Emergent literacy as sociocultural practice: How well do New Zealand parents fit with Te Whāriki?

Qilong Zhang, Dr.
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Abstract
A sociocultural approach to emergent literacy and growing concerns over the de-emphasis on literacy of the New Zealand early childhood education curriculum Te Whāriki call for locally situated emergent literacy programmes co-constructed by teachers, parents and children. While teachers’ approach to emergent literacy takes centre stage in research, little is known about approach of parents and whether and to what extent it is in tune with the national curriculum framework. Adopting deductive qualitative analysis, this study examines beliefs and practice about their child’s emergent literacy of 25 parents from New Zealand public kindergartens against the learning outcomes of emergent literacy proclaimed in Te Whāriki. The findings confirm general compatibility between parents’ approach to emergent literacy and that of Te Whāriki. Parents in this study recognize and respond to the importance of the preliteracy skills (e.g. name writing) for school readiness, which concretizes, operationalizes and localizes the generally, loosely and vaguely defined Te Whāriki learning outcomes. The findings support the practicality of the co-construction of local emergent literacy programmes by teachers and parents in chartered early childhood education services in New Zealand.

Keywords
Emergent literacy, Te Whāriki, parent, co-construction, early childhood

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Introduction

Studies have shown children’s emergent literacy to be crucial for later literacy success (e.g. Fernald and Weisleder, 2011; Roberts et al., 2005), and therefore, education authorities in many jurisdictions set out mandatory literacy requirements for early childhood services. For example, in the UK, the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) recognizes literacy development as one of the seven areas of learning and development, and provides that ‘literacy development involves encouraging children to link sounds and letters and to begin to read and write’ (Department of Children, Schools and Families [DCSF], 2014: 8). The framework lays down a set of quite prescriptive learning goals for literacy: ‘Children read and understand simple sentences. They use phonic knowledge to decode regular words and read them aloud accurately...they write simple sentences which can be read by themselves and others’ (DCSF, 2014: 11). In New Zealand, since the introduction of the national early childhood education curriculum Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996), early childhood educators have moved from developmental models of literacy to an emergent literacy model (McLachlan, 2007). However, what ‘emergent literacy’ entails largely depends on one’s understanding of the sociocultural curriculum. There has been abundant research on teachers’ approach to emergent literacy (e.g. McLachlan et al., 2006; Norling, 2014; Sandvik et al., 2014) as well as children’s literacy performance (Arrow, 2010), but little is known about parents’ approach to emergent literacy and whether and to what extent it is in tune with that of nationally mandated curricula. Given the sociocultural orientation of Te Whāriki, it is important to find out how well New Zealand parents fit with the national curriculum in terms of the approach to emergent literacy. The sociocultural perspective prescribes co-construction of locally situated emergent literacy programmes by teachers, parents and children, and getting to know about parents’ stance is a starting point of such co-construction.

Emergent literacy and home literacy environment

Researchers tend to regard emergent literacy as pre-conventional reading and writing. For example, Heilman et al. (2002) defined emergent literacy as ‘reading and writing behaviours of children that occur before and develop into conventional literacy’ (p. 93), and Roberts et al. (2005) defined it as ‘the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are necessary for the development of reading and writing’ (p. 345). In Weigel et al.’s (2006) study, emergent literacy included print knowledge, emergent writing and reading interest, while
According to McLachlan et al. (2013), emergent literacy skills encompass phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, vocabulary, comprehension and writing.

Many studies have focused on effective strategies to enhance emergent literacy. Saracho and Spodek (2010) reviewed studies involving storybook reading and confirmed a positive effect of storybook reading on emergent literacy. Justice et al. (2009) compared the use of print referencing by preschool teachers and traditional storybook reading, and found that print referencing had positive effects on building early literacy skills. A longitudinal study conducted by Piasta et al. (2012) also found print referencing to be influential on children’s early literacy skills.

Research has highlighted the importance of home literacy environment for emergent literacy (Anderson and Morrison, 2011). Roberts et al. (2005) defined home literacy environment as ‘the experiences, attitudes, and materials pertaining to literacy that a child encounters and interacts with at home’ (p. 346). In Payne et al.’s (1994) study, home literacy environment was measured by indicators such as frequency and duration of shared book reading, number of books in the home, frequency of child’s requests to engage in shared book reading and caregiver’s enjoyment of reading. According to Sylva et al. (2011), home literacy environment has a much broader meaning, which encompasses all the opportunities for the child at home of ‘being read to, painting and drawing, going to the library, playing with letters/numbers, learning activities with the alphabet, learning activities with songs/poems/nursery rhymes’ (p. 102).

Home literacy environment can be categorized into parental beliefs and expectations about literacy, family literacy activities and family literacy devices (Aram and Levin, 2011; Sénéchal, 2011). According to Sénéchal (2011), parental beliefs include parents’ perception of the importance of, and their own role in, engaging their child in literacy learning at home, and parental expectations concern what literacy skills parents expect their child to acquire. According to Aram and Levin (2011), family literacy activities include parents’ joint book reading with the child, teaching the child alphabets, familiarizing the child with environmental print, guiding the child in spelling their names and enriching the child’s vocabulary through verbal communication, and family literacy devices can be ‘storybooks, papers, pencils, markers, blackboards, alphabet cards, commercial literacy-based games, computer games, and educational television programs’ (p. 562).

Given the importance of home literacy environment, there have been intervention programmes that aim to equip parents with necessary knowledge and
skills for helping with the child’s emergent literacy at home. Based on a review of parent interventions for preschool children’s language and emergent literacy, Reese et al. (2010) concluded that shared book-reading, conversations and writing interactions were effective ways to improve the language and emergent literacy skills of preschool children, and that different parent training programmes could be designed for the specific needs of particular populations of children. Sloat et al.’s (2015) systematic literature review examined interventions aimed at increasing the amount of time parents spend reading interactively with their children, and found that the interventions yielded positive results.

Te Whāriki and emergent literacy as sociocultural practice

Te Whāriki is New Zealand’s first national curriculum statement for the early childhood sector, and ‘the importance of the social context within which children are cared for and learning takes place is one of the foundation stones of the curriculum’ (Ministry of Education, 1996: 7). In Te Whāriki, four principles (empowerment, holistic development, family and community and relationships) and five strands (well-being, belonging, contribution, communication and exploration) are interwoven, and exemplified by sets of learning goals, learning outcomes (LOs) and examples of learning experiences (Ministry of Education, 1996). The sociocultural stance of Te Whāriki is explicitly articulated in several guiding documents (e.g. Ministry of Education, 2004). The sociocultural approach requires early childhood educators to ‘keep the complexity of learning in mind and are particularly mindful of the context... [and] acknowledge multiple cultural lenses on assessment and learning’ (Ministry of Education, 2004: 3–4).

The sociocultural perspective on emergent literacy maintains that emergent literacy is situated within a context which includes the immediate social situation and children’s home and communities (McLachlan, 2007). In particular, family is a major site of and a powerful force for literacy development and learning (Anderson and Morrison, 2011; Cairney, 2003). Barrat-Pugh (2000) identified three key beliefs about emergent literacy inherent in the sociocultural approach: (1) Children learn literacy through participating in activities in their family and community; (2) individual children have different patterns of literacy learning, and (3) literacy practices are valued differently in different social contexts. From sociocultural perspective, ‘literacy is defined as more than the ability to read and write’ (Páez et al., 2011: 443–444), and literacy is understood as ‘a set of social practices associated with
different domains of life that are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and practices’ (Páez et al., 2011: 444). Two concepts are important for the sociocultural perspective. Cultural models of literacy development are related to parents’ beliefs about their own roles in educating their children and the literacy experiences they had growing up (Páez et al., 2011). Authentic literacy activities include ‘direct child-parent interactions around literacy tasks; reading with or listening to children; or talking about other literacy activities, such as cooking or shopping’ (Páez et al., 2011: 446).

As a socioculturally oriented curriculum, Te Whāriki is not prescriptive in literacy teaching and learning, and it promotes a holistic approach where programmes are required to be inclusive and cater for children with diverse backgrounds (Education Review Office, 2011).

**Concerns over Te Whāriki’s de-emphasis on literacy**

In Te Whāriki, the LOs of early childhood education emphasized children’s learning dispositions and working theories about themselves and the world around them (Ministry of Education, 1996) rather than specific skills including literacy skills. In practice, as Arrow (2010) observed: ‘It has been argued that the identification of literacy skills, such as writing one’s own name or naming letters of the alphabet, is formal, didactic, and drilled-based, and therefore at odds with teachers’ beliefs about authentic literacy within play environments’ (pp. 64–65).

Despite its long established dominant status and popularity, Te Whāriki has been criticized for de-emphasizing literacy development and learning. McLachlan et al. (2006) contended that Te Whāriki failed to inform teachers on how to scaffold children’s literacy learning or assess children’s level of literacy. They reported that Te Whāriki played a passive role in shaping teachers’ beliefs about literacy. This position was reaffirmed by McLachlan and Arrow (2011) and McLachlan et al. (2013) who asserted that Te Whāriki lacked in specific guidance on strategies to promote literacy knowledge and skills and effective ways of literacy assessment. Blaiklock (2011) compared the approach articulated in Te Whāriki with that outlined in the curriculum for young children in England and concluded that Te Whāriki had few outcomes related to literacy, provided little information on how to plan and implement literacy activities and had no requirements to assess literacy learning. Blaiklock suggested that the lack of information on literacy in Te Whāriki might have resulted in children being provided ‘an inadequate range of literacy experiences in New Zealand early childhood centres’ (p. 3). Education Review Office (2011)
identified a number of issues regarding the inappropriate strategies being used in centres as a result of the lack of specific guidance from Te Whāriki, for example, large formal mat times, and formal and teacher-led literacy teaching. The government body recommended to the Ministry of Education that written guidelines and expectations for literacy teaching and learning in early childhood be developed.

**Co-constructing local emergent literacy programmes and the aim of this study**

Because of its sociocultural stance, Te Whāriki is not and can never be a ‘one size fits all’ curriculum, and this is shown both implicitly and explicitly throughout the document. For example, Te Whāriki states that ‘[T]he list of (learning) outcomes in this document is indicative rather than definitive. Each early childhood education setting will develop its own emphases and priorities’ (Ministry of Education, 1996: 44).

It is not logically possible for a socioculturally oriented national curriculum framework to include contextualized ‘specific guidance’ on teaching or assessment. Te Whāriki emphasizes that its purpose is ‘to provide a curriculum framework that will form the basis for consistent curriculum and programmes in chartered early childhood education services’ (Ministry of Education, 1996: 10), and that ‘each service will develop its own programmes to meet the needs of its children, their families, the specific setting, and the local community’ (p. 27). Further, Te Whāriki highlights ‘the critical role of socially and culturally mediated learning’ (p. 9) and ‘a wealth of valuable information and understanding regarding their children’ (p. 30) possessed by parents and caregivers. Therefore, the sociocultural approach points to the need for locally situated emergent literacy programmes co-constructed by teachers, parents and children of individual early childhood education services.

Several established notions corroborate the co-construction process. The notion of community of practice advocates that members of the community learn together in a manner of mutual engagement and with a shared repertoire of resources, and that learning and development are co-constructed (Wenger, 1998). Teachers, children and parents are members of the community of practice and share their experiences and other resources to co-construct the learning for emergent literacy. Te Whāriki places importance on ‘the ongoing development of learning communities with a philosophy of whanaunga tanga (sense of family connection) that values the contribution each individual brings to the collective process’ (Ministry of Education, 2004: 3).
The notion of funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005) legitimizes household-based knowledge and skills in emergent literacy owned by children and parents, and points to the need for literacy programmes to be adapted to incorporate different funds of knowledge. The concept of funds of knowledge ‘provides a positive way for teachers to acknowledge the richness of children’s lives, collaborate with parents in children’s learning, and reduce the disjunction between homes and centres cited earlier’ (Hedges et al., 2011: 201). McNaughton’s (1995, 2001) socialization model of literacy emphasizes ‘a better match between families and schools’ (p. 42) to ‘optimise continuity’ (p. 43) between settings. The model holds that both parents and teachers are socialization agents and that enhancing continuity ‘needs to consider the ideas that [all] socialisation agents hold’ (p. 47). According to the model, ‘without shared understanding about activities, parents... do not necessarily act consistently with professional educators’ ideas about literacy activities’ (p. 55).

The starting point for co-constructing local programmes of emergent literacy is for teachers and parents to develop mutual understanding and respect for each other’s beliefs and practice related to emergent literacy. Presumably, teachers’ professional beliefs and practice are reflective of those articulated in Te Whāriki, and for co-constructing local emergent literacy programmes, it is ideal that parents’ beliefs and practice related to emergent literacy are in line with Te Whāriki. Therefore, this study aims to answer the research question: How well do parents’ approaches to emergent literacy align with that prescribed in Te Whāriki?

Methods

To answer the research question, I used a two-stage research design. First, I interviewed parents on their beliefs and practice in relation to emergent literacy. Second, I compared parents’ beliefs and practice to relevant provisions set out in Te Whāriki.

Stage 1: Semi-structured parent interviews

The semi-structured parent interviews followed up on a quantitative study which surveyed 127 English speaking parents who were randomly selected from 50 public kindergartens in Auckland, New Zealand (Zhang et al., 2014). At the time of data collection, the kindergartens philosophies and curricula, as described by Arrow (2010), were ‘based on constructivist notions of free play in which children actively seek out experiences, and in which the teacher
waits for the teachable moment’ (p. 60). The survey asked the parents to indicate how often they participated in parental involvement activities including spending time working with their child on reading and writing skills at home. The interview participants for this study were selected from the survey participants on a voluntary basis. The overarching interview question was: ‘Could you provide more information on how and why you spent time working with your child on reading and writing skills at home?’ I acknowledged emergent literacy’s sociocultural meaning of ‘more than the ability to read and write’ (Páez et al., 2011: 443–444), and therefore, used a range of prompts to allow parents to describe a wide spectrum of relevant beliefs and practice. Examples of such prompts were: ‘What kind of books do you read with your child? What do you think of name writing? Do you take your child to the library? Do you watch educational TV programs with your child?’ All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Interview participants were identified using the same identification number assigned to the survey participants. The ethics approval was granted both by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee and by the kindergartens’ umbrella organization Auckland Kindergarten Association. All potential research ethical concerns (e.g. confidentiality) were addressed in the Participant Information Sheet and a signed Consent Form was obtained from all participants.

Interview participants were 25 parents (all mothers) from 16 public kindergartens in the Auckland urban region in New Zealand. The average age of the mothers was 37.8 (standard deviation [SD] = 4.1) years. The average age of the target children (12 boys, 13 girls) was 50.8 (SD = 5.6) months, and the average length of time the target children had attended the kindergarten at the time of survey was 9.7 (SD = 6.1) months. The mothers’ average number of children was 2.5 (SD = 0.7), and the average birth order of the target children was 2.0 (SD = 0.8). The mothers’ educational qualification included secondary/high school (3), trade certificate or diploma (10), bachelor degree (8) and postgraduate (4), and their work status included unemployed (10), part-time/self-employed (9) and home maker (6). The annual household income of the mothers ranged from less than NZ$20,000 (1), NZ$40,000–60,000 (7), NZ$60,000–80,000 (4), NZ$80,000–100,000 (3), to over NZ$100,000 (10). All participants identified themselves as Pākehā (New Zealand European) and spoke English as the first language. All teachers that were involved in the teaching of the children of the interviewed parents were qualified teachers and identified themselves as Pākehā and had English as the first language.
Stage 2: Deductive qualitative analysis

The qualitative interview data are typically analysed through an inductive approach which is aimed to identify categories (e.g. Thomas, 2006). The main purpose of this study is to determine the level of consistency between parents’ beliefs and practice and a curriculum framework, and the conventional inductive approach to qualitative data analysis is not fit for the purpose. The term ‘deductive qualitative analysis’ was first coined by Gilgun (2004, 2005). According to Gilgun (2005), a deductive qualitative analysis begins with a conceptual model that is used as a screen placed over the data to ‘compare the patterns of the conceptual model with the patterns of the findings’ (Gilgun, 2005: 42). I chose deductive qualitative analysis as a tool to compare parents’ beliefs and practice related to emergent literacy with the relevant provisions in Te Whāriki. According to Gilgun (2005), one type of conceptual model is ‘composed of a loose set of ideas and concepts derived from one or more sources, such as previous research and theory, professional experience, and personal experience’ (p. 42). Te Whāriki’s stance on emergent literacy is most comprehensively articulated in the LOs for Goal 3 of the Communication strand (Ministry of Education, 1996), which underpins the formulation of the conceptual model for the deductive qualitative analysis in this study. Goal 3 of the Communication strand reads, ‘Children experience an environment where they experience the stories and symbols of their own and other cultures’ (Ministry of Education, 1996: 78). Goal 3 includes nine LOs, with six of them (the first four and the last two) relevant to emergent literacy. For convenience of reference, the six relevant LOs are labelled as LO1–LO6 as below:

LO1: An understanding that symbols can be ‘read’ by others and that thoughts, experiences, and ideas can be represented through words, pictures, print, ... sounds, ... and photographs.
LO2: Familiarity with print and its uses by exploring and observing the use of print in activities that have meaning and purpose for children.
LO3: Familiarity with an appropriate selection of the stories and literature valued by the cultures in their community.
LO4: An expectation that words and books can amuse, delight, comfort, illuminate, inform, and excite.
LO5: Experience with some of the technology and resources for ... reading, and writing.
LO6: Experience with creating stories and symbols.
(Ministry of Education, 1996: 78)
To help ensure accuracy and consistency in understanding throughout the data analytical process, I have identified key words in each LO and created a model that encapsulates all the six LOs (Figure 1) and serves as the conceptual model as described in Gilgun (2005).

In this study, parents’ approach was defined to include parental beliefs and practice. Parental beliefs referred to the parent’s perception of the importance of, and parental role in, the child’s literacy learning at home, and the literacy skills that the parent expects the child to acquire (Sénéchal, 2011). Parental practice included family literacy activities such as shared book reading as well as provision of family literacy device such as story books and educational DVDs (Aram and Levin, 2011). The original transcript of parents’ responses was inspected and the aspects of approach as defined above identified and highlighted.

The identified aspects of parents’ approach were further inspected to establish consistency/inconsistency with Te Whāriki. If the main words in a certain meaning unit (one or more sentences) were consistent (similar, close,
congruent) with the key words of LOs in meaning, then a consistency was recorded. If the main words were inconsistent (contradictory, conflicting, opposing), then an inconsistency was recorded.

When using deductive qualitative analysis, ‘researchers must be on the alert to ensure that they are not fitting their findings into pre-established categories or imposing theory onto findings’ (Gilgun, 2005: 43). Therefore, when comparing parents’ beliefs and practice with the six Te Whāriki LOs, I not only conducted ‘pattern matching’ (Gilgun, 2005: 42), that is, looking for consistency between the patterns in the data and those in the conceptual model but also identified patterns that did not conform with the Te Whāriki LOs.

Findings

The deductive qualitative analysis revealed: (1) Beliefs and practice of the majority of parents related to emergent literacy were consistent with most of the Te Whāriki LOs; (2) the parents gave priority to some preliteracy skills for school readiness that were not specified in Te Whāriki; and (3) the parents’ beliefs and practice related to emergent literacy were consistent with pedagogical principles (PPs) embedded in Te Whāriki.

1. Consistency between parents’ beliefs and practice and the Te Whāriki LOs

Beliefs and practice of at least 80% of the parents were consistent with all Te Whāriki LOs with the only exception of LO6 (creating stories and symbols) (Table 1). The exceptionally low number of parents that concurred with LO6 will be examined later.

Examples (quotes from the parents) are given in Table 2 to illustrate how a parent’s beliefs and practice were consistent with a Te Whāriki LO. It is possible that one example is associated with more than one LO, in which situation the example was used for the most associated LO.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LO1</th>
<th>LO2</th>
<th>LO3</th>
<th>LO4</th>
<th>LO5</th>
<th>LO6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: LO: learning outcome.
Remarkably, in contrast with the 80% of parents who concurred with LO5 (technology and resources), 20% of parents ran counter to LO5, as two parents explained:

‘I’m certain a lot of educational things we could put on the TV but we don’t like the thought of them sitting in front of TV watching the TV to do it, they don’t have enough time to watch TV, they play outside.’ (Parent 277)
I don’t have any educational DVDs, so I wouldn’t put them in front of the TV, that sort of thing. I don’t think she gets anything out of it...

(Parent 881)

2. Preliteracy skills for school readiness emphasized by the parents

In order to avoid ‘fitting [the] findings into pre-established categories or imposing theory onto findings’ (Gilgun, 2005: 43), when employing deductive qualitative analysis, I also captured preliteracy skills for school readiness that were not pronounced in the Ōtepoti LOs, but were given priority by some of the parents: name/letter recognition, name/letter writing, reading by the child and colouring in. Examples (quotes from the parents) of how a particular preliteracy skill was emphasized by a parent were given in Table 3.

It is noteworthy that name/letter writing was emphasized by nearly three quarters of parents and reading by the child emphasized by over half of parents (Table 4). Also, there are potential connections between these preliteracy skills and some of the Ōtepoti LOs, which will be detailed in the discussion section.
Parents’ beliefs and practice related to emergent literacy were in line with four PPs embedded in Te Whāriki as listed below:

PP1: Activities should ‘build upon and extend children’s interests’ (Ministry of Education, 1996: 83)

PP2: ‘Children learn through play’ (Ministry of Education, 1996: 82)

PP3: ‘All adults working in early childhood education centres should have a knowledge and understanding of child development’ (Ministry of Education, 1996: 41)

PP4: ‘Children moving from early childhood settings to the early years of school are likely to have had considerable experience with books..., be ready to consolidate concepts about print..., [and] enjoy writing...’ (Ministry of Education, 1996: 73)

Examples are given in Table 5 to illustrate how a parent’s beliefs and practice were consistent with a Te Whāriki PP.

**Discussion**

Beliefs and practices of the majority of parents were consistent with all Te Whāriki LOs related to emergent literacy except for LO6 (creating stories and symbols) which was concurred with by only few parents (8%). It should be pointed out that if the preliteracy skill ‘name/letter writing’ (emphasized by 72% of the parents) is considered as a type of ‘creating symbols’ in LO6 and therefore partially incorporates LO6, then the number of parents who concurred with LO6 will increase significantly. In this sense, it can be said that the majority of parents were in agreement with all of the Te Whāriki LOs related to emergent literacy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name/letter recognition</th>
<th>Name/letter writing</th>
<th>Reading by the child</th>
<th>Colouring in</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5. Examples of parents’ beliefs and practice related to emergent literacy that were consistent with the Te Whāriki PPs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PPs</th>
<th>Keywords</th>
<th>Parents’ beliefs and practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PP1</td>
<td>Following the child’s interest</td>
<td>‘She is fairly interested ... for a long time she was really keen on learning the alphabet... so we were trying to do about ten minutes each day working on that... but then her interest waned so I’m certainly not into forcing her to sit down and learn that...’ (Parent 117)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP2</td>
<td>Learning through play</td>
<td>‘[I] try to make it a fun thing, not a lesson thing, but it’s definitely a conscious choice to have those things available... the writing thing is more of a game thing, when it’s something fun’ (Parent 112)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP3</td>
<td>Age appropriateness</td>
<td>‘I don’t do the writing so much, I think she is too little to really be trying to think about writing’ (Parent 114)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP4</td>
<td>Smooth transition</td>
<td>‘I don’t force them to read before they start school because they have five years of no school, and then lots of years of school, so I like them to have the freedom to just be kids and run around... but if we are sitting at the breakfast table we do a bit of that, it gives them a little bit of a head start, a bit more comfort when they go to school that they know something’ (Parent 277)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: PP: pedagogical principle.

Two contradictory approaches of the parents to technology and resources (LO5) illustrate how parents’ beliefs and practice can be influenced by complex social, cultural and individual contexts. Although 80% of parents supported the LO, 20% of them did not. The reasons given by both sides are plausible. For example, Parent 459 supported LO5 because her child ‘loves the computer’ so she would rather ‘do it on the computer’ than ‘do with flash cards’, and Parent 277 did not support LO5 because she did not like her child ‘sitting in front of TV’, instead, she wanted her child to ‘play outside’. Also, the contradictory approaches explain why the Te Whāriki LOs are ‘indicative rather than definitive’ (Ministry of Education, 1996: 44).

The parents’ emphasis on preliteracy skills for school readiness unspecified in Te Whāriki reflects their sense of agency as the child’s ‘first teacher’ (Britto et al., 2006). Although many parents chose not to formally teach their children to read and write before they start school because they believed their children have enough time to learn such skills when they are in school (e.g. Parent 277), a substantial number of parents wanted to help
their child to acquire pre-reading and pre-writing skills (15, 18 respectively) before they enter school. It is true that these skills are not specified in Te Whāriki, nevertheless, the parents’ emphasis on the preliteracy skills should not be seen as a deviation from Te Whāriki. It is stated in Te Whāriki that for school readiness children may ‘have considerable experience with books... [and] enjoy writing’ (Ministry of Education, 1996: 73). The preliteracy skills emphasized by the parents such as name/letter writing and reading should be seen as concrete, operational and local meaning of having considerable experience with books and enjoying writing. In this sense, through focusing on certain preliteracy skills for school readiness, the parents concretized, operationalized and localized the generally, loosely and broadly defined Te Whāriki LOs. Further, there are connections between the pre-emergent skills emphasized by the parents and the Te Whāriki LOs. Although none of the six LOs explicitly included any specific preliteracy skills, some LOs may be construed as implicitly inclusive of some preliteracy skills. For example, as aforesaid, name/letter writing can be considered to partially incorporate LO6 (‘experience with creating symbols’). Also, LO2 is concerned about ‘exploring and observing the use of print in activities that have meaning and purpose for children’ (Ministry of Education, 1996: 78), and obviously name/letter writing can be seen as one of such activities as long as the parents believe that it has ‘meaning and purpose’ for children.

The consistency between parents’ beliefs and practice and the Te Whāriki PPs adds to the evidence that the beliefs and practice of the parents in this study related to emergent literacy were compatible with Te Whāriki. Reasons can be explored for the compatibility. One reason could be that the parents could have been influenced by Te Whāriki through parent–teacher communications on the professional philosophy that was based on Te Whāriki, and this is particularly possible for kindergartens where opportunities for parent–teacher communications were abundant (Zhang et al., 2014). Another reason could be that the socioculturally oriented curriculum has been designed to accommodate the expectations and aspirations of New Zealand parents from diverse social and cultural backgrounds.

McLachlan et al. (2006) acknowledged the danger of ‘having a very prescriptive curriculum document’, meanwhile, they expressed their concern about the danger of having one non-prescriptive curriculum document ‘which does not indicate in any detail how teachers could promote, assess and evaluate literacy’ (p. 34). Blaiklock (2011) also criticized Te Whāriki’s minimal guidance on how teachers could foster emergent literacy. One may criticize Te Whāriki for its ambiguity in many aspects, nevertheless, there is a
fine line between ambiguity and openness. In this study, the parents’ emphasis on preliteracy skills was legitimized, as discussed above, in spite of the seemingly de-emphasis on literacy of Te Whāriki, and this is because the parents in this study made the choice in response to the sociocultural contexts. Based on a study on the complexity of quality of early childhood education programmes in the US, Howes (2010) concluded that it is not the specific practice alone that contributes to the quality of the program, but rather the interaction of the practice with the cultural context of the program. Howes maintained that ‘exemplary early childhood education is both universally good and adaptive to culture’ (p. 143). In light of Howes’ theory, one should not problematize a practice without considering its sociocultural contexts. In this sense, I am somewhat concerned about some formal, teacher-led strategies for teaching literacy being labelled as ‘inappropriate’, as I referenced earlier (Education Review Office, 2011). I would ask: Why are ‘large formal mat times’ inappropriate? Might they be culturally responsive for some children?

It is important to note that the findings of the study only reflect the approach of parents from one cultural community (Howes, 2010) with the largest population in New Zealand – Pākehā. Previous studies have reported effects of ethnic, racial and linguistic status on home literacy environment (Páez et al., 2011). In particular, as one party of the uniquely bicultural society of New Zealand (Duhn, 2012), the indigenous Māori represents a predominantly important cultural community, and children from a Māori family may experience fundamentally different home language environment to those from a Pākehā family. Therefore, the finding of this study should by no means be generalized to other cultural communities. The potential effect of socioeconomic status should also be considered (Páez et al., 2011). For example, 10 out of 25 parents had an annual household income of over NZ$100,000 compared to NZ$91,900, the national mean gross household income at the time of survey (2009) (Ministry of Social Development, 2014). Therefore, the findings obviously do not apply to the socially and economically disadvantaged families.

**Limitations and future direction**

This study has limitations. As a qualitative study, its sampling technique was purposive in that selection of participants was made on the basis of their ability to provide relevant data. Consequently, in terms of Morse’s (1999) criterion of ‘qualitative generalisability’, this study is limited by the capacity
of the findings being used to ‘provide explanatory theory for the experiences of other individuals who are in comparable situations’ (Horsburgh, 2003: 311). The parents in this study had children at public kindergartens, and therefore, the findings may not be used to explain beliefs and practice of parents from other types of early childhood services. Given the native English language status of all participants in this study and the linguistic and cultural diversity of the New Zealand society, the transferability of the findings are particularly restricted. Another limitation relates to possible volunteer bias of the volunteer participants in this study. Since volunteers and nonvolunteers are different in important ways (e.g. volunteers are generally more educated, more approval-motivated) (Rosnow and Rosenthal, 1976), this study might have oversampled parents who had more knowledge about the mainstream early childhood teaching and learning philosophy and/or parents who were more motivated to meet the expectations of the teachers. Most notably, the study’s voluntary sample consists of predominantly White, English-speaking middle-class parents, and accordingly, certain indicators of ‘facilitative’ emergent literacy practice adopted in the study (e.g. story books, educational TV programmes) are linked with the dominant White, First World discourses (Razfar and Gutiérrez, 2013). This limitation has weakened the sociocultural stance that I aspired to take as a researcher. It is important to note that, as ample literature has suggested, that parents can be facilitative of young children’s literacy learning in a variety of other ways too (e.g. Kabuto, 2010). To address these limitations, for future study, I need to expand the sample, for example, to include language minority parents. I may also need to make an effort to reach out to parents who do not volunteer to be interviewed but are likely to represent a unique pattern of beliefs and practice. Further, a large-scale quantitative design can be employed at some stage to invalidate the generability of the qualitative findings.

Implication

The general compatibility between beliefs and practice of the parents in this study and Te Whāriki manifests that achieving shared understanding between, and forming community of practice (Wenger, 1998) by, teachers and parents is realistic and realizable. The teachers’ professional beliefs and practice related to emergent literacy are likely to be acceptable to the parents and vice versa, which lays a foundation for co-construction of local emergent literacy programmes. Also, since the parents’ general endorsement of the Te Whāriki LOs
and PPs revealed in this study is not taught by the teachers, it can be envisaged that teachers’ intentional, conscious effort to help parents to align their beliefs and practice with Te Whāriki may consolidate the foundation for co-construction. Further, parents in this study displayed a level of reflective thinking upon PPs, signifying that their funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005) equipped them to be well placed to engage in professional dialogues. ‘Families have a wealth of intimate knowledge about their children that the teacher is only just beginning to discover’ (Gordon and Browne, 2014: 235), and parents may have good ideas about how to support the child in emergent literacy. Therefore, parents should be encouraged to play a role in the co-construction of locally situated emergent literacy programmes. Meanwhile, it is important that teachers learn to hear parents’ perspectives and learn to work with parents. As it is important to help parents learn about professional insights on emergent literacy, it is equally important to help teachers learn about parents’ beliefs and practice. Therefore, teacher education programs should include substantial content on how to communicate with parents from diverse sociocultural backgrounds.

**Conclusion**

The sociocultural approach of Te Whāriki rules out any formulaic arrangement that includes nationally applicable provisions on how teachers promote or assess emergent literacy. There is little point in criticizing how Te Whāriki lacks in sufficient guidance or standards in emergent literacy. Rather, it is important for teachers and parents to work together and co-construct what is lacking in Te Whāriki. To gauge the practicality of such a position, this study examined parents’ beliefs and practice related to emergent literacy in comparison with the LOs pronounced in Te Whāriki. The findings showed general compatibility between parents’ approach to emergent literacy and that of Te Whāriki which affirms the practicality of achieving shared understanding between teachers and parents. The study also revealed parents’ potential for effective engagement in the co-construction process. Due to the qualitative sampling technique, the findings of this study should be interpreted under consideration of the demographic characteristics of its participants.

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