

# Slowing down to catch up with infants and toddlers: A reflection on aspects of a questioning culture of practice

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(peer reviewed)



*Adults who are engaged with infants and toddlers all have stories to tell; their 'windows of wonder' open for our very youngest children's learning endeavours. These are the magic moments that keep us involved and excited, caught up in the intensity of seeing learning unfold. So what might this look like in practice?*

## Introduction

How might we harness infants' and toddlers' thirst to find out about this world in ways that support the goals they set themselves? In essence, we implement the aspirations of the early childhood education document *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) through thoughtful programme design and engaged relational responses which connect with children's natural inclination to explore. In this article we will unpack what wise practice can look like when teachers have an image of children as researchers; learners out to explore their world with dispositions like curiosity and purposefulness driving their investigations. With this 'researcher' image comes a reflective re-look at how curriculum and programmes might connect with twenty-first century learning that looks to a future where change is the only constant.

Slowing down might seem contradictory in this new age. Yet in the sense of actively listening to infants' and toddlers' interests and cueing into their abilities, it is a way to be in tune, growing those dispositions that will enable children to respond to the challenges they will inevitably encounter.

## The power of narrative documentation

One way to explore these ideas further is to set them inside a narrative context and so provide a more concrete form to take theory into practice. The narrative context embedded in thoughtfully written Learning Stories (Carr, May & Podmore, 2000) enables us to consider the underlying processes that support wise practice, because an analysis of learning is drawn directly from experience. Learning Stories engage us in a dialogue around learning and prompt us to seek a range of possibilities for action.

So let's meet Fergus. He is an intrepid learning traveller and we have included one of his stories in its entirety to give a glimpse into the way he builds working theories about his world. It is also an opportunity to see learning unfold as children and teachers respond to and provide provocation for learning. Fergus's interest in problem solving and literacy, foregrounded in the learning story titled 'Stuck In The Muck, Like Duck In The Truck' enables meaningful learning and teaching to be made visible. This is the strength of documentation, for it allows us to revisit, rethink and add to learning that is recorded - all of us, teachers, families and children in partnership together. Once written, these reach out over time, giving children an insight into what their teachers thought, in the context of the actual learning experience.

This Learning Story enables Fergus to revisit his experiences and draws his family into a view of what valued learning looks like from a teacher's perspective. When shared, it is a catalyst for other teachers in the team to develop the story-line further as opportunities arise to widen and deepen his ideas.

This narrative assessment generated much discussion in our team because we saw Jo putting a practical face to 'surprise', while resisting the temptation to be the knower, instead choosing to leave the struggle for the learning with the children. This experience excited much participation from children and teachers and was ongoing for weeks. It became part of a Planning Story process and the deep reflection on Jo's part supported us all to think more responsively about the ways we engage with all our children.

# Stuck in the muck, like duck in the truck!

*Oh dear what have we here!* I wondered as I heard sad sounds coming from the sandpit. I went to investigate and saw the truck stuck in the sandpit with Jordan (its driver) up to his knees in water and not at all pleased about it. "The truck's stuck in the muck" I exclaimed. Fergus was first on the scene to lend a hand. Jordan was certainly interested in any offers of help that came his way and once back on firm ground tried hard to get the truck out. Until, something interesting caught Jordan's eye and he decided that he was moving on in search of new endeavours. However Fergus was keen to hang around and find a solution to this problem. After pushing with all his might and pulling through gritted teeth the truck still remained stuck.

**It's a heavy truck and a big problem**



**Fergus starts experimenting to remove the truck from the sandpit**



**He thinks of many different strategies to solve the problem**



**Fergus works with his friends to solve the problem**



**He checks out the strategies used by goat in Jez Alborough's book**

Fergus pondered this for a moment, looking a little unsure of what to do next. In the meantime his friends Jack, Zayden, Livia and Max came to see what was happening. After another energetic burst of pulling, accompanied by his friends pushing, we stood for a moment discussing what our next course of action could be. I remembered the story book 'Duck in the Truck' and mentioned this to the children. "What did Duck do to get his truck out of the muck?" I asked. The search for the book was on with Fergus leading the charge. I waited outside and with Lorraine's help the book was found and was brought outside for further investigation. We sat down and began to examine the story. Had we tried the strategies that duck and his friends had tried? We looked at the pages and saw how frog and duck had pushed together. Zayden and Fergus decided to explore this some more. But after a lot of heaving and grunting the truck was still stuck!

Hmmm, it was back to the drawing board! We read about how goat arrived with a rope to tow the truck from the muck. Ah ha, another strategy to try. We searched through the shed and a rope was found.

Zayden and Fergus looked closely at the rope and began to problem solve where to attach the rope to the truck in order to pull the truck out. They discussed this for a few minutes and tried a range of different ways. If one way was not secure they began again selecting a different place to anchor the rope or they altered the way that they secured it. Such team work is so exciting to see, particularly the way that they co-operated and expressed their ideas without either dominating the experience. Many children became involved in the experience, at many times offering their ideas or brute force as they pulled the truck or lifted the wheels to aid in the truck's recovery. With Fergus on one end of the rope, Max in the middle, Zayden and Jack pushing from the sandpit the truck finally began to move. Accompanied by other children, I waited with baited breath: "was the truck coming out of the muck!" The truck was free! There were shouts of support from those all around.

As I began the congratulations, to my surprise, Fergus and Jack carefully pushed the truck back into the muck! And this time it looked even more STUCK. Well I guess its back to the drawing board! Let the adventures begin!

Fergus brings a rope from home to continue his experiments with his friends



The problem solving process generates much thoughtful experimentation



Co-operation is a continuing strategy

The investigations last weeks



In response to this learning...

Who would have thought that Jordan's road incident today would lead to this action research. We celebrate ambiguity here at Greerton because we never know just where the children's interests might lead us and we are always excited about the possibilities. When I think about the learning that took place I can't help but admire these research-based learners, comfortable with challenge and confident to take risks, dedicated to exploring the possibilities and achieving their end result. They worked through many complex theories throughout the hours of excavation shaping and re-shaping their ideas as they explored different mathematical concepts such as depth, weight, and distance. Real work and hard work always draws a crowd around here and those who chose to get involved were drawn into the experience. At times this involved role play (as the characters in the story) and the shifting of roles from leader to apprentice to observers or to a supporter with great ideas and encouragement.

Fergus is displaying these dispositions as he sets about his day, making choices based on his interests about how and what he will learn. It was interesting to hear from Fergus's mum Sandra that this interest had continued at home and Fergus arrived at the centre with a rope from dad's garage, full of enthusiasm about trying dad's rope on the truck. Fergus had obviously given this experience a lot of consideration overnight and his journey was far from over, it was just the beginning.

Where to from here?

I wonder what Fergus would think about a pulley system?

Written by Jo Weston

*“No amount of isolated skill development can ever compensate for a sheer love of story, developed from infancy through emotionally charged relationships between adults and children, wrapped up together in each other’s arms, reading and telling stories.”*

### **Dispositional learning**

Jo’s story highlights Fergus the ‘problem solver and the story teller’ and as we follow his struggles we get to understand more about his learning strategies. He knows that books take you places and although some stories like the Duck in the Truck ones are written down and can be revisited, so too can the stories in your head, those ones drawn from your own experiences. This is an empowering position for a learner. Furthermore, he has realised that these can be shared.

The process of learning to love to learn is becoming embedded as Fergus’s active engagement with literacy is responded to, in the moment, when it is offered, not waiting for a mat time or delayed by a timetabled morning tea. There is flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) as both Fergus, his family and teachers focus so intently on the task at hand. He is already a reader in a dispositional sense because his love of reading is driving his engagement. As he pursues his passion, he will perfect the skills he needs to become an independent reader.

No amount of isolated skill development can ever compensate for a sheer love of story. This is developed from infancy through emotionally charged relationships between adults and children, wrapped up together in each other’s arms, reading and telling stories. No amount of teacher directed experience can build the kind of knowledge that comes from deeply self-motivated investigation over a long period of time, with other learners, engaged in pursuing problems set by “learners-in-action” (Carr, 1998, p. 13).

### **Continuity**

How did Fergus get to this powerful learning place? It is certainly not by accident. Unpacking the culture that enabled this learning to occur is one way to take ideas from one context and thoughtfully review how they might work

elsewhere. Understanding how Fergus got to this learning position and where this might take him in the future is a journey into continuity. When teachers are sensitive to the questions children ask – “Do you know me, do you let me fly?” (Carr, 2000, p. 2) they tune their setting to actively listen to each child’s rhythms, rather than expecting the child to fit into a preset routine programme.

The Māori Assessment Strategy (Walker, 2009), chose the traditional Te Ao Māori baby wrap as a metaphor for building an identity of Māori children as strong, confident learners. We can learn much from this view as we seek to understand the ways a learning setting might truly support individual children to explore their world. The wrap was woven, made from the harakeke plant to provide strength and filled with albatross feathers for warmth. This wrap (te whatu pokeka) was pliable and so, as the baby grew it took on the shape of the child, rather than the child fitting into a predetermined shape. We love this image as it relates to the way wise-learning cultures cue into the child’s growing understanding of the world as they build in the time, the space and the relational support from adults and children to enable deep, slow learning to occur. Malaguzzi (1993) gave a powerful message for teachers to stand aside and leave room for learning, and to observe carefully what children do: adding that teaching will then be different from before.

Probably the most defining moment for us as a team, causing us to re-think what kind of learning setting we were building, was reading Diti Hill’s (2001) view that children do not live their lives in curriculum fragments. It is adults who fragment children’s learning into sound bites. Children are naturally programmed for curious investigation that will last for days, weeks, months if they experience a setting that supports this curiosity to

flourish. Professor Ken Robinson (2006) in a video TED talk entitled ‘Do schools kill creativity?’ says: “all children have tremendous talent and we squander it pretty ruthlessly”. Guy Claxton (2007) takes us further into the kind of thinking behind the notion of freeing up programmes to enable deep investigations to occur when he says:

Good learners do not always learn fast! The ability to hang out in the fog, to tolerate confusion, to dare to wait in a state of incomprehension while the glimmering of an idea takes its time to form is another aspect of resilience and thus of learning power. (p.16)

### **A listening pedagogy**

Yet, there is still much emphasis on structured programmes, in the belief that these help children to concentrate, stay on task, follow directions, work in a group and get prepared for school. In early learning settings these rosters and routines can dictate how learning unfolds. There is much research that shows this ‘schoolification’ approach (Moss, 2008, p. 225) has a negative effect on growing dispositional learners who ‘want to learn’ and are in the process of building an identity of themselves as ‘life long learners’.

The Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander et al., 2009) considered the most comprehensive enquiry into English primary education for 40 years, shows that after ten years of compulsory literacy hours in early years settings skill levels in literacy were marginally improved, yet children’s love of literacy was radically reduced. Children no longer wanted to engage with literacy! Many unintended learning outcomes result from confining children in teacher led group times and teachers can fall into a default role as ‘policeman’ maintaining control or equally as controversial ‘entertainer’ keeping the pace ‘rollicking along’ to avoid the need for policing support.

*“The way teachers manage transition moments gives us real insight into the kinds of learning settings teachers value. Transitions into centres ought to be gentle, timed to support a child’s movement from a home environment into the larger social setting encountered in early childhood centres.”*

Consider this in relation to the kinds of learning experienced by Fergus and his friends. The intensity of learning for the children investigating alongside Fergus was palpable. These children were learning about literacy, about involvement, about leadership, about exploration, all shaped by ‘real events and problems’. Russell Bishop and Ted Glynn (1999) have an interesting view on the way teachers’ intentions and children’s intentions might play out in the kind of responsive dialogue experienced by Fergus and his friends: “Narrative pedagogy ... the approach requires the teacher to be attentive to the variety of explanations learners will create, be silent, wait and not swamp conversation.” (p. 189).

There is a great deal to consider as we set up environments that support children to have agency. Fergus was in charge of his own learning and more and more now he is drawing other children into his experiments as this passionate learner excites others to become involved. So how did he get there? He has the time, the space and teacher/family support to explore his interests fully without being whisked away by a rostered toilet schedule, group hand washing for timetabled meals, excessive numbers of mat times or the myriad of other teacher directed experiences that adults rate as more important than children’s thinking around the plans they set themselves.

Fergus is in a learning community that values ‘work in progress’ where knowledge is described as something that we do rather than something that we possess. Jane Gilbert (2005) explains:

The shift in emphasis from knowledge to knowing is important. Knowing is a process, whereas knowledge is a thing. Knowing is a verb. It involves doing things and acting on things. It involves building relationships and connections. Unlike knowledge, it is not something that can be taken in

and mastered. It has no end-point, but is always on the way to something, always in process. (p. 77)

This is the kind of knowing that we see Fergus doing, and it is also the kind of knowing that the teachers had been implicitly doing as they worked with these children. If we want to ensure that children are growing those dispositions so essential for success, in this modern world full of exponential change, we must listen to their ideas. This will ensure that the principles of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) actively drive our programmes and every relational moment will be linked into these principles.

#### **Transitions and the importance of key teachers**

The way teachers manage transition moments gives us real insight into the kinds of learning settings teachers value. Transitions into centres ought to be gentle, timed to support a child’s movement from a home environment into the larger social setting encountered in early childhood centres. They should be paced so that a child gets to know a key teacher first and that teacher gets to know this child and his family, and together build a sense of ‘Belonging’ for everyone involved.

When Fergus as a very young baby was enrolled at his centre there was a clear expectation that he would visit for at least a two week period. This gave everyone involved the opportunities to start building that sense of belonging so vitally necessary for children to be able to set their sights on practising the things that interest them. They then begin to stretch themselves towards the edges of learning where challenge, risk and the possibility of making mistakes happens.

Learning is emotional and intrinsically connected to relationships and we think having a sense of security invites inves-

tigation. So, as Fergus’s comfort levels increased, his mother left for short periods, always remaining in contact, so his key teacher who was actively listening to his interests was able to respond quickly. A coffee in the staff room extended to a quick trip to the supermarket with the cell phone at the ready. In this way, over several weeks all the partners in his transition process built trust, based on experience. His key teacher had acquired much information through the natural conversations that arose from watching how his mother helped him to settle to sleep and engage in play. His family also had a very good idea of the way relationships play out in the centre and how teachers and the environment supported him to engage with the people, places and things that invite children to stretch their learning powers (Claxton, 2002).

From this secure base the key teacher shared her growing knowledge about Fergus with the other teachers in the team. Rather than expecting this child and family to immediately be involved in the myriad of centre relationships, they expected the wider connections to build gently, over time. Centre policies often direct a parent to leave their child at a centre on the day they start. How is it possible to link these kinds of policies into empowerment, holistic development, relationships, family and community (Ministry of Education, 1996) when this practice is the antithesis of these principles.

One of the defining characteristics of a professional teacher is advocacy for children’s rights, yet teachers are often expected to implement management policy that has nothing to do with children’s rights but much to do with budgets and minimum standards. Transition policies that place a child alone in a group setting with no one they know and no one with key responsibility for them, subvert their rights enshrined in the United



Nations Charter (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) and more specifically in the principles of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). Advocacy for children's rights in these instances is a call for teachers to be courageous and to articulate to management what the principles of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) contextually look like in practice.

### A rhythm to the day

Of course transitions are not all as large as settling into a centre culture. There are many smaller ones throughout the day and this is why tuning into children's rhythms is so crucial. As a young infant, Fergus was learning to move then moving to learn, in self directed ways, as his body naturally built the strength through unfettered practice, to take him to the things that interested him. He has continued to do this, growing his social abilities along the way.

The 'Duck in the Truck' story is a cumulative story built on his competence and capability and clearly shows he is an engaging leader, a committed listener and a team player. We don't have to practice becoming something else by sitting on a mat or lining up for morning tea so that when we are school children we know how to do these things. Children are 'beings' in the now and Margaret Carr reminds us they are polymodal (Carr & Peters, 2006). They are experts at knowing what the rules are at home, at grandma's house, in the supermarket, at childcare.

Fergus spent a phenomenal amount of time on his research into the myriad of ways a truck could be immersed in and extracted from sand and water. He needed this time; he relished the challenge; he used creative strategies to help him; he drew others into a social exploration that assisted him in growing his identity as a learner in active mode, curious to shape and re-shape his theories. If we want children to be interested and involved, to persist with difficulty, communicate for a purpose, and take responsibility (Carr et al, 2000), then being involved in purposeful, communicative, interesting and complex problems is a way to develop these dispositions, particularly when children set those goals themselves.

### Children as researchers

In 2006-2008, the Greerton team of teachers, together with the academic research associates Professor Margaret Carr and Wendy Lee (2006-2008), explored our research questions in the Centre of Innovation project (see Ministry of Education, 2010): "How does a 'question-asking' and a 'question-exploring' culture support children to develop working theories to shape and re-shape knowledge for a purpose?"

It became more and more apparent that learning stands or falls on the strength of the relational connections inside the group learning setting. Throughout, we kept our sub-research questions: 'What questions are infants and toddlers asking' and 'how might we get better at responding to these' in the front frame. We wanted to really get to grips with how we might organise ourselves better to support a vibrant learning community that listened to children's and adults' ideas and yet shared the power to make the decisions. We wanted too, to dispel any notion that early learning settings are silos separate from the world out there. Most importantly we wanted to make learning as authentic as possible, with meaningful experiences driving children and teachers' thirst to shape and re-shape knowledge for a purpose (Gilbert, 2005).

A thread of inquiry that emerged from the Greerton teachers' Centre of Innovation research findings centred on 'Growing intelligence' through an image of infants and toddlers as researchers, curious to find out about the people, places and things in their world. This image shifts teachers into a credit space that celebrates what children can do. It is from this perspective that we move from principle to practice and let go of the routines that so often narrow what happens in the day.

As we tap into children's natural rhythms and think about the dispositions driving their learning, we are primed to engage in meaningful ways. When this occurs inside collaborative communities, where adults and children are able to explore surprising, convoluted pathways, we begin to notice children's huge capacity to persist with difficulty, keep practicing, and then perfect their skills through their efforts.

We even begin to like this kind of determination because it means that children set their sights on edgy, difficult goals and unperturbed work their way through. It means our learning day is filled with surprise. In this 21st century world, these are the kinds of dispositions that take us places, because despite the risks, learners keep going.

Fergus learns like this, for he takes risk seriously and he does not shy away from hard work. When things get difficult he puts the hours in to solve problems. He uses innovative, creative solutions and he knows that working co-operatively in teams is a way to achieve his goals. He persists with difficulty, yet he is prepared to trial new strategies when things don't work out. Throughout this research he is constantly growing the dispositions that drive his learning.

### Growing intelligence

When children see making mistakes as a way to learn, rather than as a reflection of their competence (Dweck, 2006), they strive to dig deeper, explore further and keep practicing. Yet, for this to be an embedded feature of a learning culture, teachers and children must know how the place works.

For many teachers, the idea of dismantling rosters and routines is a provocative notion, one that raises questions around our image of teachers and the ways we choose to engage with learning and teaching inside group settings. These notions vary widely, as anyone can see from visiting a range of early childhood centres. It can be painfully disturbing to consider changing ingrained ways of working, yet doing what we've always done is at best a cliched response that leaves the challenges of exponential change unanswered.

If we expect complex learning, there must be relationships, time, resources and energy devoted to ensure this happens. Fergus was the passionate leader driving his investigations. He brought ropes from home and more importantly, his knowledge from home about vehicles. His father drives super saloon cars and Fergus's huge understanding and interest in all things mechanical was evident in his interactive research investigations.

The characters in the Duck books became personas for the children, each one playing out their naturally assigned role. Further provocations were offered by teachers as we made a new (much loved) version of the book featuring Fergus and his friends. A harbour buoy cut in half with a heavy rope protruding from the front became 'goat's boat' and further investigations ensued as children created their own storylines. The kinds of provocations that teachers offer are tempered with a view of enabling the child to own the struggle for learning so that hard work and effort are supported. Jo's connecting link to Jez Alborough's book was just the provocation needed to set children on a journey of discovery. What might have happened if Jo had helpfully lifted the truck out? We suspect nothing more resonant than a helpful rescuing act from an adult, important sometimes yes, but only an intuitive, sensitive teacher making planning decisions in the moment will know the difference.

It is the teacher's image of and relationship with the child that drives how the teacher/learner engagement unfolds. Carol Dweck's (2006) research on mindsets gives us strong evidence around the feedback messages we ought to give to children. Learning goals that children set themselves require practice and when making mistakes is seen as a way to learn, investigations sit in meaningful contexts.

An excerpt from the Greerton team's final research paper (in preparation) opens discussion around teacher identity in relation to provocation for learning.

The teacher's role then is a finely balanced role, an intuitive role that sees each teacher making decisions 'in the moment' poised as provocateur, as listener, as learner as teacher, ever vigilant for opportunities to widen and deepen knowledge, on that knife edge that draws children into mystery, as a crew member, not a passenger (Claxton, 2002). It is a highly skilled position and one that can enhance and constrain learning in the blink of an eye. Herein lies the 'flow' that Csikszentmihalyi (1997) has so aptly described. Challenge and skill in sync, where risk is a friend as learners step

into the unpredictable, uncertain and surprising realm that is life, and thinking, find a way through. In our early learning settings this journey is a social journey where each learner's capacity for competence is in active mode not supported in a 'needy sense' but activated by the group's thirst to engage with surprise and uncertainty and develop working theories about the world we live in. [Draft report]

As we all consider the learning culture we are part of in our own settings, the image we hold of children as learners and teachers and the image we have of ourselves as teachers and learners, will drive the way our learning settings unfold. We have a powerful influence on children's lives and learning. *Te Whāriki's* (Ministry of Education, 1996) principles are a gift to us, a taonga most precious and if we set our sights on unpacking those principles into our everyday practice, rather than starting from practice and trying to manufacture principle, we will all be the very best we can be and wise practice will be assured.

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