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# INTERVIEW WITH Alex Gunn: Early Childhood Education in New Zealand

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I begin this interview by sharing with readers some aspects of my connection with New Zealand. In 2017, I organized an itinerant international exhibition at the University of Canterbury (UC) marking the 20th anniversary of the death of Paulo Freire and reflecting on *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In 2019, I returned to this university to undertake a postdoctoral fellowship under the supervision of Professor Peter Roberts. During that time, I met Andrea Delaune when she was finishing her PhD, and since then she has been developing research focused on early childhood education. Through our exchanges about my work in Brazil and hers in New Zealand, we identified several shared interests, particularly regarding the Early Childhood curriculum in both countries.

In 2025, I had the opportunity to return to UC, where I was welcomed by Andrea, a Senior Lecturer at the University of Canterbury, from April to July, during a period of study leave. On that occasion, I participated in various academic activities, including a meeting with university professors and researchers from New Zealand and Australia to discuss recent government measures in New Zealand government measures concerning Early Childhood Education. These measures, aligned with a neoliberal policy framework, significantly impact both the provision of services for children and the working conditions of teachers in Early Childhood Education. It was during this meeting that I met Roberta Carvalho and Alex Gunn, professors at the University of Otago. Since then, I have remained in dialogue with Roberta Carvalho about teacher education, pedagogical practice, and the Early Childhood curriculum.

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E-ISSN 2316-3100
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Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação

In light of these meetings and dialogues, I considered it valuable to publish an interview that could bring further insights into the topic and broaden the debate. Alex Gunn, kindly invited by Roberta Carvalho, agreed to be interviewed and to share her professional journey with us.

I believe it is important to highlight this context of meetings and partnerships so that readers may understand how a research network is gradually woven and expanded.

Alex Gunn is a Professor of Education in the Faculty of Education at the University of Otago, New Zealand, where she conducts research and coordinates postgraduate programmes.

Throughout her professional trajectory, she has combined pedagogical practice with theoretical rigor, grounded in years of experience as an early childhood educator in community-based settings—an aspect that adds depth and sensitivity to her research. She holds a EdD in Education from the University of Waikato and has dedicated her work to central themes in contemporary education, such as social justice and equity. Her research examines how teachers' beliefs, values, and identities shape pedagogical and curricular practices.

Gunn's work focuses on Early Childhood Education, with particular attention to the New Zealand curriculum framework, *Te Whāriki*, as well as to Inclusive Education, with an emphasis on gender studies and queer theory. It is worth noting that the official Early Childhood curriculum in New Zealand is widely recognized for incorporating key principles of Māori philosophy and culture, making it unique and fostering important reflections on childhood, children, and teaching.

Moreover, Gunn's research adopts qualitative approaches to problematize social norms—such as heteronormativity—within educational contexts, drawing on Foucauldian discourse analysis and cultural-historical activity theory. She also supervises research that contributes to debates on educational policy, advocating for a pedagogy committed to ethical and social transformation.

I believe that this interview with Alex Gunn will contribute to a better understanding of early childhood education in New Zealand and, above all, of her professional journey toward the education of young children and the complexities involved in teaching at this stage.

E-ISSN 2316-3100
MOMENTO Diálogos em Educação
Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação

**Gabriela Nogueira (GN):** How did your involvement with Early Childhood Education begin? Could you tell us about your professional journey and the various roles you have taken on beyond the school and university contexts?

**Alex Gunn (AG):** I came into university at the conclusion of my schooling through a new four-year degree and diploma pathway for teaching and education studies. At that time, in the late 1980s, most of the theory and research we read in ECE originated in the USA or Europe, and it was a great hope of the academics around us that through us and future early childhood students, a vibrant Early Childhood Cducation academic discipline would flourish in Aotearoa New Zealand. For me this was inspiring and I knew that ultimately I wanted to come back to university and contribute to this project of early childhood education as an academic field in the longer term.

Following that first period of study, I took a position as an early childhood teacher working with infants and toddlers (half-time) and children aged 2-5 years (half-time) whilst also raising an infant of my own. I began postgraduate study at the same time, eventually pursuing a master's degree wherein I explored teachers' beliefs and practices in visual arts education. Why visual arts education? As an ECE teacher, I was puzzling over why teachers' practices could vary so widely within arts education in general. I was a musician, and in my teaching with young children I had no qualms about giving direct instruction to children as they explored musical instruments, played drums, sang, danced with me, and so forth. And, as a musician, I had a language of music, with which to communicate. But within the visual arts, the convention at that time was not to engage so directly with young children lest it stifle their creative impulses and interests. I couldn't fathom why this was so, particularly given the way teaching and learning theory had emerged in the curriculum framework *Te Whāriki* (socioculturally based). So, to me, the practices I was immersed in did not make sense. Therefore, I was motivated to study in the area and, from this, to speak into teacher education about more active and intentional visual arts practice in ECE. This is why I am interested in the relationships between teacher's beliefs and their practices, and this is a theme I have pursued

E-ISSN 2316-3100
MOMENTO Diálogos em Educação
Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação

over time through various research projects related to inclusion, social justice, assessment, and equity in the field.

A few years into my teaching career, I met and partnered with my wife. Together, we began raising our two children. This surprising turn in life was personal but also political and eventually instrumental to my research trajectory. Following an incident of exclusion involving one of our children's school teachers – as I was not the biological parent of the child, the teacher refused to talk with me when I went to discuss our child's concerns about being in their class – I was motivated to speak back to homophobia and heteronormativity in education, hence my doctorate. In that project, I explored the pervasiveness of heteronormativity in ECE, drawing on queer theory and poststructural discourse analysis as methods.

Throughout my research career, I have worked on projects about inclusion and social justice (particularly from perspectives on gender and sexuality), and I have explored this through research involving teachers and teaching practice as well as through teacher education. I also have an interest in assessment practices, particularly in relation to narrative assessment such as learning stories, and curriculum.

**(GN):** Regarding your work at the university — considering both teaching and outreach — what have been your main activities in recent years? In what ways have you contributed to the education and training of Early Childhood Education professionals?

**(AG):** As in the case of Brazil, a research and teaching based academic role at a University in Aotearoa New Zealand typically comprises teaching, research, and service (both within the university and within the community). At our university we are expected to maintain strong links with our early childhood community through involvement in professional networks. We actively support colleagues to learn about topics we are researching, and we support their mentorship of new and emerging early childhood teachers by partnering with them when our student teachers are completing professional experience. I also regularly respond to requests from organisations to provide professional learning sessions related to research and teaching

E-ISSN 2316-3100
MOMENTO Diálogos em Educação
Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação

that I undertake, and I am involved in governance board work and public early childhood activities and events in the community (meetings, rallies, activism, etc).

A portion of my time is devoted to teaching in the university. I work with teacher education students who are learning to be early childhood teachers and with students of education studies who are learning about policy and practice in education. In both cases, my teaching regularly addresses topics of teaching practice and teacher professional learning, sociology of education, inclusion, and equity. I also work with postgraduate students – usually teachers who are undertaking part-time research and advanced study in education and research students completing theses at the masters and doctoral level. Across the range of students I have supervised research for, each has fitted somehow within one of four themes of research that I have undertaken: early childhood policy and practice, teacher education, inclusion and equity, and assessment. It has meant that student projects may have been wide ranging, but are still aligned with my own interests in some ways.

Outreach for me is an important aspect of my work – I really believe in breaking down perceived barriers between university academics and practitioners of ECE. It involves providing a lot of professional learning workshops, lectures at conferences, and policy advice or guidance to organisations and government. It also means being involved in ECE activism by promoting and advocating for ECE and qualified teachers in the field.

**GN:** With respect to your research, could you share what you have been investigating? What themes and authors have been particularly significant in your academic work?

**AG:** I have characterised my research interests in four themes: early childhood education policy and practice, teacher education, equity and inclusion, and assessment. Within early childhood, I am very interested in how certain practices become normalised and imposed on children, families, and teachers and how this makes us manage people in certain ways. For this reason I have studied issues of inclusion, equity, and social justice. As mentioned earlier, my doctoral research centred on documenting and displacing heteronormativity as a dominant discourse in ECE teaching. I researched how heteronormativity was shaping teachers' practices

E-ISSN 2316-3100
MOMENTO Diálogos em Educação
Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação

and what this meant for gender and sexuality inclusive teaching and inclusion. The project was challenging because many adults do not believe we should be teaching in gender expansive and anti-heteronormative ways, and that gender and sexuality diversities have no place in the ECE curriculum However, when viewed from the perspective of the child whose gender identities are emerging, changeable, and diverse, or the family where lesbians or gay men are raising children, or even the experiences of queer or gender diverse teachers in the field, it's difficult to ignore the impacts of exclusion, silencing, and discrimination on them once you recognise they exist. These studies have been informed by critical and post-structural theorising, and Michel Foucault was a key thinker who influenced my work.

Another theme I've pursued in my research is assessment, and the powerful way that narrative assessment can shape teachers' work, and inform children and families about children's capabilities and learning power. Margaret Carr has been a leading scholar of influence for me in this work and she and I both care a great deal for the work of Jerome Bruner and his theorising about the power of narrative.

**GN:** Concerning Early Childhood Education in New Zealand, could you describe how the system is structured? How are children cared for? For instance, are there regulations regarding the number of children per age teacher? Is the provision public, private, or both?

**AG:** It may be surprising to recognise that in New Zealand there is no public provision of ECE. It is provided either by not-for-profit, charitable, or for-profit and corporate organisations. Historically (through the mid-twentieth century) the majority of provision of ECE was through kindergartens - Frobelian in philosophy, half-day provision, and catering for mostly 3-4year olds. Community organised playgroups for 2-3yr olds were also emerging and provided an option for children who could not yet attend kindergarten. Some provision of longer-day childcare was available but on a very small scale and with some reluctance because such services were for working parents, often single parent mothers, who required out-of-home-care which was considered wrong.

E-ISSN 2316-3100
MOMENTO Diálogos em Educação
Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação

In the 1960s, the uniquely New Zealand form of ECE known as Playcentre developed and emerged as a parent-cooperative model of ECE involving parent education and community building as children (birth to school age) played and communed. Later, into the 1970s, more childcare services began to emerge and provided longer day education and care for children, which was becoming more common and accepted. Also in the 1970s, Kōhanga Reo, indigenous ECE services emerged. Kōhanga Reo can be translated to 'language nest', and within this kind of provision, te reo Māori (the Māori language) and tikanga (culture) are central. The movement was focused on arresting the loss of te reo Māori because by that time, there were so few indigenous speakers remaining. Through an intergenerational model of provision, fluent speakers, often kaumatua (elders) taught alongside kaiako (teachers) and parents in local community settings, with te reo Māori as the medium of instruction and tikanga (culture and customs) guiding practice. As there are local variations in language and tikanga amongst Iwi Māori (tribal kinship groups) across the country, the Kōhanga approach supported both the general aim of reversing linguistic and cultural loss, but also provided for the flourishing of local dialect and custom because family involvement localised the curriculum around the country. Some Pacific language early childhood services also emerged through the 1980s, and through the early 2000s, Māori Medium ECE services that are not Kōhanga Reo have also emerged.

In the 1990s, corporate for profit entities entered the early childhood landscape, and the policy settings for these types of services were slightly different (some would argue, advantageous). Since the early 2000s, the kind of provision of ECE available in this country has changed dramatically as the influence of the for-profit-sector has grown and come to dominate. In addition to these forms of provision I note here, there are also hospital-based, home-based, and more informal playgroup type ECE services that operate.

A central Ministry of Education develops policy, regulations, and professional learning resources for teachers and others working in ECE. There is no mandate for fully qualified teachers in the field, although this has been a goal of the sector since the 1980s. Regulations address minimum standards for an operating license (e.g., group size, teacher:child ratios, space

E-ISSN 2316-3100
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Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação

requirements, health standards, curriculum etc.) and a set of quality standards is monitored by an organisation called the Education Review Office.

Parents and the Government share the cost of ECE in New Zealand. A government subsidy for child attendance up to 6 hours a day is provided, including for children aged 3-4 years, who receive a 20-hour ECE entitlement. The subsidy rate is different for children aged up to two years as compared with children aged two years and over, and the type of ECE setting also matters for the level of government funding received. In practice, it means, for instance, that for children who attend kindergarten, families pay a nominal donation towards the cost, whereas in childcare the cost to families can be very high.

**GN:** Is the training of professionals who work with children aged 0 to 5 conducted at the university level? How long does the training program last, and how is it organized?

**AG:** There has been teacher qualification equivalence for ECE and primary education in New Zealand since the late 1980s. Currently, most qualified teachers coming into the sector will have a three year undergraduate degree or a one-year graduate level diploma (in advance of an undergraduate degree already held). There is a large 'field-based' teacher education sector as well, which provides for students who must work while studying at the same time. For university-based teacher education programmes, mostly these comprise a mix of coursework and practicum experiences across three-or one- year programmes. Students will study courses in education theory, teaching practice, curriculum, and sociology or psychology of education.

**GN:** When it comes to the daily practices in Early Childhood Education settings, what principles underpin these practices, particularly in terms of conceptions of children and educators?

**AG:** New Zealand's curriculum framework, *Te Whāriki,* is the policy that has shaped daily practices of teachers for 30 years. It is underpinned by an aspiration that recognises children as: "competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society".

E-ISSN 2316-3100
MOMENTO Diálogos em Educação
Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação

The underlying principle of empowerment | whakamana is central to the framework. This along with three other principles (holistic development | Kotahitanga, family and community | whānau tangata, and relationships | ngā hononga) and five strands of mana | power, prestige, influence provides a framework of a woven mat | whāriki upon which local communities and ECE settings can weave a meaningful and relevant curriculum. The domains of mana we are concerned with are wellbeing | mana atua, belonging | mana whenua, exploration | mana aotūroa, communication | mana reo, contribution | mana tangata.

*Te Whāriki* is an indigenous framework for ECE and concern for children's rights, sociocultural perspectives, kaupapa Māori, and more is woven throughout.

The high-order learning outcomes of the curriculum framework are mana | power, prestige, influence, learning dispositions, and working theories. The teacher is working on upholding and growing the child's mana, supporting them as they learn to learn, and recognising and responding to the child's working theories.

As mentioned earlier, indigenous and sociocultural perspectives of learning and teaching are central to the framework, and so teachers are encouraged to work in a free-play, child and teacher co-constructed manner. Narrative assessment in the form or learning stories is a dominant form of assessment (developed in relation to *Te Whāriki*) and through formative assessment practices, children build a sense of themselves as learners, communicators, and contributors to the social and community sphere.

**GN:** What are the main policy documents that guide Early Childhood Education in New Zealand, and what general directions do they offer?

**AG:** As mentioned earlier, *Te Whāriki* is the curriculum framework that guides teaching, learning, and curriculum in ECE – no matter what type of ECE setting a child attends. An older but still relevant resource named *Kei Tua O Te Pae Assessment for Learning ECE Exemplars* explores the theoretical bases for formative, sociocultural, bicultural, and inclusive assessment practice in the context of *Te Whāriki*. A parallel resource for Māori Medium ECE settings, *Te Whatu Pōkeka* explores and explains assessment theory and practice in that context. The

E-ISSN 2316-3100
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Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação

Education Review Office's *Ngā Ara Whai Hua: Quality framework for evaluation and improvement* outlines how ECE services are audited and monitored. Its publication, *Te Ara Poutama: Indicators of quality for early childhood education - what matters most* provides insight into what and how quality ECE is constituted in New Zealand and monitored.

**GN:** Finally, could you recommend any readings or websites for those interested in learning more about Early Childhood Education in New Zealand?

**AG:** The Ministry of Education has a section of its website dedicated to *Te Whāriki* the curriculum framework: https://tewhariki.tahurangi.education.govt.nz/

Within that site, the early learning assessment exemplars can be found here: https://tewhariki.tahurangi.education.govt.nz/kei-tua-o-te-pae-assessment-for-learning-ece-exemplars/5637225576.p

*Te Whatu Pōkeka* can be found here: https://tewhariki.tahurangi.education.govt.nz/te-whatu-p-keka---kaupapa-m-ori-assessment-exemplars/5637225577.p

Here is a link to EROs information about reviewing and evaluating quality in ECE:

https://www.ero.govt.nz/how-ero-reviews/how-ero-reviews-early-childhood-services

Information about the NZ education system, reports, statistics etc, including for ECE can be found on the Government website Education Counts: https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/home

A number of comprehensive Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood histories have been written, most notably by Emeritus Professor Helen May. Recently Helen penned a pair of articles about centre-based early childhood history and these can be read online here: https://gazette.education.govt.nz/articles/the-many-threads-of-early-learning-in-aotearoa/

https://gazette.education.govt.nz/articles/a-mat-for-all-to-stand/

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