

Intentional design for play-based learning.

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Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) is a play-based curriculum, positioning children as rights holders, and active participants in their learning, with foundations of whakamana/empowerment, and relationships (May & Carr, 2016; Stover, 2016). With the refresh of *Te Whāriki* in 2017, there was a shift in the role of kaiako (teacher) being repositioned from being responsible for setting up the environment and observing the interactions of tamariki, to providing intentional direction and becoming a co-constructor of learning with tamariki. This has led to some confusion on how to intentionally teach within a play-based curriculum. This article aims to provide practical application of how to be intentional through the design for learning and teaching in a play-based early childhood curriculum. There is also guidance for leaders and associate teachers on how to support students and new graduates to unravel the confusion.

Teaching intentionally through a play-based curriculum

Play is natural for children. “Free play” in early childhood education (ECE) New Zealand was introduced in 1937 by Susan Isaacs, and this meant adults set the environment and let tamariki play uninterrupted (Stover, 2016). *Te Whāriki* tells us that children learn through responsive interactions between people, places and things (MoE, 2017). More explicitly we are informed, children learn, “by doing, by asking questions, interacting with others, devising theories about how things work and then trying them out and by making purposeful use of resources” (MoE, 2017, p. 46)

Wood’s (2014) study of young children’s free choice and free play activities in the United Kingdom highlights that play and kaiako teaching can be balanced in interactive and collaborative ways. Zosh et al. (2022) advocate for playful pedagogy, emphasising that playful learning happens through guided play. In this approach, teachers play alongside tamariki, adding intentionality that enhances the learning experience. When tamariki have free choice to join in or leave learning experiences, tamariki are empowered to have agency and control over their play. The choices tamariki make are not always positive in supporting their play and this is where kaiako guidance and intentional support is needed, especially when tamariki are having difficulty navigating the social aspects of play or regulating their emotions.

Kaiako need to have an awareness of children’s existing knowledge, skills, and interests, and identify learning possibilities that can be enhanced by participating within play (Aiono et al., 2019). *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) positions kaiako as active participants within play, creating challenging learning environments and providing appropriate guidance to extend learning. It is important for kaiako to be aware of not taking over or stopping play when providing guidance. Wood and Hedges (2016) claim that the traditional emphasis of standing back and facilitating learning through discovery, exploration and play was connected to developmental teaching theory with less attention on teaching subject content. They further assert that learning processes (learning dispositions) are more important than subject content (Wood & Hedges, 2016). The focus of *Te Whāriki* is on dispositional learning to support tamariki to be lifelong learners (MoE, 2017).

The term kaiako was introduced to the curriculum in the 2017 refresh. The meaning of kaiako can give some context of how the intentional role within play-based learning could look. *Ako* is a concept in te ao Māori of reciprocal learning and means people learn with and from each other (MoE, n.d; Rameka & Soutar, 2019). *Kai* in this context means the doer of something, therefore, *kaiako* means the person who facilitates the teaching and learning: the teacher (MoE, n.d; Rameka & Soutar, 2019). The whole concept is that the teacher and the learner are equal partners in learning where each is reciprocal and responsive to the contributions of the other (Rameka & Soutar, 2019). Kaiako will learn as much from te tamaiti as they will from kaiako through empowering shared learning experiences where the two co-construct learning through play.

What is not teaching through play?

- When tamariki are made to sit and learn.
- Kaiako testing the knowledge of tamariki. For example, “What letter is this? What is this colour? What is this shape?” – If there is only one answer to the question, this is not learning through play, this is testing skills and knowledge.
- Kaiako set up and control the play – this can be useful when supporting acquisition of new skills and knowledge (Chen, 2016). Briefly when introducing a new topic or game, then guide tamariki to take the lead and practice.

Associate Teacher: Engage in kōrero with student teachers about the difference between child-initiated play activities and teacher-led planned activities. Support student teachers to be aware of when it is appropriate to use teacher-directed guided learning, and when to step back.

Intentional Teaching – How to do it

Ka whāngaia, ka tupu, ka puāwai

That which is nurtured blossoms and grows

Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017) notes that kaiako are the key resource in ECE with the role to facilitate children’s learning and development through intentional, thoughtful pedagogy (MoE, 2017). *Te Whāriki* lists 15 capabilities that kaiako need to have in order to achieve this intentionality, which ranges from being knowledgeable about children’s learning and development, understanding theories of development and pedagogy, being inclusive of whānau and culture, and being thoughtful and reflective in their practice (for the full range of the capabilities see page 59 of *Te Whāriki*, [MoE, 2017]).

Being intentional means being planful, thoughtful and purposeful in organising learning experiences (McLaughlin & Cherrington, 2018), and actively responding to the interests, strengths, abilities and learning possibilities of tamariki. Intentional design for learning should be collaborative with tamariki and whānau (Education Council New Zealand [ECNZ], 2017), including their cultural ways of being and doing. Designing for learning needs to include the purposeful creation of challenging and meaningful learning environments. This includes using specific teaching strategies and language techniques to support and extend learning (MoE, 2019; 2020) allowing tamariki to freely choose what and how to play. Simply, it means to *always be thinking about what you are doing, and how this will enhance learning*. Intentional teaching allows for tamariki and kaiako to collaborate in shared thinking and problem-solving to promote learning and development (Edwards, 2017). Intentional teaching is when kaiako use purposeful knowledge, judgement and expertise (McLaughlin & Cherrington, 2018) to design learning tailored to the individual tamaiti.

Kōwhiri whakapae (MoE, 2024) has a fresh focus on assessment through noticing and recognising the capabilities of tamariki and responding to these through teaching practice. This, and other sources (Carr & Lee, 2012; Education Review Office [ERO], 2021; Hanrahan et al., 2019; MoE, 2004) have been used to suggest one way to implement intentional teaching is through a model of assessment using notice, recognise, respond, evaluate and revisit.

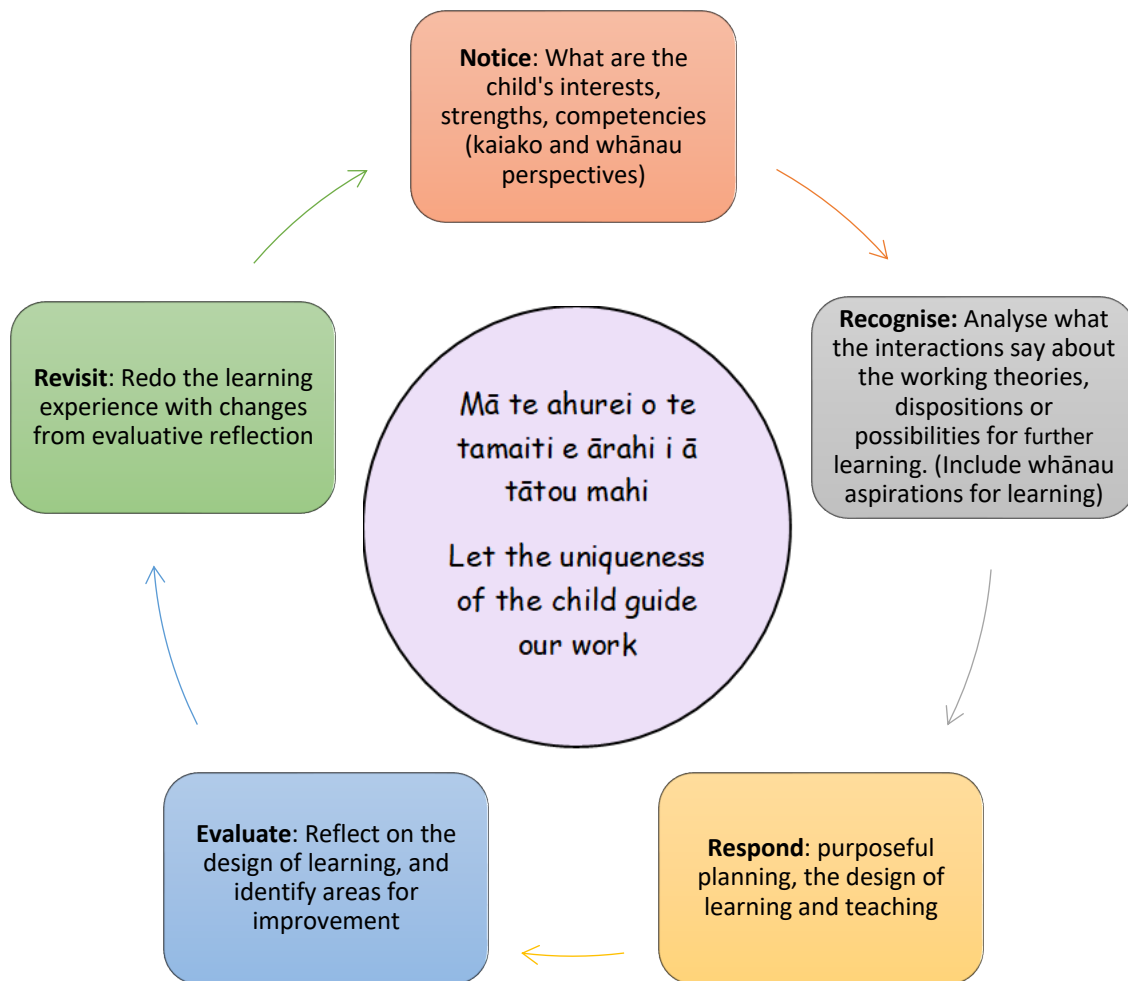


Figure 1. Intentional design for learning model. (Internal quote from MoE, 2017, p. 63)

Notice and Recognise

The first step for kaiako is getting to know the child and observe and engage with them to *notice what tamariki are interested in, their strengths, passions and competencies* as they engage in play with people, places and things. It is important to also notice the gaps in their abilities, or what they are not doing.

From the observation, kaiako *recognise what learning is occurring*, interpret the interactions of tamariki to understand their perspectives of the world, their working theories, and the areas they are developing. The identification of a pattern to behaviour and interests over time may be recognised. At this recognising stage, it is important kaiako look deeper at how te tamaiti engages with people, places and things. Instead

of merely noticing an interest in vehicles for example, kaiako should observe and document how they interact with these objects during play.

Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017) tells us that the ways tamariki think about, inquire into and make meaning as they play is how they develop working theories about their worlds. It is important that kaiako kōrero with other kaiako about what has been noticed, and gather their theories and perspectives of the learning is part of the collaborative process of recognising learning (Carr & Lee, 2012). Kaiako can never know exactly what tamariki are thinking or learning, however, making professional deductions based on observations, interactions and kōrero with tamariki, kaiako and whānau can inform this knowledge. The analysis of learning is useful to guide teaching decisions about how to best support further learning (Aiono et al., 2019).

Tamariki have a raft of knowledge from outside the ECE centre, so having a kōrero with their whānau about what they know about their tamaiti (their noticing), and what they want their tamaiti to learn (recognising learning possibilities) is an essential part of the design for learning (ECNZ, 2017; MoE, 2017). This strengthens relationships/ngā hononga by recognising and including the people who support the learning of tamariki (MoE, 2017). This is how kaiako make the learning meaningful by including the interests, strengths, culture, language and identity of tamariki in the learning design. This also demonstrates a commitment to *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* by co-constructing learning with whānau, and in this way kaiako are able to be responsive to cultural ways of knowing and being (MoE, 2019), not just for whānau Māori, but all whānau.

What is noticed and recognised could be written in a plan:

Noticing the child's interests and passions	Recognising the possible learning occurring
<p><i>Kaiako notice</i></p> <p>Interest in vehicles: all vehicles; knows brand names; knows sounds they make and likes to move them fast; compares wheels of different vehicles; constantly watches wheels spin and looks at how they are spinning.</p> <p>Screams at other tamariki nearby to discourage touching the vehicles.</p>	<p><i>Kaiako recognise</i></p> <p>Technological knowledge about how wheels work.</p> <p>Maths: comparing and patterning - wheel tread and sizes.</p> <p>Science: speed, velocity, friction, gravity (down a ramp).</p> <p>Developing skills to communicate with others.</p> <p>There is an opportunity to develop positive social skills to play and learn with others: sharing space and resources; language to support voicing feelings and ideas.</p>

<p>Whānau notice: Knows brand names of motorbikes; takes toy motorbike to bed. The family has been to a dirt bike race. Doesn't like to leave toys within reach of crawling brother and will scream at him.</p>	<p>Whānau aspiration: To share toys with his brother and use words instead of screaming.</p>
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Associate Teachers: Support student teachers to develop the ability to recognise learning by noticing more than what tamariki are interested in. Question and guide to look deeper and consider and recognise how tamariki are using the resources/space, which places they don't go to, which people they gravitate to, who they avoid. Share other observations and review the possible working theories that tamariki are demonstrating.

Respond

Mā te ahurei o te tamaiti e ārahi i ā tātou mahi /

Let the uniqueness of the child guide our work

This stage is where the intentional *purposeful planning, the design of learning and teaching* occurs. Kaiako should use what has been noticed and recognised to design clear next steps in learning (ECNZ, 2017). Reflecting on the observations of interactions of tamariki with people, places and things around them enables kaiako to develop a deeper understanding of tamariki interests, their ways of developing working theories, their strengths, and possibly the learning that is happening (Brierley, 2019). These observations and insights will guide kaiako in making intentional decisions about setting up the learning environment, selecting resources to support or extend specific learning areas, and choosing teaching strategies that guide the interests and strengths of tamariki to address gaps or explore learning opportunities.

Planning involves careful reflection and deliberate decision making about identifying priorities for learning. The design for the learning will be based on knowledge of the curriculum and child development and be in direct response to what has been noticed and recognised about the individual tamaiti (ECNZ, 2017). The design for learning should include how the learning is expected to occur (the activity or guided play), and the specific teaching strategies that could be used. The key to this it to ensure the learning continues to be child-centred and meaningful. Learning is meaningful when it is of interest and relevance to te tamaiti responding to their interests, abilities and strengths that have been observed in the notice

and recognising stage. This should include acknowledging their language, culture and identity (Rameka & Soutar, 2019).

Brierley (2019) introduces Schön’s reflection model for improving teaching practice. This can be used to also guide the design for learning. After the recognising stage start the planning with reflection-before-action (Schön, as cited in Brierley, 2019).

- What is going to be taught?
- What is the expected learning outcome or intention? How will this be taught?
- Which resources or equipment might be needed?
- What teaching strategies will be used to support the learning?

When there is a clear purpose for the learning experience, it is easier to effectively teach, and then later evaluate the effectiveness of the experience in supporting the learning planned for. *Te Whāriki’s* (MoE, 2017) goals are specifically about how kaiako set the environment for the learning and should be used in the planning. The learning outcomes are what kaiako support tamariki to achieve over time (MoE, 2017).

During the learning experience, Schön suggests to reflect-in-action (as cited in Brierley, 2019). Reflecting-in-action involves using the planned teaching strategies during the learning experience and interaction with ngā tamariki, or adapting spontaneously to what is happening in the moment (Schön, as cited in Brierley, 2019). This may be through using encouraging or explanatory language or demonstrating a skill. Kaiako need to be careful not to change the focus of the learning to something other than what te tamaiti has in mind. Vincent-Snow and Tong (2019) remind us that “playfulness [in kaiako] is the attitude that encourages, nourishes and guides play” (p. 8). They further suggest that play and fun during teaching moments enhances the engagement and learning of tamariki (Vincent-Snow & Tong, 2019).

Over time being able to recognise the learning that is happening, for example, learning dispositions, language skills, subject concepts, working theories, and being able to respond intentionally will become easier. Careful design of intentional teaching plans for learning may need to occur a few times before there is confidence to spontaneously notice a learning moment, recognise what learning is possibly occurring, and how to best to respond to and extend this using intentional teaching strategies.

Add the intentionality for teaching and design for learning to the plan:

<p>Responding: Intentional Teaching Possibilities (resources, learning experience, teaching strategies, links to ECE text). Include a clear goal for the learning that will support the responding.</p>	<p>Recognising Links to <i>Te Whāriki</i> and other ECE documents; learning outcomes</p>
<p>Goal: To encourage [tamaiti] to learn with and alongside others (<i>Te Whāriki</i>)</p> <p>Learning experience: Group activity of car racing in the sandpit, like a dirt track race. The purpose is to encourage positive interactions with others (learning outcome).</p> <p>Resources/Equipment needed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - vehicles, any and all – enough for 4-5 tamariki to play at a time. - sticks or spades to create the track with tamariki - timer to record times. - paper/chalk board to record times – encourage tamariki to do this. <p>Teaching strategies:</p> <p>Organising and displaying vehicles to make them easy to access and share (<i>He Māpuna</i>, p. 33).</p> <p>Praise and encouragement of efforts to interact positively, eg sharing resources, giving someone else a turn (<i>He Māpuna</i>, p. 65).</p> <p>Social noticing: voicing when others are waiting or want to share (<i>He Māpuna</i>, p. 65).</p> <p>Modelling specific phrases to increase vocabulary and positive interactions, such as “Can I please have a turn” “You can have a turn when I am finished.” (<i>Te Kōreroreo</i>).</p> <p>Providing opportunities to be the judge of who won, using the timer and recording the times – supporting maths and technology learning.</p>	<p>Learning outcomes: to become increasingly capable of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - using a range of strategies and skills to play and learn with others/te ngākau aroha (<i>Te Whāriki</i> LO 10). - managing himself and expressing his feelings and needs (<i>Te Whāriki</i> LO 2). - [tamaiti] using specific phrases such as “I’m not finished yet” “You can have a turn when I’m finished”.

Associate Teachers: Guide student teachers through the Intentional Teaching strategies in *He Māpuna te Tamaiti* (MoE, 2019) to inform pedagogy in practice. McLaughlin and Cherrington (2018) say that kaiako are more easily able to articulate their intentional teaching and design for learning when they have a greater awareness of how and why to do this.

Evaluate

At this stage, kaiako reflect upon and evaluate the effectiveness of the planning and implementation of the intentional strategies in supporting the intended learning (ERO, 2021; MoE, 2017). Brierley (2019) explains this as ‘reflection-on-action’ from Schön’s reflection model. Evaluation of learning can be done through use of the Smyth Reflection Model, Stop Think Change, or another familiar format. Evaluation could simply be a few questions such as:

- What worked well, what didn’t? – was it the place the learning experience took place, the resources used?
- Were you fully prepared?
- What teaching strategies were/weren’t used, why?
- What did the tamariki do and say? Can this lead to more learning possibilities?
- Did tamariki lead the play?
- What could be done differently next time?
- Can colleagues provide feedback?

At this stage, the focus is on assessing teaching strategies to determine the effectiveness of supporting the ability of te tamaiti to achieve the learning outcome over time. Through guided play kaiako support tamariki to acquire positive learning dispositions so that they are empowered to learn.

Associate Teachers: Encourage students to be reflective. ERO (2024) identified this as an area of growth for new career teachers. “Promoting and supporting the ongoing learning and development of kaiako is a key responsibility of educational leaders” (MoE, 2017, p. 59).

- Engage in *kōrero before* a learning experience is embarked on. Encourage kaiako to identify the purpose for their learning experience.
- Engage in *kōrero after* the experience – what worked, what didn’t, why? What changes did they make/could they have made *during* the activity in response to children’s participation, engagement and questions? Brierley (2019) suggests reflecting on both successful experiences as well as unsuccessful ones will enable deeper understanding of practice.

- Use the reflection models of Smyth, Stop Think Change, or others for deeper critical reflection of actions and links to relevant theories and pedagogy for theoretical based understandings of practice
- *Te Whāriki* has reflective questions at the end of each strand that should be used to kōrero and reflect on as a team to gain deeper understandings of teaching and what tamariki are possibly learning. Group reflection provides opportunities to engage with peers and gain shared knowledge and understanding (Brierley, 2019).
- Role-model reflective practice

Revisit

Guidance is given to ensure tamariki revisit their learning (Carr & Lee, 2012; ERO, 2021; Hanrahan et al., 2019; MoE, 2004; 2024) as this maximises learning. Revisiting is also useful for kaiako. After reflection and evaluation kaiako aim to provide the learning experiences again with the changes from the evaluation. It may be that te tamaiti was not in the right frame of mind during the learning experience, or kaiako misinterpreted the noticing and recognising stage, so it is important to relook at what was originally noticed, then evaluate again. Tamariki learn through repetition, and so do kaiako. Sometimes it takes trial and error to figure out the best way to support the learning, and it will be different for every tamaiti, in every learning experience. And, as long as tamariki are happy, have choices and fun, they would have learned something valuable from the experience. Having a plan enables kaiako to track progression of learning over time, and the effectiveness of the intentional design for teaching and learning.

Conclusion

Intentional design of teaching and learning for tamariki involves a thoughtful process of noticing and recognising the interests, strengths, abilities and learning possibilities tamariki demonstrate through their play. Tamariki learn with and alongside their peers and kaiako, and there needs to be a careful balance of child-initiated and teacher-led, guided, experiences. Responding intentionally with a clear design for learning that includes specific teaching strategies, that are later evaluated for effectiveness through reflection, and then revisiting the learning experience, is how kaiako intentionally support tamariki to learn through play. Associate teachers and leaders can support this process by encouraging and guiding reflective practice.

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