

Early Childhood Curriculum Comparison: Aotearoa New Zealand and Malaysia

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Abstract

This article reports on a collaborative study examining Aotearoa New Zealand's *Te Whāriki* and Malaysia's *National Preschool Standard-based Curriculum (NPSC)*. The similarities and differences focus on the diverse cultural and historical contexts, philosophies, frameworks, theories and approaches of the two curricula for children aged four-six years. The curriculum structure and framework, and its relation to the curriculum in practice, were prominent in the study. Both curricula see the child as being at the centre of all that happens, and both seek to support children for their future. *NPSC* focuses on more formal and teacher-led experiences within a play-based programme, while *Te Whāriki* is non-prescriptive and focuses on life-long learning. The nationalistic focus of *NPSC* has significant influence with the emphasis on King, country and building unity across the diverse population. On the other hand, the focus of *Te Whāriki* is on children's potential and the knowledge that early childhood education (ECE) promotes building a solid foundation for further education and life. Examples of differences such as these provide opportunities to learn about the priorities and aspirations of different nations through their ECE curricula. Findings indicated that culture was a significant feature in the two ECE curricula.

Keywords: Early childhood education, curriculum, life-long learning, play based programme

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Introduction

Curriculum can be seen as a framework or set of guidelines which support the work of education. While curriculum is socially, politically and culturally constructed (Lewis, 2021) it provides a pathway for teaching and learning. Curriculum is a central guide and supports teacher practice and pedagogy, though Alvestad and Duncan (2006) suggest curriculum provides goals and visions for teachers to aspire to, this viewpoint may not be shared by all key stakeholders.

The qualitative study reported on in this article used document analysis as an approach to systematically evaluate and compare (Bowen, 2009) two curriculum documents. The collaborative study examined two different early childhood education (ECE) curricula for children aged four-six years, one from Aotearoa New Zealand and the second from Malaysia. These curricula include Aotearoa New Zealand's *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) and Malaysia's *National Preschool Standard Curriculum (NPSC)* (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017a). While these curricula derive from two different countries with diverse histories and cultures, it was considered there were benefits to exploring some of the similarities and differences between the two, thereby providing opportunities to learn about another country's priorities and aims for learning through their respective curriculum. In addition, it provided the opportunity to work alongside colleagues in another ECE context and to engage in valuable professional discussions.

The curriculum comparison came about from a Memorandum of Understanding that existed between two ECE initial education providers who were interested in the framework of the two curricula. Six academic staff from the two organisations were involved in the research, four from Aotearoa New Zealand and two from Malaysia. These academic staff usually met fortnightly online via Microsoft Teams in 2022 and 2023 to discuss and analyse each of the curricula. The collaboration, which was led by one team member from Aotearoa New Zealand, involved an openness of all team members without judgement to discover new learning. The structure and framework of both curriculum documents, and how this related to the curriculum in practice, were a specific focus of the study. The findings provided opportunities for all participants to learn from each other, look deeply at their own curriculum document, whilst developing an understanding of another curriculum and will be significant

to those interested in ECE.

The first section provides context for both Aotearoa New Zealand and Malaysia, including a brief outline of each country, its ECE sector and curriculum. This is followed by a discussion of key areas of interest which emerged during the analysis. These key areas include philosophy and framework; theories and approaches; and the curriculum in practice.

Aotearoa New Zealand Context

Country and ECE

Aotearoa New Zealand has an estimated population of 5,127,400 (Stats NZ Tatauranga Aotearoa, n.d.), with the country being founded through the signing of a treaty referred to as Te Tiriti o Waitangi. This treaty, signed in 1840, outlined an agreement between indigenous Māori and Britain. Since the 1840s, and in particular the last two decades, the population has become increasingly diverse and multi-cultural as people from many different nations have settled in the country (Stone et al., 2021). In recent years, Aotearoa New Zealand has been identified as superdiverse. This is reflected in their ECE sector, with the 2018 census revealing that within ECE, 48% of children attending were Pākehā, 24% were Māori and the remaining 28% came from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Chan & Ritchie, 2019).

ECE first began in Aotearoa New Zealand in the 1880s in response to needs of the time. The rich history and diversity of the growth of ECE in the country has been comprehensively documented (May, 2013; May et al., 2021). Over time the sector has developed a range of different service types to meet the needs of young children, including four-six year-olds. The ECE sector in Aotearoa New Zealand is diverse (Loveridge & McLachlan, 2014) and, as mentioned, includes a range of different service types, which seek to meet the needs of their diverse communities. Additionally, each service type has its own unique history and philosophy. As illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 below, the sector is made up of both teacher-led and parent-led services (Figures adapted from Cameron, 2018). Within parent-led services children's parents are central to supporting their care and education, while teacher-led services are required to have at least 50% qualified teachers supporting the care and education of children (Ministry of Education, n.d.).

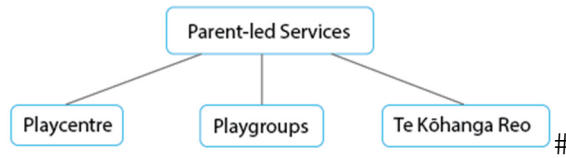


Figure 1. Overview of parent-led service types in the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE context

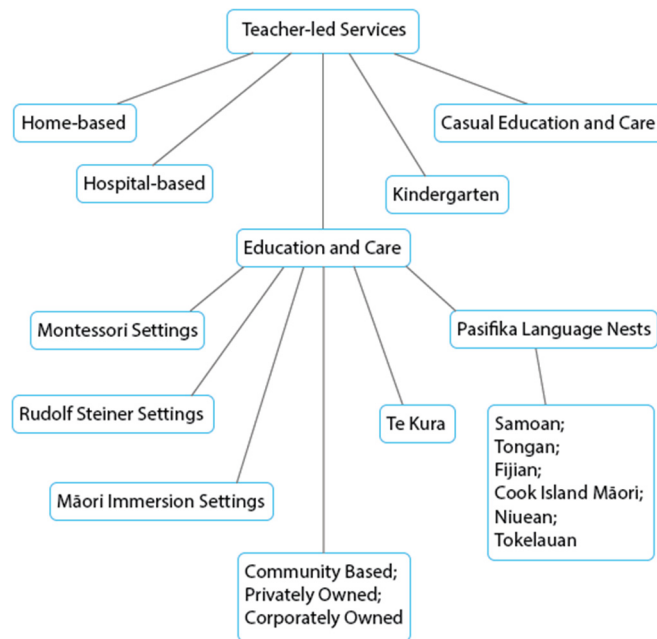


Figure 2. Overview of teacher-led service types in the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE context

In addition to the service types shown in Figures 1 and 2 there are a small number of unlicensed ECE services, such as playgroups. However, it is important to note that all licensed ECE settings are required to meet the Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2023), and the relevant Licensing Criteria (MoE, 2022a) for the service type. The regulations and licensing criteria outline the minimum requirements for settings including, but not limited to, adult:child ratios, group size, teacher qualification requirements, along with obligations relating to health and safety standards, and the implementation of curriculum. For teachers working in ECE with four-six year-olds, 80% are required to hold a recognised teaching qualification and all those working in primary

schools are required to be fully qualified.

While ECE is not compulsory, in Aotearoa New Zealand by age six children are legally required to be enrolled and attend school and most start at around aged five (Peters, 2010). Despite ECE not being compulsory, participation rates are high and in 2021, 97% of children starting primary school had attended ECE in the six months prior (MoE, 2022b). This is indicative of the focus on increasing participation in ECE, particularly for Māori and Pasifika children who participate at lower rates in comparison with other ethnic groups (MoE, 2022b).

Curriculum

In 1996 the MoE introduced the ECE curriculum *Te Whāriki* and this was revised in 2017 (MoE, 2017). *Te Whāriki* is a bicultural curriculum, upholding Te Tiriti o Waitangi. The curriculum is written in te reo Māori and English, and although contained in the same document, these two versions of *Te Whāriki* are not direct translations of each other, rather they are complimentary and responsive to Aotearoa New Zealand context and encompass children from birth to age six. Additionally, the curriculum outlines that ECE services have a responsibility to support, encourage and use both Te Reo Māori and New Zealand sign language (both national official languages). All MoE funded ECE services are mandated to implement practices that align with *Te Whāriki*. Alongside *Te Whāriki*, the New Zealand Curriculum (MoE, 2007) includes children from age five until the end of their compulsory schooling. The governing body overseeing ECE and the compulsory education sector, in Aotearoa New Zealand is the MoE. The MoE is responsible for outlining regulatory obligations such as teacher/student ratios and minimum space requirements that are linked to accessing funding. The curriculum frameworks for both ECE and schooling sectors are mandated by the MoE. It is important to note that while *Te Whāriki* is the national ECE curriculum alongside this document sit a number of additional regulations and key documents which support and guide pedagogy. Included in these are: *Our Code Our Standards* (Education Council of New Zealand-Matātū Aotearoa, 2017), ECE Regulations (MoE, 2023), ECE Licensing Criteria (MoE, 2022a), *Kei Tua o te Pae* (MoE, 2004, 2007, 2009), *Te Whatu Pōkeka* (MoE, 2009), *Tātaiako* (Education Council of New Zealand-Matātū Aotearoa, 2011) and *Tapasā* (MoE, 2018).

The aspiration statement within *Te Whāriki* outlines the vision of children as “competent

and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society” (MoE, 2017, p. 5). The framework, or structure, refers to the principles, strands, goals and learning outcomes, which serve as a guide to support a child’s life-long learning journey. The 2017 revision of *Te Whāriki* sought to place Māori at the centre of the curriculum, and to reflect kaupapa Māori. The term kaupapa Māori refers to the foundational beliefs, knowledge and values that define Māori culture. These values are in turn reflected in the principles of *Te Whāriki* (Smith, 2000). The principles are the most important part of the framework and provide its core strength through the woven mat metaphor. The principles are the “foundations of curriculum decision making” (MoE, 2017, p. 16). The four principles of *Te Whāriki* underpin the overall framework, and everything stems from these. The principles include: Empowerment/Whakamana, Holistic development/Kotahitanga, Family and community/Whānau tangata, Relationships/Ngā hononga. These principles all focus on empowering children as holistic learners within the context of family and community while noting the importance of “responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things” (MoE, 2017, p. 21). Under each principle in *Te Whāriki* a description is provided of what it means for children and families, as well as information relating to the role of the teacher within each principle. *Te Whāriki* is described as being a non-prescriptive curriculum with an openly woven framework. The 2017 revision of *Te Whāriki* placed more emphasis on the bicultural and bilingual nature of the curriculum, with the acknowledgement that *Te Whāriki* is a curriculum for all children (Skerrett, 2018), and that all children should be supported to learn about Māori viewpoints, culture and language.

Malaysia Context

Country and ECE

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country with a population estimated to be 33 million (Ministry of Economy, 2023). The various ethnic groups are comprised of: Malay 50%, Chinese 24%, Indigenous 11.0%, Indian 7%, and non-Malaysian citizens 7 %. Three major ethnic groups make up the population: Malays, Chinese, and Indians with the ethnic groups practising

several different religions. Malaysia's government is a Federal parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarch. The country gained independence and formed its own constitution in 1957, which was later amended.

In Malaysia, ECE is referred to as either 'childcare' or 'preschool' however for the purpose of this curriculum comparison the term preschool is used. Regardless of whether a preschool is national, private or international it still comes under the jurisdiction of the MoE. In Malaysia, preschool education offers educational programmes for children aged between four to six years old (this is strongly encouraged, but not compulsory for four and five-year-olds) as part of the school readiness preparation for entry into primary formal education at the elementary level (Rahmatullah et al., 2021).

Malaysia's preschool education was introduced in the 1950s and has proliferated since the 1960s (Imran et al., 2010). The 1980s saw a change in the ECE environment whereby the private sector also offered preschool educational opportunities as an alternative to parents who were ineligible from enrolling their children in government preschools. These private preschools operating throughout the country do not only provide educational opportunities to Malaysians but also international citizens.

The government passed the 'Child Care Centre Act', as stated in Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Berhad (2006) in 1984, when it realised the need to set minimum standards and regulations for childcare in Malaysia. Examples of these include registration, qualification, issuing certificates of child-minders, and health and nutrition. In 1996, preschool education was incorporated into the national education system resulting in the nationwide education system being mandated by the government. Interestingly, this corresponds with the publication of *Te Whāriki* which also occurred in 1996.

Preschool institutions in Malaysia can be classified according to their medium of instruction (English, Malay, or Chinese), curriculum approaches, religious orientation, origin (local or international), or political affiliations. Currently, preschools in Malaysia are classified as either branded (usually a local or foreign franchise) or non-branded (usually run by individual proprietors). The various types of public and private preschools are outlined in Figures 3 and 4 below:

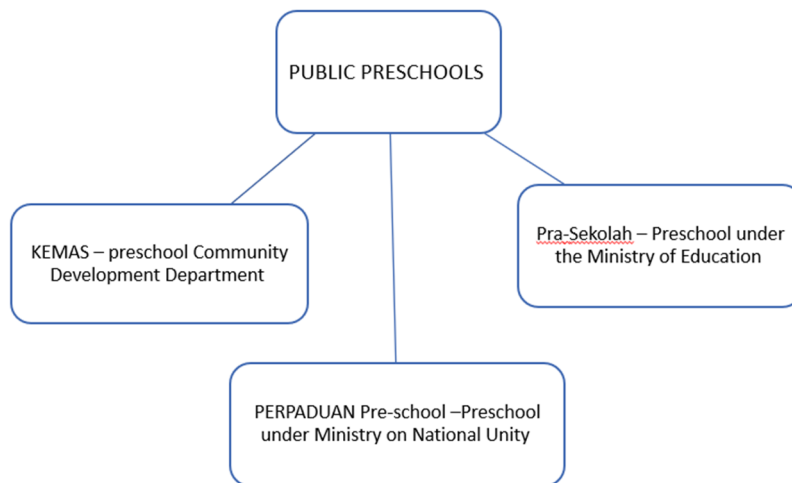


Figure 3. Types of preschools in Malaysia - Public preschool

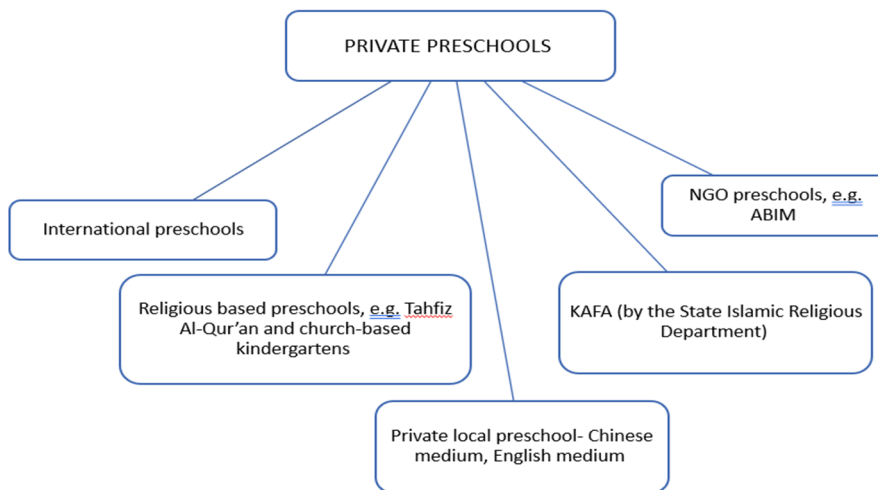


Figure 4. Types of preschools in Malaysia - Private preschool

Curriculum

The two national curricula in Malaysia are: PERMATA National Curriculum for children up to four years old and *NPSC* for children aged four to six years. For the purpose of this article, the focus is on *NPSC*, which is written in the national language of Malaysia which is Bahasa Melayu, and English. Bahasa Melayu is the main language to promote unity among

the multicultural people of diverse races in the Malaysian society and national type schools. English, as the second language, is widely used in private and international schools currently, with Mandarin being the third most used language. The aim of preschool education is to develop the potential of the children comprehensively in an integrated manner regarding their physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and social development through fun, creative and meaningful activities. A key role of the curriculum is to build a nation and establish an overall national identity. In 2003, the *NPSC* was rolled-out throughout Malaysia and was revised in 2016 in tandem with the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 and current educational needs (MoE, 2013). The Education Act 1996 establishes that preschool education regardless of their types, private or government-owned, must adhere to the national statutory preschool curriculum, i.e., the *NPSC* (Laws of Malaysia, Act 550, Education Act 1996).

The national education philosophy states that “Education in Malaysia is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner” as stated in the Laws of Malaysia, Act 550, Education Act (1996, p. 11). The five principles included within *NPSC* include: belief in God; loyalty to King and country; supremacy of the constitution; rule of law; and good behaviour and morality. *NPSC* has very specific guiding principles that children practice Muslim values, and for non-Muslim children the focus is on moral values. The national framework of *NPSC* consists of six learning strands which include Communication; Science and Technology; Spirituality, Attitudes and Values; Humanities; Personal Competence; Physical and Aesthetics. These six learning strands are the main domains and are integrated with critical, creative, and innovative thinking all aiming to being a balanced individual. The objective of this integration is to produce global citizens who embrace good moral values, who are knowledgeable, who practise critical thinking, and who offer creative and innovative ideas (Rahmatullah et al., 2021). The guiding framework of *NPSC* is focused on 21st century skills which emphasise thinking and living skills for their future careers with moral values being fundamental.

The objective of *NPSC* is to develop children’s potential in a comprehensive manner across all areas, including physical, spiritual, social, and intellectual development, in a safe and conducive learning environment through fun, creative, and meaningful activities. This is in line with the National Education Philosophy, which aims to produce holistic individuals to advance society and the country (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017b).

Key areas of interest

An analysis of both curricula highlighted the following key areas of interest: philosophy and framework; theories and approaches; and the curriculum in practice. It was challenging to come up with shared definitions of these key areas of interest as the two countries, while using similar terms, often attached different meanings to them. Alvestad and Duncan (2006) suggest that this challenge is fairly common when comparing national curriculum.

Philosophy and framework

A philosophy is a statement or vision “of perspectives, theories, knowledge, beliefs and values that underpin practice” (Arthur et al., 2021, p. 190). ‘Framework’ was the term most closely agreed upon by the authors and refers to the structure of the curriculum, or how each curriculum is organised. The framework for both curricula comprise interconnected components and emphasises integrated learning. The framework of *Te Whāriki* refers to principles, strands, goals and learning outcomes and in the *NPSC* curriculum the framework refers mainly to strands and skills.

Both curricula articulate a clear philosophy and provide an organised framework. *Te Whāriki* and *NPSC* are both underpinned by clearly stated curriculum principles and fundamental expectations. Although there are similarities in the focus of these curricula, there are also some clear differences. While the words ‘framework’ and ‘principles’ are included in both curriculum documents in some form, this does not necessarily mean they are attributed the same meanings. Within *Te Whāriki*, for example, the framework is all encompassing and refers to the principles, strands, goals, and learning outcomes which enable each setting to decide what they would like to include in their curriculum. The principles and strands are very closely woven together in *Te Whāriki*, and the principles are described as “the foundation of curriculum decision making and the guide for every aspect of pedagogy and practice” (p. 17). In contrast, within *NPSC*, the principles and strands are separate. The strands include the learning objectives and are presented as a separate section from the National principles.

There are however also some clear similarities underpinning each of the two curricula. While they both share a holistic view with the content of *Te Whāriki* making reference to

learners as being “healthy in mind, body and spirit” (MoE, 2017, p. 5), *NPSC* seeks to develop individuals who are “intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced” as stated in the Laws of Malaysia, Act 550, Education Act (1996, p. 11). In addition, the integrated nature of care (e.g., sleeping, eating, toileting) and learning is inherent throughout both *Te Whāriki* and *NPSC*. Both curricula are responsive to the local community and context. In *Te Whāriki*, this means that each setting has the autonomy to weave their curriculum to ensure it is responsive to their local context and community. The curriculum enables teachers to have flexibility in how the curriculum is enacted, particularly in relation to individual children and what is happening in their lives. *Te Whāriki* is a bi-cultural curriculum that acknowledges the place of Māori as tangata whenua (first people of the land) and there is an obligation that Māori identity, culture and language (te reo Māori) will be protected and valued. Aotearoa New Zealand also has an increasing diversity of cultures and ethnicities, and the curriculum asserts the importance of acknowledging a child’s home language and culture. Alternatively, *NPSC* outlines a wider nationalistic view to focus on Malaysia as the context and encourages patriotism and citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, possess high moral standards and who are responsible and capable of achieving a high level of personal well-being. They also encourage being able to “contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, the society and the nation at large” (Laws of Malaysia, Act 550, Education Act, 1996, p. 11). Development of a positive self-concept, improvement of skills and cultivating self confidence in children are to prepare them to “face challenges and participate in further learning” (Ministry of Education, Malaysia 2017, p. 2). Values of being respectful and tolerant towards each other’s cultures and traditions in Malaysia are taught through the spirituality and moral education strands of the *NPSC*.

A further difference between *Te Whāriki* and *NPSC* is in the different approach taken within each curriculum to meeting certain requirements. There is an emphasis and compulsory requirement within *NPSC* to provide Islamic studies, including a moral component, for all Muslim students and for non-Muslim students to attend moral education. Even though moral education as such, is not compulsory within *Te Whāriki*, there are references made to supporting children’s spirituality and knowing they make a valued contribution to society. It is also worth noting that, at this point in time, attending ECE is not compulsory in Aotearoa New Zealand. For ECE settings who receive MoE funding, however,

the principles, strands, goals and learning outcomes of *Te Whāriki* are required to be enacted.

Theories and approaches

The term ‘approach’ has been used in several different ways in the next section. Firstly, it is used as a way of describing specific educational programmes (e.g., Montessori or Reggio Emilia). It is also used to describe a set of pedagogical practices that reflect the beliefs about how children learn (Arthur et al., 2021; Nuttall, 2013). It is important to note there are a range of theories that underpin different approaches to both programmes and practices including socio-cultural and developmental theories.

Key theories and approaches inform and influence both curricula. *Te Whāriki* is underpinned by key theories and approaches including bio-ecological, socio-cultural, kaupapa Māori, Pasifika, and critical theories. Theorists such as Bronfenbrenner, Vygostky, Bruner, Durie and Pere have informed many of these approaches. The openness inherent within *Te Whāriki* enables teachers' individual philosophies and a range of theories and approaches to inform teacher practice (Nuttall, 2013). This aligns with the following statement from *Te Whāriki* that “When designing curriculum, kaiako will be influenced by a range of educational ideas and philosophies. This is consistent with the diversity of early learning services in New Zealand and will give rise to distinctive features in each local curriculum” (MoE, 2017, p. 60).

In Malaysia there are also a range of theories and approaches that underpin the curriculum. These include developmental, ecological and humanistic approaches. The emphasis on the developmental approach, which differs from *Te Whāriki*, is based on developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017c). Underpinning this approach is that children develop in sequence and through various stages of development. This approach aligns with Piaget’s development stage theory (Duchesne & McMaugh, 2016) which was more prevalent in the 1980s. The goal of DAP is to ensure that children develop physically, cognitively, socially and emotionally through appropriate practices.

Both curricula focus on understanding and accepting children as individuals. This humanistic approach emphasises children’s needs whereby teachers accept children for who they are. In addition, the ecological approach taken within *NPSC* aligns with

Bronfenbrenner's theory, and outlines that children are inculcated from the home, school and within the community where they live (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017). Teachers who adhere to this approach ensure that children's lives are interlinked and in harmony with the environment. Underpinning this approach is that ECE is the responsibility of the preschool, family and community. *NPSC* also outlines the need for active involvement between the home and the preschool. The teacher is entrusted with the responsibility of planning educational objectives to guide the children's learning in the school environment to be similar to their homes. Similarly, Bronfenbrenner is also one of the key theorists underpinning *Te Whāriki*, and the more recent bio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) is a fundamental feature of the curriculum.

A difference between the two curricula is the approach taken toward inclusion in ECE. While both curricula are inclusive, there are some differences in how this is articulated and enacted. The content of *Te Whāriki* is written for and inclusive of all children, regardless of their ethnicity, gender, ability, religion, and socio-economic background. The notion of 'inclusion' as taken within *Te Whāriki* is all encompassing, with a significant focus on incorporating the language, culture and identity of all children (Skerrett, 2018). It is however important to note that while the content of *Te Whāriki* promotes an inclusive approach for all children, considerable challenges remain in ensuring that all ECE settings and processes and teachers' practices are in fact inclusive, and especially for children (Macartney, 2019). A difference however is that *NPSC* has a separate curriculum for children with special needs, where the teachers plan teaching strategies to support their learning. Teachers provide guidance activities after they have identified the children's levels of learning difficulties/disabilities. They will diversify or modify the learning content and activities to cater to the children's needs for more effective teaching and learning.

The curriculum in practice

Alongside similarities and differences previously discussed, it is important to consider how the curriculum is enacted in practice in each of the respective countries. The role of the teacher, as outlined in *Te Whāriki*, is to provide a safe, secure and stimulating learning environment within ECE settings while highlighting that "Children learn through play" (MoE,

2017, p. 46). This acknowledgement underpins the teacher's role in relation to their practice – their interactions with children and the way they set up the environment. Inherent within the teachers' role is that children are viewed as capable, confident, and competent learners who have agency over their learning. To achieve the intent of *Te Whāriki*, teachers must have a wide repertoire of strategies and know when to use a given strategy to accommodate the different ways that children learn and the specific content they are learning (MoE, 2017).

Both curricula support the idea of learning through play with both *Te Whāriki* and *NPSC* noting the need for children to learn about the range of curriculum-subject areas, such as emergent literacy, mathematics, the arts, but there are differences in how the programme or daily timetable is structured. Learning through play includes the notion of being a child-led curriculum, whereby teachers intentionally support children's strengths, needs and interests by responding to children's holistic development (Wood, 2004). Despite the shared philosophical viewpoint of how play is used to support children's learning, it is evident that there are differences in the approach taken within the two documents. While child-led and free-play are inherent within *Te Whāriki*, within *NPSC* the teacher is described as taking a greater role in leading and deciding the play.

The teacher in Malaysia is responsible for arranging the classes, planning learning objectives and guiding meaningful activities. *NPSC* outlines the teachers' role in this way and notes routine activities which include circle time, recess, and reflection. Circle time activities comprise sharing ideas and information; storytelling for vocabulary development; improving sharing of ideas and information; improvement of social skills and active involvement of preschoolers. Recess refers to the involvement of children in the preparation of food and dining preparation. It is the time allocated for children to have their meals in addition to physical and mental relaxation activities. Self-management, manners, healthy eating, and balanced diet are emphasized during recess. Reflection provides the opportunity for teachers and children to reflect on their daily activities as well as to discuss further learning. In some ways the teacher in Aotearoa New Zealand has a similar role in terms of encouraging and promoting children to become involved in activities. However, there are some clear differences in the language used and way in which the daily programme evolves. An example of this is that there are no allocated times for specific subjects. Furthermore, *Te Whāriki* outlines a holistic and integrated approach, with the child having agency over their

learning and few times or activities formally set by the teacher.

Both curricula take a strengths-based approach. *Te Whāriki* is based on the premise of working from children's strengths, along with their interests and dispositions (Carr, 2001). The curriculum is non-prescriptive in principle, though clearly identifies three different age groupings of children – infants, toddlers and young children. The content of *Te Whāriki* however, is not linear in terms of stating when aspects of the curriculum are to be taught. Meanwhile *NPSC* refers to a 'student centered approach' which means children are allowed to discuss and express their thoughts and feelings in the way they choose. Some examples of this may include role-play, drama, art, music and other creative, aesthetic activities in the curriculum. Small group discussions or cluster groupings during class discussions are to encourage children to share their thoughts, opinions, beliefs, and class projects. Teachers are beginning to involve children in their lesson planning and simple decision making in their early years class settings.

The building of relationships with parents and families is a further crucial aspect of teacher practice in Aotearoa New Zealand (Carr & May, 1993). The relationship with families is integral to all the learning and development that happens in the ECE setting. Teachers have a responsibility to build and maintain these relationships on an ongoing basis to ensure the relationship is stable and works for all involved – children, parents, and teachers. Parents are viewed as the child's first teachers and their aspirations for their children are encouraged and heard (Carr & May, 1993). This is noted in *Te Whāriki* in the following statement, "It is important that kaiako develop meaningful relationships with whānau and that they respect their aspirations for their children, along with those of hapū, iwi and the wider community" (MoE, 2017, p. 20). In Malaysia parents are invited to participate in the daily programme, and can make suggestions, but are not invited formally to participate in curriculum enactment.

Considering key areas of interests, it is important to note all curricula are influenced by social, political and cultural constructs. Notwithstanding this, the fundamental cultural differences of Aotearoa New Zealand and Malaysia were particularly evident in the analysis of each curricula. Unlike *Te Whāriki*, which emphasises "competent and confident learners" (MoE, 2017, p. 5), *NPSC* highlights patriotism from a national perspective and contributions to harmony and improvement in family, society, and the nation. In addition, while both curricula include commonalities in child-centered and play-based learning, the differences in

the teachers' role and approaches in practice also relate to fundamental cultural differences.

Conclusion

In looking to compare the ECE curricula of two countries with different histories, cultures and ways of life, this article has identified both similarities and differences. Additionally, findings from the study provide clear evidence that culture has a significant impact on ECE curricula. Analysis revealed the view of the child within *Te Whāriki* and *NPSC* as being at the centre of all that happens, and both provide teachers with the means to support children with their learning journey. A key outcome evident within both curricula is around supporting children to develop skills for future learning, though the approaches taken do differ. The content and intent of *NPSC* focuses on more formal and teacher-led experiences within a play-based programme, while the content and intent of *Te Whāriki* is non-prescriptive and focuses on life-long learning.

A comparison of the curricula has shown that the nationalistic focus within *NPSC* has significant influence around the strands of the curriculum, with an emphasis on King, country and building unity across the population. Conversely, the focus of *Te Whāriki* is on young children's potential and the knowledge that ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand promotes building a solid foundation for further education and life. The curriculum speaks to the past in emphasising Aotearoa New Zealand's bicultural heritage, their present multicultural society and "the shared future we are creating" (MoE, 2017, p. 2).

There is specific focus on religion and the languages spoken in Malaysia, which requires timetabled focused times to support these areas. Whereas, in Aotearoa New Zealand, while te reo Māori and New Zealand Sign language are specifically noted within *Te Whāriki*, they are encouraged rather than being compulsory. Examples of differences such as these provide opportunities to learn about the priorities and aspirations of different nations through their curriculum documents.

Having undertaken this initial comparison of aspects of the two curriculum documents, there are areas that would benefit from further exploration including: the role of the teacher; the curricula for diverse learners; and how planning and evaluation are implemented in ECE.

There is much that teachers in each country can learn from each other. Teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand, for example, might find it useful to learn from the ways in which a range of languages are prioritised and a required part of everyday teaching practice. Teachers in Malaysia might find it useful to learn about implementing a more child-led curriculum within their play-based approach. The opportunity to work collaboratively with colleagues in another ECE context has provided opportunities for rich professional discussion and learning opportunities.

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