



## *The Arts and Children's Thinking: Agency, Materials and Teacher Practice Conference November 2025*

**8:30 a.m Registration Desk open** - coffee available

**8:45 a.m Welcome and Housekeeping**

**9:00 a.m - 10:30 am Session 1: The Role of the Visual Arts in Children's Inquiries**  
Sarah Probine and team

Children are born inquirers, curious and capable thinkers who make sense of the world through play, relationships, and rich material encounters. Drawing on findings from *Children's Inquiry in Early Childhood Education in Aotearoa New Zealand (Probine et al., 2025)*, this session explores how the visual arts can deepen and enrich children's inquiries across diverse early childhood contexts.

We examine how engagement with the visual arts through inquiry supports cognitive development, collaboration, dispositional skills, learner identity, and children's growing connection to place. Visual media offer powerful tools for thinking and expression, enabling tamariki to represent theories, revisit ideas, and explore complex concepts through collaborative, multimodal inquiry.

We then consider how the arts can meaningfully contribute to each stage of the inquiry process, from provoking curiosity and sustaining investigation to making thinking visible, supporting theory development, and consolidating learning. Practical examples from our research will illustrate how infants, toddlers, and young children use a range of visual languages across these stages to explore ideas and co-construct meaning in ways that reflect and respond to the unique people, places, and stories of their communities. The session concludes by inviting kaiako to reflect on their own practices and consider how intentional, arts-based pedagogy can expand the possibilities for meaningful, child-led inquiry in their own settings.

**10:30 a.m - 11:00 a.m Morning Tea**

**11:00 a.m - 12:15 pm Session 2: Blurring the Boundaries: Art as a Connector in Curriculum-Making with Children**  
Debi Keyte-Hartland

Debi Keyte-Hartland will explore theory and examples from her work illuminate the pivotal role of art as a connecting language in curriculum-making with children within the context of early childhood education. By adopting a transdisciplinary approach, art is positioned not only as a medium for exploring materials and self-expression but also as a catalyst for developing working theories, fostering inquiry, and supporting meaningful participation through collaborative learning. Importantly, aesthetics are recast not simply as the creation of beautiful environments, but as an activator and connector to evoke deeper engagement and intellectual exchange within an arena of playing with ideas.

Debi will highlight how encounters with art encourage children and educators alike to engage with diverse perspectives and to be in genuine exchange with one another's thinking. Through valuing plurality and diversity, participants are invited to rethink established paradigms and experience 'somersaults of thinking', where new possibilities and connections emerge. This approach champions children as idea makers and positions art as a dynamic force within curriculum development, activating agency and creativity in meaningful ways.

**12:15 pm - 1:00 p.m Lunch**



### **1:00 p.m - 2:15 p.m Session 3 - Thinking-with Materials: Agency, Aesthetics and Activators within the Arts and Creativity**

Debi Keyte-Hartland

This session, led by Debi Keyte-Hartland, invites participants to reimagine the role of materials in early childhood curriculum-making. Drawing on a blend of theory and case studies from practice, the session delves into the Reggio Emilia concept of intelligent materials. Here, materials are viewed not only in terms of their properties and affordances, but also through an understanding of their internal grammar' and the unique ways materials can invite, provoke, evoke and amplify children's ideas and inquiries.

Participants will explore how, by understanding the grammar and intelligence of materials, educators can intentionally design learning contexts to shape the conditions for learning that both sparks and connects with children's curiosity and which values them as active creative participants in learning together. For children, this awareness opens up a space for possibility thinking where creativity emerges from encounters with materials.

Thinking-with materials is a perspective that recognises the co-located agency present in the entangled relationships between materials, place, and the ideas of both children and adults. Through lively examples from practice, Debi will illustrate the vibrancy and energy that arise when children and educators learn alongside one another, co-creating knowledge with materials of the world where art and aesthetics serve as catalysts for meaningful engagement and the celebration of diverse ways of thinking.

### **2:15 p.m - 3:30 p.m Session 4 Navigating the Complexities: The challenges and possibilities for visual arts inquiry**

Debi Keyte-Hartland and Sarah Probine

While the visual arts hold powerful potential to enrich inquiry-based learning, kaiako often face practical and pedagogical barriers that constrain what is possible in early childhood settings. This interactive and collaborative workshop invites participants to reflect, share, and strategise around the complex realities of embedding rich arts and inquiry pedagogies in everyday practice.

Together, we will explore some of the common tensions kaiako encounter, such as limited planning time, documentation demands, resourcing constraints, differing levels of teacher confidence and pedagogical content knowledge, and the challenge of centre-wide philosophical coherence. Through collaborative dialogue, participants will surface their own challenges and co-construct potential responses that honour both the aspirations of Te Whāriki and the lived realities of the ECE sector.

As the final session of the day, we will close by inviting participants to share their freshest thinking, a concept inspired by Kline (1999) that encourages the surfacing of current, untapped, or emergent ideas. We invite kaiako to go deeper, share what is "alive" for them now, and imagine new possibilities for supporting children's thinking through the arts.

**Kline, N. (1999). Time to think: Listening to ignite the human mind. Cassell.**