

Taking Te Whariki to India ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Thanks to an NZTC India-initiative, New Zealand's ground-breaking early childhood curriculum is being presented to and embraced by early childhood teachers across India.

Te Whariki ('The Mat') was written by the New Zealand Ministry of Education as a framework for teachers to ensure children are provided with experiences that promote their optimal development. It is made up of four interweaving principles and five strands which emphasise the importance of holistic care, and the relationships between young children, teachers, families and communities. NZTC first introduced Te Whariki in India in 2009 after the establishment of NZTC India's office in Bandra, Mumbai.

The orientation workshop for the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood Education) program offered by NZTC India featured a general overview of the curriculum and its underpinning theories.

NZTC India's academic team, then comprising of Pearl D'Silva, Shama Kittur, Alaka Bhansali and Akshada Chitre, began travelling around the local early childhood centres in Mumbai to make them aware of the qualifications being offered. Many of the centre managers were intrigued by the idea of Te Whariki and asked if they would consider leading professional development workshops on the topic for their teachers.

This idea was embraced by the team and by 2010 NZTC India had contacted all the centres under the management of NZTC's educational partners to extend the offer of free Te Whariki workshops.

"The early childhood sector in India is rather new and is constantly evolving," explains Pearl, who now lectures at NZTC's Auckland, New Zealand Campus. "As there are no regulations per se regarding curriculum, early childhood centres are left to develop their own drawing on curriculum approaches from other countries."

The team developed PowerPoint presentations tailored to three specific groups; NZTC India students, early childhood teachers in centres and ECE training institutions and included songs and interactive segments to engage the attendees.

In the presentations the team were keen to reiterate that most of the principles in Te Whariki are already commonplace in the Indian culture. "The goals and learning outcomes within the strands of well-being, belonging, communication, exploration and contribution, are not alien to the traditional philosophies of education and thinking in India."

Some were initially sceptical about a 'foreign' curriculum and questioned its relevance to the early childhood sector in India, but by the end of the workshop the attendees were animated in discussions of how they could adapt their own practice with their newfound knowledge. Madhavi Shilpi, an NZTC India student who attended a Te Whariki workshop at the beginning of this year, was one such student: "At first, I wondered why I needed to bother with a foreign curriculum that would have nothing to do with my future in this field. I was wrong. I cannot begin to tell you how touched I am that someone somewhere cares about all the little children in the world enough to pen such a beautiful thought...enough to use it to develop a working model of care and education for them. It has forever changed the desolation I have felt for education." Pearl began searching the internet for centres across India who had already adapted elements of Te Whariki into their curriculum.

"It was a pleasant surprise to see that there were centres out there who had included it as part of their curriculum." She then contacted these centres to see if they would be interested in further extending their Te Whariki knowledge through professional development workshops. The team tried to make the curriculum as relevant to the educators as possible with examples from the field in India.

"The great thing about Te Whariki is that it's so broad and adaptable," Pearl explains, "it's about the child and about following their interests, not about acquiring specific skills, so there's a lot of freedom for a centre to pick and choose various ideas." Pearl says the initiative has helped teachers to become aware of why they are doing the things they are doing and knowing how to support the best interests of children.

"For me, adapting Te Whariki to the Indian context reiterates the universal goal that we want for our young children; to quote Te Whariki, '...to grow up 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'."

-reprinted from the Indian Weekender

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