
Executive Summary

This synthesis addresses the question of:

“What works in early childhood teaching for maximising children’s learning outcomes and reducing disparities amongst diverse children?”

In New Zealand, early childhood is defined as the period of education from birth to approximately five or six years of age¹. Research evidence on children’s learning points to early childhood as the foundation years for later learning and development². The evidence indicates that children’s experiences during early childhood are critical. Quality teaching is identified as the key lever for improving outcomes for diverse children^{3, 4}. This synthesis outlines what teachers can do, based on the combined best research evidence, to provide diverse children with a strong foundation for future learning.

This is the first iteration of the “*Quality Teaching: Early Foundations*” synthesis. A best evidence approach is new in early childhood education in New Zealand. The synthesis is intended to encourage dialogue amongst and between teachers, policy-makers and researchers to assist in developing policy, promoting best practices, and identifying research needs. Critical feedback on both the contents and the usefulness of this first iteration will help to inform subsequent iterations.

A wide review of the research on teaching and learning linked to child outcomes has produced seven characteristics of quality early foundations teaching. Certain research-based features were found to underpin the characteristics of quality teaching. These features are outlined and supported by examples and illustrations from research, and by theory also where relevant. The characteristics of quality teaching linked to child outcomes and the research-based features of these characteristics are:

1. Effective Pedagogy Involves Working With Children as Emergent Learners

Research-based Features

- Teaching is focused on children’s learning.
- Quality teaching facilitates children’s dialogue, cooperative and independent work, motivation and dispositions characteristic of emergent learners. It also provides conditions that support learning, e.g. opportunities to participate in interactive situations and a wide range of cognitively-oriented activities.
- Quality teaching approaches cognitive and social-emotional development as complementary to achieve better outcomes in children’s learning.

¹ The current structure of New Zealand’s education system means that early childhood education occurs between birth and 5 or 6 years of age, after which children commence their primary education. There is good argument based on research and theory for “early childhood” education to be extended to eight years. See the arguments presented in Cullen, J. (2000). The early years: Conceptual issues and future challenges. *New Zealand Research in Early Childhood Education*, 3, 3-12

² Bailely, D. B. (2002). Are critical periods critical for early childhood education? The role of timing in early childhood pedagogy. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 17(3), 281-94.

³ Phillips, G., McNaughton, S., & McDonald, S. (2001). *Picking up the pace: Effective literacy interventions for accelerated progress over the transition into decile one schools*. Auckland: Strengthening Education in Mangere and Otara, Report to the Ministry of Education. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

⁴ Bowman, B., Donovan, M.S., & Burns, M.S. (2001). (Eds.). *Eager to learn: Educating our preschoolers*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

- Learning goals focused on knowledge, skills, dispositions, and feelings can best serve children's development in the long term.

2. Pedagogy is Informed by Contextual Knowledge of Children's Learning

Research-based Features

- Pedagogic practice includes systematic observation of children and feedback to children that matches their level of understanding.
- Children's learning in other social/cultural contexts (especially the home) is recognised and built upon in early education services.
- Quality teaching builds partnerships with children's family and whanau.

3. Effective Teachers Use Content Knowledge Confidently to Support and Extend Children's Learning in Interactive and Play-based Situations

Research-based Features

- Teachers draw on content knowledge to extend children's thinking and inquiry, and support their cultural identity and sense of contribution and belonging.
- Teachers have confidence in their ability to communicate and demonstrate content knowledge.
- When teachers do not have the necessary content knowledge to support children's questions and needs they access information with children (e.g. through books, the Internet, by asking community specialists and family elders).
- When teachers are unsure of the accuracy of their content knowledge on a particular topic they check their understanding and research further into it.

4. Pedagogy Scaffolds, Co-Constructs, Promotes Metacognitive Strategies and also Facilitates Children's Learning in the Context of Adult/Older Child Activities

Research-based Features

- Teachers are actively involved in planning, structuring and informing children's activities and learning experiences.
- Teachers scaffold children's learning during play and in the context of planned and initiated focused group work.

- Pedagogy supports children to draw on their varied experiences and activities to strengthen learning in particular areas.
- Pedagogy promotes a co-construction model of learning.
- Pedagogy promotes children's metacognitive development and strategy use.
- Pedagogy provides opportunities for children to observe and participate in everyday adult/older child tasks and activities
- Effective teachers teach metacognitively, reflecting on their own thinking and children's thinking as learners. They engage in reflection and planning with colleagues and use a range of methods to help to identify how pedagogical practices can be improved to benefit children and further increase their effectiveness.

5. The Social Setting is Organised in Ways that Support Learning and Maximises Outcomes

Research-based Features

- Teachers foster a 'community of learning' approach where there are many varied opportunities for collaboration and social learning e.g. strategies to resolve conflicts with peers.
- Teachers take account of their role as models for children's learning.
- Children are supported to change roles between teacher and learner as their learning is scaffolded and as they scaffold the learning of others.
- Interactions with diverse peers facilitate children's cognitive and social outcomes.

6. The Physical Setting is Organised in Ways that Support Learning and Maximises Outcomes

Research-based Features

- Pedagogy is concerned with ensuring that the organisation of space, activities, and density is optimal for children.
- The organisation and co-location of play activity areas provides potential for shaping and enhancing children's thinking and learning
- Teachers recognise opportunities for scaffolding children's learning and promoting thinking in the playground and when children are using physical play equipment.
- Children's access to some materials is regulated by the teacher to facilitate children's use of language to request what they require.

7. Teaching is Responsive to Children's Physical and Emotional Well-being

Research-based Features

- Being responsive to children's needs for good health includes prevention of the spread of communicable diseases, and wide ranging health promotion strategies that involve families.
- Effective teachers recognise and attempt to reduce through planning and intervention, distracting and potentially harmful noise, deficiencies in children's nutritional intake, and the likelihood of children having physical accidents.
- Effective teachers create an emotionally positive climate, characterized by warm and reciprocal relationships with children and parents and families. They recognise the significance of children's relationships with their parents for adjustment to the centre, and support parents in helping their child to make this adjustment.