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**Subject content knowledge
in early childhood
curriculum and pedagogy**

A thesis presented
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Helen Hedges
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MASSEY UNIVERSITY



1061362677

ABSTRACT

In primary and secondary teaching, subject knowledge is deemed a critical aspect of teachers' knowledge base and curricula documents. However, a common feature of early childhood education is an underemphasis of the subject content knowledge of teachers and children. Teacher beliefs have been established as perhaps the most important determinant of quality teaching and learning interactions and teacher professional growth (Kagan, 1992a). Underpinned by contemporary sociocultural theory and an interpretivist methodology, this thesis explores the beliefs of teachers, parents and four-year-old children in one public kindergarten about subject knowledge, and the influence of these beliefs on the curriculum and pedagogy children experience. The beliefs held are explored through the mechanism of a shared social and cultural event, an excursion, as a framework for the study.

Teachers and parents expressed clear beliefs about the importance of subject content knowledge. Children's beliefs were also revealed implicitly through their interactions, and supported the adults' views. However, subject knowledge was underemphasised in the majority of teaching interactions unrelated to the excursion and in curriculum documentation within the kindergarten. Yet the evidence supports that children's thirst for subject content knowledge was a motivational linchpin in their socially-constructed and inquiry-based learning experiences. The meaningful responses of the teachers were crucial to positive learning outcomes and were based on their own professional knowledge of subject content, pedagogical approaches consistent with early childhood philosophy, and the children as learners.

The study's findings are analysed from two perspectives. Firstly, using four themes as a conceptual framework, categories of teacher knowledge are explored for their construct validity in early childhood education. Secondly, the findings of the study are interpreted in relation to sociocultural theory. The conclusion argues for enhanced awareness of subject knowledge in early childhood learning, teaching and curriculum in Aotearoa/New Zealand. While maintaining a play-based and integrated philosophy, the subject knowledge of both teachers and children requires more explicit attention. Teachers' subject knowledge is crucial for extending children's learning. There is potential for inquiry and reflection on beliefs and practices with regard to subject knowledge within sociocultural notions of learning communities.

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