In the fall of 2010, I moved to New Zealand in search of adventure and a new beginning. Little did I know this move would forever change my life and career path. It was by pure coincidence that I ended up working at a children's centre located at the top of the South Island. My experience was beyond inspiring and motivated me to pursue my certificate as an early childhood educator.

Upon arriving in New Zealand, I quickly came to call Golden Bay—a small rural town in the northwest of the South Island—home. Golden Bay is majestically situated on the coast between two breathtaking parks. The community is comprised of farmers and hard-working families with the occasional quirky character to add to the charm. I was struck by the openness, friendly nature, and overall free-thinking of the people.

As a newcomer to a small community, I struggled to find work. It was by pure luck that I ended up working at an early learning centre called Golden Kids. I came on staff as a relieving staff member, and quickly fell in love with the centre's teaching philosophies and the inspiring women who worked there. I was lucky to be taken on as a staff member for 10 months, working with children aged six months to five years. There has not been a time more influential to my current teaching philosophies.

At the early learning centre, I was the key teacher for a handful of children. Each child at the centre was allocated to a key teacher, who was responsible for documenting that child's journey in learning by writing monthly learning stories that were compiled in the child's profile book. The books belonged to the children and would travel between the children's homes and the centre. Parents would often provide comments or photos of what was happening in their child's life outside.
the centre. Teachers grounded their philosophies in the national Early Learning Framework. Children’s learning stories illustrated which area of learning in the framework the child was moving through, dispositions, schemas, and interests present within their play along with a commitment from the educator as to how they would extend this interest.

Key teachers were responsible for extending the interests of their key children and making these interests visible throughout the program. In this way, no child’s interests was ever left out of programming. Weekly or bi-weekly staff meetings were held to promote program planning. Each teacher had weekly office hours during which they prepared stories and program plans for their children. As a teacher, I became the researcher, ever observing, analyzing, recording, and extending my key children’s journeys in learning. My teaching held purpose, focus, and direction. Working alongside children, scaffolding their interests, I was part of an inspirational program and a vibrant, motivated, educated, and professional group of women striving towards achieving the best teaching practises.

The provocations set out for children were different from those found in many Canadian centres. The classroom was filled with natural found and gathered materials for the children to play with, craft with, and explore. Heuristic play is comprised of found and gathered household objects, and makes up many of the resources within the under two’s. No provocation was placed without intention. The classroom was constantly changing to reflect the children’s interests. Everything from the toys on the shelves to the documentation on the walls and the physical arrangements of the room was constantly molded by the children’s interests.

The classroom did not stop at the door; it extended into the outdoor environment. The outdoor environment was similarly ever changing, remaining stimulating to the children and meeting their developmental needs and interests. There is no stationary playground at Golden Kids, rather, movable parts that can be connected into climbing structures are placed in the soft fall area. Mature trees are growing in the yard, in which children are allowed to challenge their physical abilities. An edible garden and huge sandbox comprise another area. A recirculating river that naturally collects rainwater is a pleasure to splash and play in on hot summer days. Around the yard, provocations are set out every morning truly extending the classroom environment outdoors. The children have free flow between inside and outside every day regardless of the weather, allowing them to experience nature with all their senses.

As a proud enviroschool, recycling and composting is a big part of the curriculum as teachers communicate the importance of environment and sustainability to students. Buckets are kept in each classroom with recycling and composting signs for children to allocate their materials accordingly. Children live as a part of nature, recognizing and acknowledging the interconnection of all living things.

Maori culture is very present within the teaching environment. Maori artwork can be found throughout the centre. Teachers are expected to use Maori language as they speak to children as well as English. Many common nursery rhymes such as “Ba Ba Black Sheep,” “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star,” and “Happy Birthday” are sung in both English and Maori. Maori legends are told and storybooks depicting these legends are present in the classroom. It was an inspirational glimpse into the possibilities of incorporating Indigenous teachings into the curriculum.

Having a positive, open relationship with parents was emphasized. I was encouraged to spend time talking with parents and openly communicate about their child’s experiences at the centre daily. This was especially important when children transitioned into the under-two program. During the child’s first few visits, I would work to form a connection with both the parent and transitioning child. If, after staying on his own, the child was having a hard time settling into the program, I would invite the parents back and during that visit focus exclusively on building a relationship with them.
Ninety percent of the time, when that child came back for their next visit, they would be walking more confidently and would have minimal, if any, trouble transitioning.

As an educator in New Zealand I was moved to view children as capable, competent, and intelligent individuals filled with knowledge and insight. I was the facilitator of learning. I was moved to critically examine what I believed about children and their knowledge, capacity, and abilities. However, above all else, teaching in New Zealand opened my eyes to the possibilities of working with children when they are viewed and respected as individuals. I was moved to listen deeply, presently, and uncover curiosity in the ordinary. I became comfortable in not knowing, shelving my agenda, and allowing the children to uncover our process.

I remember coming home after spending my first afternoon at the early learning centre, I called my mother, who has been an early childhood educator for 30 years, to tell her about the amazing centre I had discovered. I urged her to get on a plane, telling her she would not believe it until she saw it.

**Aanyta’s Experience**

In 2011, I followed a phone call from New Zealand. The message was to come and see the most amazing child care centre ever. I have been an early childhood educator for 30 years, and I am deeply committed to my work, so how could I not follow this inspiring message on my phone. Within three months I was on a plane headed for New Zealand’s South Island. The plan was that I would have a working holiday, visiting as many child care centres as possible in just under three weeks, with a good chunk spent in a centre in Golden Bay, New Zealand, my daughter’s work place. I was ready and poised to document and record; little did I know how eye opening and reaffirming this trip would be.

I was welcomed into six different centres where I was allowed to take pictures of children’s projects and work in action, and I am forever grateful to the many educators who, at the spur of a moment, embraced my hunger for information. Visiting different centres in different areas of the island allowed me to make sure the practices I had observed at my daughter’s workplace were not unique but consistent across the field of early childhood education in New Zealand. Consistency indeed existed, hugely supported by New Zealand’s national framework for early childhood called Te Whāriki (see page 9), which has improved public funding for the field. The most amazing fact was the presence of profile books in all of the centres. These are portfolios for every child, filled with documentations and learning stories (pedagogical narratives). These profile books belonged to each child and were kept in easy reach for access to the child. More than once, a child would bring his book over to me, a perfect stranger, wanting to share who they are and contribute their view of the world through their wonderfully documented stories of learning.

The other that struck me as I walked into each centre was the documentation of projects on the walls. These were projects the children had just completed or were still engaged in. As a visitor, I found the documentation to be a great focal point from which to start conversations with the educators, and it provided me with a window into the centre and the people in it; every centre was highlighting its own community of people and what made that centre unique. I also noticed that the documentation of projects was an important tool for parent communication. It also presented the children as knowledgeable, inquiring, and contributing within their classroom community, and often reaching out into the community they lived in.

The influence of Te Whāriki was visible in all the centres, through the physical environment provided and the educators’ shared vision and commitment to children’s identities as self-motivated learners. In every centre, there was an atmosphere of respect that was natural to every educator, regardless which theory of education they followed. During my time in New Zealand I observed the most inspiring teaching and was struck how everything throughout the day was intentional. The environment was created based on the interests and developmental schemas of the children, supported through observations, allowing children to be fully engaged in their play. Here, children’s contributions were taken seriously; here, children were truly part of society.

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