Music, magic, mana reo: Waiata in early childhood centres

Educators across the motu are building brains through music. It's mana and vibe underlined work, but that mahi is helping tamariki thrive right across the curriculum. ARO spoke to kaiako who love using music to build communication, wellbeing and a sense of belonging. ARO

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Save

There is nothing quite like being sung to. It is probably the only thing more special than being part of the group doing the singing.

That is why four thoughts when I arrive at Collectively Kids, an early childhood centre (ECE) in Auckland's Point Chevalier – all the tamariki are beautifully absorbed in this unifying moment, gathered at the outstanding, singing my greeting.

They sing the lovely waiata "Tiaki Kaiaio E Hoa Ma", they sing their centre's psalm, and they sing a waiata created by tamariki and a kaiako, Manaaki Whenua. Then, like a dandelion blown, the tamariki disperse.

There is so much incredible growth and learning happening in those few minutes of waiata. It's also the kind of work our kaiako do that can easily go unseen and underrecognised.

The last song the tamariki sang before racing off to play was written by Sesa and a group of the 4-year-olds. It's all about Collectively Kids' core philosophy – caring for the kiwiness.

Writing their own waiata, and including the tamariki in the process, is all about whakamana tangitanganga, a principle of Te Whāriki. "It is empowering them. It's then taking ownership of their learning. It's them having that sense of belonging," says Sesa. "It is something that's theirs, that they're able to share with the community."

Writing waiata is also a beautiful way to build mana reo (communication), a Te Whāriki strand, and what a creation the tamariki can feel proud of.

Hiamoshi Wikuna
Hiamoshi whenua is something that we do
Papatūānuku needs help from me and you
There is no planet B, this is our only chance
Here ceteka to our planet and make sure that it lives!

Kaiako Rosa Stowers helped tamariki at Collectively Kids to write their own waiata.

"There is the space of our tamariki, and so it's important that they're the ones at the forefront of welcoming others," explains NZEI member and ECE kaiako Tessa Stowers. Tessa talks about honouring "Te Tiriti and our commitment to being a bicultural centre".

And it's a practice they can take into other spaces, like when they visit Wiraa Kaimoana Marae across the road. They've fostered a relationship with the marae, and they say they get warm smiles when it's mentioned in their psalm.

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Early Intervention Kaiako at Hart City Kindergarten Kate Hanna uses the bundles of mana in regulating behaviour too. She visits their various kindergartens, sharing advice for supporting neurodiverse tamariki. She's a wealth of information on using music to support regulation, language and executive function.

"Quite often, one of my first pieces of advice for teachers is to sing the instructions," says Kate. "Children who maybe have a delay, or they're still learning the patterns of kindergarten, if they hear a song instruction as an instruction that's delivered routinely at that part of the day, you know. It's tidy up time. It's tidy up time. If they hear that playing, they know, 'Oh, this is the time of day that we put the blocks back on the shelf and we wipe the paint up.'"

> Implements develop music-like foundations of language before they develop the phonetic sounds."

Kate also loves using waiata that name individual tamariki, like Willoughby Wolfahy Woo. "If we're sitting in a circle, looking at each other and learning what people are called, that's a huge step in belonging."

And that can call the tamariki in forming friendships with each other. "If you know somebody's name, you're a step towards having a dialog with them, and you feel their attention, and that's the start of having a relationship."

Music is incorporated into centres beautifully across many ECE centres these days – kaiako kin, some centres do a welcoming waiata, or a start-time reset. This all helps foster a sense of mana ōtea – belonging – for tamariki.

Hot Lime at Collectively Kids

Music to calm

We all one stress to help moderate our emotions. We can use one it mindfully with tamariki too, to create and regulate group dynamics. Music is one tool in the kete at Collectively Kids.

During mat time, the tamariki were all playing musical statues, then had big jiggles under the parachute.

Almost all the tamariki were taking part together as a group, focused and enjoying themselves. So it's good fun. But through an early intervention lens, there can be huge benefit neurologically and behaviorously to that game of musical statues.

Songs that stop and start, like Skipping Bunnies, help tamariki practice their ability to control impulses, Kate explains.

"It's really helping to wire their brain in a way that's going to help them and give them capabilities for life. Because if you're able to control yourself and wait to do something that's a great skill."

Kate is also seeing music used to create an opportunity to rest and reset. At Manaaptik Kindergarten they have a 'calm down area', a cobby space with soft fabric and a recording of wind playing softly.

"It's such an inviting quiet space for children who maybe need to deregulate or they're feeling a bit shy, and they just want to sit there and watch how things are going on so they can attune themselves to the environment when they need to by taking themselves away," explains Kate. Sometimes it's inviting in kaiako who need the same thing too!

Kate's also seen Nathi Kiley Kindergarten in Wellington invite tamariki to lie down after lunch. They turn off the lights and play calming music. The tamariki put their hands on their belly and a kaiako talks them through mindful breathing.

"It's just a little opportunity to relax, gather themselves, gather the energy up again, check in with their body, see how they're feeling."

Hot Lime at Collectively Kids

"But I can't sing!"

For many of us, there is nothing more nerve-wracking than singing in front of other people.

A kaiako told me she stopped singing when she was a teenager when someone made fun of her voice, and that it's been a real journey feeling OK with singing in front of anyone ever since. How many of us share that resonate with?

> "It's not a banging competition. If you have a sense of belonging in your centre and with your team, then you feel at your most confident."

But if there's anyone who doesn't care whether you can hold a tune, it's preschoolers.

It's like everything kaiako do, it's for the tamariki. "They're just here for a good time … as long as you're just a part of it they could not care less. They just want to have fun."

What happens when I bang this against that? Are yet to be one of the earliest questions an infant's brain asks. And while it may seem like a random impulse, it's their way of learning about the world around them, its objects, cause and effect and the strength of their own bodies.

As they age into toddlers and young children, Kate says kaiako can guide tamariki to create more together. Have them tap out a rhythm and repeat it back to them, ask them to make soft beats together and guide them to gradually get louder and louder, then to suddenly stop. Or put the instruments out – put no sense music and give them free reign.

Linking between home, ECEs and school

Music can be a tool we use to create links between home, school and ECEs. It can help tamariki with transitions – if they are settling into a lonely and they recognise and can join in with a waiata, the unknown can feel a bit less intimidating.

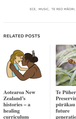
Storypath can be used to share waiata with whānau so they can sing along at home. When a new tamariki enrols, waiata the centre uses can be sent home along with information on settling in.

But the most beautiful moments can be when music from home finds its way into the ECE setting. Kate recalls a visit to Tuia Kindergarten. The kaiako had songs playing outside for tamariki to dance to. "Then this song came on that was obviously Pasifika. One girl started a beautiful dance in the middle of the playground. And it was obvious she'd learnt it – it was a real dance."

Tamariki stopped to watch her, and when the song ended, the child asked for it to be played again. She explained her aunty taught her the dance.

It's about "just having what music is available for children to show their skills, increase their skills and contribute to the community," Kate says. And what a special, enriching moment that simply having music playing enabled – a gift from the tamariki to the centre.

There is so much beautiful brain development happening when we make our ECE centres rich with music. But academic benefits aside, music brings us something both simpler and more essential. It's an intrinsic part of who we are. It soothes us, sparks joy, marks special occasions, celebrates cultures and identities.



Kaiako Cora Lee singing with tamariki from Collectively Kids

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Collectively Kids kaiako from left: Veronique McIntosh, Cora Lee, Tessa Stowers and Fakev Vuetha

Discussion points for ECE kaiako

- How do you use music to provide opportunities for your tamariki to regulate their emotions?
- In what ways are you using music to foster a sense of belonging for your tamariki?
- Reflect on the value music brings to tamariki. What do they enjoy the most?
- How can you honour Te Tiriti through the music you provide?

ECE, MUSIC, TE REO ENGLISH, TE WHĀNAU

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