

Love or aroha? Exploring concepts of love and aroha in the ECE curriculum of Aotearoa New Zealand.

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This article explores concepts of ‘love’ and ‘aroha’ within the New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, which was first published as a bicultural curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) in 1996 in both English and Māori languages (Ministry of Education [MoE] 1996). The discussion focuses primarily on the English text and the pedagogical and cultural implications for teachers working with the English text. While Māori cultural understanding of relationship, family and love are acknowledged and considered in the English text, there appears to be a difference in the understanding of cultural concepts within the two (English and Māori) texts themselves. It is important to remember that the written definitions of these cultural concepts within *Te Whāriki* inform teacher perception and how a bicultural curriculum can be implemented. In 1996, ‘loving’ was mentioned twice in the English text of *Te Whāriki* whereas ‘aroha’ appeared seventeen times in the Māori text – this difference in emphasis has been queried (Hughes, 2013; Stewart-MacKenzie, 2010; Zhang, 2019) with Hughes succinctly identifying “the relative invisibility of love in initial teacher education and Ministry of Education documentation, particularly in Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*” (p. 1).

It is interesting to note that the revised edition of *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa/Early childhood curriculum [Te Whāriki]* (MoE, 2017a), rather than making love and/or aroha more visible, reflected instead a greater disparity. Use of ‘love’ in the main text of the curriculum dropped from two down to one - a reduction of 50% - stating “...infants are learning to trust and that they are worthy of love” (p.13). (On a side note, one may wonder whether toddlers and infants are also ‘worthy of love’, but perhaps that is another conversation.) However, the revised Māori text, *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* (MoE, 2017b) increased the use of ‘aroha’ to 27 – a 40% increase on 1996. It is important to acknowledge that the English text (MoE, 2017a) does incorporate aroha on seven occasions. These are; in three learning outcomes (p.24, 37, 55), once in relation to another government document (*Te Whatu Pokeka*, MoE, 2009) (p. 23), twice in connection with Papatūānuku (the Earth Mother/source of life) (p.31, 33) and once in the glossary, indicated to mean “love, compassion, empathy [and] affection” (p. 66). As with the one meaningful reference to love and its importance for

infants (p.13), aroha is also only used once in relation to the child, and only within the realm of te ao Māori (the Māori world view).

If the assumption can be made that concepts of love and aroha are interchangeable, then one would expect to see them similarly represented in each text. They are not, and such discrepancy warrants closer consideration. If the expectation from the Ministry of Education is to implement a bicultural curriculum, how well prepared are teachers using the English text to incorporate aroha in their practice if aroha (and love) is not clearly defined. Is *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017a) supporting the cultural and pedagogical understanding of teachers?

The de-emphasising of love in teaching curricula appears to have occurred in the curriculum or guiding ECE documents in other countries also, despite contemporary literature emphasising the importance of loving and caring relationships to enhance children’s learning. By way of example, Page (2015) noted that in England “the words 'loving and secure' have been eroded from the recent iterations of the EYFS [Early Years Foundation] and inferred from this that “love no longer has a rightful place in early years practice” (para. 7). Nevertheless, literature such as Mitchelmore and Degotard (2017) and Shin (2021) continue to emphasise the critical nature of defining and implementing effective teacher-child relationships in ECE, including the place of relationship when facilitating meaningful learning. If NZ’s ECE curriculum (MoE 2017a) contains ambiguous underlying messages about how teachers both understand and prioritise love and aroha, then it may be assumed that a critical aspect of teacher understanding may be missing, or at least, not considered deeply enough.

As the guiding document for licensed early childhood care and education (ECE) settings, *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017a) supports ECE teachers’ pedagogical interpretations of aroha and love within their teaching practice. The easy use and inclusion of concepts such as aroha, whanaungatanga (kinship/sense of family connection), mana reo (the power inherent in language), tikanga (culture) and kaitiakitanga (environmental guardianship) within the English text is a cause for celebration. The aspiration of the MoE, after all, is that the language of the land “not only survives, but thrives” (2017a, p. 3). Integrating Māori language and culture is a requirement of *Te Whāriki*, but how are teachers to do this with little guidance in the curriculum around some concepts? ECE teachers must be cognisant that in the English language, ‘love’ is generally understood to relate either to family, romantic partners, favourite things or religion (for example, ‘I really love my dog; I love my child so much; I love rugby’). However, aroha from te ao Māori is subtler, more nuanced and layered in meaning. Barlow (1991) describes aroha as “an all-encompassing quality of goodness, expressed by love for people, land, birds, and animals, fish and all living things” (p. 8). Although there is an assumption that teachers can implement culturally responsive pedagogies, Ong (2021, p. 2) suggests this may “ignore...a plurality of ‘truth.’” This implies that the use of language is always culturally loaded, and that care and attention must be given to understanding the cultural values contained within a word, such as aroha.

The importance of love for children in the home setting is well-established (Bowlby, 1953; 1969). Loving and warm relationships play a crucial role in human psycho-social development, especially during early childhood. While affection from parents, caregivers, and others in the home is essential, there has been a growing acknowledgment of the importance of these loving and warm relationships in early childhood education settings (ECES) for infants, toddlers, and young children (Dalli 2006; Dalli et al, 2011; Gerhardt, 2014; Grimmer, 2021; Page, 2017). A research project in 2020 gathered data by way of a nation-wide survey in NZ (offered to ECE teachers via email and social media) (Stewart-MacKenzie, 2022). The survey explored the idea of ‘love’ as part of teaching pedagogy in ECE settings. Participants were self-selected, with a total of 180 individuals choosing to respond. Participants were from across the ECE sector including ngā Kōhanga Reo (Māori language nests), Pacific language nests, home-based childcare, playcentres and tertiary institutions offering ECE qualifications. However, the majority of respondents (79%) were from licensed English-speaking kindergartens or ECE settings. Most responses were written in English, with reo Māori (Māori language) appearing most commonly as individual words (often reflecting words and phrases used in the NZ ECE curriculum). When the survey referred to the NZ ECE curriculum, it was referring to the English text (MoE, 2017a).

Twenty-four questions were formulated for the survey (Stewart-MacKenzie, 2022) and these were based on research and literature that validated the connection between love, care, and positive outcomes in the holistic development of infants, toddlers and young children. Ten of these questions asked respondents to write a word or a phrase in response to the following terms (based on ECE discourse and literature in NZ): love, aroha, empathy, self-soothing, confident and capable, controlled crying, Pikler approach, neuroscience, attachment theory, and ABL (attachment-based learning). Two questions sought a response to the terms love (*When you hear the word love, what do you think of?*) and aroha (*When you hear the word aroha, what do you think of?*). Upon analysis of the data, it became apparent that while some ECE teachers saw the terms as interchangeable, others understood them as connected, but nevertheless separate concepts.

As data was collated, one theme that emerged was the difference in ECE teacher understanding of love and aroha (Stewart-MacKenzie, 2022). Interestingly, this had not been a consideration prior to formulation of the survey questions. Words such as care, respect and kindness were noted for both terms, but some teachers also demonstrated specific understanding for ‘aroha’ that did not appear in the interpretation of ‘love’. When describing ‘aroha’, ‘love’ was the most common word given by respondents. When describing ‘love’, ‘aroha’ was only occasionally referred to, thereby inferring these words did not always mean the same thing to all teachers. Some respondents gave significant detail in response to the question, *When you hear the word aroha, what do you think of?* For example, “a sophisticated elegant version of love”, or they used terms such as “complete”, “awhina (support)”, “breath of life”, “hononga (connection, commitment)” or “unity”, “taonga (treasure)” and “tenderness”. This emphasises that the participants view the concepts as not exactly the same, even if they are

referred to in ECE teaching practice in similar ways. To assume that aroha and love are interchangeable words may be doing a disservice to the underlying cultural concepts of both languages.

The aspiration of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017a) is to support teachers to develop and grow bicultural practice and understanding. However, it seems from Stewart-Mackenzie's survey (2022), that ECE centres and their teaching teams are relying on the English text of *Te Whāriki* which suggests aroha is "love, compassion, empathy [and] affection" (p. 66), thereby modelling use and application of the concept from the glossary translation. This was reflected in a breakdown of survey responses (number indicates number of responses, not percentage) to the question, "When you hear the word aroha, what do you think of?"; love (88); compassion (six); empathy (5); affection (11). Wardell (2019) suggests the word love is "heavily tainted by western individualism" (p. 2) whereas aroha is fuelled by "cultural imperatives... of whakapapa [genealogy, place in history] and whanaungatanga". Rather than a feeling (as the term love often is used), aroha is a culturally-grounded concept and cannot be contained by one word in English (Barlow, 1991; Grimmer, 2022; Hargreaves, 2022; Wardell, 2019; Young et al, 2020). This suggests that love and aroha should no longer be thought of as transposable, and it is therefore important to consider how ECE teachers are supported or guided by the MoE in understanding the Māori concept of aroha with the bicultural lens the Ministry requires.

Aroha is not easily translated to English – at least, not without losing its depth and layers of meaning. A *Dictionary of New Zealand Language* (Williams, 1844) was the first official attempt by a non-Māori person to provide a translation developed specifically for Pākehā (non-Māori people) to understand reo Māori and to preserve the language in a changing world. Williams translated 'aroha' by breaking it into two words: "aro ... mind, seat of feelings" and "ha ... breath". This implies that 'aroha' is defined as the breath of life from where our feelings and responses stem and should be considered as a creative force, originating from one's spirit and nurturing life itself.

The word aroha is explained by those immersed in te ao Māori as parts that make up a whole, which, like Williams' attempt 180 years ago (1844), suggests that this is more complex than the word-for-word translation; aroha means love. Makuini Tai (Aro Ha, 2020, 5:55) eloquently explained that language holds "the memory of time" and as such defines greatness in leadership and success. She identified the four words used to encapsulate the concepts contained in the one word, aroha, and explained them in this way;

- 'aro' is thought or life principle. This emphasises the importance of focusing on all perspectives, encouraging mindfulness of everything around us, supporting a broad and accepting view of our world;
- 'ro' is our inner world, what comes from within us. It highlights the importance of introspection and self-awareness;

- 'ha' is life force and energy, the very breath that sustains us. It reflects the vital essence of our forebears and connects us to life itself; and

- 'oha' is generosity, prosperity and abundance. It embodies the spirit of giving and sharing with others.

This focus on the inner-self in order to connect with our world, past present and future correlates with Barlow's (1991) description that aroha is shared with and by all humans, including our connection to the land, and everything it sustains. Yet, modern dictionaries (Orsmann, 1979; Ryan, 1994; Te Aka, 2003) have lost the subtlety of Williams', defining aroha as love, concern, empathy, compassion, support, sympathy and affection. Research articles (for example, Le Grice, 2017) and the English text of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017b) mirror these contemporary definitions.

Contemporary ECE resources may not support deeper exploration or understanding of tikanga Māori [Māori customs and values] or use of reo Māori. For example, a commonly heard song adapted for use in ECE settings explains that *aroha is love, and if you give it away, it will come right back to you*. The original American country song, 'Magic Penny' (Reynolds, 1978) likens love to a financial transaction:

Love is something if you give it away, you end up having more. It's just like a magic penny, hold it tight and you won't have any. Lend it, spend it, and you'll have so many they'll roll all over the floor.

The ECE adaptation infers that aroha is also a financial transaction; *it's just like a magic penny, hold on tight and you won't get any. But lend it, spend it, give it away and it will come right back to you*. However, while a resource like this encourages warm relationships, it could be argued that (like the glossary in *Te Whāriki*), the concept of aroha is both diluted and diminished by these lyrics. Aroha, deeply seated within Māori protocol, culture and values, conveys a deeper sense of compassion, empathy, and connectedness that goes beyond the Western notion of romantic or familial love. By equating aroha with love, the rich, multifaceted nature of aroha is oversimplified, and overlooks its cultural and pedagogical significance.

To fully appreciate the distinction between love and aroha, it is essential to consider aroha beyond the simplistic translation in the curriculum's glossary (MoE, 2017a). If aroha is the breath of life in ourselves and in others, connecting us to both our forebears and our descendants, then one begins to understand aroha is crucial to developing an intimate understanding of both ourselves and others. Aroha is, therefore, fundamentally relational, providing a conduit in our understanding to create an essential foundation for meaningful connections (Barlow, 1991; Gray, 2002; Wardell, 2019). It is a multi-layered way of being, incorporating respect, positivity, relationships in the future and the past: aroha notices the intricate detail that is life (Wilson et al, 2019; Young et al, 2020). Cram (2021) and Barlow (1991) identify the spirituality encapsulated in aroha as a sacred power emanating from the gods. Were (2021)

describes the spiritual vitality in aroha that awakens, inspires and values human action. Aroha can therefore be understood to be a motivating force from within that compels individuals to engage with the world in a compassionate, empathetic manner. Aroha urges people to cultivate kindness, foster deep connections, and contribute positively to their own wellbeing. Through aroha, the spiritual and physical merge, creating a dynamic interplay that shapes how we interact with, and impact on, the world around us. It could be argued that developing a deeper understanding aroha is vital to the ongoing goal of bi-cultural education in ECE, and for the experience of our most precious taonga, our children.

The concept of aroha is complex when considering teaching pedagogy in the bicultural context of NZ. Young et al. (2020, p. 56) suggest aroha is “the heart of co-construction” explaining the critical nature of truly noticing each other to enable trust, honesty and strong bonds between teachers, children and the wider ECE community they work with. Aroha is not just an emotion but a way of being that requires deep attention as teachers intentionally consider their interactions with children. As such, deep reflection is required within the ECE teaching sector when considering the bicultural nature of our curriculum in order to embrace the concepts within with knowledge, understanding and reflection.

In conclusion, aroha within the bicultural context of ECE settings in NZ is complex and culturally significant. Traditionally translated to English as 'love,' ECE teachers must recognise that aroha embodies a rich tapestry of meanings that extend beyond love, compassion, empathy, kindness and affection. Aroha encompasses these meanings, but deeply rooted in tikanga Māori, the interconnectedness that reflects a holistic and spiritual worldview prioritising relationship, both past (a memory of time) and present - as well as future connections (the breath of life itself) – must also be acknowledged.

Perhaps it is time for the MoE and for teachers in NZ to revisit Williams’ definition in *A Dictionary of New Zealand Language* (1844). His aspiration to preserve the subtlety of reo Māori in the changes the late 19th century brought to NZ has been lost. Instead of English-speaking teachers deepening their understanding of aroha, time has reduced the idea of aroha to being one of simply caring for another person or a thing. Williams’ definition urged us to consider aroha as a creative force that nurtured life, not as a transactional emotion to be lent and spent. Contemporary writing and literature have provided explanations that expand and deepen Williams’ original understanding and we, as teachers, must embrace the challenge to deepen our own understanding of any cultural concept we are not familiar with. What better place to start then with a concept as fundamentally essential as aroha?

As evidenced by research and scholarly discourse, aroha serves as a guiding principle for fostering meaningful connections, both among teachers and with the children and families they serve. The challenge for ECE teachers in NZ is to incorporate aroha intentionally in teaching, recognising the nuance

and depth associated within the concept. If ECE teachers are to incorporate aroha in their pedagogical approach, which includes the language used, they should be supported to aspire to deeper cultural knowledge and understanding. Development of a more culturally aligned translation of aroha to accompany the iteration in *Te Whāriki* (2017a) would facilitate this. ECE teachers may then recognise, at a new level, the potential of aroha to transform educational environments and all the relationships within them. Only with deeper understanding can aroha be authentically integrated into everyday teaching; teaching that is grounded in mutual respect for children and their families and communities.

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