

# Chapter 9

## Taking Care of Our Children: 30 Years of Child Rights in Aotearoa New Zealand



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**Abstract** In a recent report released by New Zealand's Office of the Children's Commissioner and the New Zealand Ministry for Children (Oranga Tamariki), children and young people were asked for their perspective on what wellbeing means for them. The data gathered is intended to inform a Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy. It is to be commended that this research gave an opportunity for children and young people to have a say on what is important in their lives. However, the results are concerning. While most children responded positively saying they were satisfied with their wellbeing, about 10% of the 6000 participants say they face challenges. This research data is invaluable for exploring how New Zealand is responding to these challenges in the lives of young children, and where their rights are being dishonoured.

Although adults may ask for participation from children and young people, how are the voices of the youngest children valued? Their agency is often trivialised and not respected, therefore becoming a barrier to growing citizenship in our society. The discourse around citizenship education needs to be inclusive of the youngest children who are often most affected by social and education policy. All learners have the right to gain knowledge and develop skills that are practiced and affirmed every day within the early childhood context, and within the families and communities (SDG 4.7). It is therefore, the responsibilities of teachers and teacher education programmes to take advocacy for children's rights seriously, so that young children from diverse backgrounds can take their rightful place as citizens in New Zealand society.

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*Take care of our children  
Take care of what they hear  
Take care of what they feel  
For how they children grow  
So will be the shape of Aotearoa  
Dame Whina Cooper: Māori leader. 1895–1994*

## Introduction

New Zealand has a proud history of recognising the significance of signing agreements, treaties and conventions to guide future laws, policies and practice. However, what really counts is how the citizens of the country, in this case the children, are advantaged or disadvantaged by the way the documents are applied to policy and decisions of government.

New Zealand ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1993. However, as Te One et al. (2017) report, there has been regular critique using well documented evidence from children's rights groups and NGOs but very little action by successive governments to embed a children's rights approach in state decision-making processes. The most recent UNCRC observation report to the New Zealand Government was in 2016 where the UN Committee on Rights of the Child (CRC) recommended 'the New Zealand Government adopt urgent measures on: violence, abuse, neglect; children belonging to minority or indigenous groups; child labour; and juvenile justice' (UNCRC 2016, P.1). Te One et al. (2017) noted the recommendations from the 2016 UN Committee report: 'it was clear that Aotearoa New Zealand could and should be doing much more to honour its obligations under UNCRC by implementing a child rights framework based on a common set of values, aspirations and processes that apply across all areas of government and civil society' (p.5). It seemed to the authors that in New Zealand there is neither a wide understanding nor a strong political will that is sufficient enough to realise the potential of UNCRC as a powerful document that could enhance children's wellbeing in our Aotearoa New Zealand society.

More recently in August 2019, New Zealand's Office of the Children's Commissioner and the New Zealand Ministry for Children (Oranga Tamariki) released their Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy (NZ Government 2019a). The strategy presented data gathered by children and young people who were asked for their perspective on what wellbeing means for them. It is to be commended that this research gave an opportunity for children and young people to have a say on what is important in their lives. However, the results show there is still work to be done to ensure that ALL children enjoy a healthy life and benefit from child rights centred policy and practice that will ensure positive outcomes. Professor Anne Smith, who was a prominent children's rights campaigner in New Zealand, showed concern that such surveys and data gathering often focus on deficits or areas of concern such as abuse, and fail to lead into positive action where children themselves participate in

meaningful and future-focused decision-making (Smith 2013). It is encouraging to see that the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy concludes that change requires action by all of us; this action must develop better life outcomes; and, for this action to be effective, early support is needed.

The research data from the Wellbeing Strategy is invaluable for exploring how New Zealand is responding to all challenges in the lives of young children, and where children's rights are not honoured. However, it was noted, that while most children responded positively saying they were satisfied with their wellbeing, about 10% of the 6000 participants said they faced challenges. The research revealed five main challenges faced by the children in New Zealand:

1. Accept us for who we are and support our hopes for the future
2. Life is really hard for some of us – racism, bullying, violence, drugs
3. If you want to help us, help our families – wellbeing is about relationships, not just having things
4. We deserve more than just the basics – more than the minimum standards of housing health and education
5. How you support us matters just as much as what you do. (Office of the Children's Commissioner and Oranga Tamariki 2019, p.5)

Historically, research data, interviews and surveys have not done enough to recognise and promote the rights of very young children in New Zealand policy, especially those children without language fluency for expression, and those who are not confident participants in society because of age, ethnicity, indigeneity or disability. Children's agency in the public arena has been trivialised, not acknowledged and not respected; therefore creating a barrier to growing citizenship in our society. The discourse around citizenship education needs to be inclusive of those children (often the youngest and the marginalised) who are most affected by social and education policy. All learners in every society have the right to gain knowledge and develop skills that are practised and affirmed every day within the early childhood context and within their families and communities. Although teachers and adults in New Zealand have invited participation from children and young people, this has been sporadic and it is often unclear as to how the voices of the youngest children are actually valued. It is therefore the collective responsibility of our community leaders, politicians, teachers and teacher education programmes to take seriously their advocacy for children's rights and their roles as duty-bearers, so that young children from diverse backgrounds can take their rightful place as citizens in New Zealand society.

Of particular interest in the children's rights discussion is a proposal by Julie Davis (2014), a strong advocate for education for sustainability in early childhood. Davis proposes an 'expanded rights framework' that recognises the agentic participation rights of young children that moves the rights discussion from a socio-cultural-historical approach such as Fleer (2010) to an eco-socio-cultural-historical framework. This framework embeds UNCRC as the foundation of the framework that is encircled by four further dimensions: agentic participation rights; collective rights; intergenerational rights; and bio/ecocentric rights. As concern grows for how

to develop a more sustainable world, Davis (2014) acknowledges the limitations of the present rights framework to acknowledge the contribution of early childhood to their communities within the diverse ecological contexts of the non-human world. If we, as teachers, are to respect and honour children's rights, we need to understand how early childhood education makes a valuable contribution to families, communities and the natural world.

This article will link to the Davis model of an expanded rights framework to further explore the issues and challenges of how early childhood education in New Zealand is working closely with families and agencies in diverse communities. Some of the dilemmas and debates evident in the Aotearoa New Zealand children's rights discourse will be identified along with aspects of the framework that support the competence of young children and how that might strengthen policy and practice for children's rights.

## **Early Childhood in Aotearoa New Zealand: The Roots of Citizenship**

In Aotearoa New Zealand, citizenship is the foundation of the national bicultural early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education 2017). Te Whāriki, a woven mat for all to stand on, is a metaphorical term for the early childhood curriculum, where teachers collaborate with children, parents and community to weave together the principles and strands in a 'whāriki that empowers the child and carries our aspirations' (p.10). Te Whāriki builds on four Principles: Family and Community (Whānau Tangata), Relationships (Ngā Hononga), Empowerment (Whakamana) and Holistic development (Kotahitanga). The vision states that our young children 'are confident, competent and make a valued contribution to society' (p.5), so early childhood must be the time where the notion of participation takes root and begins to flourish.

Early childhood education programmes based on Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education 2017) have ostensibly grounded our young people in citizenship, encouraging children to make decisions for their own wellbeing and express their feelings and ideas. 'Ostensibly' because, even after three decades, it is clear that the principles, strands, learning outcomes and values underpinning Te Whāriki are only slowly being understood and enacted by early childhood teachers, especially those working in market-focused, management-driven settings where the underpinning values are in conflict with the national curriculum. In general, only those teachers, who are philosophically and pedagogically driven, understand and enact Te Whāriki to its full effect. Moss (2019) states that a 'rights for all' approach to early childhood education will challenge and transform the all-too-common "simplified and simplistic cause-and-effect relationships" (p.174) that do not do justice to the complexity and diversity of life in Aotearoa New Zealand. UNCRC Articles 12 and 13 on freedom of expression underpin the pedagogy of participation, encouraging

children to have a voice through expressing their ideas. Davis (2014) refers to this as ‘agentic participation rights’ where children are making an active contribution as valued members of society. The young children entering school around five years of age are expected to have experienced participation and have a growing understanding of what it means to be a valued participant in society. In the early years young children attending early childhood education services have learned the value of working as a collective to make a difference.

Davis (2014) in her proposal for an extended rights approach has emphasised the importance for children’s rights to be positioned in the wider rights of the collective where learning about democratic process, reaching consensus and collective decision-making are all the skills needed for creative solutions, with a focus on sustainability. Young children (under eight years) are encouraged to seek out learning and information, make good decisions and express their concerns about the world they live in. Early childhood education has an important role in promoting citizenship and supporting children to participate in positive collective action for their community. However, Te One et al. (2017) suggest that while early childhood teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand are Te Whāriki/curriculum literate, they have yet to become fully UNCRC literate. That is, teacher understandings about citizenship, agency, participation, the material world and sustainability are set largely in a curricular framework, but not yet set in an expanded rights framework that explicitly acknowledges UNCRC.

The Salvation Army New Zealand releases annual State of the Nation reports that present a detailed overview of how well New Zealand is looking after its citizens. The Salvation Army is a Christian organisation that has a strong emphasis on social justice and community service. Their report in 2019 shows that participation in wider early childhood services decreased slightly in the year 2018 with slow progress in addressing inequities in the community.

The differences in the fortunes of New Zealand children are important as we consider appropriate interventions. The gaps between most children and their families and those who are marginalised have not closed appreciably, despite concerted efforts by State agencies and communities. There is even a sense from the data available that recent progress has stalled. The continuation of current approaches—especially in education, care and protection and income support—seem unlikely to produce different results (Salvation Army, p.20).

The lack of progress in closing the socioeconomic gap mentioned in the Salvation Army report suggests a possible uncoordinated approach to improving child and community wellbeing. There is a strong message here for Government departments to improve their data collection to become more accurate, regular and complete (UNCRC 2016; Te One et al. 2017; Salvation Army 2019). It would be advisable for Government to heed the messages from research carried out by independent organisations such as the Salvation Army and Child Poverty Action who address rights-focused perspectives built up over years of critical analysis. Children’s rights are economic, social, cultural, historical, ethical and political as well as educational therefore the responsibility of several government departments but in recent years our newly established Ministry for Children, otherwise known as Oranga Tamariki, has attempted to work more closely with the organisations involved in education,

welfare, health and wellbeing in the community. A more accurate picture of the state of our children in relation to the articles of UNCRC is likely to emerge.

Economic disadvantage has frequently been identified as a barrier to participation in early childhood education (Mackey and Lockie 2012). Such barriers often deny children the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to society. Authentic participation in early childhood education is described by Mackey and Lockie (2012) as being twofold: firstly, the child engages with the curriculum and secondly, the child participates in decision making around issues that honour their rights. It becomes the role of the teacher to ensure that equitable and fair practices are part of the everyday experience so that all children are respected and valued. When agentic participation rights (Davis 2014) are framed only in an early childhood curriculum/education context, the impact of UNCRC is lessened and the broader political nature of teacher advocacy for children's rights becomes clouded.

At a policy level, recommendations from child and family community organisations, such as OMEP (World Organisation of Early Childhood Education), have influenced Government strategies and goals for future action. However, all these take time for meaningful consultation to take place, and for assigning adequate funds to put policy into practice. Specifically referring to infants and toddlers, the new government initiative 'Shaping a Stronger Education System with New Zealanders' (Ministry of Education 2019a) has a goal for barrier-free access by making early childhood education available to all. As yet, it is not clear about the ages this might refer to or how the service will value the child's identity, language and culture. The Strategic Plan for Early Learning (Ministry of Education 2019b) has an unrealised goal for 100% qualified teachers in teacher-led services and improved ratios and improved group size. Even though the number of qualified teachers is on the increase, the numbers of qualified staff employed in early childhood settings has not shown a similar increase (Everiss et al. 2017).

Infants and toddlers in care settings are a vulnerable group who need specialised teaching and care. In Aotearoa New Zealand, a large number of teachers in this area of education are currently under-qualified because of past government decision making, and their work with infants and toddlers is subsequently under-valued.

## **Rights of Infants and Toddlers**

The very youngest members of our communities are often neglected as part of the discussion on children's rights; usually because adults fail to understand the complexity of infant communication and how the very young express their needs and wishes. New Zealand children's rights researcher, Sarah Te One (2010) found the teachers saw their role as advocating for listening to children as a basis for honouring children's rights but struggled with how this should be carried out in the best interests of the child, without a national policy to support their action. The Education Review Office (ERO 2015) presented a recent paper in an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the quality of education and care for infants and toddlers. Their findings

indicate that early childhood services give priority to building ‘warm and nurturing relationships’ and less emphasis to ‘communication and exploring’. Where centres understood respectful practice and followed Te Whāriki (2017), teachers were engaged and responsive to children, compatible with or in line with their image of the child as a confident, competent communicator and explorer. The ERO report noted important factors that these teachers were generally reflective practitioners, well supported by professional development and strong leadership. In centres where this was not the case, the report recommended that teachers develop their teaching in the areas of communication and exploration, to respond to children’s interests, notice the learning and working theories, and support young children as they make sense of their world. It appears that the rights to protection and provision are more obvious and easily attended to. The participation rights may be more difficult to recognise and interpret in the very young.

The ERO research supports Te One (2010) who was rightly concerned that listening to children was not consistent for all infants and toddlers. Listening to young children is the foundation for participation rights to be encouraged. The qualified early childhood teacher in a well-supported environment is vital for a day-to-day programme based on advocacy and children’s rights. Teachers need to engage in conversations and planning around some key issues such as how to best respond to infants and toddlers to ensure their participation rights are honoured in an appropriate manner.

The early childhood qualification offered by New Zealand Universities, Polytechnics and Private Training Establishments is a three-year Initial Teacher Education (ITE) degree that is approved and regularly monitored by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and the Aotearoa New Zealand, (previously known as the Education Council, New Zealand: Matatū Aotearoa) (2017). The political will of the New Zealand Government shows positive moves but has yet to recognise the value of improving qualifications for teachers of the very young that would lift the status of early childhood teachers and demonstrate a strong desire for quality practice with research-based policy (White et al. 2016). The 2016 ‘concluding observations’ by the CRC session members, as part of the reporting process on Aotearoa New Zealand’s compliance with UNCRC (2016) stated ‘general public awareness’ of children’s rights and ‘active involvement’ by professionals as being critical to addressing the current status of children’s rights in this country. Such awareness and involvement must start with the education of and care for infants and toddlers.

## **Rights of Indigenous Children in Aotearoa New Zealand**

Children who identify as being of minority groups or indigenous peoples, have a right to continuing engagement with their culture, their religion and their language Article 30 (UNCRC 1989). Unfortunately, almost 200 years of colonisation in New Zealand have trampled on the rights of tangata whenua/Māori (the people of the

land, the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand) to communicate in their language (te reo) and to live and learn in culturally appropriate ways (ngā tikanga). Māori signed a treaty with the British Crown in 1840, Te Tiriti o Waitangi yet the promises of 1840 were not fully realised and often misunderstood between the signatories. Viewed retrospectively, this was especially so on the part of the Crown. These ‘misunderstandings’ led to times of great disruption and cultural damage. The impact is still very much felt by Māori communities today (Rau and Ritchie 2011). For many years, the educational success of Māori children was measured against British standards. Poor scoring was interpreted as a low intelligence or not suited to higher levels of educational endeavour. Over the past fifty years or so, there has been a gradual ground swell of commitment by the government to ensure that Māori succeed as Māori. The Ministry of Education, the central government authority for all sectors of education in New Zealand, has developed a guiding document, Tātaiako (Ministry of Education 2011), to support success in learning for Māori children so that teachers will understand the importance of cultural responsiveness. A similar guiding document, Tapasā (2018), has been developed over the past few years to support success in learning for Pasifika children. All teachers are expected to follow these guiding documents.

In the early 1990s two New Zealand early childhood academics, Helen May and Margaret Carr, were approached by a united early childhood community to develop an early childhood curriculum that would give all young children a quality platform for learning. The curriculum, Te Whāriki, finally launched in 1996, had a twofold purpose: one was to elevate the quality of early childhood education and the other was to recognise a national commitment to the Treaty of Waitangi (Te Tiriti o Waitangi) by integrating Māori language and culture into a ‘bicultural curriculum’ that would be implemented by all early childhood settings on a daily basis. As suggested above, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education 2017) has gone some way to address children’s rights in education and redress the loss of language and culture by Māori: “This curriculum acknowledges that all children have rights to protection and promotion of their health and wellbeing, to equitable access to learning opportunities, to recognition of their language, culture and identity and, increasingly, to agency in their own lives” (p.12).

Stuart (2014, p.9) suggests that ECE policy from 1996 onwards, has used the language of Te Whāriki but “is underpinned by a theory that has travelled – a song with origins in another time and place”. Stuart explains that USA-based policy for black, American children, with its emphasis on human capital theory and economic outcomes has been used by the government in Aotearoa New Zealand. Pasifika families have been portrayed in a similar ‘economic’ way, like ‘immigrants to Europe’, with limited skills and training. Stuart (2014, p.10) states that Te Whāriki has the potential to offer local cultural and educational possibilities and acknowledges that “there is a growing body of texts to support a Māori perspective on pedagogy”. This growing trend towards a Treaty-based approach to curriculum supports the proposal for an extended framework of rights (Davis 2014) that values the rights of indigenous peoples and the intergenerational learning that is very much part of children’s cultural contexts within early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand.



In the spirit of Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education 2017), teachers must reflect on how the rights of children are honoured and respected in diverse early childhood education settings so that every child has access to an early learning setting that is valued by their parents and supports their identity, language and culture.

## Child Poverty

Poverty is a major barrier that denies individuals and communities life-long opportunities to be contributing members of society. Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) acknowledge that children who grow up in poverty are at risk of experiencing family conflict, parental mental illness and a low standard housing. These are just some of the many factors that affect healthy development. Through poverty and related abuse, too many children in Aotearoa New Zealand are not able to reach their full potential as competent, confident contributors to New Zealand society. A large proportion of these children are of Māori and Pasifika descent.

The gap between rich and poor is evident throughout New Zealand society (Te One 2010) with 29% of our children living in poverty, indicating inequalities in access to safe, secure housing, health, education and welfare. The Child Poverty Action Group of New Zealand (2014) presents similar concerns regarding our country's failure to address children's rights in relation to poverty, stating that children have the right to healthy living conditions, to loving and respectful care, and quality education. The annual State of the Nation Report from the Salvation Army (2019) notes a rise in the number of children living in benefit-dependant households. Families on benefits are likely to be in the poorest communities as the benefit wage is often insufficient to cover family living, health and education cost. Forty-five percent of children living in poverty come from households receiving wages, often referred to as the 'working poor' (Haigh 2018). Evidence in New Zealand communities of growing groups referred to as the 'working poor', indicates that the minimum wage of some workers is unlikely to be enough to pay for the everyday needs of a family (Haigh 2018; Salvation Army Report 2019).

Recent research shows that the gap between the rich and the poor in New Zealand is widening significantly (Haigh 2018; Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). Rashbrooke (2014) has used statistics to show the growing gap between rich and poor: "It is clear that New Zealand has become an unequal society with the wealthiest 1% owning 20% of the country's net worth and the top 6% owning 60%. In terms of income, the richest 1% annual income has risen rapidly since the 1980s, whereas the poorest 10% has stayed constant over the decades." (Rashbrooke 2014, p.47).

The funding of early childhood education in New Zealand comes partly from the public fund of the New Zealand Government and partly from private family fees. The issue then arises for families who are not able to pay the family fee, therefore less able to give their child an early childhood experience in an educational setting. Again, Māori and Pacific children are over-represented in lower socio-economic

communities, therefore less likely to engage with early childhood settings on a regular basis (Everiss et al. 2017). Families on government benefits are required to send their children to an early childhood setting, but often the cost and availability of transport is a barrier to attendance. Aotearoa New Zealand has no overarching strategy for children that ensures public spending respects, promotes, protects and fulfils children's rights (Te One et al. 2017).

## Children at Risk

The widening inequities within New Zealand communities have put some groups of children at risk. Those exposed to higher levels of risk live in communities where the everyday challenges are linked to poverty, poor housing, child abuse, domestic violence and crime, with a proportionally higher risk in Māori and Pasifika communities. In 2009, the New Zealand Government held a referendum so that the public could vote on a law aiming to ensure that parental or adult force was not used as a way of correcting unwanted behaviour. The 'anti-smacking law' was passed but seems to have had little impact on reducing adult violence towards children in some communities (New Zealand Government 2019b). The CRC concluding observations for the state (UNCRC 2016) registered their concern for children in such circumstances, who often do not have their issues acted on. New Zealand was advised by the CRC to strengthen its data gathering, extend the teams of professionals who are effective in supporting children and responding promptly to calls for help, and continue to raise public awareness of children's rights.

As this article is being written, there is a Royal Commission of Inquiry into abuse in state and institutional care for children 1950–1999 (Royal Commission of Inquiry 2019). Historical cases of child abuse in care settings are exposed for the first time, and it is becoming very clear that, when the abuse was ignored, the children had no form of support, therefore carrying the hurt and rejection into their adult life. The Royal Commission of Inquiry is focusing mainly on Māori, Pasifika and those with disabilities as these groups make up a disproportionate number of young people in care. The first report to the NZ Government is due in 2020. Although care and protection have moved away from institutional care settings, there is still a need to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children and the protection of their rights to a caring, nurturing environment. While this concerns parents and extended family/whānau in the first instance, early childhood teachers are also responsible as 'duty-bearers'. Stuart (2014) questions whether curricular texts can really represent the real world and whether, and how, policy can affect social justice. Stuart says that Te Whāriki remains a site "for struggle about differing representations" (p.4) and offers, as an example, the case of those mono-lingual Pakeha/European teachers who are "current beneficiaries of earlier confiscations of Māori land" (p.4). Such examples render the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki, and its relevance to children's rights, extremely complex, personal and local.

## A ‘Revisioning’ of Rights Model

Although it is acknowledged that all rights are for all children, there are, in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, specific areas where the universal nature of UNCRC has not been fully recognised. The unique nature of the needs of our youngest citizens therefore warrant scrutiny and in-depth discussion. Davis (2014, p.22) puts forward a clear argument for ‘revisioning rights’ in early childhood through an expanded rights framework. This framework is supported by the authors as it ensures that participation rights elevate our understanding of these young children as citizens to be ‘rights partakers’ in a world striving for more sustainable pathways. A framework that is more closely linked to the environmental, cultural, social and economic issues of our times should be widely adapted.

The Davis model (2014) is a necessary response to a universal approach to sustainability that acknowledges the interconnectedness of our world. Davis contends that if all dimensions of the framework are considered, the reality of a more sustainable world is likely to be realised. This model should be a valuable part of teacher education to deepen understanding of the extended rights required to care for ourselves, others, and living within a natural environment under risk. Teachers, within their everyday engagement with children and families, strive to be leaders and advocates for fairness and the rights of children. However, an extended rights framework within early childhood education is able to equip us all to live more sustainably by respecting the rights of the human world and the non-human world. This would open up dialogue between Māori and Pakeha/Europeans and other colonisers. Stuart (2014) says that the early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki, “is silent on the psychological effects of colonisation; only the ‘other’ has an identity” (p.5).

## Early Childhood Teachers – Rights and Responsibilities

Qualified early childhood teachers in New Zealand are required to be registered with the government-controlled Teaching Council. They are regularly monitored and assessed against a code of professional responsibilities and standards for the teaching profession where high standards are expected for all teachers across the education sectors. The Teaching Council acknowledges that teachers in New Zealand hold a position of trust in the community and are advocates for a fair and more equitable society. Part of a teacher’s responsibility to the community and to society is to ‘promote and protect the principles of human rights, social justice and sustainability’ (Education Council 2017). It falls to those who develop teacher education programmes and teachers’ professional development to consider how all teachers understand clearly their professional role.

All teachers must be made aware of the strong reprimand that has been handed to New Zealand by the CRC members in their concluding observations to the State, as well as reputable reports from other agencies who closely work with

communities. For too long, teachers, educational professionals and politicians have avoided using the language of rights that is expressed in the Convention; language such as the right to survival, the right to a full and decent life, the right to seek, receive and impart information, the best interests of the child. Stuart (2014) says that while many teachers are well-intentioned, “much of the teaching in ECE is of low-level language rather than a rich evocative lexicon” (p.4). By avoiding the language of rights, we run the risk of using a proxy language that is watered down, gentle on the ears of policy makers and, at best, ineffective.

The language of rights should also extend to the children so they understand the actions related to rights, see where they can make a contribution and are empowered to make a difference. Early childhood relationships and experiences grow the roots of participation where young children and their families learn more about collaboration, contribution, and participation. Children must hear ‘rights language’ from adults. Smith (2013) warns that if children are treated as vulnerable and incompetent by adults, the children will have little participation in decisions that impact on their lives. Smith noticed a significant change in adults when they realised the competence and agency of children when giving voice to their concerns. Children are not passive beings so it is important for them in their family homes and in their education settings to participate in democratic processes every day, through group collaboration, voting, consensus and deciding what is the right thing to do. Experiencing fairness will teach justice; experiencing democratic process will teach agency; experiencing rights will teach ‘I am a valued member of this community’.

In New Zealand, the national members of the World Organisation for Early Childhood Education (OMEP) have recognised the 30 years of UNCRC by recommitting to the aims and actions of the organisation in the years ahead. Our aims are to promote quality early childhood education in all its forms in Aotearoa New Zealand, with a measurable action related to advocacy for all early childhood teachers to be fully qualified. The New Zealand Government has made a commitment to teachers being fully qualified. However, further progress in this matter may require firm reminders and pressure from the full range of early childhood advocates and non-government organisations (NGOs). OMEP Aotearoa New Zealand aims to focus on fostering the optimum development of every child concerning physical, cultural, social, intellectual, emotional and spiritual dimensions in both the family and other social environs. Most children under the age of five years spend many hours each week in early childhood education and care settings; therefore, the status of qualified staff is necessary to maintain standards that uphold the wellbeing of the child.

## Conclusion

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was ratified by New Zealand in 1983. As we conclude the writing of this chapter, we are informed that on International Children’s Day 2019 our New Zealand Government pledged to

recommit to UNCRC. It is therefore imperative that all adults who are working with young children must have a deep political and ethical understanding of what an extended rights approach (Davis 2014) might mean for children regarding their survival and their right to live a full, healthy and happy life in Aotearoa New Zealand. Moss (2019, p.175) reminds us “the ability to combine utopian thinking with intense practicality should not be overlooked”. While our country has received world-wide accolades for the text of its early childhood education curriculum, Te Whāriki, issues remain around consistent and committed curriculum implementation and the shared co-construction of knowledge, as part of an overall national vision that honours UNCRC and the common rights of all children.

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