seven..”. He goes onto say; “ ... if you want to measure whose doing well when they're 32 (who has a degree)

based on the under 7 year old stuff it's to do with your perception of yourself as a learner."

So how does the child who is showing a real curiosity and enthusiasm towards playing in the rain feel when my response to this is "come inside?" And alternately how does the child feel when this is permissible? I think about the wonderful opportunities a 'yes' can give a child to fully engage and explore in learning that is exciting and meaningful growing their learner identity as an active explorer - curious and enthusiastic.



***Our teaching beliefs, values and practice are influenced by the image we hold of children.***

The image of the child and beliefs we hold of the child influences and affects our responses with children and the curriculum we provide. It affects the way our values are enacted in practice. Central to our curriculum, Te Whāriki, is the Māori world view recognising the importance of upholding the mana of the child. This is an image of a child with power and prestige, of a child that is capable and competent. Our role is to support the child's view of them-self as a powerful, capable and competent learner.

*"Ko te whakatipu i te mana o te mokopuna  
te tino taumata hei whaingā mā tātou  
Enhancing the power/status of the child  
is the highest objective for us all"  
TeWhāriki, p32.*

Te Whāriki guides us in a values led curriculum. Our centre philosophy also shares our values and our image we hold of the child and together these documents along with parent and whānau aspirations will guide our teaching practice. Aligning the vision of these documents with our teaching practice through intentional inquiry, self-review, is important in understanding the way our teaching practice is shaping and sharing messages that impact on a child's perception as a powerful learner. This is not something that should be left to chance.

ERO's review 'Priorities for Children's learning in Early Childhood Services' (May 2013) identified effective practice was evident when priorities for children's learning was:

- clearly underpinned by the service's values and beliefs as expressed in their Philosophy
- enacted through curriculum, assessment and self-review practices.

Teachers... "walked their talk through aligning the learning valued in their service with what happened in all aspects of the curriculum." p.12

***What sort of messages shape a strong and positive learner identity?***

Learner identity is founded on upholding the mana of all children. Rose Pere (2013) shares the importance of deep respect in upholding the concept of mana. Of celebrating who children are everyday - celebrating similarities and differences.

*"Taku mana, taku mana,  
Mana motuhake"*

Mana motuhake - self-determination. What a powerful disposition! A powerful identity a child can grow as a learner. Self-determination helps us to persevere when things get hard, to keep trying and not give up. These are the dispositions that will support a 21st century learner. Self-determination is strongest when children (and adults) are persevering at interests and passions - things that matter to them. Self-determination grows in an environment where teachers consider the impact of their practice on the identity of the child as a learner and the importance of

language, culture and identity which sits at the heart of a child's learner identity. This might see teachers talking to families and making connections to children's interests at home, respecting children's uninterrupted time and space to persevere and revisit areas of learning, to assess and plan learning experiences *with* children.

Guy Claxton's (2005) 'Building Learning Power' research shares the impact the language we use can have on learner identity. He shares the conversations and language we use when we identify and are engaged with children's learning shares the value we place on their learning and can build learning power or a strong learner identity. He writes, "The language that a teacher uses in these informal, often quite short, interactions, can convey different messages, some of which will encourage learning-positive ways of thinking, and others, maybe quite inadvertently, will have the reverse effect" Guy Claxton (2005)



**Nathan Mikaere-Wallis**

- Primary attachment - child being anchored in relationship
- Te Whāriki - encouraging divergent thinking, creativity, openness
- No right or wrong answers
- Encouraging problem solving
- Create the thinker before putting the facts in
- Good outcomes are associated with less structure
- Stop testing questions
- Value thinking rather than performing

This aligns with teaching practices that Nathan-Mikaere Wallis (2014) shares enhances learner identity, for example stopping testing questions such as "What colour?" "How many?" and encouraging more divergent thinking, creativity and openness. This means deeper listening to children's ideas and working theories. It might also mean researching the language we are using as a teaching team to encourage and engage positive ways of thinking and sharing.

Encouraging and engaging in positive ways of thinking means creating a 'yes' environment where children have expanded experience's such as playing in the rain. Where there is an openness to respond to children's plans and where learning is not left to chance but is supported by researching teaching practices that align with the Philosophy of the centre backed by up-to-date theory and research. Kei Tua o te Pae (2004) notes;

*"Children develop many goals for their learning, goals that are often hidden from the adult observer. Children frequently appear to "change track" as they work, and on many occasions, their goal is only apparent to adults in retrospect (and not always then). We have to find ways in which children can tell their own stories or be their own assessors without involvement in formal assessment. Not all children can do this, so we have to get to know the children well in order to notice and recognise their particular interests and goals – and we have to be open to changing our minds."*

Assessment plays a key role. Every story we write shares a message about learning that we are noticing is valued in our setting. When this is recognised and connects to learning for the child that is meaningful to them, that identifies their interests, goals and children assessing their own learning it sends a message to the child and to the family that we are in tune with them. It is a celebration of learning and reflects the principles of Te Whāriki in action, Whakamana, Kotahitanga, Whānau Tangata and Ngā Hononga.

The language we use for assessment also highlights and promotes positive ways of thinking, sharing and learning. Gipps (2002) as cited in Kei Tua o te Pae (2004) book 2 writes that the "The language of assessment ...is one of the routes by which the identity of young persons is formed....If identity is conceived as concerned with persuading others and oneself about who one is, and what one is able to do, the judgment of others is crucial"

Reification through Learning Stories highlights the dialogue (child voice, parent voice, teachers voice) and shared understandings that shape and share messages with children and families about learning that is valued. It is a public platform that makes visible the learning dialogue and the identity of the child as a successful learner. Reification through the revisiting of assessment documentation such as Learning Stories is promoted through stories that hold meaning to children and families. This means that paper copies of portfolios need to be available and accessible to children in the centre to revisit freely through their day supported by online accessibility.

I have shared a few examples of teaching practices, of ways of being and doing, that contribute to the shaping of positive learner identity. A smile, a touch, stopping to listen, showing empathy, celebrating ... there are numerous ways we shape and share messages with children and families. It is too important to leave this to chance. Let's take heed and enculture a learning environment that supports and encourages positive learner identity. And let's not forget the most powerful message of all, aroha, as shared by Rose Pere (2015) "... the presence and the breath of our divine source which is love"

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