

# INTERNAL EVALUATION: QUESTIONING OUR PRACTICE THROUGH THOUGHTFUL INVESTIGATION

## Understanding our 'local curriculum' (Te Whāriki, 2017)

It seems to me that Internal Evaluation is what thinking teachers do every day. In effect it is 'the road we're travelling' as we focus on aspects of our practice that we want to understand and grow. A process, in fact, that enables us to clarify our thoughts and articulate our learning and teaching; not as teachers working alone but as a cohesive teaching and learning team, able to unpack what our vision means in practice and articulate our 'local curriculum' (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 53). We're looking for a way to be in sync with each other, skilfully, imaginatively, powerfully; knowing full well, exactly what it is that makes a difference to children's learning in 'our place'.

The journey needs a vehicle, a way of taking this thoughtful gaze and giving it a focussed context. Inquiry Research helps us do this. When teams set a reflective question and methodically go about the task of answering it, they explore



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together aspects of their practice that are vital to building a more vibrant learning community. When we see ourselves as researchers, we are much more likely to question our taken-for-granted assumptions, put a magnifying glass over our learning and teaching and map the journey. The Principles of Te Whāriki (MoE, 1996, 2017) are a call to wise practice. Yet, we decide how that whāriki is designed and we do this best when we form strong learning partnerships with our communities. Perhaps a way in is to ask ourselves what we think our core job is – the driving force that is essential to each and every moment of our teaching and learning day? John Holt (1965) will tell you this:

*"Since we cannot know what knowledge will be needed in the future, it is senseless to try to teach it in advance. Instead, our job must be to turn out young people who love learning so much, and who learn so well, that they will be able to learn whatever needs to be learned".*

These are the kind of words that have no 'recipe-ed' format, no tick-the-box-programme. This is the kind of vision that positions teachers as life long learners too, researchers making thoughtful decisions about the way forward, based on deep connections with their learning community.





## Articulating the Learning that matters here

Te Whatu Pōkeka (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2009) uses a visionary metaphor for wise learning and teaching cultures. This document uses a traditional Te Ao Māori blanket, made with harakeke and albatross feathers for strength and warmth, to illustrate shifting the focus for ako (learning and teaching) to the individual child. In this way, the shape of the mātuaranga (curriculum) is moulded around the child, rather than the other way round. Teachers who stay alert to children's intentions become intentional teachers, rather than didactic ones, invested in ensuring children are able to follow their passions, energies and spirit. How can we make this happen? Well, not by chance, because focussing on learning outcomes is in our 'teaching gene pool' (Ken Robinson, 2010). This is a provocative video clip by Sir Ken Robinson around 21st century learning. This kind of thinking has had a huge influence on my understanding about what valued learning and teaching looks like.

In Aotearoa, New Zealand the Principles that drive us are bound inside Te Whāriki. This is our mandated curriculum and wherever we are inside the diversity that has characterised early childhood settings here, those Principles and Strands must be visible in our practice. The Education Review Office expects teachers to be able to articulate what they do in terms of these Principles and every other philosophical position must be woven into this fabric. This means we are professionally and articulately explaining our practice, documenting this so that our community is drawn into what 'we do here' and 'how we make a difference to children's learning'. The Internal Evaluation process when viewed from this perspective is worth getting excited about because teams make shifts in practice based on the Principles of Te Whāriki that have long term effects on children's identities of themselves as confident, capable learners.

### ***Disrupting conventional thinking!***

Internal Evaluation, through Inquiry Research, is a way to disrupt our conventional thinking. The spot where we focus the magnifying glass gets a little too hot, as it were, and our whole team begins the conversations that take us beyond the ordinary and the unexamined. The data we collect as teacher researchers must be something we do every day so we stay true to the notion of working smarter, not harder – working from contextualised reflection, not generalised observation. One thoughtfully written Learning Story, analysed well, written from a dispositional frame, with skills woven into the fabric of the story, does just this.



## Writing Learning Stories: Ones that make a real difference!

I say 'thoughtfully written' Learning Story because, sadly, there are settings where the joy and life has been sucked out of these, by using old paradigms, old observational frameworks, that for all intents and purposes have remained static, with just a name change. This is far from the dynamic, engaged vision of Professor Margaret Carr (2001), when she conceived a socio-cultural narrative that could give life to the puzzling enquiry of children and adults working together in collaborative learning communities.

We must put life into our stories, with emotion and passion, and they will become a valued treasure, loved by children, families and teachers. They will reveal the vibrancy of children's learning, within a context of learning and teaching imbued with life and meaning. If you are in any doubt about this, check whether children introduce themselves to strangers with their portfolio in their hands, whether children are immersed in small groups sharing their stories with their friends, whether they take these books home because they are their favourite bed time story. Teachers who write thoughtful Learning Stories work in holistic, engaging ways that have a 360 dimensional aspect to it. They embed their reflections into the context of children's learning.

Over time, what better way to reveal yourself as a thoughtful, engaged teacher, fulfilling every conceivable professional criteria, working smarter, not harder, working with passion, commitment and courage? This sounds like 21st century learning to me.

The Greerton teachers in their Centre of Innovation Research (2006-2008) had this to say (Greerton, 2010): *"In the 21st century, it will be essential for all learners to have the sensitivity and inclination to respond to learning in different situations. As we have come to understand this, we have tried to embed into our practice ways to actively seek edgy learning situations that require us to struggle with uncertainty and doubt, and to be comfortable with doing this"*.

John Bennet (2011) situates this with such strength of character when he says:

*The early childhood centre is viewed as a life space, a place in which children and pedagogues (teachers / kaiako) "learn to be, learn to do, learn to learn, learn to be together"*.

### **Teachers as Researchers ...Children as Researchers**

It ultimately comes down to the image we hold of ourselves as teachers. Here is a small excerpt from the Greerton Centre of Innovation Research Project (2006-2008).

*"This is a finely balanced role, an intuitive role that sees each teacher making decisions 'in the moment' poised as provocateur, as listener, as learner, as teacher, ever vigilant for opportunities to widen and deepen knowledge, on that knife edge that draws children into mystery, as 'a crew member, not a passenger' (Claxton, 2002). It is a highly skilled position and one that can enhance or constrain learning in the blink of an eye"* (Greerton, 2010).



Internal Evaluation could best be described as understanding what enhances learning in your place.

Considered investigation helps make your place a vibrant, intriguing, learning and teaching environment, full of possibility for puzzling enquiry, where children build theories about the world, explore these and then adapt them for their own purposes. Internal Evaluation shifts us from individual teachers making a difference to children's learning – *and our own learning through respectful/ responsive engagement* – towards an understanding of how the culture we have built in our settings contributes to children's identities as life long learners. As we deepen our understanding, it supports children's abilities to pursue, in depth, the things that interest them over time. This is why dispositional frames for learning communities are so important. As soon as we become didactic, teaching the things we think are important, we fall into that banking model of education that Paulo Freire (2007) disparages so much. When we attempt to 'fill children up with knowledge' we are closing doors and narrowing possibilities. When we slice and dice their day into "curriculum fragments" (Diti Hill, 2001) we deny the time and space children need to go beyond the superficial, into complex thinking which are the hallmarks of engaged, switched on learners.

And when we direct children to "do this, go there, sit still, be quiet", we are very likely disengaging them from the business of being intrinsically motivated, self directed learners who care deeply about exploring the meaningful, the so very interesting, very often difficult puzzles, they set themselves.

### ***My thoughts on learning and teaching:***

In New Zealand, our Te Whāriki curriculum has enormously shaped teachers' vision of children and the way socio-cultural learning communities can be designed to positively nurture learning identities.

We focus on the process of what it takes to be a learner, inside collaborative communities, where each voice can be heard. As a consequence dispositions like empathy, courage, imagination, resilience and persistence, and skills and knowledge, catapult to the surface, as the natural result of sustained, playful, thoughtful, co-operative inquiry. Within a 'blue skies' vision for our reflective processes, focussed on continual improvement, teachers explore how we all might contribute to this research through an inquiry into an aspect of our work that we are deeply interested in. *This is the pathway for professional growth.*



## Starting Internal Evaluation

We must not err on the side of deficit, and the last thing I would suggest is to set an inquiry research question around something we don't do well. That is a recipe for teacher disengagement. If we think that staying in a credit space with children is wise teaching and learning practice, then it certainly is a principle that works for adults. Credit doesn't mean staying in safe, easy places. Anyone watching children "in the zone" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) will know that they set themselves difficult, tricky goals that push them to the edge of their skill sets. It's a very different feeling to have to work on something you know you aren't good at, particularly if someone else is telling you, you have to. Compare this with following something you intuitively, intrinsically are interested in. This will provide you with a deeply motivated desire to push your understanding further, so you are able to articulate and share this with your colleagues. Here is the most likely place for you to lift your expectations and push through barriers to get even better. It is in this process that difficult things become easier, simply because you are putting in the time, energy and thoughtful engagement, in other words practicing, to get better. This somehow changes our views about other difficult, edgy things. We are more likely to see making mistakes as a way to learn and develop a growth mindset (Carol Dweck, 2006), where we keep pushing those boundaries out further. This is the place to start an Internal Evaluation process.



The good news is that Internal Evaluation works most effectively when you do this in your teams with a commitment to shared leadership. Wise leaders do not tell you what you need to work on. That 'need' word will immediately put you all into a tail spin of accountability driven compliance, *the worst place for an engaged teacher to be*. In deciding on which area to focus an Internal Evaluation/Inquiry Research question, we need first to think about children's interests. You might like to skip to Appendix 2 and read the Learning Story I wrote for Francesca to see what kinds of research questions could come out of this narrative reflection. This is where your passion will be driven from: not from a generalised observation, but from the gritty, the gutsy business of children's learning, in the context of that learning, embedded in a thoughtfully written narrative. It is all about finding the magic (Lee, 2011) - the thing that captures you and your team's imagination and exploring this deeply, widely, enthusiastically. In this way too, you will be doing the smarter not harder work, as you utilise this documentation for a range of purposes.

The Learning Story written by Catalina Thompson (Appendix 1) is the kind of thoughtful reflection that can be duplicated for Teacher's Certification Evidence, Teacher Appraisal and, of course, stimulate animated discussion when read at Team Planning meetings. Internal Evaluation happens best when teams set a research question that is meaningful to them. Aligning our other professional responsibilities together means that individual teachers contribute and collaborate to understand what Te Whāriki (2017) describes as our "Local Curriculum".

Lift your sights: Make this a research inquiry worth doing; one that will make a difference to you and to your learning community

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So ensure that your Teacher Appraisal and your evidence for Teaching Council Certification are connected to your Internal Evaluation and make certain that you share your research findings together. Write comments, referring to the Teaching Standards on each other's draft Learning Stories. This widens the view of Teacher Appraisal to 360 degrees and keeps the process shared not top down. In this way you will be strengthening your local curriculum and making the difference to each and every child that we are tasked to do as thoughtful, *life long* learners and teachers. The starting point is to really think about your reasons for selecting this particular research question and how you think it might contribute to enhanced shared understanding. This becomes your base line data. It is a thoughtful reflection of where you think you are now and some visionary thoughts about where you want to go. A 'blue skies' vision with heart and passion because this is what will sustain you for the next year as you pursue these dreams and make them a reality. "Everyone who got to be where s/he is had to begin where s/he was" (Richard L Evans). Children have the right to have 'invested teachers' who care deeply about stretching their professional practice. The next task is to gather documentation to track your progress.

When you use your thoughtfully written Learning Stories, reflection is embedded in them, so there is no need to write additional comments. You don't have to be burdened by extra 'stuff' that will just sit in a cupboard! My reasons centre on the power of those reflections. As you explore and analyse learning under headings like: "*What did I learn about Josh today? How can we all grow this learning further with Katie?*" you draw families into a view of what valued learning looks like. We have a small window of opportunity to nurture children's identities as life long learners. It is their parents, their families/whānau that will be their life long advocates, and teachers have an ethical responsibility to let families into their perceptions of what wise learning and teaching might look like. This is never a top down, power over, model. Children arrive at our settings with very large 'back packs' and families who care deeply about them. They come with cultures and experiences that say this is 'me'. We must be listening ever so intently so we really know our children and families. Reflective Learning Stories widen families' appreciation of valued learning; learning that leads to life long success. They grow partnership in this process, strengthened through working together, listening, sharing, experiencing.

You will have to organise this documentation and additional reflective questions inside your Internal Evaluation folders will arise as you explore further. They will act like sign posts mapping your intent and journey. Things like: '*How did it all start? How was this interest, enquiry sustained? What surprised us? How have we changed? How are dispositions embedded into the fabric of the way we teach and learn?*' '*What does this say about the way we embed literacies into our every day experiences?*' It is always about dispositions and skills and knowledge but in the context of following children's deep seated interests as these arise in their play. Guy Claxton is one of my learning heroes. He so wisely says (2001):

*Good learners do not always learn fast! The ability to hang out in the fog, to tolerate confusion, to dare to wait in a state of incomprehension while the glimmering of an idea takes its time to form is another aspect of resilience and thus of learning power.*

Maybe this is a way to see Internal Evaluation as we gather evidence for Teacher Council Standards and Teacher Appraisal, for where there are questions answered, more questions will be asked. Internal Evaluation represents a journey into learning for life, simmering away inside the conversations you have each day. These are drawn together into a communal space through your Inquiry folder, where they are revisited, re-worked and reflected on, emerging as powerful practice, understood by everyone in your team and in your community because you find innovative ways to share your insights. This seems to me to be a challenge worth pursuing.



This whakatauki (Māori proverb) epitomises the way I feel about enabling children's learning to flourish in a childhood encased in relationships that are respectful, responsible and reciprocal (Te Whāriki) 2017, 1996):

*Kua ta whiti kē tō haerenga mai, kia kore e haere tonu;*

*He tino nui rawa ō mahi, kia kore e mahi tonu.*

*You have come too far, not to go further;*

*You have done too much, not to do more.*

*Sir James Henry, Ngāti Hine*

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**If you want to use this article, please reference it as follows:**

**Sands, L. (2019). *Internal Evaluation: Questioning our practice through thoughtful investigation (2nd ed.)*. Retrieved from: <http://www.elp.co.nz/articles.cfm>**

Appendix

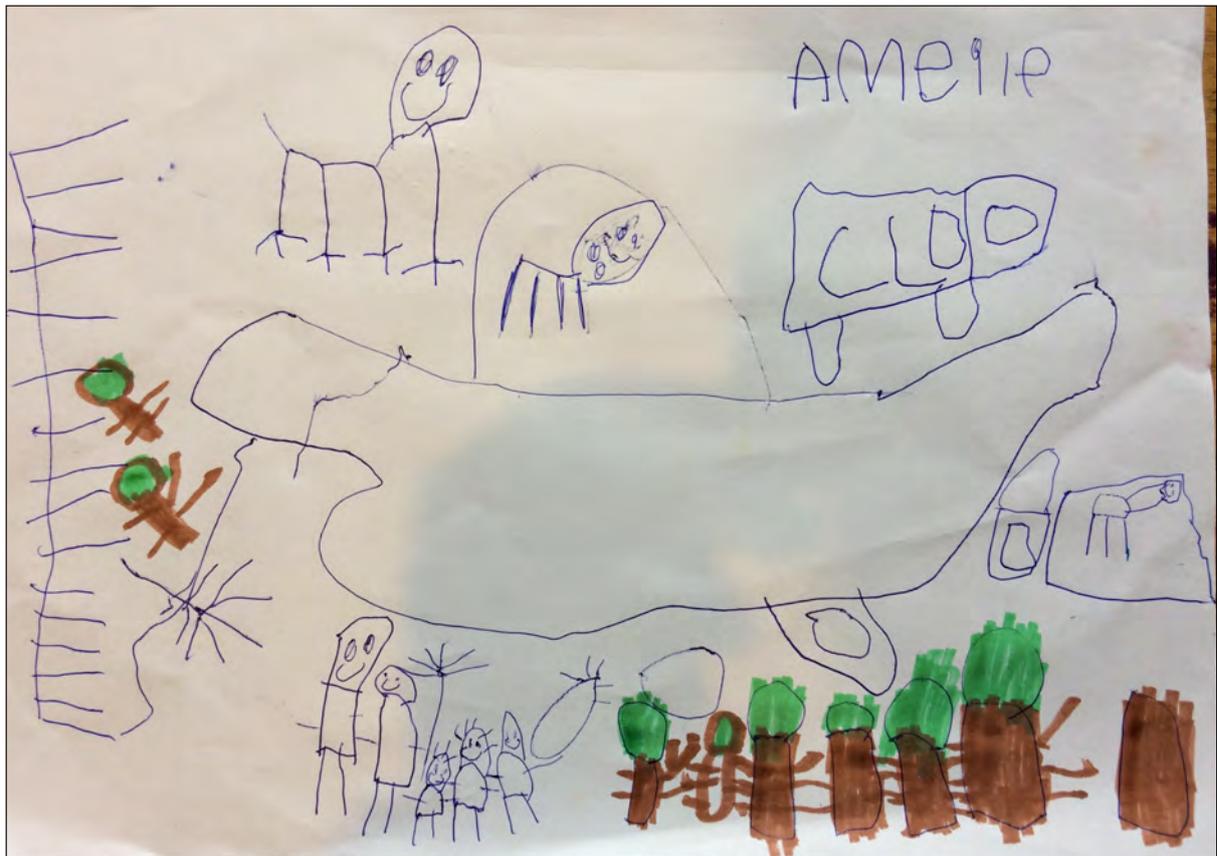
**Author's note:** Learning Stories are assessments that travel in time. They emotionally engage children, families and colleagues. I hope these examples in this appendix give you a window into learning and teaching that is thoughtful, and above all leaves the strongest of impressions that children are the designers of their own learning. Learning Stories ought to offer children and families an insight into their identity as a learner, from a teacher who deeply cares for this child. There is a whole 'other discussion' around how early childhood settings refrain from institutionalising very young children and focus instead on building long and strong relationships with children and their families. Is your setting a place where, not only children and families learn 'to be, to live, to love', but one where teachers feel such a strong identity and belonging that they too will invest their lives there for years and years? Children get one chance at living their early childhood lives, how do teachers make this a wonderful, playful, learning, relational context to grow those amazing brains and one where the relationships are long term! I'll write more about this. Maybe someone else will share their thoughts with me. I would love that!



Adventurous learners, exploring freely, learning to love this world of ours and work together to both explore and protect it! The photos in this article are all of the children and teachers at Greerton Early Learning Centre, Tauranga, New Zealand.

# A Map Of Many, Many Happy Thoughts

## **Amelie's story**



"I'm going to draw the map of the farm," Amelie declares making herself comfortable at the table. I quickly grab a camera ready to record her story. Why? Because I am more than intrigued to document Amelie's perspective on what forms a big chunk of her learning life at Greerton. I want to find out how the learning we do at the farm, so deeply grounded in nature, is transported here, to Mitchell Street.

**"That's a picture about the farm, to show you where to go. That's the cow in the cow paddock. I am making the stream now. That's the big, long fast water and that's the tree that fall down and ran across the stream. That's where we were, right there,... I was even lots stronger. And that's the chicken coop. And that's an avocado and that's a feijoa. And that's Henry."**

Amelie continues mapping. When I have a close look at Amelie's work, I am struck by a resemblance: both trees and children are drawn close together, bound by team spirit. Hmmm!

**"That's a little nest in the tree with baby chicks."** The mud pit is on the edge.



**“Im going to do the van, that’s the door and those are the seats.”** The hut, flying fox and alpacas (with long neck and smiley faces) are all represented. The last thing Amelie does is to sign her map, as if to say ‘I made this’. Of, course!

### ***Unpacking Amelie’s learning....***

This is what memories are made of... When children experience freedom to explore, discover, investigate or simply be in nature, the type of learning they do cannot be taught by any other means. It was only the week before that we conducted our stream safety test so, seeing that ‘event’ represented on her map and the image Amelie shaped of herself as someone ‘lots stronger’, is simply priceless. When we build positive, empowering learning identities, children are more likely to tackle life’s uncertainties and challenges. With every farm trip, Amelie is working hard to strengthen hers. And, as Eistein once said, “knowledge (and not only) comes from experience”. Anyone having a closer look at the map, can see that all living creatures (with the exception of trees) have big smiley faces. No doubt, Amelie has established a very joyful, emotional relationship with the farm and these positive emotions, “*broaden* our perception and

range of thought, which allows us to see what we didn’t see before, put ideas together in new ways, experiment with new ways of behaving, and in these ways *build* our repertoire of knowledge, ideas and skills.”(1) During our forest farm adventures we have conversations, ponder in silence, live thrills and question and because of this rich repertoire of happenings, our Amelie (alongside others) is able to grow her intelligences and make them visible through different media. I believe this is how we ‘teach’ literacy, science, numeracy, arts, social competencies and so on; through trust, freedom and genuine presence in the moment.

### ***How can we stretch this learning further?***

Dear Amelie, I want to ask you if it is possible to display your map on our wall as a testimony of the different kinds of learning that happens during our forest farm adventures. My hope is that, as a team, we can further grow our learning and communicate it to our community in different ways. Your map is most definitely a fabulous start.

Cu afectiune/Arohanui, Cat

August 2018

(1) Gray, P. (2013, p.153) - Free To Learn, Basic Books, New York

## *Francesca, how does your creative brain flourish?*

I've been wondering about this because I constantly see you thinking up an idea and working quite systematically, with determination and inventive flair, to complete the goals you set for yourself. I can't begin to think how we could see the world in the way you do, and design a scheduled 'activity' for you to complete! This would highjack your learning! Isn't it just as well then, that we all offer you so many 'loose parts' to spark your imagination further, and of course the time and space for working through the issues that arise between having an idea and making it a reality.

### **Take for instance the way you have worked with the glue guns...**

I was thinking back about how this first started and I remember when you apprenticed yourself to Zac. He had been using glue guns for a while and you recognised that he had a lot to teach you. Zac had spent most of the morning assembling pieces of wood to make an enormous building, and about the time you found each other, he was happy to have a team mate. He showed you which pieces of the gun were hot and asked for your help to make the building more complex. Of course this meant tricky problems to solve but solve them you did together! Since then I've seen you return again and again to using glue guns, always with a project in mind. Look back in your folder and you will see the Learning Story I wrote for you about your creative plan to make a swing - the one you cut, drilled and attached to the flying fox, no less!



### **My thoughts on your learning....**

Since then you've made numerous creations like this robot. It sparked my thoughts to track your learning over time and try to trace some of the characteristics you are developing. It seems to me that you draw your inspiration from many places. I know some of this building work is from watching your Dad and your brother, Arthur who have focus and determination in their

building projects. The habits of people we admire, our heroes, rub off on us! But I've been wondering how you have taken these characteristics and grown them across a range of your interests and so I've been paying careful attention. I watched you make a 'double pizza' using our wedge blocks and saw your enormous concentration. I've never seen anyone have this idea before. And look below at these photos to see you writing your name and making 3D play dough friends sitting together on a chair. As you repeatedly wrote the letters to your name and made mistakes, you covered them up by gluing some paper over one, colouring over another with a crayon and scribbling one out. That's a creative approach and one that shows mistakes don't phase you because you simply take a deep breath and have another go. I think you have high expectations as I see examples of the way you keep stretching that creative brain of yours. Yet you so very obviously understand it takes time to deepen and broaden your skills and that practice, with a clear head and heart is the key!

**How might we all support this learning to flourish?** It seems we must never underestimate your determination to stretch your own learning and yet I so often see you working with friends. Steadily, over time, you have become a Rangatira here. Younger children watch you closely, and you generously invite them into your projects. I can see a wholehearted approach to leadership becoming another part of your identity as a life long learner. More stories to come!!



Arohanui Lorraine

# "I'm using my brain to think."

"I'm using my brain to think."  
"It takes a lot of time to paint."  
"I'm just doing my painting really carefully - I don't want any gaps."  
"I've done all of this work."  
"Patch, you're doing nice drawing."  
"This is taking very hard work."  
"I think I'll do it [S] from one of those letters." (looking at his shirt)  
"I'm the bestest drawer ever!"



### ***What does this tell me about Israel's learning?***

Effort, persistence, and recognition that in order to create something fabulous, you need to put in some work! How amazing is this to know about yourself as a learner! Just recently Cat celebrated Israel using all these same dispositions to climb the magnolia tree. This is why we find such accomplishments so exciting - once you know that these skills are the key to achieving lofty goals, there is nothing to stop the learning! Both of these magnificent pieces of art were finished off with Israel writing his name. This too took effort and persistence, but each time Israel practices his writing, it gets a little easier. I had watched Israel scale the magnolia tree in seconds just this morning, so I can tell you that the tree climbing is getting easier with practice too!

### ***Where could this learning lead to for Israel?***

Israel is off to school soon, where he will find new and exciting learning challenges. I know though, that the knowledge of how to be a fabulous learner will support him as he goes off on this new learning journey.  
Arohanui, Tanya.

November 2018

