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Early childhood teachers' beliefs and practices related to peer learning: a
mixed methods study

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Abstract

This study investigated New Zealand early childhood teachers' beliefs and practices related to peer learning, as little is known about how teachers support peer learning in play based settings. A mixed methods exploratory sequential research design was used. The first phase of the study consisted of case studies, which comprised interviews and observations of teachers in three early childhood centres. Filmed observations of teachers' practices as they supported opportunities for peer learning were undertaken. Stimulated recall interviews were then completed to gain a deeper understanding of teachers' intentions about this aspect of their practice. Constant comparative analysis was used to analyse the case studies, including the use of the NVivo programme for content analysis. The second phase of the study was a nationwide survey sent to early childhood teachers. The questions for the survey were derived from analyses of the case studies and extant literature. Survey data was interpreted using descriptive statistics and coding of open ended questions. Findings from both phases were used to answer the research questions.

The study revealed teachers' beliefs about peer learning recognised the social, participatory nature of learning, alongside provision of opportunities for individual exploration and discovery. Balancing these beliefs created a tension for teachers and at times they struggled to express their role in supporting peer learning. The need for teachers to better articulate and deepen their understanding of their role in this type of learning is implicated in these findings. This study found the early childhood setting played a critical role in mediating teachers' practices and beliefs about peer learning. Therefore children had varied experiences of peer learning as teachers supported children's agency amongst their peers in different ways. This finding was of concern, as teachers who work in settings that do not actively promote peer learning may not effectively support children's potential as teachers of their peers.

Participants espoused beliefs about child-led learning, however observations revealed teachers' intentional support of peer learning. This finding highlighted a major contradiction between teachers' beliefs and practices whilst revealing teachers' inability to take ownership of their intentional teaching practices. Teachers used the curriculum guidelines from *Te Whāriki* related to wellbeing and a sense of belonging to support peer learning; the role of children as knowledge constructors was less closely aligned with teachers' beliefs and practices. This finding draws into question teachers' understandings of how to implement peer learning across the curriculum

strands whilst implying the need for further investigation about how young children’s learning is assessed.

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