

"And who will be my child's special teacher?"

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This article looks at multiple perspectives of a key teacher strategy which is currently being implemented in our early learning centre. By sharing this, we hope to add to conversations across centres, and to raise debate about what it means for children and families to join teacher-led early childhood settings.



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Introduction

For a long time now the teachers at Greerton Early Childhood Centre have asked the question: "What does it mean for a child and their whānau/family to walk through the doors of our early childhood centre for the first time, each day and every day?" Over time, as we have listened to families, read widely and come to understand *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) more deeply, our understanding of children, families and whānau has undergone radical review and change.

About five years ago, a series of conversations around what it means for families to give us their most precious children to care for, to teach, to learn alongside, to love, was reignited as a child was transitioning into our toddler area. It felt like a lightning bolt when his mother asked us: "And who will be my child's special teacher there?" Who indeed, because at that point we hadn't thought about having key teachers for older children. This led us directly into the principles of *Te Whāriki* making us reconsider our practice as we began to pursue the process of building relationships with children and their families. As Gopnik (2009) states:

But what children observe most closely, explore most obsessively and imagine most vividly are the people around them. There are no perfect toys; there is no magic formula. Parents and other caregivers teach young children by

paying attention and interacting with them naturally and, most of all, by just allowing them to play. (p. 4)

Lorraine Sands writes:

"Do you know me? Can I trust you? Do you hear me? Is this place fair for me? Do you let me fly?" (Carr, May & Podmore, 1998, p. 25).

These questions, so poignantly phrased from a child's perspective, touch the hearts of teachers because they are questions that really matter. They are imbued in the spirit of *Te Whāriki* they are the essence of the principle of Relationships/Ngā Hononga and we think this is why they connect so powerfully on an emotional level with teachers. They have certainly connected with our team and made us think deeply about ways to embed opportunities and possibilities for learning that provide very real answers centred around the language, culture and identity of each child and each family.

Yet transferring this emotional connection into wise practice means asking further, thoughtful questions around what it means for a child and his or her family/whānau to walk through our doors, for that first time, each day and every day. This is how reflective teachers ensure that the reciprocal, responsive nature of Relationships/Ngā Hononga, demanded by the principles of *Te Whāriki*, move from theoretical philosophy into intuitive,

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relational action. While as educators we listen carefully to models from around the world and choose pragmatically the things that make sense to us, essentially we are centred here in this place, in our own contexts. We have *Te Whāriki*, a curriculum drawn from the cumulative wisdom of our early childhood community, to build learning communities that make a difference for our children, families and teachers.

Te Whāriki is a values driven curriculum designed around supporting children to build working theories about the people, places and things in their world, focused on dispositions that drive children to explore widely and deeply as they build knowledge and skills. We do not expect or want recipes for routinised practice and we think that sharing conversations around how teachers can make these relational processes more authentically connected to each child, grows our understandings of wise practice. There are many and varied ways across Aotearoa New Zealand for children and families to begin the process of building a sense of belonging just as there are many approaches from teachers designed to support this process. We want to hear more about these, so together we raise the profile of how critically important these early beginnings are in creating successful, enduring learning pathways.

The perspectives in this article are a variety of offerings from one such community and the hope is that they will generate further discussions around the rituals involved in these processes. These early relational beginnings have the ability to grow bonds that provide strong foundations for resilient, resourceful learners. Rinaldi (2009) describes children as “the first great researchers” (para. 1) and we think this powerfully describes our view of infants and toddlers.

The key teacher strategy described below, happens inside a learning and teaching community committed to asking and exploring questions because ‘knowing’ is seen as a process of shaping and re-shaping working theories (Gilbert, 2005). A rhythm to the day enables children to stay focused on the things that interest them so that dispositions like persistence, involvement and curiosity are nurtured. Free movement for infants enables them to learn to move, so they can move to learn. The environment is full of intriguing, natural experiences designed to stretch children’s ‘learning muscles’ (Claxton, 2002) and support a ‘growth mindset’ (Dweck, 2006). Risk and challenge are thoughtfully woven into the cultural fabric of a ‘leaderful’ community (Whalley, 2001).

As you read further you will hear from a number of voices. This is how narrative theory gains its validity (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). We rest on the strength that comes from deeply listening to each other, inside our own community and beyond. As the echo grows we have more assurance that a way of working has indeed generated wisdom, is worth pursuing, worth embedding into our teaching and learning cultures.

Karen Fowler writes:

I have to wonder what goes through the minds of teachers and parents in a centre where there are children left for entire days at a time after having briefly met the people they will be staying with. It seems to me to fly in the face of common sense to expect a child to feel a sense of belonging or wellbeing with perfect strangers, simply because they are the staff of an early childhood setting.

I wonder how parents feel as they walk away leaving their child for the first time in a place where things are unfamiliar,

where they have yet to learn the ways of being, where they may not have even remembered anyone’s name. As a parent myself I know I would be worried sick. Will they know when my child is hungry, how will he sleep, who will be there to cuddle him when he wakes? I wonder how the children feel, scooped from the security of all they know and love into a world of strangers and strangeness. No matter how kind and well meaning, this must be at the very least an unsettling experience for children.

At Greerton Early Childhood Centre I think teachers have had a sensitive and supportive transition process as one of our core beliefs for a long time. The foundations of this process are laid whenever we have prospective parents visit the centre. Visitors, even unexpected ones, are always greeted warmly and no matter how busy we are, we make the time to show new families around, introducing them to the teachers, children and whānau/family we meet along the way. We show them all areas of the centre and talk about learning and teaching as we see it unfolding in our setting in this twenty-first century world. During this visit we explain our requirement that all children participate in a transition process of no less than two weeks and parents often seem relieved to hear this. Right from the start our intention is to let them know, through our engagements with them, just how much we value and respect our emerging relationships. We write learning stories for children soon after they start at our centre because we want families to know their children are valued. Written documentation provides a visible way in which to share children’s interests with family and whānau.

We like to think about the unspoken questions children are asking. Do you know me? Can I trust you? Our transition process is one that has developed within a



culture of teachers who seek to research and challenge the way they do things. Through this process we have come to view transition as a hugely important part of supporting children to be robust, lifelong learners. Within our Centre of Innovation research (2006 - 2008) (Greerton et al., 2009) we talked about the importance of transitions in support of children's learning.

Continuity comes from strong, stable relationships and teachers in our environment know children and their families well. It comes from a familiar environment and an understanding of the regular events that happen each day. It is an understanding that adults in this environment will react consistently to children, supporting them when they ask for help, encouraging them to take risks and explore and guiding them gently through the minefield of learning about the people places and things in their world. (Fowler, as cited in Greerton et al., 2009, unpagged)

It is these things we seek to establish as we transition new children into our centre.

When it comes time for a new child to start, a key teacher is chosen and they make a time with the family for a first visit. This is usually quite short, between half an hour and one hour and it is a time for introductions, getting to know the family and the child's place within it. We encourage parents to relax and spend time with their child while we work alongside them engaging in conversation. As each situation is different we are flexible in order to give the sort of support each family is seeking. Some parents, whose child has never been with anyone else, are looking for reassurance that someone will be taking very special care of their most treasured child. For others this may be a second or third child into the centre and it is more a catch up on how things have been going. Continuity is important and where possible siblings will have the same key teacher.

On that first visit a plan is negotiated between the key teacher and the child's family, involving several more visits over a two week period. The minimum requirement for all children is six visits,

however sometimes this process takes longer, for example, if a child is unwell and can't make it for a visit, or they just seem to need a little more time. We are flexible and always put what we think are the best interests of the child ahead of all other considerations. We make these decisions in conversation with families as we begin a partnership process that is moulded around each child.

On the second visit we continue to build a strong relationship, finding out all we can about the child and their family and answering all their questions. When we can see they are feeling comfortable, we encourage families to leave their child with us for a short time. We use our professional judgement to decide how long this should be. For some families we may encourage them to head into the staff room for a coffee for ten minutes or so. Other children seem more at ease and keen to explore, so we suggest to parents that they leave the centre for half an hour. We like to keep this time short and successful. This way children are learning that their parents leave, they enjoy themselves while they are gone and then their mum, dad or perhaps grandma returns. If parents are unable to be involved in this transition process another whānau/family member takes on this role.

Visits three and four lengthen out the time the child is spending away from their whānau/family, up to around two hours. key teachers and families will have already discussed children's rhythms; what they like to eat and when; food sensitivities; whether they feed themselves or need help. Food will have been offered, a snack or lunchbox, while children's families are here with them so that they are building an understanding of the way we do things, while they still have the support of their family close at hand. The focus of these two visits is building a relationship between the key teacher and the transitioning child. The key teacher will stay close by the child, joining in their explorations, introducing them to other children and adults, showing them around the different parts of the centre. One of our 'threads of enquiry' (Greerton, et al., 2009) here is to create a culture of playfulness. This is one of the tools we use to engage children and build strong trusting relationships. The child is learning from these interactions;

I am safe; someone here cares about me and knows me; I am having fun. In our centre we follow a rhythm rather than a set timetable so that for all children, meal, care moments and sleep times are dependent on their own rhythm.

The key teacher's intimate knowledge and attachment to their children is essential. When we can see they are tired and ready we invite them to come to bed. This is a flexible, natural way to work with children and it means that where children are deeply involved in their learning environment they are not unnecessarily interrupted. (Pennell, as cited in Greerton, et al., 2009, unpagged)

Sleep is a process that is carefully thought about and discussed with families and is not approached until the child is showing a level of comfort with the environment and their key teacher. Most children will have a sleep on the fifth visit. Infants will have their family put them to bed for the first time, while their key teacher watches on. Older children generally feel comfortable to go to sleep with their key teacher's support. This is a process that has been carefully discussed between the key teacher and family so that key teachers are able to put children at ease by following their home pattern as closely as possible. We ask parents to be close at hand and call them to collect their child as soon as they have woken. This aims to make the day a successful one with a settled happy child. Our goal is to build trust in the child as they come to understand that their parent will come back to collect them. It is important to note that all teachers are fully aware of the transitioning child and support that child's key teacher to have plenty of time to spend, one on one, building a strong trusting relationship. In this way, with the support of the whole team, they are able to engage deeply in care moments without any hurry.

The last visit seeks to consolidate the relationship and confidence that is built up over the previous visits. Children sleep for a second day, they are able to spend lots of time supported by their key teacher and reassured by being collected by their parent just after waking from their sleep. By now children are feeling quite confident in this environment. With the transition process complete, the child is ready to

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officially start in the centre. We continue to look for ways to support new children and for some we suggest adjustments such as shorter days for the first few weeks. Children have built a trusting relationship with one adult who has also taken the time to get to know their family. The relationship that has been nurtured, endures and children remain in the care of their key teacher who will support them at meal, care and sleep times. We are learning inside a community so gradually, particularly as children become more mobile, they begin to build relationships with other teachers as well. Once the key teacher's relationship with a child is secure, a buddy strategy is woven into this process to ensure there is a companion teacher who intimately knows the child's rhythms for the times when a key teacher is absent.

There is a very real sense of deep respect at the heart of this process which reflects our question asking, question exploring culture, where we view infants and toddlers as people of the world who are born asking questions with plans and ideas that they seek to shape and re-shape. From the basic premise of viewing children as capable and competent we understand children's rights to be introduced into our environment in a way that supports them to feel secure, nurtured and safe. We seek to do things with children and families, rather than to them. In this way we endeavour to follow *Te Whāriki* principles and weave a culture that supports each and every child and their whānau/family to feel part of this community as quickly as possible and in an enduring way.

Reece's Mum writes

The beginning: Reece began the transition process at Greerton Early Childcare Centre in early January. I visited with Reece six or seven times over a period of two weeks. Initially I stayed with Reece while he explored and then left him with his key teacher, Karen Hose, for increasing

periods of time. The transition process was invaluable for my son. He was reluctant and cried at first as he had never been left anywhere before. The teachers accepted Reece's and my fears and allowed us both time to feel confident in the environment. At no time were we rushed into the next step but were encouraged and congratulated at each milestone. Administration was not presented in a confronting way as is so often the case, but explained and discussed, as were any questions I had (and continue to have!).

One week: Reece has been at full time daycare for just over a week now, though he seems as at home as if he lived there! He recognizes all the teachers, especially Karen, and greets them with delight, and is friendly to the other children. He has favourite interests, which we are kept informed of through learning stories in his folder, and is settled into a rhythm. I believe that he is happy there because he is given the safety, time and support to discover it for himself. There is no doubt in my mind that the safe, accepting environment at Greerton made an often fraught transition to daycare a much gentler and ultimately calmer experience. The conversations I observed and had with teachers showed me that this should not be underestimated, as it had obviously come out of experience, research and a genuine concern for the wellbeing of the children.

Nine months: Reece has been at Greerton for nine months now, since I returned to full time work. During this time, Karen's reassuring presence has given him the confidence to attempt many new challenges. These include exploring the centre, and building new relationships with the other children and teachers. I am filled with admiration for the role Reece's key teacher plays in his life. She is a consummate professional, dealing with delicate situations with discretion

and understanding. This is balanced with a profound sensitivity to, and respect for Reece's personality. She does not shy away from discussing areas of concern if they arise, but also retains a sense of playfulness and works hard to put wonder in Reece's everyday life. She seeks to help him discover who he is. The value of the relationship between Karen and Reece cannot be underestimated. It is being built through shared experiences, achievements and conversations but is fundamentally based on respect. He feels safe and supported and I have security in knowing that he is cared for and truly loved, extended and given opportunities to lead.

Karen Hose writes:

The role of a key teacher, for me, is like the keystone in a block wall or arch. When you look at the wall, the keystone is indistinguishable from the rest of the blocks but the trained observer will be able to see it, and if the keystone is removed from the wall it will cause the wall to fall. In this way then, the key teacher is pivotal to the child and family when the child first begins at the centre. The key teacher supports the development of deep respectful relationships as the child becomes accustomed to the new environment. Care routines are very important for the key teacher at this stage as they allow trust and meaningful relationships to form. While the key teacher is pivotal at the beginning, as the family and child feel more comfortable, other teachers in the team begin to form and develop relationships with the child and family. At this point the wall or arch is very strong, as all the blocks are working together to create this amazing structure, and in our case relationship. Now when you view the wall the key teacher or keystone is unrecognizable. She is, however, still there in those moments of stress, ill health, or when important information needs relaying. Her purpose is to strengthen and support the child.



EXPLORATION



Reece follows his interests.....

Reece is certainly feeling comfortable in this new environment and he has been able to indicate this to me, as he freely moves away to follow his interests. I have seen on his visits that Reece was interested in exploring paint but today he quietly moved off and sought this interest out for himself. Painting at the easel was Josh and Reece confidently moved over to join him. Reece keenly watched Josh paint and then began his own research. Today Reece spent a lot of time dipping his hands into the paint and squelching the paint between his fingers. His painted hands would then smack onto the

easel making an interesting sound. At times Reece seemed to be shaking his hands, as if trying to remove the paint. He would also try painting with the brushes and experimented with materials he found on the ground as to whether they would make good brushes, or not. Reece was very focused, and researched here for ten minutes before moving off to the water.

What learning did I think was happening? Deep learning comes from a sense of trust in your environment and the freedom to research what interests you.

Reece, we have shared many special moments together, playfully exploring and developing our relationship. This deepening relationship allows you to feel a sense of ease, where you realize that your questions and concerns will be listened to. It is by developing respectful and reciprocal relationships, and being immersed in an environment rich in provocations, that creates questions for you and stirs your curiosity. This is what encourages you Reece to set goals, where your focus and perseverance can be sustained for long periods as you research your interests.



We learn and teach alongside children who have an innate ability to find out about their world. If we listen to the questions they are asking of us, they take us on this curious journey with them. The key is to know them through engaged involvement over time, listening carefully, sensitively, relationally, so we travel as companions together, stretching all our capacities to learn on the way. Gopnik, Meltzoff & Kuhl (2001) draw our attention to this:

Walk upstairs, open the door gently, and look in the crib. What do you see? Most of us see a picture of innocence and helplessness, a clean slate. But, in fact, what we see in the crib is the greatest mind that has ever existed, the most powerful learning machine in the universe. (p. 1)

These authors state:

Watching children awakens our own continuing capacities for wonder and knowledge. But we are more than just witness to the Romantic genius at work. When we take care of children, we are also helping the human species find the truth and understand the world. (p. 211)

As we read these thoughts we were thrust once again into reconsidering our image of ourselves as teachers and learners and of children as learners and teachers. And so, the reflective thinking continues.

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