

Think like a
lightbulb!



Imagine, if you will, this scenario: A learning environment mindfully created with resilience, resourcefulness, challenge, social and cultural engagement foremost. I wonder what picture this conjures up for you.

In my mind, I think it means a learning environment where children have agency to set learning goals for themselves, and the time to experiment to find ways to achieve these goals. These are not environments for the fainthearted because in these kinds of learning settings kaiako are fluidly responsive to children's initiatives and their working theories. The learning here happens in co-constructed ways as teachers and children figure out together ways to make sense of their experiences. This means kaiako are courageously working at the edge, and always thoughtful because teachers are invested in building a local curriculum designed to nurture learning identities. I think these kinds of learning settings are truly embedded in the principles and strands of *Tē Whāriki*. I think, too, that our curriculum aspirations are essential for wholehearted, energetic, curious, social and cultural learners to thrive.



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Now, are these the kinds of environments children experience every day when they go to their early learning settings? I suggest you look around your own setting and consider the images you see because this is the place where you can make change. Is your community a learning space immersed in nature? Do rhythms and rituals unfold in unhurried ways? Are these centred on building connections rather than completing a task? Is assessment formative, offering feedback to children and families that enable learning to be stretched further? Is there a sense of partnership, participation and protection? Is it a place where there is stability, where teachers want to stay because they too feel a sense of satisfaction for the work they do with and alongside children, families and their colleagues? Is it a place where the languages, cultures and identities of children, families and teachers are valued, visible and validated?



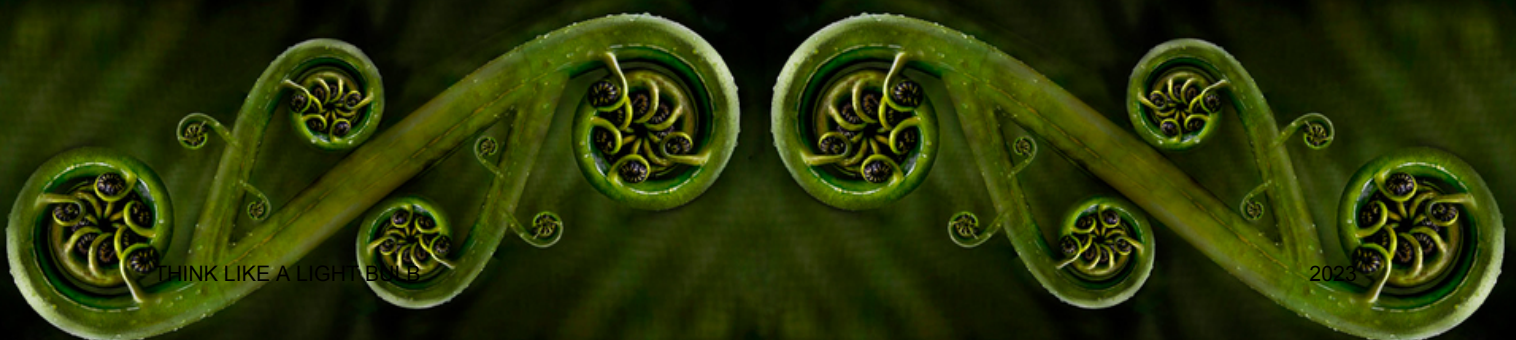
Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mo nga mokopuna o Aotearoa gives us an aspirational, visionary curriculum and it is in the hands of kaiako to ensure we design learning settings worthy of these principles and strands and indeed worthy of the immense curiosity children bring to their learning lives. Understanding the ways we think of ourselves as learners, essentially happens cumulatively over time, in different places and within a range of social and cultural contexts. There is no one story, no one truth, no one ideal learning identity. This is why Learning Stories written by multiple teachers and contributed to by families and children, as we all respond to learning with and alongside the people, places, and things we love bring learning alive. Emotionally connected Learning Stories make it possible to re-visit, re-imagine and re-energise our possible selves. As these kinds of Learning Stories are shared they have a dramatic effect on the way children see themselves as learners, and actually, on how teachers and families see their children and their own roles in nurturing learner identities for the children they care so deeply about (Sands, 2022).

Alison Gopnik (2016) says: “Our job is not to shape our children’s minds; it’s to let those minds explore all the possibilities that the world allows” (p.24).

Learning Stories when written with emotional connection are able to bring a heart-energised component to the ways we all engage in learning because it is emotional connection that imbues learning with the kind of excitement that encourages children to be brave, courageous, kind, thoughtful, resilient and resourceful, as they act with manaakitanga, kaitiakitanga and with arohatanga. These are of course dispositions. When teachers write about the times children were being brave, thoughtful, kind, leaderful, resilient and resourceful and we share these Learning Story narrative assessments across our communities, children hear these stories in multiple places, times, and social contexts. Children then begin to think: I am brave, I am kind, I stick with things when they are hard and I don’t give up. The title of this article: “Think like a light bulb” is just one example of this kind of feedback. Over time, Isla has internalised this dispositional thinking and knows that it is indeed “all the good ideas inside your brain that will help you”. (See learning story attached.)

Professors Margaret Carr and Guy Claxton (2004) do not see dispositions as a noun but as a verb. Something to be acquired and to keep acquiring over time. They suggest it is the role of early childhood settings:

To strengthen valued learning responses and actions along three dimensions: increasing their frequency and robustness, widening their modus operandi, what they look like in an ever-widening circle and deepening their complexity and competence (p.95).



So, as we view a child's learning and write about this, do we see positive learning dispositions becoming more frequent? For example, when something is new, is it the child's default response to be curious? Do we see this learning occurring in ever more varied places and times, and is it growing in complexity and richness? Alison Gopnik (2016) says: "Our job is not to shape our children's minds; it's to let those minds explore all the possibilities that the world allows" (p.24).

With this in mind, turn an inquiring eye inwards towards the local curriculum we have contributed to in our settings, and decide if we can see evidence of intentionally nurturing the children in our settings to build the brain they will have for their lifetime. I think we can do this through the way we write story after story about children in the context of their lived experiences. This means writing about the very essence of being a learner. Children and teachers then acquire the kind of view of themselves, whatever that may mean to each of us, that will sustain us all through the joyful as well as the difficult times and with a resilient resourcefulness find our many possible selves.

I offer just one of many possible inquiry foci as an example. What does this mean for a practice like setting goals for each child through an individual development plan (IDP)? Well, taking *Te Whāriki* principles as an embedded process informing all we do, it means stopping these kinds of practices. IDPs cut deep into children's rights to have agency over their own learning. Children are not consulted when these goals are set, so children continue their learning journeys often oblivious to the adult's agenda. Where IDPs are dangerous, though, is around the narrowed focus of the teacher. Children's own agendas may well be hijacked as teachers endeavour to meet these task-driven planning goals by guiding children, setting up activities (often templated and structured) and generating assessments that show those goals being met. I am aware that this kind of goal-setting for children has become quite pervasive, not necessarily because teachers want to do this. Kaiako are often instructed to set these agendas because they are part of the way "things are done in this place". It takes courageous teachers to resist, but resist we must. Disrupting conventional thinking is a way to re-look at practice. How is this goal-setting ahead of time, often in place for a few months, authentic? The place to look for whether we are being authentic is *Te Whāriki* and our wonderful curriculum asks us to be responsive, within a process of reciprocity and relational connection.

So, write Learning Stories because it matters. Write with joy, intensity and energy and in doing so, my thinking is that kaiako will no longer talk about a programme or an IDP. They will talk about curriculum, the kind of curriculum embedded in *Te Whāriki's* view that everything is part of our learning, our lived experiences: The people, the places and the things that connect with us. Kaiako will no longer talk about “planning” either. Instead, kaiako will have deep conversations with each other about ways to design a curriculum for curious investigators to investigate. This shifts our focus and our practice. It widens our perspectives and deepens opportunities for learning to be more complex, more relevant, more of everything that matters to the child and not what matters to adults. And when we write Learning Stories that embrace this thinking and learning we generate wider conversations that have the power to strengthen children’s views of themselves as active learners. Then we find children stretching their learning, setting themselves enormous goals far beyond what adults might conceive as necessary. John Holt said this many years ago:

If we take from someone his right to decide what to be curious about we destroy his freedom of thought. We say, in effect, you must think not about what interests and concerns you but about what interests and concerns us. And Te Whāriki (MOE, 2017) says this:

Mā te whāriki e whakaata te kotahitanga o ngā whakahaere
katoa mō te ako a te mokopuna, mō te tipu a te mokopuna.
The early childhood curriculum reflects the holistic way
children learn and grow.

Our role as Kaiako is to enable each child to follow their unique learning pathways in real time, in this moment in front of us, and in evolving social and cultural contexts. Every time an action cuts across empowerment, holistic learning, family and community, and reciprocal relationships there is an opportunity to reflect, resist, and reset our practice to make *Te Whāriki* a living, breathing reality in our learning settings.

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