



## Art in Early Childhood

# WORKING WITH YOUNG CHILDREN IN MUSEUM SPACES TO DEVELOP CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

Maisie Chilton Tressler  
and Lisa Terreni

### ABSTRACT

The provision of rich learning experiences can provide children with opportunities and challenges to engage in new learning contexts and have experiences that widen their sense of cultural identity and place in the world. Excursions to cultural institutions and heritage sites constitute an important dimension of an early childhood programme. It is important that children are involved and included in important cultural institutions of a nation such as art galleries and museums. This article highlights the ways in which young children's encounters in and with museums can inspire their engagement in productive explorations of art, history, and science as well as provide an avenue for them to better understand their own and others' cultural heritage. A learning project involving teachers and children at Tai Tamariki kindergarten is discussed as an example of this type of rich engagement, and highlights how the children's research used the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa's collections to inform the painting, drawing and carving of their own little whare (Māori meeting house).

### INTRODUCTION

*Te Whāriki*, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2017), encourages early childhood (EC) educators to think about children as "global citizens in a rapidly changing and increasingly complex world" (p. 7). It also urges teachers to provide opportunities for children "to learn how to learn so they can engage with new contexts, opportunities and challenges with optimism and resourcefulness" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p.7). The provision of rich learning experiences that provide children with opportunities and challenges to support these aspirations occur within an EC centre but, equally, these can happen outside the centre's gates. Excursions to cultural institutions and heritage sites can constitute an important dimension of an EC programme. Nonetheless, this can sometimes be challenging for teachers (Terreni & Ryder, 2019), and requires teaching teams to have a broad understanding of the benefits that field trips and excursions can provide (Ministry of Education, 2018).

Determining appropriate venues for excursions can require careful consideration. When EC teachers examine or investigate new opportunities and learning contexts that will foster young children's experiences of the wider world, it is important to consider not only how these will benefit children's learning but also how young children can meaningfully participate in the civic and cultural opportunities provided by their communities. Young children have rights as cultural citizens (Britt, 2018; Mai and Gibson, 2011; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989; Piscitelli, 2012), and opportunities for participation in events, festivals, rituals, and celebrations of their ethnic, social, or religious identities is important. The provision of experiences in music, movement, dance, drama, literature, media and the visual arts of their own and others' cultures are also crucial so that children, like adults, can have access to and be able to participate in, "the rich opportunities for leisure, education and cultural experiences the arts provide" (Terreni, 2013).

Equally, children need to be involved and included in the cultural institutions of a nation, such as art galleries and museums, where "their rights to visibility, to participation, [and] to belonging" (Britt, 2019, p. 28) within these public spaces is actively supported by their teachers and families. This article highlights the ways in which young children's encounters in and with museums can inspire engagement in rich explorations of art, history, and science as well as provide an avenue for them to better understand their own and others' cultural heritage. A learning project involving teachers and children at Tai Tamariki kindergarten is discussed as an example of this type of rich engagement. Author A, one of the authors of this article, was the lead teacher in this project.

### **Cultural encounters in museum settings**

Museums and galleries can be vehicles for contributing to children's developing understanding of the peoples and cultures of Aotearoa New Zealand, and of a shared cultural heritage. Terreni (2017) suggests that visiting museums and galleries can play an important role in educating children about a nation's cultural diversity. Significantly, museum visits can highlight the importance of Māori as New Zealand's indigenous culture (Clarkin-Phillips et al, 2013), and for some children visits to cultural institutions such as museums and galleries can be ways in which they can make connections to their own ancestry and links to the past.

Tai Tamariki kindergarten, a mixed age early learning centre located at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (more commonly referred to as Te Papa), is in an extremely fortunate position of having easy access to the museum's collection of significant cultural artefacts and art works (Chilton Tressler, 2016). Visits upstairs to the museum are something that occur on a regular basis and they contribute significantly to the kaupapa (principles and ideas) of the planning of learning opportunities for the infants, toddlers and young children that attend the centre. Te Papa has a collection of many significant Māori taonga (treasures), from a variety of different tribal regions from around Aotearoa New Zealand, and the Tai Tamariki kindergarten children are able visit these on a regular basis.



*Figure 1 - Child's use of black paper strips to explore the architectural shapes of Te Hau-Ki-Tūranga*

Te Hau-Ki-Tūranga, a traditional whareniui from the Rongowhakaata iwi (tribe) in Gisbourne, is an important taonga displayed at Te Papa. Te Hau-Ki-Tūranga was built in the 1840s and is the oldest whareniui of its kind in the country (see <https://www.rnz.co.nz/programmes/ours/story/2018650130/jody-wyllie-and-te-hau-ki-turanga>). The meeting house is a repository of specific cultural history, stories, and art work (Skinner, 2016), for Rongowhakaata. The visiting public is permitted to enter inside this building to learn about its traditional art work and architecture and whenever the children from Tai Tamariki visit the meeting house they are fascinated by the carvings, tukutuku (woven ornamental panels) and kowhaiwhai (painted rafters) that can be seen inside. In 2017, after an inspiring visit to Te Hau-Ki-Tūranga to observe the architecture (see figures 1 and 2) and art work in the whare, it was suggested by one of Tai Tamariki's children, 4-year-old Penny, that the children "make a whare (meeting house) at kindy". The idea was encouraged and supported by Chilton Tressler and the teaching team, and a year-long learning project unfolded at the kindergarten.

### **The whare project: Researching and creating He Iti Pounamu**

It was decided that the way to begin the project was to use the frame of a small playhouse that was in the kindergarten's playground as the bones for the children's whare. This had originally been built as a playhouse for the children by a family member but, over time, the frame had had many different incarnations – as an art gallery, a rocket, and a fire station. Consequently, this little playhouse already had a rich whakapapa (history) of its own, and when the children's project started it was already the center of many of the children's previous learning experiences. However, when the children embarked on making their own whare they started by giving the frame of the playhouse a paint job.

The painting process was a collaborative one and a wide range of children of all ages were able to contribute and get involved. Because Tai Tamariki is a mixed age centre (children aged 0-5 years attend) this type of communal learning experience between older and younger fostered tuakana teina learning relationships (where younger children learn from

older children and vice versa). This is integral to the children's learning processes and it is a mainstay of the kindergarten's teaching and learning philosophy. Consequently, by painting the whare together many on-going collaborative relationships between children (and teachers) were established at the very start of the project. The painting process also facilitated rich planning discussions with the children as they worked together.

After the painting of the playhouse (now recognised as their whare), the children continued to research aspects of both traditional and contemporary whareniui. This was often done by taking clipboards for drawing upstairs into the museum to do observational drawings and sketch what they could see. As well as revisiting Te Hau-Ki-Tūranga, they visited Te Papa's contemporary marae, Rongomaraeroa (see <https://www.tepapa.govt.nz/visit/exhibitions/te-marae>), which showcases examples of Māori contemporary art. Designed and built by the late Cliff Whiting (artist and master carver), Rongomaraeroa includes the whareniui Te Hono ki Hawaiki.



*Figure 2 - Using observational drawing to develop ideas about whareniui*

### **Developing the carvings**

The contemporary carvings in Te Hono ki Hawaiki tell a range of stories about New Zealand's bi-cultural identity (Hayward, 2012), but also the well-known Māori pūrākau (myth) Māui and the Sun which was well known to the Tai Tamariki children and a much-loved story. Through careful observation of the carvings at the top of Te Hono ki Hawaiki the children were able to identify in Whiting's work parts of the story they knew. The connection to the children's existing prior knowledge about the story helped them to build a solid, contextual understanding of the use of carving to tell stories. During this process they started developing an understanding about the use of symbolism in visual art (in this case, carving) to convey information.

The children's interest in carving was further fostered by being able to see some demonstrations of traditional carving that were happening upstairs in the museum, and back at kindergarten they continued their research by watching online videos of traditional carving. The kindergarten was also lent some carving tools. Because the teachers wanted the focus of this learning experience to be on the process of carving, and that it be as genuine as possible the children were able to practice using the tools with some soft wood at the carpentry table. Chilton Tressler remarked "It wasn't easy, but the experience solidified our understandings of the carving process and the work that it entails. To keep the carving experience authentic, it was important for the children to use real tools and equipment for the art work" (personal communication, Chilton Tressler, May 17, 2017).



*Figure 3 - the routed designs on the maihi are inspected by one of the children*

The enthusiasm for the carving process resulted in new work. Children were encouraged to create designs for their own maihi (the carved barge boards on a meeting house) and the tekoteko (a carved form attached to the apex of the barge boards) for their whareniui. Ngake and Whātaimai, the story of two taniwha (monsters) who once inhabited Wellington harbour, was used to inspire the designs because of its geographical relevance - the museum and kindergarten are located on the harbour's waterfront. However, the actual carving process for this part of the project was done by one of the kindergarten fathers who worked in the museum. The children's designs were carefully copied onto some wood that had been gifted to the kindergarten, and a router was used to carve the designs into the wood (see figure 3). The permanence of the children's designs in their carved form appeared to hold a great deal of significance to them, and the children were frequently observed running their hands over the routed designs.

### Developing the paintings

Another part of the project involved creating designs for the internal walls of the children's whare, and again they chose a pūrākau for their inspiration. The creation story about Ranginui and Papatūānuku, the sky father and the earth mother, was a story that they all knew well.



*Figure 4 - Ranginui and Papatuanuku with their baby Ruamoko is transposed onto the walls of the whareniui.*

These characters and some of their children - Tāwhirimātea (God of the wind), Tangaroa (God of the sea), and Rūamoko (God of earthquakes), were explored through their art work and became the designs for the walls, depicted in ways that were recognisable and significant to them. The design process allowed children to practice their drawings until they were happy with ones they liked best, but without the pressure of committing work straight onto the wall of the whare. Like the carving process, when the designs were finished, they were transposed onto the walls of the whare using carbon paper (see figure 4). These were then painted on to the walls by one of the teachers, enabling the work to be completed using more permanent paint that had brighter pigments and greater durability than those used by the children.

### Understanding symbolism in tukutuku panels

Alongside the work depicting aspects of the creation story, the children began to learn about traditional symbolism depicted in some of the tukutuku panels at Te Hau-Ki-Tūranga. Laksh, a 4-year-old boy of Fijian Indian descent who had been very engaged in the project since its beginning, had suggested in the children's initial planning korero (conversations) that their whareniui needed "zigzags." Laksh was referring to poutama, a staircase pattern in tukutuku that symbolises stages of attainment and advancement in learning (Victoria University of Wellington, 2016), which is a very relevant concept that illustrates the learning and teaching that happens at Tai Tamariki kindergarten.

As with many traditional Māori art-forms, depicting poutama accurately is relatively prescriptive and formulaic. Because of the need to be respectful of cultural symbols, Chilton Tressler described the drawing process to children as being like that of forming letters of the alphabet. She told the children “If the shape isn’t correct, the symbol may not be recognisable enough to convey it’s intended meaning” (personal communication, Chilton Tressler, 2017). Consequently, to be able to realistically depict poutama, the children continued with observational drawing and sketched the poutama they could see in Te Hau-Ki-Tūranga. Back at the kindergarten the children used this work to inform their ideas which were directly drawn with pencil directly onto the side walls of their whareniui (see figure 5). To complete the work, children painted over their designs with regular tempera paint, and this was then covered in several clear coats of acrylic varnish by the teachers in order to protect it from wear and tear.

By the time this process was finished, Laksh’s understanding of the “zigzags” he had identified in Te Hau-Ki-Tūranga had developed dramatically. He had begun regularly approaching teachers and announcing “Poutama means learning!”, along with many other snippets of new-found knowledge gained from his visits into the museum.



Figure 5 - Drawing and then painting the poutama

### Family involvement

During the development of the whareniui, the children’s parents and families had taken a keen interest in the work the children were doing. Many were involved in contributing materials as well as ideas for the project. The son of one of the Tai Tamariki teachers (who sometimes worked at the kindergarten) named the children’s whare *He Iti Pounamu* (which means little greenstone or little gem). Likewise, for the remaining end panel in the kindergarten’s whare it was suggested by one of the parents that the symbolism in a tukutuku panel at Te Tumu Herenga Waka Marae, which is located at Victoria University of Wellington, could be relevant to the children’s work on their whare. This tukutuku features a waka (canoe) moored to hitching post. In this context the hitching post represents the individual student’s connection to the university and the symbolism of this design refers to

any aspect of the student's learning journey at the institution. Students at the university, like the young children at Tai Tamariki, come from many different places and locations and when the time comes to leave because their learning is completed, they unhitch their waka to be able to move on to another place in their lives. Again, this seemed an apt symbol for the children attending the kindergarten.

Whilst the children did not visit Te Tumu Herenga Waka Marae to observe the tukutuku panel, photographs of the tukutuku panel were studied and discussed by the children. However, more trips upstairs into the museum were made to further extend the children's knowledge about waka, and so that they could study and practice drawing some of the many full-sized waka in Te Papa's collection. The teachers found that the children's ability to create realistic drawings of waka for the symbolic purposes of this painting (which in this instance felt appropriate), progressed monumentally once they had undertaken their observational drawings of the real waka and this was found to be much more effective than drawing from photographs. The visits to see waka also allowed time for the group to revisit and discuss with their teacher the meaning of the Figures and symbols they were planning to add to the whare.

Connections to family were very important for 4-year-old Sam, who had been very engaged in the carving process at the very start of the project as a toddler (see Chilton Tressler, 2017), and who had continued contributing to the whare project throughout the year. After a conversation about the focus on history and whakapapa (genealogy) in traditional wharehau, Sam decided he wanted to draw in his entire family. He was encouraged to do this, and his drawing became an important point of connection and satisfaction for him. On several occasions when his family came to collect him after the kindergarten session had ended Sam would run to the whare and describe where each family member was depicted.



*Figure 6 - The (nearly) completed He Iti Pounamu*



### Connections to their own and others' cultures

The preceding discussion of the project has illustrated clearly that the children returned frequently to Te Hau-Ki-Tūranga and were able to visit many other artefacts within the museum to do their research. This demonstrated how their ability to explore significant Māori symbols and stories embodied in the taonga (treasures) held by the museum empowered the children which became evident in their art-making. Most importantly, the project work established and/or affirmed children's identities as cultural citizens of Aotearoa New Zealand (Terreni, 2013) and, in some case, make poignant connections to their own culture.

This was illustrated by Laksh who was able to tell his teacher about the stories and symbolism he could see on the walls of the kindergarten whare and make connections to stories he knew from his Fijian Indian culture. A video recording was made as he began to talk about his own Hindu Gods and his understanding of Māori atua (Gods) that demonstrates some of his insights. What follows is a transcription from part of the recording.

Laksh: "I know more... about.. Krishna!"

Teacher: "What's Krishna about? I've heard that name before"

Laksh: "Krishna was fighting with bad guys."

Teacher: "Oh, I think I've heard Krishna in relation to Shiva... Are they related?"

Laksh: (shakes his head to signal no) "but they're both blue!"

Teacher: "Are they?"

Laksh: "Because, when Krishna was a little baby, a snake tried to poison him... But he didn't get poisoned!" (laughing).

Teacher: "So hang on, are these Hindi atua (Gods), or Fijian? Or both?"

Laksh: "Hindi."

Teacher: "Cool, you know a lot more than I do about that, you know a lot about that. And, you know a lot about the Māori atua too. Can you point them out?"

Laksh: (Pointing at the Gods depicted on the wall of the whare) "Papatūānuku, Ranginui..... Ranginui, Papatūānuku."

Teacher: "Can you remember the name of our earthquake atua?"

Laksh: (Shakes head)

Teacher: "Rūamoko."

Laksh: (laughs)

Teacher: "Can you remember how he's related to Papatūānuku and Ranginui?"

Laksh: (nods) "Mhmmm"

Teacher: "How?"

Laksh: "He's their little baby."

Teacher: "Yeah he is. Can you remember who these guys over here are?" (Pointing to mural)

Laksh: "Tangaroa's little children."

Teacher: "Tangaroa's children, she's the sea atua. And what about this guy up here?"

Laksh: "Tāwhirimātea."

Teacher: "Tāwhirimātea. That's really beautiful Laksh. You know a lot and, do you remember... you know when you said "Can you tell me some Māori stories?" "

Laksh: (nodding)

Teacher: "And I said there's a name for that, do you remember what the name was?"

Laksh: (shakes head) "Mmm... Mmmmm.."

Teacher: "Pūrākau."

Laksh: ( laughs) "Pūrākau?"

Teacher: "Pūrākau, yeah. The stories that teach us things about history and our ancestors. And the earth. Pretty cool aye?"

Laksh: (Suddenly points at other wall) "Poutama!"

Teacher: "Poutama yea! Poutama is about learning, and you painted that aye?"

Laksh: "Yeah. One side."

Teacher: "One side yeah, and Minka did the other side. That's pretty incredible Laksh!"

When Laksh turned 5 and it was time for him to unhitch his waka from the kindergarten and move on to primary school, his grandmother approached Chilton Tressler to convey her thanks all the staff for the work they had done with him. She told them the project work had made it easier for her to teach Laksh about his own culture because, she said, "he sees it as the same, not different". This was particularly gratifying for the teachers. They had been able to see the cultural connections the children were making due to their own involvement in the project, but to have it confirmed by a grandparent was very affirming of its success.

## CONCLUSION

Museums can offer young children extraordinary opportunities for informal learning (Bell, 2010; Clarkin-Phillips, Carr, Thomas, Waitai & Lowe, 2013; Danko-McGee, 2000; Savva & Trimis, 2005; Terreni, 2017). Stimulating encounters with the artefacts and art works that are located there can give children new and creative ways of experiencing and thinking about their communities and place in the world. If the Tai Tamariki kindergarten children had not had the opportunity to regularly visit their museum, their complex and multi-faceted learning journey may not have developed as it did. The whare project enabled them to make connections to their own and other cultures, and this was heightened by their ability to experience traditional and contemporary Māori architecture and artefacts first-hand by visiting the museum's collections. The art work that was stimulated by undertaking the observational drawings and discussions that were integral to the research process, enabled children to process and develop their thinking and learning about Māori art and symbolism in sophisticated ways.

The whare project discussed in this article also demonstrates that EC teachers are in a powerful position to provide young children with the opportunity to enjoy the learning experiences offered in museums and art galleries which they might not otherwise have easy access to (Terreni, 2013). EC teachers, therefore, can facilitate opportunities for children (and their families) to visit these places of wonder and use the experience to generate and maintain interest in significant learning projects. As Carr, Clarkin-Phillips & Paki (2012, p. 9) suggest, the use of these important cultural institutions has "the potential for learning for the whole community (children, teachers and families)".

## GLOSSARY OF MĀORI WORDS

Atua –the Māori gods (but can refer to other gods).

Maihi - the carved barge boards on a meeting house.

Papatūānuku – the earth mother in Māori mythology.

Poutama - a staircase pattern in tukutuku designs.

Pūrākau – a Māori myth or legend.

Ranginui – the sky father in Māori mythology.

Rūamoko – the god of earthquakes in Māori mythology.

Tangaroa – the god of the sea in Māori mythology.

Tāwhirimātea - the god of the wind in Māori mythology.

Tekoteko – a carved form attached to the apex of the barge boards of a meeting house.

Tukutuku – woven ornamental patterns generally found in a meeting house.

Whare – a Māori house or meeting house.

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## **BIOGRAPHIES**

Maisie Chilton Tressler is a kindergarten teacher at Tai Tamariki kindergarten. She is also an artist and a poet. E-mail: [maisie\\_jean@hotmail.com](mailto:maisie_jean@hotmail.com)

Lisa Terreni is a Senior lecturer at the Faculty of Education, Victoria University of Wellington. She is also an artist. E-mail: [lisa.terreni@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:lisa.terreni@vuw.ac.nz)