



# Research needs in the early childhood sector

**An interview with  
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An important strand through the Centres of Innovation work that needs further exploration concerns educational leadership. What is going on in early childhood centres to really pull together the teaching team to be the very best that they can be? The Iterative Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) project on leadership, which is close to being completed, contains five leadership practices—rather than styles—which have come through the schools research. It would be good to pick those up and see if they can be researched in an early childhood education (ECE) setting.

Educational leadership is a gap—it hasn't been addressed in the strategic plan implementation yet, and it's something that people comment on informally as a gap. In the early childhood sector, you can't always assume that the manager is the person responsible for the educational leadership, especially with clusters of centres. Sometimes there will be someone responsible for the management, and team leaders who are supposedly the educational leaders. How do they go about having the conversation with their teachers about what 10 out of 10 looks like in terms of high-quality teaching and learning? It would be good to see a research project used as a pathway to raising awareness and getting people thinking about educational leadership.

A related strand is about centre-specific factors that change teaching practice in ways that improve learning outcomes. We are unlikely to see another longitudinal study like Competent Children/Competent Learners—not from TLRI anyway—but it would be possible to do a centre-specific one focused on the cluster and/or sequence of factors that significantly changed teaching practice in that specific context in ways that improved child outcomes. It is strategically important for the whole sector to find out more about how a centre lifts practice from 'just good enough' to 'very good'. That is, I am suggesting a case study approach—albeit involving several centres.

An area that keeps coming up is about how to foster bilingual development. This is really important because of changing demographics: we're heading towards the situation where children who come from European New Zealand backgrounds will be in the minority.

It's quite clear from the evidence that bilingualism is very positive, when fostering it is done well. We're getting good signals now from Māori immersion—we need more evidence from Pasifika education settings. Researchers interested in this area should go to the work of Susan Foster Cohen and Stephen May for pointers, as well as the team at Wycliffe Ngā Tamariki Kindergarten.

Penny Haworth, Joy Cullen, and Heather Simmons from Massey University working with Wycliffe Kindergarten have looked at bilingual development in the early years and it would be good to build on that research, and on the language findings from A'oga Fa'a Samoa Centre of Innovation because we are just not doing well enough for the growing number of children who have English as a second language. We know strengthening their first language is extremely important for the cognitive development of bilingual young children. Whether you are talking about adding Māori to a strong English language base, or English to another first language, the early years are really important. We are not giving teachers enough guidance in this area. It's below people's consciousness yet it's hugely important for New Zealand education.

What is coming through in a few Centres of Innovation projects, and more generally, is that for children with a first language other than English, we're getting a disruption between early childhood centres and schools. We think because they have managed to learn and are doing reasonably well in early childhood education, it will be okay for them in school. But the sociolinguistic ways of communicating are quite different between the two settings. There's quite a disruption. They've begun to understand the sociolinguistic codes and norms in early childhood and then they get to school and it's like a foreign language—they can't understand what's going on. It's causing children to stall for a while. Adults need to be more consistent with their language

and to realise when they are speaking jargon—there's quite a lot of school-specific jargon as well as ECE-specific jargon that is different again. It is confusing for the children.

It could be difficult to shape the research question—I would suggest talking to Susan Foster Cohen or Kon Kuiper, both from Canterbury University. But what I'm hearing is that teachers now recognise that at times they're talking past students. It would lend itself to quite a specific linguistic study, so that we understand the problem better as a first step to finding solutions.

I and others would be interested to see some research around the new school curriculum and what it means for the transition from early childhood to school. The new curriculum now contains concepts that are closer to Te Whāriki than previously. Will there be better alignment that will help learning and teaching?

There are a number of people now beginning to make the comment that although we talk about children as being active learners from birth, we're not actually honouring that in practice. There is a doctorate thesis just finished, by Helen Bernstone (MIT), which says we're not doing enough to stretch children when it comes to problem solving. A lot of work has been done to assist children's recall as ECE teachers improve the documentation of learning, but we're not weaving into our teaching practice enough stretch in relation to a range of other cognitive processes, such as getting children to make predictions or to evaluate.

One of the two main aims of Te Whāriki is to help children develop their working theories—the other is to foster positive disposition towards learning. There's been a whole batch of work done, funded by the ministry, which is very focused on the dispositions aim. We've ended up a bit out of balance, with little focus on working theories, except where they cross over with dispositions. We need to know what is happening in centres to give children more of a stretch with their thinking, their theorising.

One other area ripe for research is family day care, also known as home-based care. It is a growing part of the early childhood sector and we know very little about the teaching and learning in those settings. They get the same government grants, they come under the same policy—it would be good to know more about what is going on.

Across the sector, we know less about teaching and learning for infants and toddlers than the older age group. It would be great to do something in a centre that had the age groups split into different areas and compare educational practices. There's still a bit of tendency for what we do with infants and toddlers to not be seen as educational.

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