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A curriculum of open possibilities: a New Zealand kindergarten teacher's view of professional practice

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Thematic analysis of a continuous video record of a day in the life of a New Zealand kindergarten teacher, and of a narrative reconstruction of the day during a follow-up interview, yielded a view of early childhood professional practice as focused on a 'curriculum of open possibilities'. This paper discusses elements of the teacher's professional practice that contributed to her curriculum: her understanding that curriculum planning required relational involvement and being part of the children's life within the kindergarten community; that professional practice required teamwork and attunement to one's colleagues; and that acting professionally was about being fully present and 'bringing everything together'. It argues that behind the apparent 'trivia' of the teacher's day there were layers of activity that maintained a fabric of connections that sustained the open possibilities. In this way, the teacher's role as a curriculum planner emerges as a finely balanced role that is creative and agentic rather than prescribed by narrow curriculum goals. The findings of the study are located within the emergent New Zealand literature on what it means to be a professional early childhood teacher in the contemporary early childhood sector, and research on New Zealand's early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*.

Keywords: curriculum; professionalism; professional practice; relationships; teacher role

Introduction

The last few years have seen an unprecedented interest in issues of professional practice in early childhood education with many countries introducing curriculum documents and regulatory policies aimed at enhancing the quality of early childhood education for children and their families and professionalism within the sector (Laevers 2005; Miller and Cable 2011; OECD 2004, 2006). New Zealand has taken a prominent part in this global trend with two key pedagogic and policy developments attracting international interest: first, the introduction of the innovative curriculum document, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education 1996); and second, the 2002 launch of a comprehensive 10-year strategic plan for early childhood education – *Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki* (e.g. David, Gooch, Powell and Abbott 2003; Moss 2007; OECD 2004; Trister Dodge 2004). Policies within the

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strategic plan to progressively upgrade staff qualifications across all teacher-led early childhood services to a benchmark level of a three-year diploma or degree¹ marked out New Zealand as a leader in professionalising its early years workforce.

This paper draws on data from the New Zealand case study within a six-country project that explored early childhood practitioners' views of their practice (Dalli forthcoming; Miller, Dalli and Urban forthcoming). Using a *day-in-a-life* framework (e.g. Gillen et al. 2007), researchers in each of the countries in the project collected a continuous video record of a day in the life of one early years practitioner. In a follow-up interview with the practitioner a few days later standard questions were used across the different country contexts to collect a narrative reconstruction of the videoed day and to explore the practitioner's perceptions of her professional practice.

The primary task of the six-country project was to generate rich descriptions of the 'phenomenon' of early childhood professional practice in specific local contexts with their different sociohistorical and policy backgrounds. This was not to create a comparative study but rather to open up a space for shared thinking among a group of researchers who were interested in the notion of professionalism which, as argued elsewhere (Dalli and Urban 2010, 151), is increasingly understood 'as a discourse as much as a phenomenon' and as something that is 'fluid, contentious and constantly under reconstruction' in local contexts. The practitioners in the study were a convenience sample of early childhood professionals who were all previously known to the researchers. In each case study the practitioner worked with children aged three to five years, was qualified at the minimum level required in her context, and had worked for at least three years after gaining her qualification.

In this paper, data from the New Zealand case study is presented to draw a picture of professional practice based on key themes in the interview and a narrative reconstruction of the videoed day offered by Bette, the kindergarten teacher in the case study. Starting with an outline of current early childhood curriculum research in New Zealand and an overview of the emergent literature on how professionalism is understood in the local early childhood sector, I argue that the themes in Bette's narratives illustrate that behind the apparent 'trivia' of the teacher's day there were layers of activity and a fabric of connections that sustained a curriculum of 'possibilities' consistent with the open ontology of *Te Whāriki*.

Contextualising early childhood curriculum research in New Zealand

New Zealand research and commentary on the early childhood curriculum can be traced back to the introduction of *Te Whāriki*, first in draft form in 1993 with its subsequent final version in 1996 (e.g. Carr and May 1993; Cullen 1996; McNaughton 1996). Previously, discussions about early childhood programmes used a terminology of 'aims and objectives' with 'curriculum' first appearing in the title of an early childhood official document in 1988 (Department of Education 1988).

Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education 1996) swiftly became noted as a 'good practice' curriculum, with analytical critique (e.g. Cullen 1996, 2003) emerging relatively slowly. In 2003 *Te Whāriki* was chosen as one of four curriculum models discussed at an OECD symposium on *Curricula and Pedagogies in Early Childhood Education* for national policy coordinators held in Stockholm (Laevers 2005; OECD 2004). Together with the Experiential Education model from Flanders, the High/Scope curriculum from Michigan in the United States, and the Reggio Emilia

model from Italy, *Te Whāriki* was described as an ‘open’ curriculum (Pramling, Sheridan, and Williams 2004, 29). Open curricula provide:

... space for individual initiatives from both teachers and children ... room for exploring, trying things out, for raising open questions to which there are no fixed and final answers ... opportunities to think and reflect ... room for children’s questions, exploring, creativity, fantasy and challenging ... for different learning styles and strategies. In this way each and every child can find a learning space and appropriate activities within a programme. (Pramling et al. 2004, 29)

Scholarly discussions of the ‘open’ characteristics of *Te Whāriki* have highlighted both positive and problematic aspects. On the positive side, it has typically been noted that the title of the document – *Te Whāriki*, a Māori word meaning a *woven mat* – is symbolic of the way that each early childhood education setting is able to use the principles and guidelines of the curriculum framework to weave its own centre *whāriki* or curriculum (e.g. Alvestad, Duncan, and Berge 2009; Garbett and Yourn 2002; Guild, Lyons, and Whiley 1998; Nuttall 2002; Trister Dodge 2004). In this way, *Te Whāriki* is seen to enable cross-setting consistency at the level of its four curriculum principles² and associated strands and goals, as well as making space for the particular characteristics of each individual centre/setting within a very diverse sector to be expressed (e.g. Mutch 2003). In an interview study with nine teachers talking about *Te Whāriki*, Alvestad et al. suggested that the openness of *Te Whāriki* also enabled teachers to focus on supporting children’s learning by following their interests ‘as individual learners who [bring] their own skills, experiences and interests to the early childhood setting’ (2009, 10). Stated in these terms, *Te Whāriki* could be seen to have inscribed the traditional *child-centred* approach to early childhood practice with new meaning: from a pedagogy based on a view of children as individual initiators of their own learning (who thus need only the provision of resources for learning to follow), the *Te Whāriki* child-centred approach becomes a pedagogy that is negotiated as a sociocultural activity within a learning community that respects individual interests and choices.

However, this new inscription of meaning is neither a guaranteed outcome in day-to-day practice, nor necessarily an unproblematic one. For example, Alvestad et al. argued that following children’s own interests was ‘a source of tension for the teachers who had their own professional ideas for both skills and content knowledge that they wished the children to experience in the programme’ (2009, 11). From a slightly different angle, Brostrom likewise pointed to tensions that teachers might experience because of *Te Whāriki*’s lack of ‘explicit reflections on the relationship between its overall aims and examples of educational content’ (2003, 237). Brostrom favoured a curriculum that enabled teachers to ‘choose content that is related to the document’s aims’ (ibid. 237) and advocated for a curriculum that would explicitly ‘support children to become citizens of the world, able particularly to act in a future society’ (ibid. 236). Others have suggested that teachers are using *Te Whāriki* to justify pre-existing practices rather than to transform their practice (e.g. McLachlan, Carvalho, Kumar and de Lautour 2006; Nuttall 2002).³ Additionally, Nuttall has argued that while the openness of *Te Whāriki* was an ‘enormous strength, allowing maximum regard for centre contexts in teacher decision-making ... it may also be *Te Whāriki*’s greatest weakness ... [because] the structure and language of *Te Whāriki* can be easily appropriated to legitimate practice that is ideologically at odds with the theoretical bases of the document’ (2002, 101).

These findings and other critiques – such as Gammage’s (2008) labelling of *Te Whāriki* as a ‘vacuous curriculum’ that provides little in the way of specific guidelines for teachers (see also Blaiklock 2008; Hedges 2007; McLachlan et al. 2006) – provide a provocative background against which to present the analysis in this paper.

Research on professional practice and professionalism

With one notable exception (Dinniss 1974⁴) most New Zealand scholarly discussion on early childhood professionalism emerged – unsurprisingly – at a similar time to research on the curriculum (e.g. Bruce, 2000; Cherrington 2001; Cooper 1993; Dalli 1993). In this early work, one preoccupation was a desire to claim the ground of professional status for the early childhood sector. Thus, traditional definitions of a profession – listing criteria such as prolonged training, qualifications, a specialist knowledge base, requirements of distance from the client and professional autonomy (e.g. Katz 1985) – were frequent starting points for stock-taking arguments about whether early childhood teaching could be called a profession (e.g. Dalli 1993). The launch of *Te Whāriki* in draft form in 1993, in a format that signalled pedagogic innovation around a diverse but specialist knowledge base, together with the contemporaneous development of the Early Childhood Code of Ethics, both contributed to the sector’s emerging sense of being a profession (see Dalli and Cherrington 2009). Within a few years, a discourse of *being professional* and of *professionalism* had spread beyond scholarly to policy documents. For example, the 10-year strategic plan for early childhood education, *Ngā Huarahi Arataki* (Ministry of Education 2002, 1), stated that ‘professionally-trained’ early childhood teachers were essential to ensuring a quality early childhood education sector, and one Minister of Education, Trevor Mallard, famously announced at a practitioner conference in 2005: ‘Early childhood people are being regarded as professionals. They have gone from *childcarers* to *educators*’ (Mallard 2005).

More recently researchers have developed new lines of argument about professionalism and professional practice. Aitken and Kennedy (2007) argued that contemporary challenges to professionalism include the need to strengthen the knowledge and qualification base of the early childhood workforce, and structural issues like ongoing professional development and mentoring, and the encroachment of managerialism and privatisation in a field with a strong belief in education as a public good. Notions about cooperative forms of centre management consistent with a community-of-learning approach to professional practice (e.g. Oberhuemer 2000) have also attracted attention in local research (e.g. Aitken 2005; Scrivens and Duncan 2003), as have critical perspectives (e.g. Osgood 2006, 2009) that challenge the notion of ‘professionalism’ from different theoretical positions. This includes seeing professionalism as part of a neo-liberal vocabulary of accountability and control (Duhn 2010). Taking a different approach, in an earlier paper (Dalli 2008), I argued for a definition of professionalism that reflects the lived reality of early childhood teachers’ practice. Using data from a 2004 national survey of New Zealand early childhood teachers’ views of practice, I proposed a ‘ground-up’ definition of professionalism structured around the three core components of specialist pedagogic strategies, professional knowledge and practice, and collaborative relationships.

This paper adds to the small body of New Zealand research on early childhood teachers’ perceptions of professional practice. Additionally, by bringing thematic

analysis of the data from the *Day in the Life of an Early Years Practitioner* project to bear on current thinking about curriculum and its enactment, it contributes a profile of professional practice that is consistent with the underlying ontology of *Te Whāriki* as an 'open' curriculum.

The case study teacher: Bette in local context

The practitioner in the New Zealand case study, Bette, was a kindergarten teacher with eight and a half years' teaching experience. Kindergartens were among the first types of early childhood services established in New Zealand in the late 1880s, and the first to receive government funding support; they remain one of the most affordable early childhood services for families. Regional Kindergarten Associations act as the employing bodies for kindergarten teachers throughout New Zealand; they provide policy guidelines and administrative services, as well as a teacher support structure that includes regular supervision visits to kindergartens by senior teachers. Traditionally kindergartens have enrolled children aged between three and five years with older children attending daily morning sessions and three-year-olds present for three afternoon sessions a week. Although many kindergartens have adapted this daily structure in recent years (Duncan, Dalli, and Lawrence 2007), Bette's kindergarten ran on the traditional timetable; on the two afternoons when no children were present, the teachers engaged in programme planning and professional learning and development activities. During a full two-session day, a total of 86 children attended the kindergarten.

Bette was the head teacher in a three-teacher kindergarten in an ethnically diverse community with a mixed socioeconomic background in a semi-industrial suburb. She held a three-year diploma of teaching gained from a Teachers' College and was contemplating upgrading her qualification to a degree as part of what she saw as a professional commitment to ongoing learning. Her two colleagues likewise met the New Zealand benchmark qualification of a three-year early childhood teaching degree or diploma.

Data gathering, ethics and analysis

A full-day video record of Bette's day was collated one clear, midwinter day in 2007 by a professional cameraman, while I kept a pen-and-paper record of the day as a non-participant observer. Although the focus of the study was the teacher, ethical approval for the study was also negotiated with the parents of the kindergarten children and other teachers in the kindergarten as well as the Kindergarten Association. In filming the day, beyond following the usual ethical procedures to gain informed consent for the study, we also remained vigilant for any possible indications of discomfort, or lack of assent to the filming among children and adults: no instances of this occurred. Four days after the videoing, I interviewed Bette about the day with a particular focus on her view of what it means to act professionally and her perceptions of being a 'professional' in early childhood education; the interview also included a narrative reconstruction of the videoed day.

The analysis of the data was broadly thematic. Following a full transcription of the interview, and verification of the transcript by the teacher, codes for segments of the video data were developed and related to other segments from the interview data with the connections inspected and interrogated to establish themes (Richards

2009), and thus open up meanings and understandings around the research questions.

Bette's professional practice: a curriculum of open possibilities

The phrase a *curriculum of open possibilities* is a composite phrase from statements made by Bette when explaining her view of professional practice, and as this view was visible in her enacted practice. For example, responding to my question about whether her day had gone to plan, Bette explicitly described the curriculum in her kindergarten as one of open possibilities:

I think I didn't have any particular plans ... what happens in our programme planning cycle is ... we observe the children and we take photos and we write up what they're interested in doing ... and then we talk about that maybe on a Friday afternoon or a Wednesday afternoon. So then we have in our head maybe eighteen separate *possibilities* [emphasis added] of what might be happening with different children or groups of children. So that if the elements come towards you and say, 'will you read this?' [tone indicates that 'read' is an example] you say, 'yes!' Because this is an ongoing interest and you *know* [Bette's emphasis] – and you say, 'and maybe you could tell such and such a person because they're really interested in [for example] sharks too'. So you know, you'd have maybe ten or twenty things in your head about what could happen and you're not able to ever do all twenty, but it may be that you can see bits of them happening around the place and you could either just throw a supportive comment towards a child. ... You might say: 'And here, take one for Sam too' ... so it's actually part of the plan and it's part of an ongoing thing that you have all discussed together and put into your head for development.

This statement also highlights that Bette saw programme planning as deriving from the observation of children's interests, and discussions of them in teacher meetings leading to the identification of 'possibilities' for learning as the basis for later pedagogic/curriculum action by the teacher. Bette's phrase 'if the elements come towards you' captures another important aspect of her view of curriculum: specifically the idea that the curriculum was enacted in the spaces that the particular 'elements' – or happenings of the day – opened up for teaching and learning. Elaborating her view that the curriculum should be responsive to children's interests – both as they were expressed in the immediacy of any one time, and as they became known to the teachers through the children's and teachers' shared history within the kindergarten, Bette memorably said:

... fortunately plans are not an aligning; I mean plans are much more of a question mark and you have to have an *open mind* [emphasis added] about where any bit of any interest might go ... just taking opportunities – it's just a huge, vast amorphous bunch of things that might [happen] – possibilities really. So as you say, did what you planned happen? *Yes*. [Bette's emphasis]

These statements by Bette create a view of the curriculum as emergent and fluid with the image of plans as a 'question mark' reminiscent of Pramling et al.'s description of open curricula as leaving 'room for exploring, trying things out ... for open questions from the teacher ... for children's questions ... creativity, fantasy and challenging' (2004, 29). Bette's additional statement that a 'huge, vast amorphous bunch of things' could unexpectedly unfold in the course of a normal day as 'opportunities' for teaching and learning further highlights her view that the

teacher's role in the curriculum is, as argued by Sands and Weston (2010, 15), one of 'making decisions *in the moment* poised as provocateur, as listener, as learner, as teacher, ever vigilant for opportunities to widen and deepen knowledge'. This image of curriculum decision-making is consistent with the open ontology of *Te Whāriki*; it constructs the teacher's pedagogic role as creative and agentic, rather than as reactive and prescribed by narrow curriculum goals.

Three key themes were identified as capturing additional aspects of Bette's professional practice, which were essential in supporting her curriculum of open possibilities. The rest of this paper elaborates these themes.

Theme 1: Professional practice as relational involvement: 'You are all part of each other's lives'

Arriving at Bette's kindergarten, the overwhelming impression was of a place abuzz with activity. Bette began her day in the book corner from where she was able to greet the children and their parents as they entered the main room after stowing their bags in named trays near the front entrance. Bette spent the next 30 minutes of her morning surrounded by up to eight children while she read a story chosen by the first boy to join her in the reading corner. As more children gathered round her, Bette's reading became punctuated with a steady flow of comments – not all related to the story – addressed to the group of children around her, and to other children who wandered past on their way to nearby activities.

Looking on as an outside observer, Bette's comments could easily appear like trivial distractions from the main pedagogic activity of story-telling. However, during the interview Bette provided a perspective that linked the apparently 'trivial conversation' to a much larger pedagogic goal, that of creating – and maintaining – personal connections with the children's lives that referred back to their joint history within the kindergarten and encompassed a wide range of experiences. Bette reflected on her morning as follows:

I felt, looking back on the morning, that there had been a whole lot of trivial conversation ... but it's like, with each child you are in a conversation that has taken days and weeks. You know, you are all part of each other's lives ... to the extent that ... they notice if we have a new pair of shoes and we notice if they have a new pair of shoes ... we all have a degree of involvement in each other's entirety of our lives together...

Looking closely at the video data in light of Bette's statements about 'conversations that take days and weeks' revealed a pattern of such conversations sprinkled throughout the day. For example, Bette's greetings to children at the start of sessions often included personal comments such as: 'Have you got earrings on today? Were they for your birthday present?' and 'You've got army pants on; I wonder who else will wear theirs today?' or 'Hello! That's Becky's little baby you've got there' (referring to the doll being carried by one of the girls). These greetings both welcomed the children to the new day at kindergarten and established a link to the shared history that the children had with the teacher and with their peers. Similarly, a discussion about haircuts which developed from a girl's comment about wearing plaits, and Bette's comment that a friend had 'missed you on Friday when you weren't here' were among other examples that revealed that underneath the numerous

and often fleeting exchanges between Bette and the children, there was a deeper layer of connections based on intimate knowledge, and shared reference points – Bette’s conversations that spanned days and weeks.

Also nurtured through these apparently ‘trivial’ comments were caring relationships and a sense of togetherness within the kindergarten. Thus, Bette’s questions: ‘Where’s your sore thumb? Let me look – is it growing better?’ or ‘I wonder if Alice is better today. Is she here yet?’ and ‘I wonder who else will be wearing their army pants?’ functioned both to acknowledge each child’s immediate experience, as well as to direct the children’s attention beyond their individual focus to a group one.

The sense of caring and intimate involvement in each other’s lives, reminiscent of what Brennan (2007) memorably has called ‘a culture of tenderness’, had an additional significance within the afternoon session. According to Bette, the younger age of children in the afternoon session meant that the teachers were ‘more likely to have more of [their] personal time and space – [their] body – ... taken up with the comforting of children who are separating from their parents’. Bette explained:

... you’re kind of more involved in their personal lives. ... More involved with their bowel habits and undies and ... it’s just so open, you know, you have this lovely talk, ‘have you got nappies on today or undies?’ ... ‘Oh, I don’t have to have undies today, I’ve just got my nappy.’ [Bette changes voice affectionately to sound like a child]. And they’re all quite happy to be on a continuum of learning about toileting. ...

... different children develop a relationship with you – so as teachers you have to be open to that ... there’s one little guy and if he needs to go to the toilet he gets me. So the other teachers know if they see me and this child running towards the loo, to check where I was at and cover for me. So you don’t say, ‘no, I’m the outside teacher’ in that case. You go to the toilet: it’s urgent. There are different matters of urgency in the afternoon.

Bette’s focus on professional practice as essentially relational emerged strongly in these statements, which also highlight Bette’s view that being professional is personal: it involves making the teacher’s body available to children for comfort; it means being prepared to take care of children’s very personal bodily needs; and it requires a preparedness to drop everything and run to the bathroom with a child who needs support, thus privileging the child’s well-being over other demands.

Theme 2: Professional practice as teamwork and attunement to one’s colleagues

While Bette’s last statement above highlights the importance of attentive responsiveness to children’s well-being as a characteristic of teacher professional practice, it also makes clear that attentive responsiveness was reliant on support from colleagues who would ‘cover’ for Bette. Thus, collegial support was extended out of responsiveness to the child, as well as because of what Bette described as ‘your consciousness as a team of what is happening with your group’. This statement draws attention to the importance of teamwork in early childhood practice that is attuned to children’s well-being – a key strand in New Zealand’s early childhood curriculum. For Bette, team consciousness was renewed at the beginning of each day when: ‘we set up any things that we didn’t set up the night before and check in with each other and grade each other’s wellness’. Furthermore, teamwork required regular communication:

... keeping in touch during the day and communicating enough. That's a constant issue in a three teacher team – to make sure that you communicate equally, or that all of you know. You have a personal relationship with your colleagues individually, but then you have a collegial responsibility to share a certain amount of information about the children and about their needs; and when you're making the transition between parts of the day, about how that's going to go... Or making sure that the necessary apologies [are made] ... you know, saying: 'There was a phone call about that, I'm so sorry I didn't get out here in time and communicate that to you' ... dealing with the consequences of miscommunication is part of it as well.

In this way teamwork among the teachers was not something that occurred only at the structural level of agreeing responsibilities for the day, but also at the level of day-to-day negotiations of human relationships with implications for the enactment of the curriculum.

Theme 3: Acting professionally: 'Being fully present' and bringing it all together

Responding to my question about how she would describe 'acting professionally' in her interactions with children, Bette said:

... while being fully present with a child you still have to access things you've learnt and things that you have studied and things you've planned and you have to access your conversations with the parents, your conversations with the other team members – and bring it with you. In terms of ... your being present, there is the concept of what the child, right then, needs as well as this other stuff that's in your head.

This statement draws together many of the threads of Bette's thinking about professional practice; it indicates Bette's awareness that to act professionally means to bring together multiple layers of thinking, understandings and knowledge from diverse sources. Later in the interview she called that moment of bringing it together, or professional decision-making, a moment of 'balancing':

So you have your knowledge of that child and you have the knowledge of the other children and then you have to look and see what's happening ... and work out what you're going to do professionally. That's the whole *balancing*... So what needs to happen? Yeah, *balance*, *balancing* [Bette's emphasis].

The following section provides an insight into 'balancing' as curriculum decision-making by highlighting some examples of opportunities for learning that were opened up in Bette's kindergarten through professional practice focused on a curriculum of open possibilities.

Curriculum decision-making: opportunities when 'the elements come towards you'

Bette's phrase – 'if the elements come towards you' – was a powerful way of explaining that some curriculum experiences unfolded within her kindergarten through apparently serendipitous happenings which were transformed into opportunities for learning through the professional actions of the teaching team.

Learning the haka and bringing the outside world into the kindergarten. One notable opportunity for learning 'in the spaces that open up' when 'the elements come towards you' was glimpsed in the first half-hour of Bette's day. During this time Bette was in the reading corner surrounded by up to eight children while she read the book

The fish of Maui. The book was chosen by Rangi, the first boy who arrived in the reading corner. Rangi settled down to listen to the story and quickly became very engrossed in the book, with which he was obviously very familiar. He pointed to the pictures and contributed phrases from the story as they came up in Bette's reading of it. When Bette turned the page to a picture of Maui with his father, Bette asked who they were. Pointing to each in turn, Rangi said 'that's me; and that's my dad' promptly opening his eyes wide mimicking how to *pukana*⁵ in a *haka*⁶. Noticing Rangi's wide-open eyes and the ceremonial body stance he had adopted, Bette complimented him, saying: 'You're quite good at that. We'll have to learn to do the *haka*' whereupon Rangi burst into a performance of a short segment from a *haka*. Later that morning, as Bette was leading a group of children making play-dough, two other boys could be observed re-enacting the *haka* moves performed by Rangi.

Both these events were fleetingly captured on the video and, as I observed them on the day, made but a momentary impression on me. However, in discussing Bette's programme planning during the interview four days later, Bette made an unprompted reference to Rangi's interest in the *haka* and used it to explain how she and her colleagues saw it as an opportunity for expanding the curriculum, including looking outside the kindergarten to resource it:

... one of the things that's been very exciting for us is our little boy who's really fascinated with doing *haka* – he's only three, in the morning group, and he calls ... the Maui books, he calls them 'haka books'. He has just seized onto this interest but ... because of his energy and enthusiasm there are like eight kids who are interested in that whole group of books now ... we're now looking at how can we build on it and go with it, and who can we bring in? Because the boy, [the] *haka*-practitioner, he knows women don't know this stuff. ... At three, he knows he needs a man. ... So we've been trying to get in touch with the school to see if we can get a *kapa haka* group⁷ down, or if we can go and see one there. It might be that we end up needing to get a video of one if we can't manage it ... we're going to get the words so we learn what the words are, we're going to learn ... about the meanings ... just to enrich the real interest.

Clearly, Rangi's personal interest had serendipitously opened up a space for valued learning for the whole kindergarten, which incidentally also had the potential to bring the outside world – the local school *kapa haka* group – into the kindergarten. From Bette's perspective, what I had observed as a momentary display of interest in a common New Zealand cultural practice – the *haka* – had nothing fleeting about it; rather it was evidence of a child's ongoing interest which she and her colleagues had already identified, were keen to nurture when it re-surfaced, and planned to extend in the future.

The camera-man in the kindergarten. Serendipitous learning was encouraged also through the opportunities that arose around unusual or unexpected happenings within the normal course of the day such as the presence in the kindergarten of the camera-man to film Bette. As the children walked into the kindergarten at the start of each session, they inevitably noticed the camera-man and the video camera aimed at Bette. Noting their interest, Bette briefly explained to the children close to her that she was being filmed today and this enabled her to subsequently integrate the children's interest in her lapel microphone, and other responses to the filming, within her general activity. For example, when one girl cuddled up to Bette and

exclaimed ‘I’m going to be in the photo now’, Bette put her arm around her in an affectionate gesture and explained that yes, that would be the case, as she was now in the camera’s sight-line. Similarly, when a new child joined the group and asked who the camera-man was, Bette introduced him by name and suggested the child say hello. Even Baggins, the kindergarten rabbit, became part of the action around the camera-man with the children commenting that he ‘wanted to be in the pictures now’. In this way, the children were able to make sense of the unexpected presence of an unknown person within the centre, link it to their established life within the kindergarten (and Baggins as an integral part of it), as well as generally expand their understanding of the process of filming, including the use of lapel microphones. Within the interview, Bette explained that unexpected happenings of this kind could fit in ‘entirely well with our curriculum in that it’s part of the world and ... finding out how things work’.

The dead bird in the garden. The discovery of a dead bird in the outdoor area of the kindergarten was another of the ‘vast, amorphous bunch of things’ that unexpectedly became part of the emergent curriculum on the day of the study. The bird was found by one of the boys as it lay under a bush close to the footpath just inside the kindergarten gate. At the suggestion of one of the teachers the boy placed the bird in a plastic container and took it indoors to show to Bette. After exploring with Bette how the bird might have died (‘someone put his hand up and it fell into his hand’), and what he might do with the dead bird (‘I’m going to keep it’), the boy took the bird outdoors again and, with the help of other children and the outside teacher, dug a hole in the garden to bury it. The children then decided to put up a notice to mark the bird’s grave. The notice, hand-printed with felt pens on paper from the collage table and taped to a garden stake, said: ‘A bird died’. The notice flapped in the light breeze and attracted attention throughout the day from children and parents alike.

As in the case of the camera-man and the filming equipment, the discovery of the dead bird was a one-off event. In having the freedom to explore these events as they occurred, the children had the opportunity to widen their knowledge in naturally arising ways within a setting where curriculum decision-making was open enough to allow it, rather than constrained by the need to deliver pre-determined outcomes.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a picture of early childhood professional practice in New Zealand by bringing data from a study of a day in the life of a kindergarten teacher, Bette, to bear on current thinking about curriculum and its enactment. The paper identified three key elements of the teacher’s professional practice as contributing to Bette’s enactment of *Te Whāriki* as an open curriculum: a focus on relational involvement in the children’s life at the kindergarten; teamwork that went beyond structural planning to include ongoing relational attunement to one’s colleagues; and professional decision-making described by the teacher as ‘bringing it all together’ in an act of ‘balancing’. The paper has argued that these elements of professional practice operated as layers of activity and consciousness that were often hidden behind the appearance of trivia in the teacher’s day. In this way this paper both supports earlier findings that curriculum decision-making is highly complex (e.g. Nuttall 2002) and simultaneously throws light on ways in which teachers can implement *Te Whāriki* in the way it was intended – as an open curriculum.

The study also makes it reasonable to suggest that as Cullen (1996, 123) hoped, working with *Te Whāriki* is contributing 'to the growth of professionalism in the early childhood community and its ability to reflect critically about current practice'. While Bette may not be typical of the early childhood education workforce at large, her professional action during the day of the study, and her thoughtful reflections during the subsequent interview, reveal a level of intentionality of practice that demonstrates that it is possible for teachers to eschew the potential for enormous gaps between curriculum ideals and practice identified by some writers (e.g. Alvestad et al. 2009; Brostrom 2003; Cullen 1996; Nuttall 2002; Nuttall and Edwards 2007). Although the focus of this paper has not been on the extent to which critical reflection on current practice was part of Bette's practice, critical reflection was embedded in Bette's professional reflection regarding the videoed day. The topic of critical reflection as an integral aspect of working with an open curriculum could be a useful focus for future research on professional practice.

Notes

1. The 10-year strategic plan for early childhood education, *Pathways to the future – Ngā Huarahi Arataki*, introduced under a Labour-led government in 2002, had a target of achieving a 100% qualified workforce in teacher-led services by 2012. A National-led government elected in November 2008 subsequently removed the 100% target and established a new target of 80% qualified by 2012.
2. The four principles in *Te Whāriki* are: well-being/mana atua; holistic development/kotahitanga; empowerment/whakamana; belonging/mana whenua.
3. It is worth noting that this argument does rather presuppose that everything that predated *Te Whāriki* needed to change – and this is by no means a demonstrable proposition.
4. Dinniss (1974) gave an address in which he considered whether early childhood work could be called a profession on the basis of criteria of a profession proposed by M. Lieberman in the 1956 publication of *Education as a Profession*, by Prentice Hall.
5. *Pukana* is a verb meaning to stare wildly, dilate the eyes – done by both genders when performing haka and waiata to emphasise particular words.
6. A *haka* is a Māori traditional dance form performed by men, most famously at the start of national rugby games.
7. Most New Zealand schools have Māori Performing Arts groups called *kapa haka* groups; *kapa* means line or row and refers to the way that *haka* are performed by groups of people arranged in lines.

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