

Challenging and expanding the concept of ‘readiness to teach’ in neoliberal times: Insights from new materialist and posthumanism theories.

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Teacher education degree programmes have a range of imperatives when preparing students for the multifaceted and complex role of becoming a teacher. In the field of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Aotearoa, readiness to teach is one such pressing driver. It is important to prepare student teachers to develop a range of theoretical and practical competencies that will support them in being ready to teach. Yet teaching is so much more than a technical practice – it’s a political act that occurs in a localised time/space. In this article, I rethink the concept of ‘teacher readiness’ in neo-liberal contexts in Aotearoa. This article uses new materialist and posthumanist theories to challenge the neoliberal notion of teacher readiness as an outcome based on predetermined attributes and standards. Instead, I focus on how the concept of (un)readiness might challenge dominant Western Euro-centric and neo-liberal ways of knowing and being. It is argued that refractive thinking allows a nuanced and fluid approach to aspects of teacher readiness such as teacher positionality, identity, and pedagogy. Embracing (un)readiness opens spaces for imaginative, creative and deeply thoughtful practice with children. It also offers possibilities for a deepening resistance to the neoliberal discourses within ECE in Aotearoa.

‘Readiness to teach’ in Aotearoa

New graduates of Early Childhood Education (ECE) initial teacher education programmes in Aotearoa are expected to “demonstrate core teaching skills when they start teaching” (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2022). The Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand (2022) acknowledges that the idea of the ‘readiness’ of newly graduated teachers is an ongoing and important debate and that there are often tensions between different expectations of what this means. The stance of The Teaching Council is that teachers do not need to be completely ready to teach on day one. Rather they should continuously undertake professional learning based on inquiry, collaborative problem solving and critical reflection to maintain their practicing certificates (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand , 2022).

The acknowledgement by the Teaching Council that teachers are on an ongoing journey in building their skills and experiences is important. Teachers are given a two-year induction and mentoring programme

after beginning teaching to prove that they can meet the six Standards | Ngā Parewa from *Our Code, Our Standards* (Education Council New Zealand–Matatū Aotearoa., 2017). Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers use *Our Code, Our Standards* to support student teachers and new graduates in identifying and developing high quality and ethical practice in the settings they may work in (Education Council New Zealand–Matatū Aotearoa., 2017). Students are expected to provide evidence of enacting the standards in their practice. It would be difficult to imagine trying to prepare student teachers for the complex process of teaching in ECE settings without a coherent and agreed upon set of standards as a guide.

Understandings of teacher readiness have become normalised in the educational sector, including policy and public discourse. The national ECE curriculum *Te Whāriki* is a key document which shapes understanding of ‘teacher readiness’ (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017). *Te Whāriki* - translated as a woven mat for all to stand on - is collaborative and open-ended and aims to support teachers in implementing the curriculum in ways that are culturally inclusive and locally contextual (Lee et al., 2013). Teachers in Aotearoa are expected to have the pedagogical knowledge to implement a curriculum based on a variety of approaches to learning including socio-cultural, kaupapa Māori and play-based approaches to learning. For example, the responsibilities of teachers according to *Te Whāriki* are (among other things) “to be knowledgeable about play-based curriculum and able to conceptualise, plan and enact curriculum that is motivating, enjoyable and accessible for all” (MoE, 2017, p. 59). Teacher readiness in this context refers to acquisition of a body of valued knowledge, and the skills to plan and put this into action. It also suggests that teachers are ready when they can motivate children and to make learning accessible and inclusive.

The ideal of inclusivity is woven throughout *Our Code, Our Standards* and *Te Whāriki* which contain a strong commitment to the indigenous people of Aotearoa as tangata whenua. *Our Code, Our Standards*, for example, is underpinned by Māori perspectives and Māori values – manaakitanga (care), whanaungatanga (positive and collaborative relationships), pono (integrity) and whakamana (empowering learners) (Education Council New Zealand–Matatū Aotearoa, 2017). These key documents also require teachers to uphold and honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi and redress the impacts of colonisation (Ritchie, 2018).

Te Whāriki is a socially progressive document that supports the United Nations principles of children’s rights. Teachers are expected to “uphold and protect children’s rights, interests, and points of view from the earliest ages” (MoE, 2017). Social justice, then, is a core feature of ECE in Aotearoa. *Te Whāriki* is to be lauded for the non-prescriptive guidelines; its weaving metaphor as an inclusive mat for all; its bicultural commitment; its attempt to weave Māori philosophical tenets throughout; its sociocultural and critical lenses; and its attention to local cultural traditions, contexts and places (Ritchie, 2018; Tesar, 2015).

According to Tesar (2015) *Te Whāriki* resists neo-liberal/neo-colonial discourses. This is important for teacher readiness because neo-liberalism in Aotearoa since the 1980s has seen an increasing shift away from community provision of ECE to a market based, private and profit-model of delivery. Under the neoliberal model, education is reconfigured in terms of a marketable commodity and families become vulnerable to market forces (Ritchie et al., 2014). This has implications in terms of social justice as education shifts from a public good toward a private good. The framing of ECE in terms of a Western market-based approach is incongruent with te ao Māori (Māori worldview) relational and collectivist values that are infused throughout *Te Whāriki* (Ritchie et al., 2014).

It has been suggested thus far that ‘teacher readiness’ within Aotearoa involves the ability of teachers to implement *Te Whāriki* and uphold *Our Code, Our Standards* in their practice. I hope to have demonstrated that this is as much a political as an education practice – indeed the two cannot be separated (Freire, 1992). While *Te Whāriki* is a socially progressive document, the wider political context is shaped by neo-liberal market-based ideologies which contradict the values from te ao Māori. The context of late-stage neoliberal policy contexts and performativity requirements further complicates this issue.

‘Teacher readiness’ then is about negotiating and navigating both political and educational spaces as mutually constituted. While teachers may acquire core knowledge and skills to teach competently (in inclusive and motivating ways), they will always be in the process of becoming ready to teach. They will never achieve a finalised state of readiness, because readiness is an ongoing process and not a finished state. They will also be vicariously positioned as the wider political landscape shifts and in ways that may be at odds with the core social justice tenets of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017).

Suspended in a stasis chamber

The term ‘readiness to teach’ might imply the idea of new graduates in a stasis chamber; suspended in place and time and imbued with dominant attributes, values and ways of knowing and being in ECE. Teacher identity might include the concept of ‘the ready teacher’. This fits in well with a neoliberal way of thinking, where the idea of a relatively stable teacher identity is linked to the Euro-Western privileging of the rational individual human subject.

Yet the idea of a singular teacher identity that may shift and change over time negates to embrace the fullness of identity formation as a reiterative process that constitutes us in an ongoing way (Davies, 2022). Davies (2022) challenges the idea that identity is singular and stable. She argues that the construction of identity works through processes of repetition, categorisation and maintenance which serve to limit thought. Normalisation of teacher identity includes the reproduction of preferred bodies of professional knowledge. In a neoliberal climate the shaping of teacher identity in terms of the market is concerning. Under neoliberalism children are categorised in terms of human capital rather than taonga (treasure).

Teachers may be reframed in terms of business agents competing on the education market for whānau (family) who are in turn regarded as consumers of a service.

This neoliberal worldview is not only impoverished but is completely at odds with Māori and Pacific ways of relating to their children. Consider the following poem written from a Samoan onto-epistemological position by Jacoba Matapo et al. (2023, p. 21):

Pepe meamea

We knew you before birth

Your value in collective worth

In dreams of the living, you bind

The past, present and future divide

Like the fanua we walk

And whispers of ancestors talk

You are imagined in form

The weaving that adorns

Belonging: Your birth-right

Inheritance and foresight

Intergenerational reaching

You come into being

Being ready to teach in Aotearoa from a *Te Whāriki* perspective means relationality and respectful engagement with indigenous knowledge systems. Being ready through a *Te Whāriki* lens means to engage in dialogue with indigenous families and communities; to challenge binary oppositions and to allow space for indigenous ontologies and epistemologies.

(Un)readiness to teach in Aotearoa

In this article I attempt to disrupt the notion of readiness to suggest that consideration is also given to the idea of (un)readiness. This is not an argument that seeks to negate the significance of ‘teacher readiness’ or of the importance of having generic standards or a national curriculum that provide expectations for beginning teachers. Neither is it to pose the idea of unreadiness as a binary to readiness. Rather I aim to signal the importance of thinking diffractively about how teacher readiness and teacher practice are always unstable and fluid, rather than fixed.

I suggest that the term (un)readiness for teaching is a more inclusive approach because it highlights diverse ways of knowing and being and thus fits in well with the tenets of *Te Whāriki*. (Un)readiness does not mean a teacher who is unprepared to teach. Rather it is about how ‘teacher readiness’ is not a fixed (but alterable) state, but that it is *relational*. We teach in *relation* to other bodies, more-than-human bodies, socio-material factors, inter-subjective encounters, and socio-affective atmospheres. (Un)readiness means being able to attend to the silences in dominant ways of knowing and being within ECE contexts.

In this article the focus shifts from thinking of ‘teacher readiness’ as a coherent, relatively stable and disembodied state. Rather the idea of teacher readiness is troubled as I analyse teacher practice as emergent and unpredictable, playing out within an assemblage of complex material practices in ECE settings (Hill, 2017). It is within these configurations that the boundaries between readiness and unreadiness are collapsed. I introduce the new materialist notion of diffractive thinking as a way that teachers can deconstruct dominant systems of thought - such as neoliberalism - that shape what and who matters in ECE pedagogy.

Thinking reflectively and diffractively

In terms of physics, reflective thinking is an optical metaphor for waves of light, water or sound bouncing off a surface – like a mirror. Hill (2017) discusses how with reflective practice we are looking in a mirror and see the pre-determined and bounded individual looking back. Reflection involves objectivising and analysing the internal self to transform external teaching practice (Hill, 2017). This thinking is based on conceptual binaries between internal self/external world. Reflection is predominantly portrayed as a cognitive process which may be technical (focused on changing elements of teaching pedagogy) or critical (uncovering and challenging dominant power relations and presuppositions) (Hill, 2017).

Reflection is critical to ensure that we grow as teachers and adapt practice according to new knowledge and experiences. However, the idea of reflection can be limited because it is aligned with a Euro-Western individualistic ontology and binary thought. On the other hand, refractive thinking can offer transformative insights similar to (but not the same as) Schön’s (1985) conceptualisation of reflection-in-

action (Cited in Hill, 2017). It alludes to the “bending or spreading of waves when they encounter a barrier or an opening” (Hill, 2017, p. 2). Diffractive thinking attends to difference and multiplicity rather than sameness and singularity. When applied to ECE settings it encourages teachers to consider themselves in relational terms. Teachers are just one part of the material configurations and entanglements in ECE involving human bodies and the more-than-human world.

Material things or ‘the material world’ refers to natural phenomena like Covid-19 or a cyclone; non-human ecosystems including plants, animals and microorganisms. The material world is soil, clay, wind, trees, sunshine, rain, clouds, animals, birds, humans, bacteria, viruses, weather, flowers, and insects. It also refers to human-made things such as carvings or sculptures or strollers or plastic toys (Nelson et al., 2021). Material entanglements is about the way that “the material world is always already entangled with the world of humans: how it shapes it, is shaped by it” (Nelson et al., 2021, p.449). This offers opportunities for teachers to think refractively about how they shape and are shaped by, for example, the layout of the ECE building; access or otherwise to the non-human world; and encounters with the more-than-human world.

It is this mutual shaping between human and the non-human that is important in understanding new materialist thought. The entanglements between humans and the more-than-human world (meaning objects, phenomena, non-human animals, plants and relations therein) deserve our attention as teachers. These are always shifting and changing into diverse configurations. The relations within these configurations are regarded as unpredictable and unique. Through intra-actions between phenomena, boundaries are made and unmade; collapsed and interfered with (Hill, 2017). Diffractive thinking considers the intra-action between internal and external factors and is configured and reconfigured on an ongoing basis (Barad, 2007). The concept of intra-action replaces the notion of interaction between bounded entities that remain the same (Barad, 2007).

Thus, diffractive thinking unsettles the Euro-Western and neo-liberal ontological premise of the pre-determined rational individual who holds a set of relevant knowledge and skills and is ready to teach. Instead thinking diffractively focuses on the “intra-action between bodies” that produce material configurations of reality in a particular time-space configuration (Hill, 2017, p. 6). Thinking diffractively about teacher readiness would involve reimagining what it means to be ready when readiness is in a constant state of flux; how readiness might be interrupted; how practice is embodied in real flesh and blood; how it is inherently unstable and is made and remade relationally and dialogically. Teachers and children are participants in the process of making meaning and forming relations with more-than-human entities (Molloy Murphy, 2021).

Considering the notion of teacher readiness in a diffractive way would mean peeling back multiple layers of possible meaning. It means attending to an alternative imagining of the idea of readiness. It involves

asking questions about the singularity and impossibility of the concept of readiness. How can teachers be ready for encounters that unfold in an emergent and dynamic manner? Teacher readiness might be reimagined as (un)readiness and attention to the present moment; to material entanglements and configurations. As Davies (2022) remarks it means to attend ...

to the movement in-between one emergent phenomenon and another. In-between a listening child, the sound of waves, the wind and an acorn gently dragged across the floor, or in-between a child, the leaves, the light, the clouds and the wind. (p.312)

Open-ended becoming, relationality and diffractive thinking

So far, I have argued that the idea of teacher readiness is problematic in its humanist Euro-centric orientation and alignment with neo-liberal ideologies. The idea of (un) readiness has been suggested as a reframing of teacher readiness in terms of emergent becoming. This opens possibilities for teachers to be radically present with children and to resist dominant neo-liberal framings of the world.

Below is an illustrative vignette that focuses on in-betweenness and relationality of phenomena rather than their separateness during an encounter between myself and my granddaughter.

It is stormy outside and I am reading a book about vegetables that came to life with my granddaughter. The wind howls and the trees snap against the window with a bang. They have scary faces, she says, pointing at the uprooted vegetables in the book. The trees outside the window caught her eye. They're coming, she said. They are moving. They're coming through the window. Her blood runs as cold as the sap coursing through tree veins.

I hold her tight and whisper of the great gentleness of trees, the great strength of their history on Earth, and the homes that they give to the baby birds. As I hold her, I remember the gentleness of my baby's cheek (this baby's mother) and softness of the curve of her nose. It's just the wind, I say. The wind is moving the leaves. They won't come through the window. She snuggles trance-like into my arms. You're a baby bird in a nest, I say.

The above vignette illustrates a material practice – an encounter between myself, my granddaughter, a house, a book, and a window. When the wind picks up it is introduced as another self along with the trees within this material assemblage in a particular time-space. Binaries between the human and non-human are disrupted when my granddaughter evokes their aliveness and agency. She resists the idea that the wind and trees are inanimate, with no life force. This encounter assembled to produce a counter to dominant Euro-Western understandings of trees and wind; cause and effect to rather focus on their entanglements and liveliness. The rigid demarcation between inside/outside is collapsed as the trees

crash through the window in my granddaughter's imagination. They are in-between, in a space which would allow new possibilities for relationality with the more-than-human world. Through evoking their aliveness my granddaughter is at one with the trees; fearful yes but respectful of their agency. She sees herself in relation with the trees.

The attribution of a life force or agency to other beings including animals, plants, humans, spirits and the environment is called animism (Smith, n.d.). Animism is an ontological perspective that is based on relational epistemology (Bird-David, 1999). It resists the dominant modernist Euro-Western scientific assumption of the 'knower' who can 'know things'. Bird-David (1999) uses the example of trees to illustrate the animist versus the materialist scientific ways of relating to trees. For example, botanists might cut down a stand of trees and further cut them into pieces to study and classify them botanically. This is contrasted by Bird-David (1999) with an animist and relational approach where one is 'talking with a tree' which stands for two-way relatedness. Bird-David (1999) writes that an animist approach is to "perceive what *it* does as one acts toward it, being aware concurrently of changes in oneself and the tree. It is expecting response and responding, growing into mutual responsiveness and, furthermore, possibly into mutual responsibility" (Bird-Davis, 1999, p. 77).

A relational approach to the more-than-human world (which might include trees, leaves, mosses, bark, roots, soil, insects, birds, rain, wind and more) situates humans 'in relation with', rather than 'separate from' other entities and beings. This is more aligned with indigenous relational ontologies. Thinking refractively about teacher practice opens possibilities for alternative relational meaning making and radical possibilities about the world and our place in it. It's about being aware how we (as teachers) might inadvertently position children relation to the more-than-human world through dominant Euro-Western ontologies of separateness rather than relationality. As Barad (2007, p. 91) argues, "making knowledge is not simply about making facts but about making worlds".

Children's storybooks are excellent examples of how dominant ontologies and epistemologies are mediated to children, storying the world. For example, the book *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein (first published in 1964) tells the story of a little boy who loved a tree and the tree loved him. This story starts with a relation between the boy and tree based on reciprocity. The boy played with the tree by climbing her and swinging on the branches and sliding down the trunk. However, over time the boy grew up and stopped playing with the tree, eventually taking the trees apples, branches and trunk to eat and build a boat and house until the tree was just a stump. When he was an old man, the boy visited the stump and used it as a seat.

The story is usually told as a story of selfless giving. Another reading is about how nature is a human resource to be extracted from and exploited without thought. It reproduces dominant Euro-centric views of human separateness from nature which is given a utilitarian value only. It also articulates with the

neoliberal ideology of hyper-extraction from the Earth to fuel late-stage neo-liberal capitalism. Refractive thinking and practice offer opportunities of resistance to such violent and dominating epistemologies.

Rooney et al. (2022) offer the concept of “weathering-with pedagogies” that are “situated, experiential, embodied, relational and ethical” (p. 109). Through everyday encounters with weather children engage with the uncertainties of the capitalocene including climate change. The authors are careful not to create a binary between children and the weather, referring to the idea of ‘weather bodies’. They write, “not only are humans weather bodies, but all materials, creatures, rocks, dirt, mud and clouds are also weather bodies” (p. 112). The continuity between children and the more-than-human world seeks to unsettle dominant ideas in ECE and that separate nature/culture, perpetuating this Euro-centric dualism.

Refractive memories

Refractive thinking is fluid and not limited to compartmentalised knowledge such as ‘a body of professional knowledge’ that we apply to our practice. Refractive thinking supports the entanglements of memories with present time and professional knowledge. It is about emergent becomings; about what Davies calls “response-ability, to each other and to the earth and our earth others” (Davies, 2022, p. 311).

I return to the vignette of my granddaughter to illustrate this.

As I held her and we watched the leaves move with aliveness in the wind I thought of all the trees I planted from seed pods harvested in the Indonesian rainforests as a child. Spending hours wandering little pathways with lush trees jumping with monkeys I collected the pods and took them home. I planted the seeds out the back and crouched over them in wonder as they sprouted one by one, two by two and three by three; until I had a forest in my backyard dripping with crimson orchid like flowers, that in turn grew their own seedpods.

My fascination with seeds began there. Or maybe it began earlier when my father helped me plant a row of zinnias. I still plant zinnias, but not in rows as he taught me. I plant them among flowers in diverse configurations that dip heavily under the bumblebees.

I am back in the humid and heated backyard in Indonesia. The ants scurried around collecting the bodies of dead insects and carrying them in unison down tunnels and holes into the earth.

Is it dark down there?

The thousand voices of a thousand children speaking in the thousand languages of Reggio Emilia surround me, take flight on the wind. There is nothing to fear here. Is there? How can I teach my students to be ready to teach in a world of a thousand languages?

I must remain (un)ready within my readiness to teach. I cannot universalise my teaching pedagogy but rather seek to make spaces for the unexpected to unfurl and transform the educative space.

There is an aliveness to teaching as it shifts and emerges in response to our encounters with and within both the human world and the more-than-human world. When I teach tertiary students in ECE initial teacher education programmes in Aotearoa I sometimes feel the filtered sunlight of those long-ago forests on my skin. I yearn to bring forests into the pedagogy; yet I am stuck in a classroom with a power point and chairs loosely clustered around grey desks.

So I bring the forest to them. I start with tiny seeds and watch as my students delight as they emerge from their shells and sprout up, moving upwards to the sky and downwards through their roots to the darkest spaces. Some students don't want to grow seeds. They tell me that they can't grow them and they will die. The fear of death drowns out biophilia – the love of life.

Fear and love are I think the important thing here.

We teach what we love, and rhizome like our pedagogy expresses itself through constant seeking and growing, configuring and reconfiguring. What happens to us when we see a seed we planted emerge from the soil? For many it is transformative and exciting experience that triggers feelings of marvel and awe. We grow in love for the earth and feelings of nurture and care. We have a new story to tell of intra-action where we nourished the growth of another from the more-than-human world.

(Un)readiness in the mundane

(Un)readiness to teach is about being aware of how we position both ourselves, material and children (Boucher, 2019). It is about being responsive and always open to the unpredictable and the new within the intricate and dynamic relationships we form and reform. Yet how does the newly graduated (un)ready teacher gather ways of being-with and teaching in this way when their initial focus might just be getting through the day, establishing relationships, rhythms and routines? According to Myers et al. (2023) thinking and practicing in ways that reframe unquestioned and taken for granted truths occurs in everyday 'mundane' practices and doings in the centre. For example, in everyday moments we can attend to children's relations with the more-than-human world (Rooney et al., 2021).

Concluding comments

This article has been a journey about the concept of 'teacher readiness' in Aotearoa. I have attempted to trouble this concept in terms of what it means to be ready to teach within the context of Aotearoa. It has been argued that teacher readiness is framed in terms of key documents such as *Our Code*, *Our Standards* and *Te Whāriki* which support a non-prescriptive and relational approach to pedagogical practice.

However, the current neoliberal political climate that frames the ECE context in Aotearoa shapes the sector in reductionist ways that uphold Euro-Western individualistic and capitalistic ways. Within this messy and constantly heaving terrain, the idea of ‘teacher readiness’ becomes unsettled. What it means to be ready as a teacher is not easily answerable. It is not about holding discrete and pre-packaged knowledge and skills. Instead it is about embracing the messiness and paying attention to moments of being-with children. A reimagining of teacher readiness in a diffractive way positions the teacher in terms of open-ended ‘becoming’. Diffractive thinking and practice are about attending to entanglements in the everyday practices in ECE.

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