

Children's rights, voices, and learning: Conversations about inclusion

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In this issue we bring together a rich collection of practitioner reflections, research informed perspectives, professional conversations and critical reviews that collectively advance our sector's ongoing commitment to inclusion, equity and social justice in early childhood education. The articles highlight not only the complexity of teaching in diverse settings but also the deep ethical responsibility kaiako hold as advocates for the rights, belonging and flourishing of all tamariki.

We begin the Practitioner Section with Sean Dolan's thoughtful revisiting of Vygotsky's concept of defectology and its continuing influence on inclusive pedagogy. Sean reminds us that despite the deficit-oriented language of its era, Vygotsky's theoretical work was profoundly emancipatory. By framing disability as socially and culturally mediated rather than fixed or biologically determined, Vygotsky laid crucial foundations for the relational vision of learning and inclusion that underpins the early childhood curriculum in New Zealand, *Te Whāriki*. His work encourages teachers to view diversity not as a problem but as a generative force that invites us to reconstruct environments so that all learners can participate meaningfully.

Kerrin Hearfield continues this conversation by grounding inclusion in the everyday realities of early childhood practice. Her discussion of responsive equity offers clear, practice-based examples of how kaiako (teachers) can minimise physical, social and conceptual barriers for tamariki (children) with diverse abilities. She emphasises that adapting environments, collaborating authentically with family and upholding high expectations for all learners are essential components of inclusive teaching. Kerrin's examples such as adjusting materials for individual access or providing sensitive peer mediated support remind us that inclusion is expressed most powerfully in attentive, thoughtful daily actions.

Janice Pennells completes the Practitioner Section with a reflective and insightful examination of the image as a tool for enabling the child's voice in assessment. In an era of increasing digital documentation, Janice highlights both the opportunities and challenges that come with using images to capture and interpret learning. Her practice examples show how accessible images can deepen communication, support identity formation and invite even the youngest children into learning conversations. Her work is a timely reminder that documentation must remain a collaborative space where children's perspectives are valued.

The Interview Section features a rich professional conversation between Dr Claire Coleman and Leanne Stewart from The Champion Centre. Their exchange illuminates the nature of early intervention in New Zealand and the profound relational work that underpins effective support for children with developmental disabilities. They describe early intervention as a collaborative, interdisciplinary endeavour that centres whānau (family) expertise and strengthens the child's participation across multiple settings. Their discussion reinforces the vital role early childhood teachers play in noticing developmental concerns, initiating conversations with whānau and advocating for timely, appropriate supports.

The Peer Reviewed Section opens with Marjolein Whyte's significant contribution on social justice within early

childhood settings. Marjolein draws on her doctoral research to reveal the covert and overt forms of exclusion experienced by parents of disabled children. She argues that while *Te Whāriki* provides a strong philosophical commitment to inclusion, inequities persist unless kaiako and leaders actively interrogate normative assumptions, challenge ableist practices and respond to the specific rights of children and their families. Her article positions social justice not as an abstract ideal but as a practical, relational and ethical responsibility woven into everyday interactions.

Kerry Purdue and colleagues then explore the role of artificial intelligence as a tool to support student teachers and kaiako with learning disabilities. Their research centres the lived experiences of disabled educators who describe discrimination, masking and fatigue as common features of their professional lives. The authors highlight the accessibility benefits of artificial intelligence while also raising important questions about integrity, affordability and the risk of overreliance. Their work encourages the sector to consider how emerging technologies might contribute to a more equitable teaching profession when used thoughtfully and ethically.

The final peer reviewed article by Kate McAnelly and Michael Gaffney presents a compelling and deeply affirming approach to neurodivergence in early childhood education. They challenge deficit-based narratives by positioning neurodivergent tamariki (children) as capable, inherently sensory learners whose ways of being enrich their learning communities. Their guidance on slow pedagogies, trauma informed responses, multimodal listening and adaptable environments offers kaiako concrete strategies for supporting authentic participation. This article stands as a major contribution to the sector's understanding of neurodiversity and its implications for rights-based practice.

The Book Review Section opens with Fiona Woodgate's review of the *Inclusive Teaching Practice Guidance* published by the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand. Fiona outlines how the framework of an open mind, open heart and open arms supports kaiako to reflect on their biases, strengthen partnerships with whānau and create environments where all learners can thrive. Her review positions the draft guidance as an important sector wide resource that encourages inquiry-based improvement and a collective commitment to inclusion.

The issue concludes with Merryn Turner's engaging review of Murphy's text on neurodiversity affirming practices in early childhood. Merryn highlights the book's accessible blend of research, practice examples and reflective tools that support kaiako to move beyond surface level inclusion and toward genuine, strengths-based support for neurodiverse learners. She emphasises that Murphy's reframing of developmental norms and celebration of diverse ways of being offers kaiako a powerful shift in thinking that aligns closely with the principles of *Te Whāriki*.

Together these contributions honour the richness of our profession while challenging us to continue evolving. They remind us that inclusion is not a destination but a sustained, relational and justice-oriented practice that requires courage, reflection and deep respect for the mana of every child and every whānau.