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Research Article

Aligning early childhood education practice with regulatory compliance in Aotearoa New Zealand: A case study of an independent primary school

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood education (ECE) shapes children's socio-emotional development and later academic attainment, yet the practices that constitute quality provision vary across national systems. Aotearoa New Zealand's arrangements are distinctive: schooling is compulsory from age six, children may enrol from their fifth birthday, and schools may operate a transitional Year 0 with continuous or cohort intakes. This configuration produces classes with substantial variation in age and prior schooling. This case study examined how one independent primary school in a large New Zealand city aligns its early learning provision with internationally recognised practice while meeting New Zealand's compliance requirements. Qualitative data was generated through 200 hours of non-participant observation across 11 weeks in transition, Year 1 and Year 2 classrooms, together with documentary analysis of regulatory instruments, curriculum frameworks, review reports and international ECE literature. Data was interpreted thematically and through a documentary comparison with two comparable independent schools. Findings indicate that the school meets and, in several respects, exceeds both the early childhood licensing and private school registration requirements, particularly in staffing levels, individualised assessment and family communication. Three areas for development were identified: class composition in Year 1, the absence of a structured second-language programme, and the lack of a formal internal evaluation process. Recommendations are directed at the school and wider stakeholders, including policymakers.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education; Te Whariki; School Transition; Cohort Entry; Class Composition; Aotearoa New Zealand

INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH FOCUS

The first years of formal education establish the dispositions and foundational competencies on which later schooling depends, and international interest in the quality of early childhood education (ECE) has intensified accordingly (OECD, 2025). What counts as quality provision, however, is not uniform. Curriculum priorities, entry ages, and pedagogical traditions vary considerably across jurisdictions, complicating the straightforward transfer of practice from one system to another (Gunnestad et al., 2022).

Aotearoa New Zealand presents a particularly distinctive case. Schooling is compulsory from age six, but children may enrol from their fifth birthday, and many schools offer a transitional Year 0 that bridges early childhood services and formal schooling (Ministry of Education, 2025a) Since 2017, schools have also been permitted to operate on a cohort-entry basis, admitting new entrants in termly groups rather than individually (Office, 2022). The practical consequence is that a Year 1 classroom may contain children who have completed three terms of Year 0 alongside

children who have just turned five and have no prior school experience.

This study examined the dynamics within a single institution, referred to throughout as ”the School” (see Ethical considerations). The School is a long-established independent primary school in a large New Zealand urban centre, with over 200 students from its Early Childhood Education Centre (hereafter ”the Centre”) through to Year 8 and employing over 50 staff. Its early years provision spans the Centre and a Prep School covering Years 0 to 2. These two settings sit under distinct regulatory regimes. The Centre is a licensed early childhood service governed by the Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations 2008, while the Prep School forms part of the private school registered under section 214 and Schedule 7 of the Education and Training Act 2020. The distinction is maintained throughout what follows because the two regimes impose different obligations on settings that sit side by side within a single institution. This research is based on the internship project undertaken by one of the learners on AIC campus. Considering the applicable ethics considerations, the name of the institutions including the comparators have been anonymised as the names of the institutions does not have any relevance to the research focus. The anonymised references are also featured in the reference list. The research addressed the following question:

How can the School's Early Childhood Education Centre and Prep School adapt internationally recognised best practice in early childhood education while remaining within New Zealand's external compliance requirements?

Three aims followed from this question:

1. To identify internationally recognised best practice in early learning education and the compliance requirements applying in New Zealand.
2. To collect and analyse data on those practices to identify gaps in the School's provision.
3. To recommend improvement strategies and an associated implementation approach.

BACKGROUND AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMING

School Entry and System Design

School starting age varies internationally, with most jurisdictions beginning formal schooling at age six, some at age seven, and others at age five (Bertram & Pascal, 2016). New Zealand's continuous-entry model, under which a child may begin school at any point after turning five, is unusual among developed systems (Menclova & Ali, 2019). Menclova and Ali (2019) found that earlier entry is associated with improved later academic outcomes and university entrance, thereby supporting the Year 0 arrangement. Their analysis does not, however, resolve the question of relative age within a cohort: children entering Year 0 are typically several months older than those entering Year 1 directly at age five, and at this developmental stage, such gaps have material consequences for social and emotional readiness.

Curriculum orientation also differs by system. New Zealand's curriculum foregrounds biculturalism and diversity, England's emphasises school readiness, and Italy's centres children's rights (Gunnestad et al., 2022). Reflecting Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Maori culture, identity and te reo Maori must be embedded in both the learning environment and pedagogical practice.

Stakeholders and the Learning Environment

A child's progress is shaped by a network of relationships rather than by classroom instruction alone. McNaughton (2020) demonstrates that literacy outcomes depend on the interaction between school and home practices, with family engagement and socio-economic circumstances both exerting influence. Peters (2010) similarly identifies family involvement as central to a successful transition to school, while noting the additional contributions of relationships with teachers and peers, as well as individual characteristics and background. Westerbeke (2016) adds that learning is facilitated where relationships among stakeholders are strong. These findings informed the decision to observe relationships among teachers and parents, teachers and children, and children within their classes, as well as communication among staff.

Shared Values and Organisational Learning

Quality provision also depends on the organisational conditions in which teachers work. Melasalmi (2018) argues that professional knowledge, professional identity and collaboration must be shared across a setting if learning purposes are to be realised. Senge (1990) account of the learning organisation is consistent with this position, proposing five disciplines - personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning and systems thinking - through which an organisation develops its collective capability. Deakins (2007) applies this framework directly to early childhood settings, arguing that meaningful dialogue, mutual respect and a shared vision reduce misunderstanding, support continual innovation in practice, and strengthen staff confidence and retention. Where change is proposed, the McKinsey 7S framework offers a means of ensuring that structure, strategy, staff, shared values, skills, systems and style are addressed in concert rather than in isolation (Channon & Caldart, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

Design

The research question concerns meaning, context and professional judgement rather than measurable frequencies, and a qualitative design was therefore adopted. Qualitative inquiry is suited to complex settings in which human context and nuance are central, and to the interpretive development of understanding rather than the testing of predetermined hypotheses (Lim, 2025; Greener, 2008). A single-case design was selected to examine practice in depth within its regulatory and institutional context.

Data Generation

Two methods were used for data collection. Non-participant observation, a primary method in which data are generated directly by the researcher (Saunders et al., 2012), was conducted over 200 hours across 11 weeks. Observations were recorded as dated field notes covering four domains identified from the literature: variation in age and skill, socio-emotional needs, infrastructure and management, and stakeholder relationships. The first eight weeks were spent in transition classes and the remaining three in Years 1 and 2.

Documentary research provided the secondary dataset (Greener, 2008). Regulatory instruments, curriculum frameworks, and review reports were retrieved from the Ministry of Education, the Education Review Office, and the OECD, and peer-reviewed literature was identified through academic databases. All material used was publicly available. Sources were catalogued with a summary of their content and an assessment of relevance to the case.

Analysis

Field notes and documentary summaries were analysed thematically following the approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006) . Data was coded inductively, codes were clustered, and three themes were developed corresponding to the research aims: regulatory requirements applying in New Zealand; internationally recognised practice; and gaps in the School's provision. A documentary comparison was then conducted with two comparable independent schools using the constant comparative logic of Glaser and Strauss (1967) , examining curriculum, stated values, and facilities to identify practices in use locally but absent from the case.

Limitations

The project was constrained by time, considering a fixed number of internship hours. Thirty-six days were available for observation and five weeks for documentary collection and analysis, which precluded the use of interviews and questionnaires that would have provided access to participants' own accounts of their practice. No observations were undertaken in the Centre, so conclusions concerning that setting rest solely on documentary evidence. Observation was necessarily partial, and events occurring outside the researcher's presence were not captured. Documentary research carries its own limitations: the volume of available material can obscure relevance, some sources were inaccessible, and interpretation is susceptible to researcher bias. Internal records concerning children's backgrounds and family circumstances were excluded on ethical grounds. Finally, as a single-case study, the findings are analytically rather than statistically generalisable; they highlight mechanisms that may operate in comparable settings rather than establishing prevalence.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the researcher's institution. Observations were recorded factually and anonymously, no photographs or recordings were made, and the institution, its staff and its students are not identified. Communication took place through a password-protected internal email account provided by the School. Anonymity extends to the two comparator institutions, designated Comparator A and Comparator B. Documentary sources that would identify any of the three schools, including institutional websites and external review reports, are therefore cited in anonymised form, and identifying details of the setting have been generalised.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Observation established that variation between children was the defining feature of these classrooms. Academic skill, language proficiency and socio-emotional regulation differed markedly within every group observed. Within a single Year 0 literacy session, teachers distributed differentiated worksheets; handwriting ranged from correctly formed letters within the lines to an inability to write one's own name; one child with limited English communicated distress through crying rather than speech; and completion times for identical tasks varied substantially. In Year 1, the variation was compounded by age, with some children still five and others approaching six.

Documentary analysis established the regulatory frame and the international evidence base against which these observations could be read. The two datasets were then interconnected, producing the three themes summarised in Table 1 and discussed below.

Table 1: Themes developed from observational and documentary data

Theme	Basis in the data	Interpretation
Regulatory requirements: the Centre (early childhood licensing).	Licensing, adult-to-child ratios, qualification, ·and premises standards under the Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations 2008; Te Whāriki as the curriculum for licensed early childhood services (Ministry of Education, 2017).	Licence held and standards met; observed staffing exceeds the prescribed minima. Internal evaluation was identified as underdeveloped (Office, 2022).
Regulatory requirements: the Prep School (private school registration)	Registration under section 214 and Schedule 7 of the Education and Training Act 2020, requiring suitable premises, staffing, equipment and curriculum, tuition standards no lower than those of a state school, and fit and proper managers; Phase 1 of the national curriculum; obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Ministry of Education, 2025b).	Criteria met for premises, staffing, curriculum and tuition standards (Office, 2026). No numerical staffing ratio is prescribed; observed staffing is suitable to the age range, level and size of the cohort.
Internationally recognised practice	Play-based and differentiated pedagogy; enabling physical environments; wellbeing as precondition; ECE–school continuity; family partnership; teacher qualification and retention (Alton-Lee, 2003; Erer et al., 2025; OECD, 2021, 2025).	Observed in use: differentiated literacy tasks, one-to-one withdrawal, game-framed assessment, interest-led adaptation, kindergarten visits, and multi-channel communication with families.
Gaps in the School's provision	Class composition as a school-level achievement mechanism (Erer et al., 2025); early bilingual programmes (Melvin et al., 2020; Robinson, 2024); formal self-review instruments (OECD, 2021; Office, 2023b).	Year 1 combines a wide age range, divergent prior schooling, no structured second-language course, and no documented internal evaluation system within the Centre.

Regulatory Requirements in New Zealand

The Centre must hold an early childhood service licence and meet the standards set by the Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations 2008 and the associated licensing criteria, while the Prep School must satisfy the Schedule 7 registration criteria summarised inTable 1. Two curricula therefore operate across the School's early years provision, but they apply to different settings rather than to the same setting concurrently. Te Whariki, organised around wellbeing, belonging, contribution, communication and exploration, is the national curriculum for licensed early childhood services and governs the Centre (Ministry of Education, 2017). The Prep School follows Phase 1 of the national curriculum, covering Years 0 to 3 (Ministry of Education, 2025b); at the time of writing, the updated curriculum for Years 0 to 10 has been fully released, with English and mathematics already required and the full framework required from 2027. That the Prep School also retains Te Whariki's dispositional emphasis in Year 0 and Year 1 is a pedagogical choice supporting continuity across the transition, not a regulatory obligation - precisely the kind of locally determined decision that falls outside the compliance frame.

Analysis indicates that the School satisfies both regimes and exceeds several of their requirements. Staffing in the Prep School was observed to be approximately 1 teacher and 1 teacher aide per 15 to 18 children. Schedule 7 prescribes no numerical ratio, requiring only that staffing be suitable to the age range, level and size of the cohort; the observed level comfortably satisfies that criterion and would also exceed the 1:10 minimum imposed by the 2008 Regulations on the Centre for children over two. Specialist facilities for sport, music and the arts are extensive. This

matters beyond the case: because New Zealand's curricula are flexible, nationally unified and oriented towards play and individual development, they align closely with the international evidence rather than constraining it (OECD, 2021). Compliance and quality are, in this system, largely complementary - a point that qualifies the assumption that regulatory obligation operates as a brake on pedagogical innovation. The exception concerns the Centre, where an external review identified the need for stronger internal evaluation and clearer analysis of the local curriculum (Office, 2023b).

Internationally Recognised Practice

The documentary analysis identified a consistent set of practices associated with quality provision. Play-based, child-centred pedagogy is embedded in the curricula of Australia, Ireland, Japan, Switzerland and Canada, each of which affords teachers discretion to adapt practice to children's needs (OECD, 2021), and the Scandinavian systems place comparable emphasis on wellbeing and development (Robinson, 2024). A nationally coherent curriculum that specifies values and pedagogical orientation while leaving instructional decisions to teachers thus emerges as a design principle rather than a national idiosyncrasy. Differentiation by readiness, interest, and learning profile - through content, process, product, and environment - is considered a core practice in New South Wales (Government, 2025).

The physical environment matters independently. Dedicated activity spaces and materials that promote interaction between children support development (OECD, 2021), and outdoor learning contributes to environmental understanding (OECD, 2025). Health, safety and wellbeing operate as preconditions rather than adjuncts: children must feel safe and included, school climate must be positive, and physical activity and nutrition are themselves curriculum content in Australia (OECD, 2025). Continuity between ECE services and schools supports transition by transferring professional knowledge about individual children (Office, 2015), an approach that Ireland is formalising in national policy (OECD, 2025). Family partnership is likewise consequential, with communication between teachers and parents enabling closer alignment between home and school practice (McNaughton, 2020; OECD, 2025). Finally, teacher quality is decisive: qualification, continuing professional development, favourable ratios and low turnover are each associated with stronger provision (Alton-Lee, 2003; Deakins, 2007; Farquhar, 2003; OECD, 2021).

Observation indicates that the School already enacts most of these practices. Small classes with additional adult support create genuine capacity for individualised activity, assessment and intervention, and this capacity was used rather than merely available: one-to-one mathematics withdrawal, alphabet cards issued to the ten children per class identified as needing handwriting support, and assessment conducted as a game to reduce anxiety were all observed. Teachers adapted to individual interests and attainment; in one instance, a teacher permitted a child with additional social needs to choose his own art subject, after which his engagement with the class changed markedly. Institutional values, rules and uniform supported a strong sense of belonging; weekly meetings maintained internal communication; and teachers communicated with families through email, telephone, newsletters, scheduled appointments and daily informal contact. Transition was actively managed through kindergarten visits, pre-entry sessions for children joining from outside the School, and liaison with previous ECE providers.

Comparative Analysis and Identified Gaps

Two comparable independent schools, designated Comparator A and Comparator B, were examined. Both offer single-sex education from early learning to Year 8 within the same metropolitan area as the School. Analysis was confined to their junior school provision (Years 0-2), as the phase most comparable to the Prep School. All three schools provide similar facilities, specialist-taught extracurricular programmes, small classes, individual support and

an explicit values framework (A. Comparator, 2026; B. Comparator, 2026), and both comparators fully meet ministerial requirements (Office, 2023a, 2025). Both comparators, however, place greater emphasis on community service than the School appears to, and both use digital technology and early structured academic work more extensively, where the School retains a more traditional play-based approach (A. Comparator, 2026; B. Comparator, 2026). Distinct pedagogical frameworks are also in use across the two comparators, including a Singapore-style mathematics methodology, documented chiefly at secondary level (Kaur et al., 2018), Reggio Emilia-influenced early years practice (Edwards et al., 2012), and a provider-defined whole-school framework (Learning, 2021). As these approaches were not identified in the international evidence reviewed here, their suitability cannot be assessed from the present data. This comparison relies solely on published institutional material and is limited accordingly.

Three gaps emerged. The first concerns class composition, which Erer et al. (2025) identify as one of five interconnected school-level mechanisms bearing on achievement differences. In Year 1, the School's composition encompasses a wide age range and divergent prior schooling, and observations suggest these two sources of variation compound rather than offset one another: the youngest children were frequently also those who had not attended Year 0. The second concerns language. Singapore's bilingual programme and the multilingual emphasis in Finland and Hong Kong are associated with developmental benefit (Melvin et al., 2020; Robinson, 2024); the School uses individual words and greetings in te reo Maori and other languages but offers no structured language course at this level. The third concerns internal evaluation. The review of the Centre (Office, 2023b) identified the absence of a formal self-review system, whereas Ireland, Luxembourg and Switzerland employ self-assessment or inspection tools to identify professional development needs (OECD, 2021).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Because these recommendations affect staffing, timetabling and parent relationships simultaneously, implementation should be approached through the McKinsey 7S framework (Channon & Caldart, 2015), ensuring that changes to structure and systems are accompanied by explicit attention to shared values and staff understanding. Where the rationale is communicated to all stakeholders, acceptance is more likely and implementation more durable.

Group new entrants within a single Year 1 class. Children entering Year 1 without Year 0 experience, whether from the School's Centre or external services, were observed to be at a comparable starting point to one another and to be behind those who had completed Year 0. Grouping them together would reduce within-class variation and allow instruction to proceed from a common base. The change requires no additional resources and could take effect at the start of the 2027 school year. Class size, at approximately 17, sets the constraint: where new entrants number fewer or more than this, children who joined Year 0 in its final term - and who have therefore had only one term of practice - could appropriately be included.

Reduce the age range within Year 1. Development in the first five years is rapid, and small age differences correspond to observable differences in skills and socio-emotional needs. Under the standard classification, children who start school during Term 1 are placed in Year 1 for that year, whereas those starting from Term 2 onwards are classified as Year 0 and enter Year 1 the following February. A child turning five shortly after the school year begins is therefore placed directly into Year 1 alongside peers approaching six, a combination that is difficult to teach well. The recommendation is that such children instead begin in Year 0 from the Term 2 intake and enter Year 1 at the start of the following school year, having completed three terms of transition. Applied consistently, this narrows the Year 1

age range from roughly 12 months to approximately six and ensures that every child entering Year 1 has completed a transition year. The approach remains within regulation, since enrolment is permitted from the fifth birthday and compulsory only from the sixth. Implementation depends on communication with families, who will need to understand both the rationale and the longer-term academic benefit associated with Year 0 participation (Menclova & Ali, 2019). Over time, this reduces the need for the preceding recommendation; during the transition period, the two should operate together.

Introduce a formal internal evaluation process. A structured annual self-review, completed by all teaching staff using a common instrument and addressing their practice, working environment, and recommendations, would directly respond to the Centre's review findings (Office, 2023b). The exercise should be followed by a collaborative meeting to discuss results, since the benefit lies in shared reflection rather than in data collection. This recommendation carries a caveat: the review is now three years old, and no observation was conducted in the Centre or at staff meetings, so a self-review process may already have been introduced. The School should verify current practice before acting.

Introduce a structured te reo Maori course alongside existing integrated practice. A weekly 30-minute course in Year 1, taught by a specialist through games, songs and activities, would build on the evidence supporting early language learning. Te reo Maori is the appropriate choice, aligning with the School's obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi and with the bicultural emphasis of both curricula. The course is proposed as an enhancement to, not a replacement for, the integration of te reo and tikanga Maori within everyday teaching: tikanga is developed through daily classroom practice, karakia, waiata and routine interaction, and a timetabled course adds structured vocabulary and language progression to that foundation rather than displacing it. Since te reo Maori is already taught elsewhere in the School, an existing specialist teacher may be able to deliver it. Implementation is best timed to the start of a term.

Further research. Several questions fall outside the scope of this study. The pedagogical frameworks observed at the comparator schools - Reggio Emilia and Montessori approaches, Singapore-style mathematics, and proprietary high-performance learning models - require investigation into their design, evidence base and suitability for this context before adoption could be considered. The role of digital technology in early years settings also warrants examination, particularly given medical guidance recommending that screen exposure be avoided before age 6, as in France (Willsher, 2025).

Recommendations for wider stakeholders. Teachers should sustain engagement with professional development, particularly as technological change alters both the tools available and the competencies children require. Parents should recognise the weight of their contribution, maintain active relationships with teachers, and apply agreed home-learning practices. Policymakers, and the Ministry of Education in particular, should continue to align curricula, facilities standards and regulations with emerging international evidence - for example, by developing a national framework for transition and family partnership along the lines adopted in Australia and Ireland (OECD, 2025), and by incorporating stakeholder consultation into curriculum revision as practised in Ireland and Japan (OECD, 2021).

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between internationally recognised ECE practice and regulatory compliance in one independent New Zealand primary school. The central finding is that these operate in alignment rather than

in tension: New Zealand's regulatory and curriculum framework is itself consistent with international evidence, so meeting compliance requirements does not constrain quality provision. The School was found to implement most of the identified best practices, with play-based learning, individualised development, wellbeing, and inclusion supported by favourable staffing levels, experienced teachers, and low turnover. Three areas for development were identified - class composition in Year 1, the absence of structured second-language provision, and internal evaluation in the Centre - none of which requires significant additional resources. The wider implication is that in systems where regulation is evidence-aligned, the productive question for school leaders is not how to reconcile compliance with quality, but where locally determined decisions such as class composition fall outside regulatory reach and therefore require deliberate institutional attention.

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