



*Art in Early Childhood*

# Place, Pedagogy and Possibility: Nurturing Identity and Belonging in the Young through Arts-based Approaches

Patricia A. L. Ong  
Auckland University of Technology  
patricia.ong@aut.ac.nz

## Abstract

This paper explores how place-based and contextualised approaches can strengthen learner and cultural identities through the arts. Grounded in a localised curriculum within a community setting in Aotearoa New Zealand, the study emphasises belonging, positive learner experiences, and equitable outcomes. Using an action research approach, the project positions teachers as researchers in their own practice, reflecting Stenhouse's (1975) principles that view curriculum as a process shaped through inquiry, reflection, and adaptation to context. The theoretical framework draws on place-based education, culturally responsive pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and funds of knowledge; framing curriculum as dynamic, culturally sustaining, and responsive to local histories, ecologies, and identities. Teachers collaborated to design and implement arts experiences embedded in local places, stories, and cultural narratives, enabling learners to engage with their social, historical, and ecological surroundings in meaningful ways. Data insights reveal that culturally relevant, place-based arts practices support learners in expressing identity, affirming diverse cultural narratives, and developing a sense of belonging. Implications for practice include integrating local knowledge, lived experiences, and cultural perspectives into curricula, and preparing teachers through critical pedagogies that challenge dominant narratives while fostering inclusive, culturally responsive classrooms.

*Keywords: localised curriculum, place-responsive pedagogy, identity and belonging  
The Concept of Place and the Localised Curriculum*

In educational contexts, the concept of place encompasses not only the physical location and surroundings but also the social, cultural, and emotional environments that shape learning. Place carries multiple associations and meanings informed by activities, histories, and cultural narratives connected to a location (Taylor, 2010). Physical place influences engagement, creativity, and feelings of safety, while its social and cultural dimensions such as community relationships, heritage, and collective experience are equally significant in shaping learners' sense of belonging (Erfani, 2022).

Emotional connections to place can foster motivation, self-esteem, and ownership of learning, whereas feelings of alienation or displacement can have the opposite effect (Jack, 2010; Marques et al., 2020). From an ecological perspective, place-based pedagogy encourages learners to engage with their local environments, cultivating awareness of sustainability and the interconnectedness between people and the natural world (Etkin, 2024). The environments in which learners grow and learn play a central role in shaping identity and community participation. A localised curriculum adapts educational content to the linguistic, cultural, historical, environmental, and economic contexts of the community (Hunter et al., 2021). Drawing on funds of knowledge from homes, communities, and local environments, it ensures education is relevant, responsive, and reflective of learners' lived experiences (Hedges, 2012; Moll, 2019). The integration of arts-based and culturally relevant approaches within place-based education provides experiential learning opportunities that strengthen cultural identity, deepen connections to place, and support holistic development (Inwood, 2008; Sesigür & Edeer, 2020).

### Epistemological Basis

This study is anchored in place-based education and culturally sustaining pedagogy, two perspectives that position local histories, ecologies, and cultural narratives at the centre of learning. Place-based education enables learners to make meaningful connections between lived experience and curriculum by engaging with the physical, social, and cultural dimensions of their environment (Gruenewald, 2003; Sobel, 2004). In this project, the arts were situated within the stories, landscapes, and traditions of a specific Aotearoa New Zealand community, fostering belonging and stewardship. Culturally sustaining pedagogy (Gay, 2018; Paris, 2012) complements this by affirming and maintaining learners' cultural identities, challenging deficit perspectives, and valuing Indigenous and multilingual knowledge systems.

A second cluster of philosophies draws on curriculum-as-process (Stenhouse, 1975) and social constructivism (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978). These perspectives view curriculum as dynamic and co-constructed through teacher–learner interaction, reflection, and adaptation. Here, teachers acted as practitioner-researchers using action research (Mertler, 2021) to iteratively plan, implement, and refine arts-based, place-connected experiences. This approach positioned educators as both designers and participants in the learning process, responsive to community and learner needs.

A third conceptual strand emerges from critical pedagogy (Friere, 1973; Giroux, 2010) in dialogue with the concept of Funds of Knowledge (Gonzales et al., 2005; Moll, 2019). Critical pedagogy frames education as a means to question and transform dominant narratives, particularly important in decolonising early childhood practice. Funds of Knowledge recognises the skills, stories, and practices embedded in children's homes and communities

as valuable curriculum resources. Together, these perspectives highlight the political, cultural, and relational dimensions of teaching, ensuring that curriculum honours the expertise of whānau and community.

These three theoretical clusters collectively frame arts-based approaches as powerful in nurturing children's sense of belonging and identity. Place-based and culturally sustaining pedagogy position learning within local ecologies, histories, and cultural narratives, affirming connections to land and culture (Gruenewald, 2003; Paris & Alim, 2017). Curriculum-as-process and social constructivism view learning as dynamic and co-constructed, with the arts providing dialogic spaces where children negotiate meaning and express emerging identities (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978). Critical pedagogy and the funds of knowledge framework extend this by interrogating power hierarchies and valuing the cultural resources of families and communities in curriculum design (Giroux, 2010; Moll, 2019). Together, these perspectives highlight how arts-based, place-responsive practice can act as rooted, relational, and critical pedagogy that affirms multiple identities and fosters belonging in early childhood contexts.

### Exploration Strategy

The study adopted a qualitative, practitioner-researcher approach situated within an action research framework (Mertler, 2021). The cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting enabled the teaching team to iteratively design and adapt learning experiences in response to children's interests, whānau input, and local events. The study involved between 32 to 35 children (reflecting enrolment fluctuations), six teachers, and fifteen parent volunteers who contributed to the inquiry process. The first action research cycle spanned eight months (April-November 2024), while at the time of writing, a subsequent inquiry cycle was underway.

Ethical considerations were integral to the study's design and implementation, and assent was respected from children through ongoing, child-sensitive engagement. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained in data recording and reporting, with all information securely stored. The research adhered to the ethical guidelines for practitioner research in early childhood education, emphasizing relational ethics, respect, and care within the learning community (BERA, 2018; Mertler, 2021). This investigative framework was grounded in reciprocal learning relationships and culturally responsive pedagogy, aligned with the principles of Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017), positioning kaiako and tamariki as co-learners in a shared inquiry.

Arts-based inquiry was the primary investigative tool, chosen for its facility to surface and express identity, belonging, and cultural narratives in ways that transcend purely verbal communication (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2009). Activities included collaborative creation of symbolic artefacts such as waka collage models, taonga pendants, and mixed-media artworks depicting the local ranges. These projects invited intergenerational participation, with whānau contributing materials, stories, and skills. The artefacts served both as learning outcomes and as visual data points for analysis, embodying children's perspectives and community connections. Alongside arts-based methods, activities including nature walks to the local ranges and nature reserve, where resource gathering functioned as both a pedagogical and investigative process. Observations during these excursions captured how children engaged with local ecology, cultural landmarks, and shared narratives.

Documentation included photographs, field notes, and children’s verbal reflections recorded during and after the experiences.

Empirical inquiry was carried out through a multi-modal approach that combined participant observation during creative and outdoor sessions, visual documentation of artefacts and learning environments, and narrative accounts of children’s and whānau contributions. In addition, kaiako engaged in reflective journaling to capture their pedagogical decisions and emergent insights. The analytic process followed a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019) with codes generated from recurring patterns in children’s creative outputs, dialogue and observed activities. These codes informed ongoing curriculum adaptation, ensuring that emerging themes of cultural identity, belonging, and agency directly shaped subsequent learning experiences. This integrated research process blending action research, arts-based engagement enabled the project to both investigate and support the fostering of children’s cultural identities, grounding the process within the lived realities of the community. Evidence analysis began with reiterated viewing of visual documentation and review of narrative assessment, teacher reflective logs to identify recurring ideas, symbols, and interactions. Initial inductive codes were drawn from children’s creative outputs such as repeated motifs of maunga, waka, or family gatherings alongside patterns in their language and behaviour. These codes were then clustered into broader themes that reflected the project’s focus on cultural identity affirmation, belonging, intergenerational knowledge exchange, place connections, holistic learning identities, and agency. Coding was inductive, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data, and deductive, informed by the project’s theoretical framing and the principles of Te Whāriki (See Table 1). Regular teacher-researcher discussions ensured interpretive rigour, with differing perspectives explored to strengthen trustworthiness. Artefacts and field notes were revisited throughout the process to validate and refine themes, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in children’s voices and lived experiences. The analysis process was not a separate, end-stage task but integrated throughout the action research cycle. Insights from emerging themes fed directly into the design of subsequent arts-based and place-based activities, creating a dynamic link between research and pedagogy.

Theme	Subthemes	Deductive Codes (theory-driven)	Inductive Codes (data-driven)
1. Identity and Belonging	Identity formation Belonging to place Social belonging	Identity, belonging, cultural rights, hybrid identities	Mapping stories on local landscapes and events, whānau connections, peer relationships
2. The Arts as Pathways for Meaning-Making	Arts-based expression Creative risk-taking Voice and agency	Arts-based learning, multimodal expression, agency	Children’s artwork, sculptures, performances, experimenting with materials
3. Place-Responsive Pedagogy	Learning with landscapes Relational worldviews Embodied learning	Place-responsive pedagogy, ecological literacy, relational learning	Nature walks, sensory exploration, land art, use of natural materials

4. Cultural Continuity and Knowledge	Transmission of traditional narratives Symbolic and material practices Whanau and Kaumātua sharing	Cultural sustainability & whakawhanaungatanga Intergenerational relationships in fostering identity, belonging	Elders and whānau share traditions, local histories and pūrākau. Connection to whenua, maunga, awa and local narratives
5. Teacher Positionality	Teacher positionality Disruptions and tensions	Postcolonial lens, decolonising pedagogy, power relations	Teacher reflections as non-Māori, tensions between Eurocentric norms and local practices

Table 1- Emergent coding framework table: Place-responsive & Arts-based pedagogies

### Overarching Themes and Key Insights

The key insights of this study are derived from an analysis of ongoing assessment documentation of children’s learning experiences and developmental progress through the use of learning stories (Carr, 2001; Carr & Lee, 2012). These narratives constitute a core component of the children’s portfolios maintained throughout their time at the early learning centre. Additional information sources included minutes from monthly teacher meetings, teacher self-reviews, reflective journals, and evaluation reports compiled between April 2024 to March 2025. A content analysis of the documentation was conducted over this timeframe. A few overarching themes are elaborated here (See Table 1).

### Cultural Identity Affirmation

*“We observe that when children sing waiata, create and wear art that reflect their cultural identities, they take pride and are affirmed in their cultural identities.”*

(Excerpt from teacher reflective log, Jun 2024)

With more than fifty percent of the children identifying as Māori, the theme of cultural identity affirmation is significant and revealed through how tamariki’s sense of self was strengthened when their cultural backgrounds, languages, and connections to place were made visible in the learning environment. Learning evidence synthesis was made from children’s artwork, teacher reflections, observation notes during hikoi, and whānau contributions showed some level of integration of te reo Māori, symbols, and narratives. Children were noticed to be increasingly using te reo Māori terms such as maunga, awa, and whānau in their conversations and dialogue, and were encouraged to incorporate kōwhaiwhai, koru, and taonga motifs in their creative work. Representations of significant places such as the local ranges, Waipa-Waikato rivers, the Marae, and family homes were common, often accompanied by personal statements like “That’s my maunga...” These key points suggest that arts-based, place-responsive pedagogy aligns with Te Whāriki’s Mana Whenua (Belonging) and Mana Tangata (Contribution) strands.

As Thomson and Hall (2008) note, it is through creative processes children represent cultural narratives that are often silenced in mainstream education, reclaiming space for their identity. These practices help advance decolonising objectives by privileging Māori perspectives and disrupting Eurocentric dominance in the curriculum approach. From an art education perspective, Eisner (2002) reminds us that the arts are not mere decoration but a way of knowing. The symbolic images of mountains and gardens become forms of thinking that embodied children's identities. Dewey's (1934) *Art as Experience* helps explain why the process of making is as significant as the final artefact: children reconstructing meaning in real time.

### Sense of Belonging

*“Through art, children are given a way to express their sense of belonging; to include their whānau, their homes and their communities through their creations...we see children representing their maunga and awa in their creations, demonstrating their belonging not just to the people but also to the land.”*  
(Kaiako reflection, Sept 2024)

This theme indicated that tamariki developed stronger connections to people, places, and communities when learning experiences were grounded in familiar cultural contexts and collaborative practices. Observation notes, artefacts from arts-based projects, and feedback from whānau showed that children expressed belonging through repeated references to shared spaces such as the marae, local parks, the local ranges, and community gardens and through their participation in group activities like waiata, weaving, and storytelling circles. Children demonstrated pride in their contributions to collective projects, such as murals and waka-making, often referring to them as “ours” or “we made this together.” Whānau involvement in excursions, resource-making, and classroom celebrations further reinforced reciprocal relationships, validating children's identities and roles within the learning community. Analysis revealed three interrelated subthemes: belonging through relationships, belonging through shared cultural narratives, and belonging through active participation in collective creation. These patterns align closely with Te Whāriki's Mana Whenua and Mana Tangata strands, supporting wellbeing (Mana Atua) by fostering secure, inclusive, and culturally responsive environments that affirm every child's place in the group. Wright (2011) expressed that it is through the arts, children express who they are and where they belong; their creative work reflects relationships, culture and place.

### Intergenerational Knowledge Exchange

*“Through harakeke weaving, waiata, action songs or the use of traditional patterns or symbols in art, children are inheriting the language and values of their whānau and learning about a form of knowledge handed down through the generations.”*  
(Excerpt from parent - teacher dialogue, Jun 2024)

This theme revealed that learning was enriched when tamariki engaged in collaborative activities with parents, grandparents, kaumātua, and other community knowledge holders. Documentation from arts-based projects, photographs, and educator reflections showed that these exchanges often took place during nature walks, weaving sessions, traditional

costume making, gardening, and storytelling. Elders share local histories, pūrākau, and traditional practices, while children responded through drawing, constructing artefacts, and retelling stories in their own words. These interactions not only potentially served as means for transmitted cultural knowledge but also modelled respect, reciprocity, and the value of lived experience as a form of expertise. Children reference experiences from whānau in later play and artmaking, indicating sustained influence while whānau express pride and emotional connection when their knowledge is integrated into learning environments and educators note increased engagement, confidence, and cultural fluency among tamariki. As noted by Wright (2011), it is through collaborative art-making, children and adults engage in reciprocal learning, a process of ako that connects generations.

This theme aligns with Te Whāriki's Mana Reo (Communication) and Mana Tangata (Contribution) strands, highlighting the role of intergenerational relationships in fostering identity, belonging, and the transmission of Indigenous knowledge systems within early learning contexts. Durie (2003) cultural sustainability and whakawhanaungatanga (Metge, 2010) frame these moments as relational and future-focused. In art education theory, such exchanges illustrate Dewey's (1934) view of art as socially situated experience. The making was not isolated 'creativity' but embedded in cultural practice.

### Place-Based Connections

*Parent and kaiako reflection on children's art as a means of connecting to their maunga and community - "The maunga is their backyard... Through the artwork of the children about their environment, mountain, events in the community, they are creating their own memories, connections to the place and a sense of belonging".*

*(Excerpt from parent-teacher dialogue, Aug 2024)*

This theme demonstrated that children's engagement with local environments fostered a stronger sense of identity, belonging, and environmental stewardship. Evidence from observational notes, photographs, and children's artworks showed that regular visits to familiar places such as the local ranges, local rivers, parks, and community landmarks allowed tamariki to develop emotional, sensory, and cultural attachments to these sites. Activities like sketch walks, nature material gathering, and mapping exercises encouraged children to notice seasonal changes, recognise native flora and fauna, and link natural features to local Māori narratives and pūrākau shared by whānau and kaumātua. Over time, tamariki began to reference these places in storytelling, pretend play, and art, signalling an internalisation of place-based knowledge. Educators observed that this grounding in whenua not only enhanced environmental awareness but also supported cultural identity affirmation through recognition of Indigenous knowledge systems. Subthemes included the integration of local stories into creative expression, sensory immersion as a pathway to connection, and the use of art as a reflective tool for strengthening relational ties with place.

These emergent patterns align with Te Whāriki's Mana Whenua (Belonging) strand and reinforce the idea that sustained, culturally anchored place-based pedagogy strengthens both personal and collective connections to land and community. These insights are also supported by earlier research by Smith (2002) who makes the observation that the creative explorations of local landscapes support a pedagogy of belonging, where learning is grounded in relationship and reciprocity with place. Arts-based approaches strengthen children's place-based connections by transforming local experiences into creative

expression. Through embodied sensory and cultural engagement, art fosters ecological awareness, identity and belonging. In Aotearoa, integrating local stories and materials affirms children's rights and sustains indigenous knowledge (Eisner, 2002; Gruenewald, 2003).

### Holistic Learning Identities

*"With multi-modal arts-based practice, children are gaining greater competencies in many ways - physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually."*

*(From Kaiako Reflection, Sept 2024)*

This theme highlighted that children's identities as learners are formed through the interconnected development of their cognitive, emotional, physical, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. Activities such as collaborative mural-making, nature-based art, and storytelling from local pūrākau allowed children to draw on personal experiences, cultural heritage, and sensory exploration simultaneously. Teachers reported that these experiences encouraged children to see themselves not only as knowledge receivers but as active contributors and co-creators, fostering confidence, agency, and resilience. The inclusion of whānau knowledge and community collaboration further strengthened the integration of multiple perspectives, reflecting Te Whāriki's holistic view of the child (kotahitanga). Subthemes included learning as relational and interconnected, the valuing of diverse modes of expression (visual, oral, tactile, performative), and the recognition that identity formation is an ongoing, evolving process. This approach aligns with Indigenous and decolonising pedagogies (McArthur, 2021; Smith, 2022), which view learning as embedded in relationships with people, place, and the more-than-human world rather than as isolated skill acquisition.

Arts-based activities that integrated movement, storytelling, and painting supported children's holistic development. Carr and Lee's (2012) learning dispositions framework intersects here with Hetland et al.'s (2007) observe, reflect, and stretch and explore habits as children moved fluidly between modalities, experimenting without fear of failure. Dewey (1934) would interpret these activities as opportunities for continuous interaction between doing and undergoing; children were shaping the work, and the work was shaping them. Such environments legitimise multiple forms of intelligence, countering narrow academic hierarchies (Eisner, 2002; Gardner, 2005).

### Empowerment and Agency

Educator reflection on children exercising agency, collaboration, and creative decision-making through open-ended art-making.

*"Through art-making, every child is able to contribute their ideas, negotiate with peers in collaborative work and make creative decisions about colours, materials and so on... There is no right or wrong answers and they are allowed to explore, experiment and direct their own meaning-making through different materials."*

*(Field note, Teacher interview, Aug 2024)*

This thematic finding emphasized that learning experiences empowered tamariki to take ownership of their ideas, choices, and creative processes. Across observations, educator reflections, and children's artefacts, evidence showed that when learners were given meaningful choices such as selecting materials, deciding how to represent their stories, or leading aspects of group projects they developed a greater sense of control over their learning journeys (Scott et al., 2020). Arts-based, place-responsive activities provided multiple entry points for self-expression, allowing children to draw from personal, cultural, and environmental resources.

Teachers noted shifts in confidence, with tamariki increasingly initiating activities, sharing opinions, and negotiating roles with peers. The involvement of whānau and community knowledge holders further reinforced children's ability to act as co-constructors of knowledge rather than passive recipients, reflecting Te Whāriki's principle of Whakamana (empowerment) (Macfarlane et al., 2012). For example, during a project that involved children designing their own wakas, they watched video clips on the significance and the design of these vessels; children ask questions or share their own experiences of being on boats, and work on their drawings and designs of small model boats. Here, everyone learns together; koro shares his traditional knowledge, the teachers guide the exploration, and the children add their own questions, ideas, and experiences.

Subthemes include the right to voice and choice, recognition of children as competent decision-makers, and the creation of safe, culturally sustaining spaces that encourage risk-taking and innovation. This approach aligns with decolonising pedagogies that seek to redistribute power in educational relationships, valuing children's perspectives as central to curriculum design and knowledge creation (Baker et al., 2023; Scott et al., 2020).

When young learners have a choice of the themes, media, and sometimes even the physical location for their work, such as creating a clay "maunga for the playground" so that 'the mountain can come to us.' This reflects Te Whāriki - Empowerment (Whakamana) and Freire's (1970) education as a practice of freedom. From an art education standpoint, this agency is tied to Hetland et al.'s (2007) Envision Habit when children imagined possibilities beyond the given, then acted to realise them. Eisner (2002) would see this as imaginative transformation, where the arts enable children to reshape reality in meaningful ways.

Strengthening Identities through a Localised Curriculum

Excerpt - Teacher reflection on connecting local places with children's cultural identities.

*"We realise that when we use local places as an integral part of our projects, children take pride in sharing their family and cultural backgrounds which form part of the local community."*

*(Fieldnote, Sept 2024)*

Significant emphasis in the curriculum was placed on utilising the funds of knowledge inherent in the local environment, including its natural resources, history, and cultural significance (Holdom & Page, 2022; Ritchie & Rau, 2006a). The early learning centre close proximity from the summit route to the ranges provide regular opportunities for tamariki to engage in nature walks, which formed the basis for numerous learning activities. These included collaborative artworks such as sculptural reliefs of the ranges, printmaking with natural materials, and exploration of local flora and fauna.

Given the predominantly Māori composition of the centre's population, teachers played a crucial role in facilitating the co-constructing of learner and cultural identities through

culturally embedded activities and celebrations. For instance, the children made their own cultural dresses adorned in handmade piupiu and headband, performed with pride during Waitangi Day celebrations, embodying cultural expression and identity. The centre also hosts cultural events such as kapa haka performances by a local primary school, reinforcing the community's connection to Māori heritage and language through waiata (songs). Art projects, such as collaborative creation of waka, functioned as cultural motifs fostering a collective sense of belonging, symbolically uniting tamariki as participants in a shared journey. The local context, including the annual regatta featuring waka races and other cultural performances, further enriched these place-based learning experiences. Teachers described initiatives such as fortnightly hikes to Hakarimata and projects extending children's observations of flora and fauna to curricular on sustainability and environmental guardianship (kaitiakitanga). The local ranges hold profound cultural significance as ancestral landmarks integral to Māori identity, genealogy (whakapapa), and spiritual belonging, highlighting the importance of place in identity formation.

### Critical Reflection

Overall, the study demonstrates that integrating arts-based approaches with place-based and localised curriculum practices offers a robust framework for enacting culturally sustaining pedagogy. Arts serve as a medium through which children explore identity, culture, and community, while localisation ensures that learning is rooted in familiar landscapes, histories, and social contexts. Identity affirmation, belonging, intergenerational knowledge exchange, holistic development, and empowerment are mutually reinforcing when arts and place-based approaches are intentionally combined. By embedding local culture, environmental context, and creative expression into curriculum design, educators create learning environments where children's voices, heritage, and experiences are central, fostering engagement, resilience, and a strong sense of agency. Such approaches illustrate the potential of culturally responsive and contextually grounded pedagogy to transform early childhood education, enabling children to navigate learning environments that honour who they are, where they belong, and what they can contribute. This supports similar observations and inferences earlier studies (Chan, 2011; Macfarlane et al., 2012) Arts-based approaches create powerful possibilities for nurturing young children's identity and belonging by connecting them deeply to place, culture, and community. When children engage in creative practices that draw upon local stories, natural materials, and cultural traditions, they learn to see themselves as active participants in the landscapes and relationships that shape their lives. These experiences affirm diverse cultural identities, while also fostering shared responsibility for the environment and collective well-being (Ritchie & Rau, 2006b). In Aotearoa, such practices align strongly with Te Whāriki's vision of the child as a holistic learner who is competent, confident, and grounded in relationships with people and places. Arts-based pedagogies also embody children's rights under the UNCRC (1989), particularly the right to cultural identity and participation, ensuring education sustains both personal and collective heritage. Through the integration of identity, belonging, and possibility, arts-based approaches position young learners as active creators of sustainable futures, enabling them to carry forward the cultural and ecological knowledge embedded within their communities. While Te Whāriki is grounded in Māori values, language, and worldviews, non-Māori educators have to navigate the tension between being cultural outsiders and upholding obligations to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi and children's

rights to their cultural identity. This involves acknowledging limitations in lived experience while committing to partnership with whānau, iwi, and Māori colleagues, and ensuring authentic use of te reo Māori, tikanga, and local narratives rather than tokenistic inclusion. Pohio (2017) in *Landscapes of Identity: Young children and the Visual Arts* investigate how visual arts are a critical means through which children's cultural ways of knowing can be communicated and made visible. Barton (2015) explores how arts-based educational research empowers young children to express themselves through multimodal forms which naturally foster collaboration and shared meaning-making. Ritchie and Rau (2006) examine how Māori cultural values and artistic forms such as waiata, moko, and storytelling can be woven into the ECE curriculum to affirm children's cultural identity, emphasizing relational learning, community engagement, and the importance of teachers working in partnership with whānau and iwi to enact bicultural curriculum meaningfully. These practices demonstrate that learning through the arts is not merely expressive but serves as a vehicle for embedding culture, place, and identity into meaningful experiences, while also grounding education in the local community and environment. Cultural identity affirmation was strongly evident where children used the arts to explore and represent their heritage; creating taonga pendants, weaving, and painting local landscapes enabled children to connect with their whakapapa, language, and traditional practices. As Paris (2012) emphasizes, culturally sustaining pedagogy involves maintaining and fostering diverse cultural identities, and arts-based approaches provide tangible, experiential means to enact this in practice. Through these activities, children see their identities reflected within the classroom community and experienced validation and pride, reinforcing a sense of belonging and connection to the learning environment (Gay, 2018).

Arts-based activities support collaborative learning and a sense of community (Education Gazette, 2023). Group murals, shared performances of waiata and haka, and co-constructed art projects encourage peer interaction, recognition of contributions, and collective achievement. These practices foster inclusion, engagement, and emotional security, reflecting the interrelationship between identity affirmation and belonging. Children participating in communal arts activities not only express themselves creatively but also strengthened their connection to peers, educators, and whānau, emphasizing the relational dimension of learning and the social nature of early childhood education. Intergenerational knowledge exchange are similarly mediated through arts-based experiences. In her doctoral research, Lee (2009) made the observation that storytelling, song, dance and visual art are intergenerational practices through which Māori knowledge, identity and belonging are sustained. Elders and whānau shared traditional stories, songs, and craft skills, which children interpreted and represented through artistic activities. For example, observing and learning flax weaving creating traditional carvings may allow children to internalize ancestral knowledge through hands-on creative processes. Rogoff (2003) notes that learning is deeply embedded in cultural and social contexts, and the arts offer a powerful medium for children to engage with intergenerational knowledge, fostering respect for elders and continuity of cultural heritage. Such experiences also strengthen connections between home, community, and school, reflecting a localised approach to curriculum that values children's lived experiences and family expertise.

Place-based learning has been evident in the ways local environments and community contexts were integrated into educational experiences. Binder and Kotsopoulos (2011) observes that children's drawings and constructions of place are deeply connected to their sense of self and community, reflecting how they experience belonging in their

environments. Walking into the local ranges and reserve, observing native plants and birds, and engaging with local landmarks inspired artistic representations, including paintings, models, and performance-based interpretations. Sobel (2004) argues that place-based education fosters both environmental awareness and cultural understanding, allowing children to situate themselves within their immediate surroundings and community. By connecting arts experiences to local landscapes and histories, educators embedded curriculum within meaningful, contextually relevant experiences. This approach not only reinforced children's sense of place and belonging but also fostered environmental stewardship and an understanding of community as an extension of the classroom. The integration of place-based experiences with arts-based pedagogy illustrates how localised curricula can support holistic learning while maintaining cultural and ecological relevance. Holistic learning identities emerged as arts-based, place-connected experiences supported growth across cognitive, social, emotional, and cultural dimensions of development. Binder and Kostopoulos (2011) makes the note that the arts enable children to explore and express knowledge in multiple ways, connecting thinking, feeling, imagining and doing. This integration nurtures holistic development. Collaborative painting, music, drama, and storytelling encouraged cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and cultural growth simultaneously (Barton, 2015; Lines et al., 2014). For instance, children painting a representation of the local ranges while discoursing feelings, history and whakapapa integrated artistic expression, emotional literacy, and cultural knowledge. This also aligns with the Reggio Emilia perspective, which views children as competent, expressive learners whose development is multifaceted and interconnected (Edwards et al., 2012). By integrating the arts with local and cultural contexts, children are able to engage deeply with themselves, peers, and place, constructing meaning across multiple domains. Empowerment and agency have been further enhanced through arts-based experiences and localised projects. Children exercise choice in the materials, techniques, and subjects of their creative work, were part of the decision-making in the process and shared their artistic interpretations with peers and whānau. Providing children with opportunities to lead, create and be involved in the decision-making process enables them to experience ownership of learning, develop confidence, and communicate personal and cultural perspectives (Clarkin-Phillips & Morrison, 2018). When combined with place-based activities, agency extended beyond classroom boundaries, allowing children to interact meaningfully with their local environment and community while expressing identity and knowledge through art.

## Final Thoughts

This practice-informed research highlights the central role of arts-based approaches in early childhood education as a means of enacting culturally sustaining pedagogy. By engaging tamariki in creative processes that draw on local environments, stories and symbols, teachers support children in expressing identity, belonging, and connection to place. For educators, this highlights the importance of reflexivity, critically considering their own cultural positioning, pedagogical choices, and relationships with whānau and communities. Arts-based practices also call for teachers to act as facilitators rather than mere transmitters, creating inclusive spaces where children's voices, languages, and cultural knowledge are visible and valued. The implications for practice include embedding the arts across curriculum areas, using collaborative and interdisciplinary projects to foster critical thinking, and building strong partnerships with families and communities to ensure authenticity. In

this way, teachers are not only enhancing learning outcomes but also cultivating dispositions of creativity, sustainability, and social responsibility in young learners.

## Glossary of Māori Terms

Ako	Learn, study, teach, advise through reciprocal relationships
Aotearoa	Māori name for New Zealand.
Awa	River
Kaitiakitanga	Guardianship and stewardship of the environment, emphasizing sustainability.
Kaiako	Teacher or educator.
Kaumātua	A respected Maori elder.
Kapa Haka	Māori performing arts, including song and dance.
Koru	Spiral symbol representing new life and growth.
Koro	Elder, a male relative or ancestor
Mana Atua	Wellbeing strand in Te Whāriki curriculum.
Mana Tangata	Contribution strand in Te Whāriki.
Mana Reo	Communication strand in Te Whāriki.
Mana Whenua	Belonging strand in Te Whāriki, linked to land and identity.
Matariki	Māori New Year celebration.
Maunga	Mountain
Piupiu	Traditional flax skirt worn in cultural performances.
Tamariki	Children.
Taonga	Treasured cultural artefact.
Te Tiriti o Waitangi	Treaty of Waitangi, foundation of bicultural partnership.
Te Whāriki	New Zealand early childhood curriculum framework.
Whakapapa	Genealogy and ancestral connections.
Whakawhanaungatanga	Process of establishing relationships, relating well to others.
Whānau	Extended family or community.
Whakama	Empowerment principle in Te Whāriki.
Whenua	Land
Waka	Canoe, symbolizing identity and community

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