



*Art in Early Childhood*

# AWARUA AND THE DRAGON: ENHANCING YOUNG CHILDREN'S, TEACHERS' AND PARENTS' SENSE OF PLACE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY THROUGH ART AND STORYTELLING

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## **ABSTRACT**

One of the tasks of many early childhood education curricula is to foster both a strong sense of children's own cultural identity and an understanding of and respect for the identity of others. This is important because in many countries children, their families and their early childhood teachers live in increasingly diverse communities. The aim of the Awarua and the Dragon research project was to explore how storytelling and related multi-modal arts based activities – such as visual art, construction, music, and dramatic play – could enhance young children's sense of place and cultural identity. The research design was informed by sociocultural understandings about the role of collaboration and cultural tools in meaning-making and identity formation. The research was conducted in both China and New Zealand. Data was generated in both locations by collecting teachers' documentation, conducting focus group interviews with teachers and parents, and employing visual methods to stimulate recall of activities and engagement. However, at the time of writing, data from the Chinese researchers was not yet available, so this paper concentrates exclusively on the New Zealand side of the project. The outcome of the Chinese research and the analysis of the significant similarities and differences between the two sets of data will be the focus of future papers. Findings from the New Zealand research suggest that the project fostered and strengthened the place-based knowledge of children, teachers and parents. Knowledge of the different cultures within the community was also increased. Shifting teachers' pedagogical approach in visual arts education from one that was driven primarily by children's interests to one that involved more intentional teaching was also evident throughout the project.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Quality early childhood education (ECE) for young children is greatly enhanced by the provision of engaging and diverse opportunities for them to communicate their thoughts, knowledge, and experiences of the world they live in. The arts play an important role in this, and visual art education has a key place in many early childhood education (ECE) curricula around the world. New Zealand's early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) for example, acknowledges that there are multiple

languages children use to communicate their knowledge, ideas, and thinking processes. These include "...words, sentences, and stories..." but also "... sign, mathematics, visual imagery, art, dance, drama, rhythm, music and movement" (p. 41). It suggests that one of the main learning tasks in the early years for young children is the development of competence and confidence in the use of these multiple languages.

Story reading and telling in ECE programmes are also common practice internationally. They are often used by teachers to introduce young children to the literacy conventions associated with written or spoken language (Miller & Pennycuff, 2008). Stories are also used to present new ideas and information about the children's own environments and communities (McLachlan & Arrow, 2017). Wells and Zeece (2007, p. 286) observe that "children's literature has the potential to teach in the context of what is familiar to children, thereby helping them to make connections to the real world". But story reading and storytelling can also, importantly, introduce young children to the myths, legends, and imaginary worlds embedded in their own and other's cultures (Black, 1999). This type of literature can be a way to introduce young children to the mythical people and creatures who inhabit the stories from folk lore. Literature is also a road into to the physical places within the environment that are significant to these stories. Furthermore, children themselves have a capacity for rendering their own life experiences in narratives (Bruner, 1990) that are given meaning from the historical and cultural circumstances in which children's lives are lived.

Exploring places within their communities that are mentioned in local myths, legends, cultural stories or histories, can help strengthen children's developing "knowledge about and/or spiritual significance of features of the local area" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 32). Place-based education, which encourages students to examine their relationship with their environment (Penitito, 2009), can also be an important vehicle for their identity formation in relation to the environment in which they live and learn. Sobel (2004, p. 7) expands this idea by suggesting that place-based education can be a "starting point to teach concepts ... across the curriculum". He believes that this approach to education can be even more enhanced when coupled with arts education.

Research was undertaken about an art and storytelling project involving two kindergartens, one in New Zealand and one in China. The project generated opportunities for children and teachers to explore aspects of their own communities and culture. The research specifically set out to investigate if a story telling project could enhance young children's sense of place and cultural identity, their own as well as that of others, by examining the multiple learning opportunities generated by the storytelling. It also looked at how the storytelling, and the related art learning activities, fostered greater understanding for teachers and parents about the cultural backgrounds of children attending the EC centres. This article, however, only discusses findings from the New Zealand kindergarten setting. The outcome of the Chinese research and the analysis of the significant similarities and differences between the two sets of data will be the focus of future papers.

## *Background*

The New Zealand setting for the research was Plimmerton kindergarten, a government funded public kindergarten in Wellington New Zealand. Plimmerton Kindergarten is

located in a seaside village on the shores of Porirua Harbour in the Wellington region of New Zealand. It is licensed for forty children (2-5 years old), and is run by a local management committee consisting of parents and teachers, but is governed by **Whānau Manaaki**, the umbrella organisation for kindergartens in the Wellington region. Teachers are very emphatic that children's learning must be predominantly child-led, and that learning projects need to emerge primarily from the children's interests. The kindergarten's physical environment is planned to provide stimulation and motivation for learning where children are free to choose from and explore a wide range of learning materials that are available to them throughout the day. A unique aspect of the programme is a commitment to regularly taking small groups of children out of the kindergarten into the bush and the beach nearby. This helps to give children open-ended opportunities for learning directly in the natural environment.

All the teachers involved in the kindergarten were invited by the researchers to take part in the project. The stimulus for the project involved an original story, written by one of the researchers, called *Awarua and the Dragon* (Terreni, 2016). The story was based on an existing Māori legend about a taniwha, a supernatural creature from Māori mythology, who once lived in the Porirua Harbour (see <http://eng.mataurangamaori.tki.org.nz/Support-materials/Te-Reo-Maori/Maori-Myths-Legends-and-Contemporary-Stories/Awarua-the-taniwha-of-Porirua>). The new story included Awarua the taniwha and introduced a Chinese dragon.

#### **Awarua and the Dragon**

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The story (translated into Chinese) was written with an open ending, so that children and teachers in both countries were encouraged to explore what the creatures in the story might look like, and how they lived their lives. Mythical rather than real creatures were deliberately chosen in order to create opportunities for the children's creative thinking, imaginative interpretations, and personal renderings of the story. We were

interested in exploring the potential of mythology to enrich story telling as well as emergent art learning opportunities.

The invitation to participate in the research project supported the learning and teaching aims of the Plimmerton kindergarten teachers. Their internal review process of the programme had identified an aspiration to develop a better and deeper connection with the local Plimmerton community. They also identified that they wanted a better understanding of their local Māori history and the stories of symbolic, cultural, and social significance in the community. As their community was becoming increasingly culturally diverse, the teachers felt it was important to implement a programme that also responded to families from different cultures.

#### *Methodology and Methods*

The authors of this paper were Lisa Terreni, Judith Loveridge, Rachel Denee (all from Victoria University of Wellington) and Jing Zhou (independent ECE Consultant and PD Facilitator, Beijing). Rachel Denee was also the Head Teacher at Plimmerton kindergarten

at the time of this research. Rachel, the five other trained early childhood teachers at the kindergarten, and seven parents (who volunteered for a focus group interview) were the research participants.. Ethical approval was sought from the University Ethics Committee and all participants gave informed consent for their engagement in the project. Parents gave retrospective consent for the documentation related to their children, which was collected over the duration of the project, to be used for research purposes.

The initial pedagogical provocation (the use of a shared story across two different cultural contexts) and the research design itself were informed by socio-cultural theory. Rogoff (2003) proposes that as people participate in the sociocultural activities and processes of their communities they are transformed through that participation, and in turn they also contribute to the transformation of those activities and processes. Hence, the story offered children, their families and teachers opportunities to explore the history and culture of their own communities, their sense of place and their own cultural identity. Sociocultural theory is also interested in how human meaning making and the environment are mediated and transformed through cultural tools and artefacts. Stetsenko (2005, p. 72) argues that “human development is based on active transformation of existing environments and creation of new ones achieved through collaborative processes of producing and deploying tools”. As will become evident, the multi-modal artefacts and understandings that were collaboratively produced in the pedagogical processes also transformed the kindergarten community’s sense of identity and place, and also the sense of place, cultural identity and practices within families.

The researchers sought to examine how the pedagogical provocation had transformed participants and their practices through analysing data collected through a range of methods such as:

- Teachers documented the project and shared their work with each other as they proceeded. This documentation included: a programme plan, reflective e-mails, teaching stories, children’s learning stories, videos and photos, and artefacts that the children created, e.g. stories, art works, songs, dance, and drama.
- Focus group interviews with the teachers and parents of children who had been actively involved in the project.
- Visual methods were used to assist data gathering. Teachers and researchers set up an exhibition of the children’s art work as a tool to stimulate recall and reflection before the parents’ focus group interview. Prior to the interview the parents circulated around the exhibition with their children, interacting with them and the teachers, recalling the experiences the children and the families had around the project. A large portfolio pertaining to the programme planning, which incorporated a lot of visual documentation, was passed around and referred to during the focus group interview with teachers. Bagnoli (2009, p. 548) argues “The use of visual and creative methods can generally facilitate investigating layers of experience that cannot easily be put into words”. Furthermore, visual methods can also reveal the temporal aspects of children’s work, revealing growing understandings over time.

## *Key findings*

Themes that emerged from focus group interviews with Plimmerton teachers and parents, as well as the teacher's documentation, revealed that fostering place-based knowledge through storytelling and arts based learning experiences had been a significant dimension of the project. Developing increased knowledge of, and closer relationships with, diverse cultures within the community was another important outcome of the project. Both these findings not only involved the children but also the teachers and the parents. However, for the teachers specifically, their visual art education pedagogy and practices shifted as a result of the project. A dialectical relationship between children's interests and teachers' intentional strategies was generated through the project and this resulted in some teacher practices. Three themes are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

### *Fostering place-based knowledge through storytelling and arts based learning experiences*

The Plimmerton teachers planned ways to use the project to increase the children's understanding of local legends and physical places of cultural significance in the environment. Consequently, the teachers took groups of children on regular excursions into the local environment and while they were there intentionally facilitated storytelling, ephemeral art-making with natural materials found in the environment, drawing, and conversations about significant sites. These onsite investigations provided the children with resource material and knowledge that could be used in their work and play back in the kindergarten. The teachers also involved families by suggesting exploration activities in the term breaks, such as seeking out images or references to taniwha in their community. This in turn led to families developing increased awareness and understanding of their local environment. One parent interviewed said that her child knew more about the local environment and stories than her friends' children who went to other ECE services, and that her daughter had led the family on outings in the bush and around the area to share her knowledge with them. She observed enthusiastically, "It's incredible, her sense of place and her community from what happens here is huge."

The project prompted the teachers to use a diverse range of stories, such as Māori legends, as a stimulus and a tool to mediate learning. Children, teachers and families gained increased familiarity with local legends which were connected to significant places in their local community. These became an avenue for learning more about local history, and a stronger connection to the place where the participants lived and worked. One of the parents interviewed said that the project was the first time she had heard the local legend of Awarua the taniwha (who crashes into Mana Island flattening its top). She said, "I grew up here and went to this kindergarten and Plimmerton School and I hadn't heard of [Awarua] so that was quite nice...to learn that the island is flat because of that reason."

Large collaborative murals of taniwha made by the children became important cultural artefacts in the kindergarten. The mother of a Māori child, who lives at the local marae and is tangata whenua (Māori/indigenous people of the area), participated in the parent group interviews. She explained that when her child started attending the kindergarten the project had already begun, but that the large collaborative murals of taniwha made by the other children were significant to their feeling of belonging in the kindergarten

environment. She remarked, “The mural had been done, so for me coming in it was beautiful to see that mural ... that was just gorgeous.” She went on to explain the important connection to Mana Island and Awarua for their family and particularly her child, saying “it’s also really lovely to have that connection to Mana Island because everyone here sees it” (Mana Island is visible all along the coastline around Plimmerton). The project also assisted in developing the relationship between the kindergarten and the local Māori community. For example, the teachers obtained grant funding to commission a permanent mural of the legend and, as a consequence, found a local Māori artist to design and lead the mural painting.

### *Developing increased knowledge and relationships with diverse cultures within the community*

The teachers noticed that the project promoted diverse cultural understanding for children, families and themselves. The primary focus of the investigation at Plimmerton was on local Māori culture, history and stories, centred on the Awarua story. The project also created opportunities to learn about other cultures of children and families in the kindergarten community. As the project developed, the teachers extended the invitation to all families to share significant myths and stories from their own cultures. One parent who spoke at the focus group interview shared how the project brought up a connection to their family’s culture saying, “We are of Welsh heritage and obviously the dragon is on the flag ... I remember that [my daughter] did make that connection.” Prompted by the teachers several families brought in stories and pictures of mythical creatures from their cultures, and this gave the children an opportunity to make links between the stories from their home lives to those stories being explored in the kindergarten.

The project also fostered understanding of Chinese culture through the research relationship with the kindergarten in China. In particular, relationship development with a Chinese family at the kindergarten was significant. This family had been attending the kindergarten for five years, but the teachers found that their relationship with the mother, who was very shy, blossomed through the project. One of the teachers commented, “at Chinese New Year we had a much bigger focus on China. We try and celebrate different festivals anyway so it fitted in really well and it was a really nice way to include our Chinese family”. The teachers and children spent several weeks researching Chinese dragon costumes and Chinese New Year festival traditions that resulted in the children creating a large mural of a dragon.

At the teachers’ invitation, the Chinese mother participated in kindergarten activities several times over the period of Chinese New Year. She made dumplings with the children, painted a large Happy New Year mural using Chinese characters, and shared her appreciation of the collaborative mural the children had created of Chinese dragons. Her daughter showed visible pride in her mother’s involvement. One of the teachers remarked in the interview that the child would often revisit the photographs of these events in her learning portfolio, observing “she is so proud that her mum came in and did that!”

## *Shifting the pedagogical approach to visual arts education*

Data analysis from the focus group interviews with Plimmerton teachers indicated that the project resulted in shifting the teachers' pedagogical approach from one that was principally driven by following children's interests to one that included some planned strategies that were intentionally teacher-led. For example, teachers described how before starting the project they generated a mind map of possible teaching and learning opportunities that could potentially arise from the project. This helped to identify areas where teacher-initiated activity could be used to extend learning as well as stimulate children's interest. However, they were also conscious of the need to allow for the children's emerging interests from these types of interventions so the children could take the project into new directions as the project evolved. A balance between teachers scaffolding the learning and the children exploring the learning through their play resulted in an array of multi-modal creative explorations and expressions of thinking throughout the project. The head teacher observed:

*the children started bringing Awarua up everywhere in the kindergarten, so she got built in the sandpit and talked about at the play-doh and then they would make her out of blocks and just woven into [everything]. The children were involved in storytelling and imaginary play in every corner of the kindergarten so Awarua just began to feature everywhere ... We purposefully used singing and storytelling at mat times, and reminding the children ourselves sometimes during play, but often that just came from the children ... For the teachers, the intentional strategies were mainly in the art [learning experiences].*

The teachers shifted to having a more active role in the art area, and this was described by the teachers as "unusual" "new" "different" and "exciting". Teaching strategies included providing examples of taniwha artwork (often taken from books and the internet) to assist children to draw their own taniwha, encouraging the children to represent their thinking through art, and teacher facilitated experiences such as collaborative art-making.

The early stages of the project involved weeks of taniwha drawing and group discussions that were supported by teachers. From this work, the children developed sophisticated drawing skills and were able to co-construct knowledge about taniwha. Children were then actively supported and encouraged by the teachers to make art together that reflected their learning throughout the project, and this resulted in several large murals. These works became very important to the children, the families and the teachers. Through the teacher-facilitated collaborative art-making experiences, the children developed and practised not only their art skills but also skills such as communication, negotiation, and collaboration. The art works that resulted from this work became a source of immense pride and generated much conversation amongst children and adults. This engagement with the work and resulting dialogue was sustained over a long period time. In the focus group interviews, the teachers identified that collaborative art-making was an area where both the new ways of teaching and the breadth of children's learning were surprising and exciting.

## DISCUSSION

This paper has illustrated how myths, legends or stories can be used effectively as stimuli to provoke children's discussions, creativity and ideas that, in turn, can extend young children's visual art education and place-based learning. They can also be used effectively to increase not only children's understandings of different cultures but also those of teachers and parents. The findings from the Plimmerton kindergarten research demonstrated how considerable creativity and energy for learning was generated through a storytelling approach. Clearly, stories about imaginary creatures, such as *taniwha*, often have great appeal to young children (Wilson-Jackson, 2013) and these can be useful tools for helping early childhood teachers provide children with "expanding experiences and understanding of people, places, events and things" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p.21).

As Guo (2012) suggests, sharing and communicating with families is not always enough to generate a real sense of inclusion. Rather, "becoming a member of a community of practice involves contributing and sharing" (p. 8). This was very much the case during the Plimmerton kindergarten project. Researchers Ho, Cheung and Didham (2017) suggest that family involvement is paramount for children's learning, particularly for those of Asian descent. Families, they argue, are important for helping children develop a sense of belonging and assist with language acquisition through shared activity within ECE contexts. Learning opportunities identified by these researchers as being effective include "cooking traditional food with children, story-telling and folklore, making traditional crafts and learning dances" (p. 40).

The place-based dimension of the project involved teachers taking children out into their community to experience and observe physical places and spaces of significance and interest. This helped children develop "knowledge about the features of an area of physical and/or spiritual significance to the local community..." (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 32). Connections and links to the Māori community and things important to them were also fostered by this approach. Furthermore, this research supports the claim made by Lane Zucker (Sobel, 2004, p.ii), that place-based education "might be characterised as the pedagogy of community, the reintegration of the individual into her home ground, and the restoration of the essential links between a person and her place". We also note that the kindergarten's relationship with the environment and the community involved reciprocal transformations, each contributing to the identity of the other.

The New Zealand early childhood curriculum states that "Kaiako [teachers] are the key resource in any ECE service. Their primary responsibility is to facilitate children's learning and development through thoughtful and intentional pedagogy ..." (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 59). Visual art education researchers in New Zealand have noted however, that whilst this is an aspiration of the curriculum, intentional teaching is often specifically lacking in visual arts education (Clark & de Latour, 2009; Richards, 2007; Terreni, 2009). The intentional teaching that arose from this project through teachers engaging in a range of active, hands-on strategies to enhance children's learning, thinking and creativity, supports Terreni's contention that in visual art education for young children "the provision of unlimited time, quality resources, and intentional and often imaginative teaching strategies enable sustained opportunities for in-depth learning to occur" (2016b, p. 56).



Intentional teaching strategies used by the teachers throughout the project included: planning for and providing interesting stimulations for learning, engaging in active discussion with children and parents about the project, scaffolding children's art learning experiences (often through hands-on engagement), and the provision of relevant resources and related learning opportunities. Regular communication with parents about the project through conversations, e-mails and invitations to be involved can also be seen as intentional aspects of the project. Nonetheless, the ability of the teachers to know when to step in and then step out of children's visual art learning experiences was also evident in the project. This allowed for children's self-directed play and creative expression to still take place. This illustrates "the purposeful and deliberate actions of teachers, drawing on both their knowledge of individual children and professional knowledge and skills to provide meaningful and appropriate curricular experiences ..." (McLaughlin, Aspen & Snyder, 2016, p.176.) for the children involved in the activities.

While it is beyond the scope of this article, it is likely that the move to more intentional teaching was supported by pedagogical leadership provided by the Head Teacher at Plimmerton Kindergarten. Lindsay (2015) found in a recent study that art education in ECE is affected by the self-efficacy, beliefs and understanding of the positional leader. She believes that "educational leaders in services have considerable influence upon visual art practice, with arts-inspired leaders effectively guiding their teams" (p. 18). She proposes that leaders with a lack of skills or confidence in art are less likely to provide the necessary pedagogical leadership to develop effective teaching practice for young children's art education. In the kindergarten, pedagogical leaders facilitated the teachers professional learning and teaching through the Awarua and the Dragon project, and this was strengthened by the teachers' willingness and enthusiasm to participate in the project.

## **CONCLUSION**

People connect to stories about their culture and national identity, and for young children it is important that they know who they are and where they are from. The story telling and art-making learning opportunities that were generated throughout the project, often intentionally by teachers, enhanced children's awareness of their own cultural and local identity but also that of others. Exploration of the local physical environment, an essential element of the project, also supported children's developing sense of connection to their community. As McLaughlin, Aspen and Snyder (2016, p. 191) note "Intentional teaching provides a way to conceptualise teacher-child interactions that moves New Zealand teachers beyond broad descriptions of responsive and respectful relationships, to make more visible the specific knowledge, actions and decision-making processes that are centre to professional teaching practice in ECE". The effectiveness of increased intentional teaching in the art learning experiences that arose throughout the project was evident by the children's enthusiastic and sustained learning through their art-making and storytelling.

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## Biographies

Lisa Terreni is a senior lecturer at Victoria University of Wellington's Faculty of Education, teaching in the early childhood education degree programmes. Her research interests focus on exploring how visual art can be used to enhance young children's thinking, communication and multi-literacy skills. She also has a keen interest in social and cultural diversity and how teachers can meet the needs of diverse communities. Her recent PhD research examined early childhood access to and use of art museums and galleries in New Zealand.

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Judith Loveridge (PhD) is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Victoria University of Wellington. Her research focuses on the intersection between social and cultural processes and individuals' learning and development, examining both implicit and explicit cultural practices, educational discourses and pedagogies.

Rachel Denee has been working in teaching, leadership and research roles in early childhood education since 2000. Her research interests include educational leadership, professional learning, and visual art in early childhood. Rachel is a PhD candidate at Victoria University of Wellington, studying ECE teachers' practices and perceptions about art through a professional learning community.

Dr. Zhou is an independent early childhood researcher and professional development facilitator based in Beijing China. Dr. Zhou got her masters degree and PhD in Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. She also has over 25 years experience working in and with local Chinese kindergartens and international schools. One of Dr. Zhou's research interests is around how social and cultural contexts influence the teaching and learning, curriculum and assessment practices in Chinese kindergartens. Now she is working closely with the Chinese kindergartens to explore a child-environment-relationship centered teaching and assessment approach in the contemporary Chinese context.