

Critically examining teaching practices to support participation and empowerment of children during group experiences

Group experiences are an important area of *Te Whāriki*, the early childhood education (ECE) curriculum in Aotearoa, New Zealand. When supported by a sound pedagogical understanding, group experiences can offer tamariki an extensive reservoir of collaborative learning. The underlying conceptualisation of *learning* in *Te Whāriki* lies in the following statement: “[Children] learn by engaging in meaningful interactions with people, places and things” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 12). Hence, *Te Whāriki* holds great value in the empowerment of all tamariki to learn “with and alongside others by engaging in experiences that have meaning for them” (MoE, p. 13).

This paper presents a shift in our practice as a teaching team within group-experiences, where we initially followed a *loose* model of group-times. In this model, one kaiako (teacher) holds the sole responsibility to run the group experience and all the tamariki (children) are expected to attend. The events that take place in this model can be flexible and at times unpredictable, as each kaiako has the creative freedom to introduce activities, artefacts, and discussions in any order or format. Upon investigating and experimenting with different group pedagogies, our teaching team transformed group times into a structured layout, where regular routines and experiences take place every group time.

Firstly, we outline the background of our ECE centre and group-times. We then present the main issues we encountered in academic literature. This is followed by an illustration of the procedures in which we refined and reflected on our practice. Next, we reveal our most significant findings upon the implementation of structured group-times. Surprisingly, the changes that are implemented in the revised model are contradictory to our free-play philosophy; but nevertheless, the changes worked greatly to support our current group of tamariki.

The findings we discuss in this paper are based on evidence from our Internal Evaluation in the form of video-recordings, teacher reflections, formal peer observations, and team meetings. These findings include collaborating with teachers, fostering the autonomy of tamariki, focusing on quality engagement over attendance of tamariki, and growing teacher confidence. Finally, we conclude our discussion with a reflective paragraph about our growth into an intentional, engaging, and safe space at group-times.

Background: Mat-time as our main group experience

At Campus Creche, we are a not-for-profit ECE centre that is located in a suburban area in Hamilton. We share close grounds with the University of Waikato and currently have four age-based centres. The findings in this paper are presented by the Kauri centre, which supports the oldest age-group of tamariki enrolled 3.5- to 6-year-olds. The teaching team includes four qualified and registered kaiako, and two unqualified kaiako. Kauri is licensed for 40 children and at the time of the investigation had approximately 27 enrolled.

At Campus Creche, we annually review an area of our practice to ensure that teachers continue to develop and grow their knowledge and understandings of current pedagogical practice. We refer to this review as an Internal Inquiry. In our 2019–2020 Internal Inquiry, we recognised that group-times were an underdeveloped area of practice at Kauri. Kaiako lacked confidence in intentionally supporting and engaging with a large group of tamariki. Therefore, we chose to investigate how our group experiences could become an engaging and empowering experience for all tamariki and kaiako.

Our group-time was initially called *Mat Time*, and it involved gathering on a large mat inside our centre. We held the belief that *Mat Time* should be very open-ended and that each kaiako could facilitate group times as they liked. This led to a lack of a shared vision for what this time could offer tamariki. On one side, this meant that tamariki could experience diverse learning opportunities every day; and on the

other hand, intentionality was overlooked and learning opportunities became a one-off experience. In the following reflection, Tim discusses the stress caused by having a free-play philosophy that does not align with a compulsory group-time sitting.

For a long time, Mat Time has lacked intentionality and for the kaiako supporting this time, it can be an incredibly stressful experience. Most of us have a free-play philosophy, so forcing children to conform and sit while something (that they aren't interested in) is happening just feels wrong. (Tim, June 2019, professional reflection)

Informing the research process

We each looked at academic literature to support our understanding and reasoning of what a unified vision could look like. These main issues we found are present below:

Anita Mortlock's (2016) thesis on school group times:

1. Paying attention does not always involve children keeping still and can in fact be the opposite.
2. Sitting in a circle is a powerful way for children to observe everyone and view body language.
3. It is important to ask questions in a way that does not generate competition amongst the group and is instead inclusive.

Circle Time (Teacher Tom's Blog, 2016):

1. Creating a culture of participation is important.
2. *Circle Time* can be viewed as an inclusive time to share and make decisions about the day (i.e: democratic decision making, a process he feels all members of the learning community need to be present for).

Upon discussing these ideas in our weekly team hui we created a plan to move forward and slowly started changing our practices with the tamariki during group times. First, we realised that it was important to know children individually (i.e., who likes to fiddle, who enjoys the sensory stimulation of tapping the mat, etc), and therefore not insisting that the tamariki sit still. Not all tamariki are the same, and it is important for them to have their space by keeping their bodies to themselves.

We have made an effort to reduce the closed questions that we ask and focus on utilising open-ended questions and provocations to instigate dialogue. Our intention is to steer away from a monologue or simply seeking a correct answer. As a result, we have utilised our *Mat Time* to share ideas and experiences and reciprocate that culture with all the tamariki.

That culture lies in the heart of our shared philosophy for Whānau Time: for all stakeholders to belong, feel empowered, and enjoy meaningful interactions with others through intentional and consistent practices.

The research process

When we discussed the idea of a shared vision, the name of our group time emerged as a significant theme. In the following reflection, Vanessa shares her resemblance of group time to a family meeting together:

I like the idea about all participating at Whānau Time—our name indicates this is a time for us all to be together as a family. I feel that as a team we do not hold Whānau Times frequently and I would like us to have a shared view about whether we think it is important or not. Some consistency and a shared philosophy would be great. As for my

own practice, one of the biggest barriers is still confidence. (Vanessa, professional reflection, December 2018)

Anything can be discussed at Whānau Time; hence, it is generally seen as a hui for everyone to come together. Therefore, the name of our group time changed from Mat Time to Whānau Time. A shared vision calls for some shared practices in order to flow. Consistency in routines is paramount for children to have predictability, which allows children to be comfortable in the ECE setting. Below is the consistent sequence of events of *Whānau Time* that every kaiako follows:

1. The bell is rung and everyone comes inside to the mat.
2. All kaiako and tamariki sit around the edge of the mat.
3. Mōrena song is sung (greeting everyone at Kauri, including pets).
4. The day of the week, and events for the day are discussed, then any important notices are shared.
5. The lead kaiako sets out the plan for the rest of *Whānau Time*.
6. Tamariki are given a choice to stay and participate in the experience offered by the lead kaiako, or to go outside and play.
7. Experience commences.

Expectations of everyone are set out and clarified by the kaiako every *Whānau Time* and this is coupled with abundant praise to everyone. The set routine for *Whānau Time* provides predictability for children and enhances their ability to cope with the transition of routines. In the following section, we illustrate some of the key findings that we experienced when consistently following a structured *Whānau Time*.

Findings and discussion

1. *Autonomy*

When we introduce an experience or activity at *Whānau Time*, we invite the tamariki to join in and participate. This offers tamariki the autonomy to make an informed choice about whether or not they would like to participate. In the following reflection, Vanessa discusses how some children chose to leave halfway through a story at *Whānau Time* with minimal disruption to their peers:

During the story, a couple of children took themselves off to play outside. This was done quietly and without interruption to those listening to the story. A teacher supporting Whānau Time got up and went out to supervise them. (Vanessa, professional reflection, November 2019)

We noticed that the growing autonomy of tamariki supported the richer engagement of tamariki that chose to stay. This is because they are not disrupted by their peers, who would have been otherwise forced to stay in our previous *loose* model. It is also partly because of the smaller group size, which allows for greater communication and support from kaiako. In the following reflection, Tim identifies that giving children autonomy has resulted in lower stress levels for kaiako:

Giving children the autonomy to stay or leave for the story/game/activity means that the children who stay are engaged and the children that don't want to engage are able to move away and engage in their interests. This has reduced the stress of children and myself as the Whānau Time lead kaiako as I am not continuously having to ask children to sit still. (Tim, professional reflection, January 2020)

Some may argue that the tamariki who continuously do not attend *Whānau Time* could miss out on valuable teacher-led opportunities. We have found alternative ways to engage these children outside of such a large group experience. For example, Tim explored herbs with a small group of children at

Whānau Time and knew these tamariki were likely to share their new knowledge with others. In the following reflection, Tim highlights this engaging experience with a small group as an opportunity of leadership amongst peers:

These children will share with their peers through their play, and hopefully other children will also explore the herbs in the garden following the lead of these tuakana.
(Tim, professional reflection, August 2019)

We would also like to acknowledge that although *Whānau Time* can be mostly teacher-led, there are opportunities for tamariki to contribute as well. For instance, during the daily discussions, tamariki can share anything they deem important. There are also conversations beforehand about what kind of experience they would like to partake in before *Whānau Time*.

2. *Teacher collaboration*

We found that *Whānau Time* was much more engaging for tamariki when we had all the kaiako join in. Kaiako being present helps demonstrate healthy body language around space and posture. It is also useful to communicate praise to the tamariki to support their growing social competence (i.e., by smiling and nodding and making eye-contact). It also helps the lead kaiako (who is running *Whānau Time*) feel supported in case any urgent matters arise, or any tamariki need additional support. In the following reflection, Vanessa explains that the presence of all the kaiako supporting a structured *Whānau Time* allows her to enjoy this experience:

The other teachers helped, so I felt fully supported. Six months ago, I dreaded taking *Whānau Time*. Now with the changes we have made, creating routine within routine, *Whānau Time* is something we can all enjoy. (Vanessa, professional reflection, November 2019)

3. *Growing teacher confidence*

The growing collaborative culture of the kaiako and interest of the tamariki has resulted in a tremendous boost in confidence for kaiako to lead *Whānau Time*. Expectations of everyone have become consistent. In the following reflection, Tim elaborates on why he believes his confidence is boosted in guiding discussions at *Whānau Time*:

Discussions like this are becoming easier and easier to have at *Whānau Time*. I think that is in part due to the regularity that *Whānau Time* occurs and how the children are used to and comfortable with this routine, but also due to my own confidence in facilitating these discussions with the cohort. (Tim, professional reflection, November 2019)

4. *Individualised learning: Enhanced quality of child engagement*

At times, only a few tamariki stay to participate in the kaiako provided experience. We consistently allow the tamariki to make their informed choices, and we will support the children in the same regard whether there are 40 or just one child participating at *Whānau Time*. The experience chosen by the kaiako can be tailored to meet the individual needs of tamariki. In a self-regulation exercise, Vanessa thought of one particular child who struggled with other people being in her space. Vanessa utilised *Whānau Time* to introduce a game that would be engaging for the entire group of tamariki but intended to provide additional support and guidance to the child in mind. In the following reflection, Vanessa explains how this takes place:

Although the activity idea seemed to work for all who participated, for that child in particular, it may become a useful tool for her to use in helping her to regulate her emotions. (Vanessa, professional reflection, November 2019)

Final reflections on outcome/growth

The culture that was created as a result of the consistent practices and set structure of *Whānau Time* has instigated the growth of a safe space. After the first COVID lockdown at the beginning of 2020, the tamariki shared the matters that have changed in their everyday lives at *Whānau Time*. In the following reflection, Vanessa highlights that *Whānau Time* is an intimate space to make sense of major events like the COVID lockdown:

Our first several Whānau Times after lockdown, the children talked a lot about COVID lockdown, the virus, things they had been doing under lockdown, the videos they had seen of their Kauri teachers during lockdown, and generally wanted to participate in this circle of connectedness. It seemed to me Whānau Time became an essential time for our tamariki to process this incredible event in our lives.” (Vanessa, professional reflection, May 2020)

The development of an intentional group space has led to an increasing enjoyment of *Whānau Time* by all stakeholders. In the following reflection, Tim celebrates the positive shift that a structured and consistent layout of *Whānau Time* has on the increased enjoyment of this experience:

Being able to see that the tamariki are engaged and know how they come together for a short time means that the sessions are much more enjoyable for all stakeholders. (Tim, professional reflection, June 2020)

Different groups of tamariki have different interests and learning dispositions. It is important to be open to the various possibilities of teaching pedagogies that cater to the needs of the tamariki attending a centre. A structured group time was far from what we would have expected at the start of our Internal Inquiry, but we found that it provided the consistency that supports tamariki to engage in meaningful ways and to allow for predictability. Teaching pedagogies are not meant to be permanent, and it is essential to continuously refine and reflect on our practice. Without an open-mind, meaningful change is hardly possible.

References

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