Peer-Reviewed Paper

Beliefs and Principles in Practice: Ethical Research with Child Participants

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ABSTRACT: *Choosing a research method involves fitting research techniques to a research question. The choice may also be influenced by the beliefs the researcher holds. This paper reviews beliefs and ethical principles associated with a research study that included children as participants. These beliefs and principles are examined in light of the research experience, with particular regard to the methodology used and the veracity of the findings. Consistent with sociocultural theory, a commitment to seeking principles, approaches and methods that empower children's active participation in research is advocated.*

INTRODUCTION

Research has indicated that in relation to teachers' professional knowledge, teacher beliefs mediate between thinking and practice. Beliefs are personal, complex and enduring. Nespor (1987) concluded that beliefs were more influential than knowledge in influencing teachers' educational decision-making. Perhaps the same could be said of researchers. Firestone (1987) stated that choosing methods is not just based on fitting research techniques to a problem, but is also based on the beliefs the researcher holds. Firestone suggested that it is important to consider the approach in which the researcher feels comfortable and a methodology that will address the research question. Furthermore, while all research requires careful consideration of ethical principles, beliefs in relation to ethics may also influence a researcher's approach.

The study referred to in this paper sought children's, teachers' and parents' beliefs about subject knowledge in early childhood curriculum and pedagogy (Hedges, 2002). The research involved a case study of a kindergarten community, Oaktree Kindergarten, a sessional public kindergarten in Auckland, New Zealand. The main mechanism through which beliefs were ascertained was a shared social and cultural event, an excursion undertaken by teachers, parents and four-year-old children to Kelly Tarlton's Antarctic Encounter and

Underwater World. This is a tourist venue in central Auckland with two main attractions: the Antarctic encounter where penguins are viewed in a simulated natural habitat, and an aquarium with a viewing tunnel. People stand on a travelator to travel through this tunnel and view the creatures. The impression is of being within the aquarium itself as creatures swim directly alongside and above the glass tunnel.

SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY

Beliefs about children's participation in the study were underpinned by sociocultural theories of knowledge, pedagogy and curriculum. A sociocultural perspective considers children as powerful and competent, and growing in competence through participation in educational and socially and culturally valued activities (Woodhead, 2000). Empowering children's participation in research as a valued activity acts on beliefs in children's abilities consistent with a sociocultural perspective. "Children are social actors with their own abilities and interests, who should be respectfully researched within relationships that enable them genuinely to participate in the process" (Woodhead, 2000, p. 31). Genuine participation involves actually listening to and acting upon what child participants say. Accordingly, recent studies have given children a voice with regard to their experiences (Dilkes, 1998; Langsted, 1994; Sheridan & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2001; Smith, Taylor & Gollop, 2000).

Consideration of sociocultural theory also guided the choice of a research methodology. Qualitative methodology is well-established within early years research. The term "interpretive" may however be more inclusive and avoid the non-quantitative connotations that qualitative has acquired (Graue & Walsh, 1998). Interpretive research is conducted in a natural setting, focuses on the importance of understanding participants' perspectives, and questions and methods can be adapted flexibly during data collection. Interpretive research values building relationships prior to conducting research and allows participant observing to get a feel for a research setting. I spent seven weeks in the research setting. The opportunity to spend an extended length of time in the kindergarten allowed for informal observation and participation in the daily events and routines of the kindergarten, including conversations and interactions with children, parents and teachers. It also allowed relationships to be built, and accustomed the children (and the teachers and parents) to my presence prior to explaining the research and conducting the study itself.

OBTAINING INSTITUTIONAL APPROVAL FOR RESEARCH

An important first step for a research study is obtaining ethical approval prior to involving participants. Research organisations and tertiary institutions commonly undertake responsibility both for this matter and the supervision of inexperienced researchers. Codes of ethics provide a set of principles by which to conduct research. The Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC) guidelines (1999) are augmented by additional information about conducting research with children, but suggest that gaining the consent of children under the age of seven is not required. MUHEC initially queried my proposal in relation to the necessity of gaining the consent of children in my study. In the case of young children, the ability to give consent is problematic, but is possible, and demonstrates both respect and reciprocity for children (Hedges, 2001) and beliefs in children's capabilities. Young children's ability to give consent rests significantly on the efforts of the researcher.

ETHICAL PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE

Ethical principles usually include voluntary participation, informed consent, minimising harm and issues such as privacy and confidentiality. Specific application of generic principles in relation to children's participation required consideration. Beliefs about empowering children to participate in research in an ethical manner involved attention to methodological literature and advice from experienced researchers. How these significant ethical principles were put into practice in ways consistent with my beliefs is now described.

MINIMISING HARM

This principle means that children are not put into any situation where they may be hurt or disadvantaged in any way. Of special consideration is that research ought not to disrupt the normal environment of teaching and relationships. In practice, this principle was applied in three ways.

The first application of this principle was spending time getting to know the children. Aldridge and Wood (1998) suggest that for interviewing children under eight years of age, more time than with older children must be spent building rapport. I applied this by building rapport with children (and adults) well in advance of conducting the research interviews. Involvement in children's learning experiences and following up on these assisted building relationships. For example, on the second day of the research period, two girls were engaged drawing pictures of gardens. I talked with them about flowers in the garden at

the kindergarten and those they know are in their home gardens. I told them that my first daffodils were flowering in my garden at home. They informed me they didn't know what daffodils looked like. I offered to bring one the following day to show them. One, perhaps experienced in the promises of adults, told me sternly "You'd better write that down before you forget. Put the note in your bag to take home". I remembered to bring a daffodil the next day in an effort to build a trusting and responsive relationship. On that day, I ended the session with red dye on the sleeves of a white shirt and pink playdough on the knees of blue pants. The same child noticed this and told me "Don't worry - they're only kindy clothes". This child later agreed to participate in the research and became a key informant.

The second application of the principle of minimising harm was that focus group interviews were chosen as a data generating technique. The rationale was that these would minimise the adult-child power relationship, and is less threatening for children than dyadic interviews. Children could participate by answering questions of interest or relevance to them and not feel pressured to provide a response to questions they did not understand or thought were irrelevant to them. It was also consistent with the sociocultural literature that discusses the socially-constructed nature of children's learning and suggests both teachers and researchers concentrate less on dyadic teacher-child interactions and listen to children's voices in peer groups (Cullen, 1998; Singer, 1996).

The third application of this principle was that the children's interviews were carried out at the kindergarten as this was a familiar environment for them. Moreover, if research is conducted within the normal play context of early childhood settings, potential harm is further minimised. Each session at the kindergarten began with a small group teaching session. For the period of the interviews, instead of there being three groups at the beginning of the session with the kindergarten teachers, there were four groups - one with the researcher. Rather than one-hour interviews as occurred with the adults, children's interviews were 15 – 20 minutes in length. This meant there was no disruption to the normal learning and teaching programme. Furthermore, given that these began in the fourth week of my presence, the children were keen to be involved and were comfortable with me. The place and process of the interview was negotiated with them. The children chose to sit around a kindergarten table in a familiar area and in the first week also engaged in a familiar activity (drawing) while discussion occurred. The children agreed anyone could speak when they wanted to and monitored each other's turn-taking at times.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Voluntary participation means that children feel comfortable with a researcher and are genuinely able to choose to participate. Children behave differently with people they are unfamiliar with. Application of this principle meant that I knew all the children whose parents had agreed that they be approached by the time the project was explained and participation invited. Ongoing voluntary participation also came from establishing reciprocal and responsive relationships that were crucial to obtaining authentic data. Children were not pressured at any stage to participate in the research.

For example, during the focus groups, children were free to leave the interviews each time when they wished to. With regard to the questions I was asking them, children were told that I was genuinely interested in their views and experiences and that there were no right or wrong answers. My experience was that, having established trusting relationships, four year old children were quite capable of indicating verbally and non-verbally when they had had enough. It was important for me to be sensitive to this and to allow them to leave to play elsewhere. I also found that I knew the children well enough to realise when they were trying to give a response in order to please me, and reassured them that "I don't know" or "I'm not interested" were acceptable replies.

Secondly, the use of participant observation in the natural setting ensured voluntary participation. As a participant observer, I waited for children to invite and involve me in their learning experiences. Along with the excursion itself, these shared experiences allowed children to choose when and how to involve me in their interests and learning, many examples of which became research data. These shared experiences contributed to intersubjectivity between the children and me, a further contemporary notion within sociocultural theory.

INFORMED CONSENT

The ethical principle of informed consent means participants are provided with sufficient knowledge of the research project and their role in it so that they understand what will be required of them. This principle was applied firstly through parents' consent to approach children being sought first, followed by the children's consent being sought. In no instance was proxy consent from parents used to obtain children's participation.

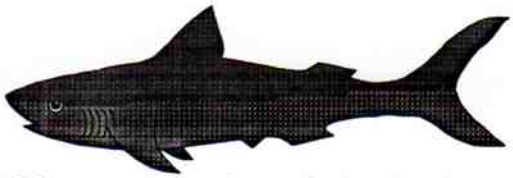
Secondly, I discussed the project verbally with children at the kindergarten at appropriate times while they were engaged in play. I explained that we were going to talk about the sea creatures they might already know about, learn about some more and then go on a trip to see some. Afterwards, we would talk about

the trip and what they learned from going there and talking to teachers, parents and their friends. I asked the children if they would let me watch them with their friends and the teachers, allow me to take photos, write stories about them in my notebook and tape-record our discussions. Children were informed about audio recording, practised this and listened to themselves through earphones. They were shown examples of interview transcriptions, and told that the information would end up as a "long book".

Thirdly, children signed consent sheets. No examples could be located of children's consent sheets in existing literature. Advice from a researcher experienced in involving children in research was followed in designing one (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Children's Consent Sheet

Consent to Participation in Research



Title of Project: Subject content knowledge in the early childhood curriculum in New Zealand: The beliefs of teachers, parents and children

Researcher: Helen Hedges

Project Supervisors: *(names)*

My name is:

I have talked to Helen about why she is at my kindergarten. I am happy to talk to her about the trip to Kelly Tarlton's we are going on. I am also happy to talk to her again after the trip about what we saw and learned. I will let her tape the talks we have. I will let her watch me playing with and talking to teachers and children in the kindergarten and on the trip.

Child's signature:

The processes utilised in obtaining written consent were appropriate to participation in early literacy practices consistent with sociocultural theory (Barratt-Pugh, 2001; Cullen, 2001; Göncü & Katsarou, 2000). I read the consent sheet aloud with each child individually. As I began to explain the consent sheet to one child, he told me "Oh, Mum's already told me about this. She said I have to write my name – is it here?" and pointed to the correct place. Making an attempt to write and sign their name was an important way of children being respectfully and actively involved in the consent process. For example, one child told me she was happy to sign her name, but she "can't do all the letters", so she would "just sign the ones I know". Another said, "you can't actually read people's signatures so I'll just scribble a few letters". The four-year-old participants in this study demonstrated a wealth of early literacy knowledge.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

With regard to confidentiality, children were told that what was discussed would be private to them and their parents; the latter to assist verification. They had previously been shown examples of transcripts and I had explained how people's real names had been replaced by other names. The children were told that they could choose their own pretend names (pseudonyms). The children had previously named after animals the existing three small groups that the teachers took each morning. Given this, and the focus of the excursion and the research, it was not surprising that the children chose the research group's name as the 'Sharks and Penguins'. The children's choice of pseudonyms also reflected the focus of the excursion (Shark, Orca, Penguin 1, Penguin 2, Penguin 3), and their interest in animals (Kitten, Puppy, Bunny) or possessions, in this case, pyjamas (Frankenstein). Respect for the children's choices of pseudonyms has been maintained.

REFLECTIONS ON PUTTING ETHICAL PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE: INFORMED OR EDUCATED CONSENT?

I believe that the children were informed about the study sufficiently to give their consent to participate - or otherwise. One boy refused my request for participation. After explaining my study to him, he said he didn't mind if I took a photo of him at Kelly Tarlton's, "but, nah, I don't want to talk to you about anything". This experience confirmed my belief in obtaining children's consent directly, further vindicating my explanation to MUHEC that although they were under seven, I wanted to seek consent from children as a sign of respect and genuine voluntary participation.

Consistent with an interpretive approach which allows flexibility in data gathering, the following two variations in informed consent occurred. During participant-observation interactions, no child was excluded from spending time with me on the grounds that they were not research participants. One particular child made potentially significant contributions to the study through her comments and actions. Towards the end of the research period, I talked to her mother about her daughter's learning. This parent indicated that she had been too busy with her baby to have given consideration to her daughter's participation in the study at the time consent was sought, but wished she had done so. After consultation with my supervisors, retrospective consent was obtained from the parent and child to enable the child's contributions to be acknowledged and included in the findings. The child's excitement at realising she had obtained a similar status to her research participant peers was revealed. As she signed her consent sheet, she asked, "Can I be called 'Starfish'?"

The second variation occurred in relation to the focus group approach. While advice indicated that the optimum size for a focus group is 6-10 participants (Morgan, 1997), in this research, nine children in practice were too many for one focus group to enable all children to experience genuine opportunities for participation and contribution. I re-negotiated children's consent to undertake individual or small group interviews with them after the excursion. The children were by this time quite comfortable with me and agreed to this change of process. The interview process was much more successful in drawing out detailed information and probing individual children's responses.

However, in relation to being "informed" in the sense of the ethical principle, did the children really understand what my purpose for spending time at the kindergarten was and what "research" was? Did my attention to building relationships to enhance the research process and findings confuse children as to my primary purpose? In any qualitative study where the researcher spends a length of time in the setting, the impact of the researcher on the setting and the research itself requires consideration with regard to the validity of the findings. I felt comfortable with the philosophy and practices of the setting and adopted the role of a "complete participant" (Gold, 1958 cited in Merriam, 1998) in terms of acting as a teacher. In practice, the researcher role created some confusion and ambiguity as the children essentially saw me as a teacher.

Only two children involved in the research gave any indication that they knew I did not quite fit the organisational systems the teachers operated under. During one interaction, 'Penguin 2' asked me to go inside to get a basket to collect more flowers and leaves. She said I was an "inside-outside teacher" who could go wherever I liked, suggesting knowledge of the teachers' typical daily duty areas. A few weeks later, 'Penguin 2' demonstrated further understanding that I did not

quite fit the teacher role. As tidy-up time was announced, she and 'Starfish' had just begun a new game with me. They were disappointed, as they wanted the game to continue. 'Penguin 2' revealed conspiratorially to me that "Once I didn't do tidy-up and nobody saw. Let's do that again". While she saw me as a trusted adult, if I were seen as a teacher, surely she would not have told me this. ater, however, 'Starfish' was adamant that I was a teacher:

> 'Starfish' asks me to turn the hose on and I say I'll need to check with a teacher. She says "But you <u>are</u> a teacher. You teach us things". *(fieldnotes)*

Children's confusion between the teacher and researcher role was apparent in these situations.

With regard to explaining the research as part of obtaining consent, was it appropriate to describe the study that would result as a "long book" about what they did at kindergarten, or the fieldnotes I made as writing "stories"? I used the latter as an explanation both during the process of gaining consent and also when children asked what I was doing during interactions with them.

> Penguin 2:...What are you writing in your book for?
> Helen: I'm writing that we wrote shopping lists today.
> Penguin 2: But you can write it on here (gives me a blank shopping list form)
> Helen: I write the stories of what we do each day at kindy in here.

While I now doubt that the children fully understood what research or the role of a researcher were, I felt justified in my belief that children are competent and capable with regard to giving consent. One parent commented:

> You made the children feel important by having them sign their consent sheets. *(Anne)*

Moreover, children's understanding of and interest in the consent sheet was an example of a purposeful literacy experience. The importance of a wide range of authentic first-hand experiences to give context and relevance to learning has been highlighted by research into literacy (David, Raban, Ure, Goouch, Jago & Barriere, 2000) and is consistent with sociocultural theory.

However, whether the consent was "informed" in the sense of the ethical principle or "educated" (David, Edwards & Alldred, 2001) as in influenced by adults, remains unresolved in my mind. David, Edwards and Alldred (2001) noted that it is possible that adults influenced children's decisions to participate in their study. Teachers enthusiastically welcomed the approach of the researchers and their presence in the primary school classroom. The researchers reflected that this provided few opportunities for students to refuse participation.

Similarly, teachers and parents approved my presence in the kindergarten. I was a new adult in the setting, providing novelty to the teaching and learning environment. As I approached parents first to gain approval to approach children, they may have influenced their children's decisions about participation and consent. As research participation was a new experience for these four-year-old children, their consent may have been encouraged and educated rather than informed.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

In this study, spending a length of time in the setting was valuable in relation to developing relationships with the children. As a result, I have no doubts that the children participated voluntarily with me during the research process itself. For those children who became research participants, there was no pressure to participate in any aspects of the research.

Time was also helpful in relation to the participatory process of the children's focus groups. Literature is plentiful about conducting interviews with children (Aldridge & Wood, 1998; Cullen, 1997; Gollop, 2000; Mauthner, 1997). However, Scott (2000) notes that there is little guidance in the literature about conducting focus groups with children. The first two interviews were fortunately intended as "warm-ups" to orient the children to the interview situation as I initially experienced some difficulties that have been described as the issue of "losing the plot" (Cullen, 1997, p. 18) in interviewing children. During the first interview, despite prior familiarisation with the tape recorder, two boys constantly giggled and whispered "I love you" into the microphone. Discussion about pets, favourite teddies and television programmes and requests to listen to the tape were common. Considering whether or not to control a discussion with children for the research purposes or to acknowledge the children's lead was a dilemma, as philosophically I did not want to exert power or influence the children. This appears to be a concern shared by other researchers wanting to adopt a different image of children as research participants (see Fasoli, 2001).

However, this lead-in time proved to be a successful strategy. By the time the children's focus groups began discussing issues relevant to the research, both the children and I were more comfortable and familiar with the interview process and our group relationship. On reflection, I consider that during the initial interviews when I experienced some difficulties, it is likely that the children were establishing their power within the research situation. These interviews also allowed time for the "talk of many things" (Robbins, 2001, p. 11) appropriate in following a sociocultural approach to interviewing children.

These contributions from the children about their lives, interests and families offered me much useful information about their prior knowledge and interests that further enhanced the research relationships and findings.

The children felt special to be the "research group" and be with me during the small group time at the beginning of the session for two weeks. Two comments from parents were:

> You've had a big impact on Penguin 1... Because you brought her a daffodil, she's got a very very big thing about daffodils now. I think just the fact that a teacher brought something in and gave it to her ... Your name definitely does come up a lot at home. She's just absolutely loved the time with you. *(Sue)*

> You've certainly made an impact as a person, I guess I hadn't been looking at the trip. *(Lucy)*

However, Sue and Lucy's comments have left me wondering if some children were participating voluntarily in research, or participating voluntarily with a person they thought of as another teacher. Perhaps the children perceived me as someone who shared their interests, and/or had time to spend with them that was not interrupted by other kindergarten regular events that may disrupt their interactions with their teachers. Much of the time, I was another experienced and knowledgeable adult and the teachers commented that a benefit of the research for all the children was that the frequency and quality of interactions increased through the presence of the researcher as a fourth "teacher" in the setting.

> I think it has been great to have the extra language that was happening and the interactions have been wonderful. And yeah, probably a bit more in-depth than what we can sometimes, because of our group size. *(Kate)*

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

The following incident highlights that children's understanding of ethical principles may not be as intended. 'Penguin 3' expressed to me a child's view of confidentiality a month after completion of data gathering. While I was visiting the kindergarten, she asked me "Did you forget my brother's name?" Unsure of what she meant, I responded "Why do you ask that?" She replied "Because you called him Sam in your story from Mummy's research group. But Sam is Gemma's brother, they are my cousins, my brother is Matthew". This exchange indicated that she had seen and discussed aspects of the parent

transcripts, a positive outcome. However, her conceptual understanding of confidentiality related to truth and accuracy rather than anonymity.

VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

In research, validity is about its truthfulness and reliability about the trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis processes. The methodology of the study highlighted the value of a researcher being embedded in the research setting for a period of time to foster a way to genuinely listen and respond to children. Children's direct involvement as participants and the researcher's attention to relationship building prior to undertaking the children's interviews were established as essential to authentic data gathering techniques.

A concern related to validity and reliability was that I was aware that the children could not read their interview transcripts by themselves and that they may have difficulty recalling their contributions to verify them when discussing transcripts with their parents. Two strategies were utilised to maximise validity and reliability in relation to the children's participation.

Firstly, during the interviews, after children had spoken, I repeated or summarised their contribution so they could correct any misunderstanding or misinterpretation immediately. This strategy demonstrated the value of respectfully empowering children's agency by establishing positive relationships with children prior to undertaking the interviews.

> Bunny " ... the starfish was hard on the top and hard underneath too, ... but I saw its mouth when I tipped it upside down"
> Helen "Oh yes, what did its mouth look like?"
> Bunny "It looked like a (makes upturned grumpy face with lips) maybe it was sad"
> Helen "A grumpy look with its lip up?"
> Bunny "No, because I saw little drips because I saw tears over its face so maybe it was sad"
> Helen "Oh OK maybe it was wet because you'd picked it up out of the water?"
> Bunny "No cos I heard it go (crying noises)"
> Helen "Oh did it make sad noises too did it?
> Bunny "Yeah so maybe it was sad"

This excerpt of transcript demonstrates how Bunny felt confident about denying my interpretations of her comments and asserting her own. This situation echoes the experience of Alton-Lee (2001) who describes a child comfortable in the research situation. The child both refused to answer an interview question and

suggested that the interviewer was actually not asking an appropriate question in terms of the research consent.

Secondly, the children were provided with transcripts and their parents asked to read these with them for verification. The children had been informed that their parents would read the transcripts so there was no breach of confidentiality or privacy. Some clarification and minor corrections and changes did result from this verification process.

CONCLUSIONS

Guidance on applying ethical principles to research with children is sparse in existing codes of conduct. As researchers share their experiences, knowledge specific to involving children as participants in research is being created (e.g. Alton-Lee, 2001; Cullen, 1997; David, Edwards & Alldred, 2001; Fasoli, 2001; Gollop, 2000; Hughes & Helling, 1991). This article has described and reflected on the application of beliefs and ethical principles to a specific case study that used an interpretive methodology. Beliefs about children's capabilities have been described in relation to sociocultural theory. The ethical principles discussed were minimising harm, voluntary participation, informed consent, privacy and confidentiality. The beliefs and principles interacted in a complex way with methodological considerations including the presence of the researcher in the setting. The beliefs, principles, approaches, strategies and suggestions may be added to the existing body of knowledge and perhaps will be useful for other researchers to apply and adapt to their specific studies.

I hope that this discussion has also raised further awareness of ethical issues in relation to young children's participation in research by describing reflections on the experiences of putting my beliefs and principles into practice. The findings of the study (Hedges, 2002) highlight that, provided with the appropriate opportunity, children can offer meaningful contributions to inquiry about their educational experiences. Perhaps as more researchers, including teacher-researchers, provide such opportunities in an ethical and empowering manner, children's abilities and contributions will further increase to inform early childhood theory and practice. As more researchers undertake studies in early childhood settings that include children under five years old as participants, further issues and possible solutions may be problematised.

Researchers are urged to strive to empower children to be competent and capable participants and communicators in research studies. A commitment to seek and advocate for principles, approaches and methods to empower children's active participation in research is consistent with a sociocultural

perspective of children and interpretive approaches. As Moss (1999) writes, a sociocultural interpretation views:

> Children as citizens, with a recognised place in society as well as the family; children as social actors, active participants, with a voice to be listened to; children as learners from birth, as co-constructors of knowledge and identity; children as critical thinkers, with ideas and theories that need taking seriously and the capability to think and act for themselves; children as powerful pedagogues, with a pedagogy of relationships in which children are understood to be actively engaged in co-constructing their own and others' knowledge and identities. (p. 148)

Putting into practice beliefs about children's capabilities and ethical principles that are respectful of and responsive to children is a necessary step towards achieving Moss's vision.

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Helen Hedges was the practicum co-ordinator for the early years programmes at AUT at the time of the research reported in this paper. This year, she has extended her work in the area of partnership. She facilitated a series of seminars for teachers, collectively titled "Philosophy, pedagogy, play and partnership with parents", as part of her professional development role with the Northern Auckland Kindergarten Association. Helen also currently lectures for Te Tari Puna Ora o Aotearoa/New Zealand Childcare Association's Diploma in Teaching (ECE). She hopes to have the opportunity to research the impact of in-centre and out-of-centre practicum experiences on these field-based student teachers' personal and professional development.