



# Engaging With Nature In Aotearoa

## An exploration of Froebelian principles in the outdoor environment in Aotearoa New Zealand



### Aim

*Manaaki whenua, manaaki tangata, haere whakamua - Care for the land, care for the people, and go forward*

This Māori whakatauki (proverb) could have been written by Froebel himself as he believed the land/garden was a place where young children could play and explore and have opportunities for learning to care for living things. Froebel's principles and philosophy "...have lasting value and have become a navigational tool, leading reflective practitioners in different parts of the world into a new era." (Bruce, 2012, p.2)

The Māori world has a core value of Kaitiakitanga - a responsibility of being a guardian for the world around us. From a Māori perspective, kaitiakitanga is important in acknowledging our reliance on, and respect for nature, as well as maintaining a thriving environment.

The concept of kaitiakitanga goes hand in hand with the work of Friedrich Froebel. As a Froebelian setting, we are committed to ensuring that children have direct, enriching experiences and access to nature. Learning In nature rather than learning about nature. Froebel emphasises the role of the garden in providing children with opportunities to play and explore independently, along with growing an understanding and appreciation of the connections between all living things (Tovey, 2017).

### Rationale

"Outdoor play is about *potential* - the potential of spaces to engage children's imagination, curiosity and creativity and foster their health and well-being. As Froebel argued, the quality of the environment and the interactions within it are crucial". (Tovey, 2017)

It was important to create a garden that the children could plant what they wanted and then take care of and have real, first hand experiences of the cycle involved in growing.

Regular excursions into the wider community, to have opportunities to visit community gardens, go on nature walks and have a place to explore and climb trees was a priority.

### Implementation

Planter boxes made from recycled timber were used for our garden and the children were involved in filling them with soil and planting sunflower seeds and a swan plant. As the planter boxes were around the back of the kindergarten without free access for children, planting and then checking, watering and caring for the gardens became mini excursions that the children excitedly looked forward to each day.

Children go on weekly excursions to the secondary school next door where there are fallen logs and tree stumps and are able to observe, climb, balance and take risks in this space.



### Evaluation/Sustainability

Children have been actively involved in growing plants and have observed the beginnings of a seasonal cycle with harvest time approaching. They have also witnessed the life cycle of the monarch butterfly.

Excursions will become more than weekly, eventually building up to daily excursions to areas close by - a bush area at the perimeter of the high school has a lot of native plants, short tracks and trees to climb so this will be a new place to explore nature and offer new challenges for the children.

Sustainability is key to engaging with nature. We are all kaitiaki of the land - acknowledging our reliance on and respect for nature, as well as maintaining a thriving environment. This ensures that future generations continue to benefit from nature's gifts.

Children experience nature in different contexts and have opportunities for open-ended exploration, problem solving, risk taking, being risk aware and making connections. Fostering their own sense of kaitiakitanga for children is important.

### References

- Bruce, T. (2012). *Early Childhood Practice Froebel Today. Chapters 1 and 4.* London: Sage.
- Lilley, I. M. (1967). *Friedrich froebel: A Selection from his writings,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McNair, L. (2012). 'Offering Children First-Hand Experiences Through Forest Schools: Relating to and Learning About Nature' in T. Bruce. *Early Childhood Practice Froebel Today.* London: Sage. Chapter 5, pp.57-68.
- McNair, L.J. (2019). 'Case Study at Cowgate Under 5s Centre' in T. Bruce, P. Elfer, S. Powell, L. Werth *The Routledge International Handbook of Froebel and early Childhood Practice.* Abingdon: Routledge.
- Tovey, H. (2008). *Playing Outdoors: Spaces and Place, Risk and Challenge.* London: Open University Press.
- Tovey, H. (2016). *Bringing the Froebel Approach to your Early Years Practice.* Abingdon: Routledge.
- Tovey, H. (2017). *Outdoor play and exploration [Pamphlet].* Froebel Trust.

