

Working with Junior: An emerging teacher's journey

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An inclusive environment requires teachers to respond to children's strengths, interests, and needs and to remove any social, physical, or conceptual barriers serving to exclude children from full participation. A sociocultural view of development, supported by current research in neurobiology and language development, emphasises the importance of reciprocal and responsive relationships, rich in verbal communication. For children still developing language knowledge and skills, the time required to accompany and scaffold their learning journey within early childhood settings can present a social barrier. This article outlines the shared learning journey of a young boy and an emerging teacher (myself) in such an environment, highlighting the importance of practising ako within a credit-based, child-led curriculum approach.

Please note, this article has been written and published with the permission of Junior, Junior's parents, and his early child care setting. Junior is an imagined name, chosen by Junior to be used in the article, to protect his right to privacy.

Aotearoa New Zealand's *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) is a credit-based curriculum; requiring teachers to weave meaningful and inclusive learning experiences that respond to children's strengths, interests, and abilities. Credit-based assessment approaches focus on celebrating children's skills and knowledge; building upon their interests to facilitate further learning and development (Niles, 2015). In contrast, deficit models highlight what children cannot yet do and focus on teaching skills and knowledge found lacking (Niles, 2015). In terms of inclusive practice, *Te Whāriki* states teachers must provide additional support as required, to ensure all children experience equitable opportunities to grow as capable and competent learners (MoE, 2017). Additionally, it stresses the importance of creating inclusive environments by continually considering the social, physical, and conceptual barriers serving to exclude children from full participation, and seeking to redress them (MoE, 2017). In this regard, it can be argued, the curriculum subscribes to a social relational understanding of disability, that stresses disadvantages and limitations experienced by individuals with diverse needs, often derived from restrictions imposed by rigid environmental and social factors (Thomas, as cited in Mackenzie, Cologon, & Fenech, 2016).

This article outlines the shared learning journey of a young boy and an emerging teacher (myself) within an early childhood setting. In responding to social barriers often experienced by children developing their verbal language proficiency, I reflect on the importance of teachers taking the time to build reciprocal and responsive relationships with children, to support and celebrate their learning inquiries. Repeating cycles of observation, planning and learning narratives were utilised to build opportunities for language development through shared learning, based upon the child's interests and strengths. Accompanying him in his play and inquiries, and practising ako to learn alongside, with, and about him, was fundamental for implementing inclusive teaching approaches supported by *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017). The Māori concept of ako recognises "every teacher is a learner and every learner is a teacher" (Walker, 2008, p.7).

Junior (aged four years and eight months) is a boy from a Filipino family, with one older sister, and three close cousins. Adults in the family speak Tagalog at home, though Junior's mother comments that the older children largely speak English with some Tagalog inserted. Junior is learning the two languages simultaneously. In my first few days at Junior's centre, I noticed him several times taking an interest in my presence and smiling shyly at me from the fringes of a group of children with whom I was engaged with. He hesitated to move in closer. Each time, I offered a friendly smile

and initiated conversation with Junior, to which he replied in minimal English, before racing away. Eventually, Junior approached me while I was exploring an insect and spider book with another boy. He sat with us and joined in our conversation which had, at that point, segued into a discussion of the boy's Spiderman t-shirt and related super-spider-like abilities. Junior contributed his own knowledge of Transformers to this conversation and revealed a strong interest in exploring the book further. He remained with me long after the other child had departed; absorbed in our shared learning.

Throughout our conversation, I consistently needed Junior to repeat himself for me, so I could understand his words and sentences. It took many repetitions and unsuccessful guesses before I got words right, some of which, I never did. Always, Junior was patient and persistent, and stayed engaged in this process, showing a strong desire for me to understand his communication. I reflected his sentences back to him as we conversed; allowing for his approval while also demonstrating clear pronunciation and sentence structure in a casual, indirect manner. Junior, while correcting or agreeing with me, practised and extended his verbal communication, and we increasingly cemented our knowledge and vocabulary together as we went. My commitment to taking the time needed to understand Junior's communication was rewarded with the privilege of accompanying Junior in his explorations and inquiries; sharing his joy and love for learning. I was struck by Junior's intelligence; his ability to take abstract information, understand it, and rapidly apply it to extrapolate and construct his own working theories. He questioned me extensively to test and assimilate his understandings.

Junior... stayed looking at the insect book with me for a very long time yesterday afternoon... [He] asked lots of questions, pointing to pictures and asking, "What's this" and... sharing his knowledge, pointing out eyes and counting legs. If I couldn't understand Junior, he was very patient with me and repeated himself until I understood... Junior was interested in a mosquito drinking from a blown-up image of skin. I explained he was drinking blood and pointed to the blood vessel, showing the vein under my skin. After explaining this several times for the children, Junior pointed to the mosquito's red abdomen and noted, "Blood! Eating blood!"

"That's right, he's eating the blood!" I reflected.

"Drinking!" Junior clarified.

"Yes, drinking the blood," I said.

"Yes." Junior agreed.

I was impressed by Junior's ability to understand the concept I was explaining and make the connection to the red abdomen of the insect and that the insect was drinking blood. This showed a strong visual understanding and ability to connect new knowledge to other knowledge he [already] had, to come up with a theory. A new understanding!

When Junior arrived the next day, he saw I had the insect book and came to discuss it again. He pointed out that a big blown up image of an insect head, was its "face" and he counted eyes and legs and told me about the "butterfly" and what insects were "eating". Again, Junior had loads of questions and was patient with the time I took to understand his words....

Excerpt from emerging interest observation form

Vygotsky's sociocultural view of development stresses the importance of shared communication within social relationships for children's learning. He believed that language is an essential precursor for cognitive development (as cited in Pound, 2014). Neurological research supports this view, highlighting the pivotal role responsive and reciprocal relationships play in cognitive, social, emotional, and verbal development (Conkbayir, 2017). Current discourse on inclusive early childhood pedagogy for bilingual children likewise emphasises the value of teachers engaging children in meaningful interactions within language-rich environments (Clarke, 2009). The time required for teachers to

accompany children, in deepening their learning engagement, often presents a significant social barrier in busy and demanding early childhood settings. This is particularly true for children needing additional language support.

Committing the time required to build a shared understanding of each other's verbal and non-verbal communication was an essential foundation for my ensuing relationship with Junior. Such communication utilised ako and scaffolding to follow his learning interests; seeking to deepen his learning inquiries and develop his verbal communication, while at the same time aiming to enhance positive self-identity, belonging and wellbeing. Ako extends beyond shared content-knowledge construction to encompass the social and cultural learning occurring through relationships with one another. Children and adults alike learn about themselves, as well as others, through relationships. Being open and attentive to what children are teaching us about themselves is essential if we are to follow children's lead in their learning. Maintaining a mindful awareness of everything we can learn from each child, about who that child is, what they enjoy, and how they like to learn, will facilitate us to consider what each child needs from the teacher-student relationship.

Junior appeared to have a strong interest in insects and their anatomy, initiating conversations to revisit our previous learning. Alternatively, I recognised he could simply have been enjoying the shared learning and discussion with me, revisiting specific verbal exchanges for each of the insect pictures. I looked to Junior to further reveal his focus; observing his play closely over the following weeks and extending casual invitations to engage in various insect-related activities, which notably, he declined. Meanwhile, Junior actively pursued his own explorations; extending a series of invitations to me to converse and accompany him in a variety of play and inquiry-based activities, ranging from cutting fruit in the home corner, reading a variety of books, throwing balls, climbing the playground, or simply joining me in activities I was enjoying with other children.

Throughout our interactions, he continued to build his knowledge and sense of who I was, and who he could be in relation to me, as well as his understanding of what rules, boundaries, and potentials could be found within our relationship. Rich conversation, discussing and sharing Junior's play activities and experiences, was a significant feature of our growing relationship. Through this focus, I recognised Junior was actively developing his confidence and competence for verbal communication, as well as strategies for learning alongside others.

Junior is learning holistically by sharing discussion and exploration with me. He is emotionally nurtured and enjoying building a positive affirming relationship that values his contributions and is sensitive to his gentle spirit. Enjoying cuddles, as well as demonstrating his ideas with his body through jumping and pointing etc. includes his physical senses and development. The learning is embedded in social interaction and communication and the knowledge being built demonstrates high cognitive abilities and learning dispositions for being involved, taking an interest, persisting with difficulty, expressing a point of view, reciprocity, and creativity.... By giving Junior the time, patience, and attention he needs to communicate his questions and ideas... Junior can engage in a deep and meaningful construction of knowledge and development of working theories, whilst developing the physical and cognitive skills required for verbal communication.

Excerpt from teacher planning notes

The curriculum *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) requires teachers to enact a strength-based view of children by facilitating experiences that follow their interests, making their learning visible through sociocultural assessment practices, and celebrating their contributions. Responding to Junior's conversational interests by continually engaging in meaningful dialogue with him based on his own focus, proved hugely beneficial for his language and identity development. By recognising and responding with reciprocal delight and enthusiasm to Junior's relational and interest-based explorations, Junior experienced himself as a valued contributor to another's learning and wellbeing.

Junior loves to learn

Kia Ora Junior,

I love reading books with you, and together we have explored insects, spiders, and dinosaurs. You know a lot about these animals and you have shown me the eyes, spines, wings, and legs. You showed me the T. Rex in the dinosaur book and you gave me a big scary T. Rex growl that made me feel like you really would eat me up.

I love learning with you, Junior. You ask great questions and always want to learn more. You are patient when I don't understand and tell me again until I do. You listen to my answers and understand how insect and dinosaur bodies work.

For instance, when we were talking about the mosquito and I showed you the veins in my arm where my blood is, you could see it was the same as the vein in the picture that the mosquito was sucking from. You showed me how the mosquito's body was red and full of blood. You told me the mosquito had eaten that blood and then corrected yourself. "Drinking!", you said.

The next week when we looked at the dinosaur who was bleeding from the other dinosaur's sharp teeth, you showed me the veins in your arm as you explained its blood was on the ground.

That is excellent learning about blood and bodies Junior. And insects and dinosaurs. Your inquiring mind will keep you learning all the things you want to understand.

Thank you for sharing your knowledge with me.

Excerpt from learning story assessment document

Narrative stories for Junior's portfolio celebrated Junior's dispositions for taking an interest and learning alongside others, emphasised his strengths and accomplishments, and drew attention to the value of collaborative learning for Junior's language development. Sharing these stories with Junior provided further opportunity for meaningful exploration and conversation as together we remembered, reconstructed, and assigned personal meaning to our experiences.

One such story was based on his growing love of playing running games. These games included a strong social element that appeared to nurture Junior's developing self-identity with positive interactions and a sense of achievement.

Junior clearly both loves and excels at running. When Junior runs, his face is full of joy, and his body is powerful and fast. Running games with his friends is an area where Junior contributes personal excellence and achievement, though Junior is not 'racing to win' or thinking of himself in comparison to the other children. The games do not have a winner or a finishing line. Achievement is measured, if at all, by passing other children as they run around. It is realised, assessed, and embodied by Junior himself, through his sense of spiritual flow, wellbeing and mastery; feeling the thrill of speed; feeling strong and powerful.

Excerpt from teacher planning notes

Verbally describing my observations and celebrating Junior's prowess at running with him, both during and after his play, facilitated Junior's continuing communication and language development as he enjoyed explaining and retelling his games.

Junior loves to run

Kia Ora Junior,

I have noticed that you are an excellent runner... My goodness, how fast you speed past when you are playing chase with your friends, or tag with your teachers. Your long legs fly over the ground as you whizz and zoom and leap over obstacles in your path.

We had a special visitor one day. It was [an 8-year-old boy who] loves to run and chase as well. Junior, you really enjoyed [his] visit. When [he] raced around the playground, you were right behind him. No matter how fast he ran, you ran just as fast; leaping equipment, swerving around corners, and climbing up the slide. The other children trailed far behind.

Later, another schoolboy visited, and you watched the two older boys playing soccer. They kicked the ball very hard and fast and you kicked the ball as well when you were fast enough to get it. You really enjoyed learning by watching and copying the games the older boys played. Then, as soon as the other boy left, [the 8-year-old boy] and you began your game of chase again.

Links to Te Whāriki

Holistic Development/Kotahitanga: ... Junior's play is full of meaningful social, emotional, and spiritual development whilst being physically demanding and cognitively stimulating. Every aspect of Junior is passionately engaged when he plays chase with his friends and his learning crosses all the strands of belonging, wellbeing, contribution, communication, and exploration. Junior is growing in self-confidence and has a strong sense of his own identity as somebody who is fun, capable, competent, and strong.

Where to next?

Junior, you are contributing such fun to all your... friends. We love to see you challenging yourself and your friends to go even faster and grow even stronger. We looked at books with pictures of different sports and children doing healthy exercise, and you have shared stories about your swimming classes with your swimming teacher. I would love to see photos of you swimming Junior and wonder if you'd enjoy making a movie of your running and climbing and jumping....

Learning story assessment document

In addition to running with his friends, Junior talked daily about his swimming class and most especially his swimming class teacher. Swimming classes were something new and exciting in his life and as with running, incorporated social learning, positive relationships, and sense of achievement. Junior's mother shared Junior was progressing with speed through the skills being taught there and enjoying his relationship with his new swimming teacher. Wondering if Junior had an overall interest in physical play and sports, I again looked to Junior; continuing to observe his play, invite his engagement in various sports-related games, and selecting books around these themes. Again, Junior revealed his focus by choosing to repeatedly explore and revisit a photographic book of puppies swimming. This had underwater photos and provoked great conversations in which Junior pointed out the bubbles and enacted stories of going down to the bottom, "down bottom", and jumping in, "jump". Junior's mother provided photos of Junior at his swimming class for him to discuss and share further with his friends and teachers. Talking about things and experiences that had personal meaning and interest for him emerged again as one of Junior's strong desires.

In conclusion, the important role of social interaction and communication for neural, cognitive, and language development is well known and documented (Clarke, 2009; Conkbayir, 2017). A sociocultural view of learning and development stresses the role of relationships and shared construction of knowledge through language and scaffolding (Pound, 2014). The curriculum *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), therefore, stresses that teachers ought to provide a language-rich environment, teach through authentic and meaningful social relationships, and follow the strengths, interests and contributions of all children.

For children developing their verbal language abilities, building responsive relationships requires a time commitment from teachers which can pose a significant social barrier in busy environments. This narrative has illustrated how taking the time to recognise and respond to one child's conversational interests, engage in rich and meaningful dialogue, invite deep social interaction, and pursue shared construction of knowledge, provided powerful possibilities for deepening his inquiries, language and learner-identity development. Teaching practices, reflecting the Māori concept of *ako*, in which teachers remain mindful of everything they can learn from children about who they are, and what they are seeking to know, are essential, in my view, for inclusive pedagogical practice.

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