

DOCUMENTING Learning Progression IN EARLY CHILDHOOD



*Practical guidance for kaiako working with
Te Whāriki*



Why documenting progression matters

Documentation in early childhood education is not about proving that learning happened.

It is not evidence gathering for its own sake, nor a record of activities completed or moments captured. At its best, documentation supports kaiako to notice what matters, reflect on what is developing, and make sense of children's learning in ways that honour their strengths, identities, and capabilities.

Te Whāriki positions learning as non-linear, holistic, and deeply relational. Learning unfolds over time, across contexts, and through relationships — it is rarely tidy or predictable. When documentation focuses on making learning visible over time, rather than on isolated moments, it becomes a tool for recognising progression, strengthening intentional teaching, and understanding how children's capabilities are growing and connecting.

“Learning is integrated and holistic.”

(Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa, 2017)

Look for patterns, not moments



One observation on its own rarely shows learning progression. A single moment can be interesting, meaningful, or affirming, but it does not tell the full story of how a child's capability is developing.

Progression becomes visible when kaiako look across time, noticing what continues to reappear and how a child's knowledge, skills or attitudes are gradually shifting.

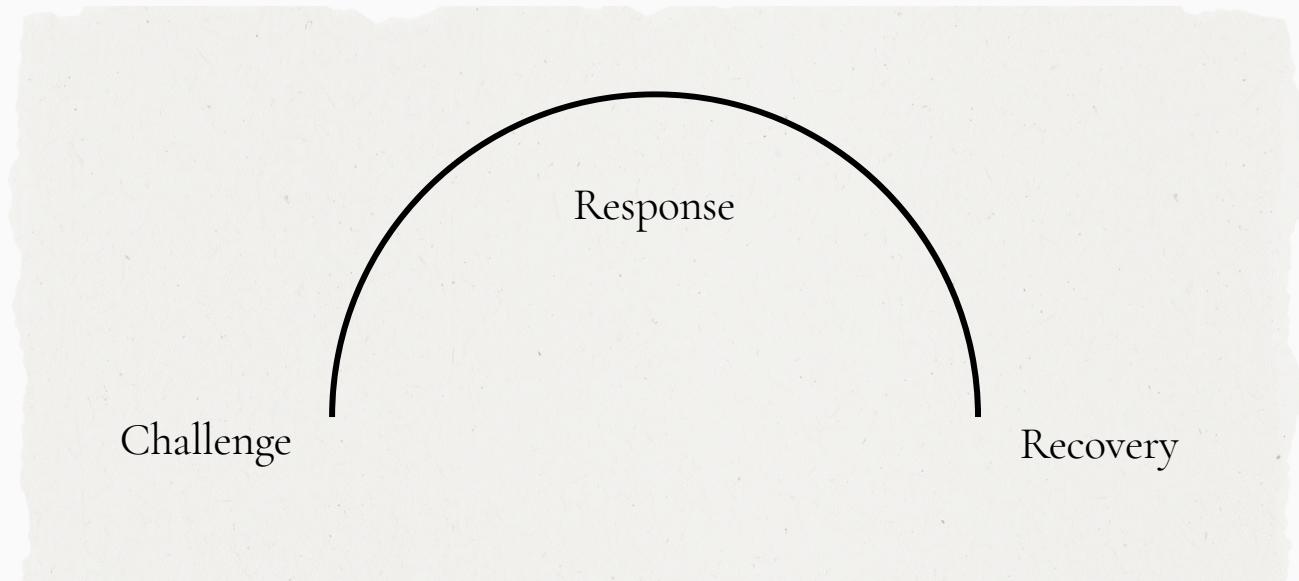
Learning grows through repetition with variation. When children return to the same experiences, challenges, or routines, they are not "doing the same thing again" — they are refining, adapting, and extending their understanding. Each return offers an opportunity for children to approach a situation with slightly more confidence, skill, or intention than before.

Patterns in behaviour, thinking, and engagement signal strengthening capability. This might look like a child returning to a familiar challenge with greater persistence, managing routines with increasing independence, or applying a strategy that worked in one context to a new situation. When documentation captures these patterns, it shifts from recording moments to revealing learning over time.

Document recovery, not just challenge

Learning progression is often most visible after moments of difficulty. While confident, successful moments are easier to capture, it is what happens next that often reveals the most growth. How a child responds to frustration, uncertainty, or challenge can show developing emotional regulation, resilience, and learning strategies in ways that polished moments cannot.

Progression includes a child's growing ability to calm themselves, to try again, and to adapt when something does not work. This might look like calming more quickly after an upset, seeking help in ways that are increasingly intentional and appropriate, or adjusting an approach rather than abandoning a task. When documentation captures these moments of recovery and adaptation, it highlights learning as a dynamic process that unfolds over time, rather than a series of successes.



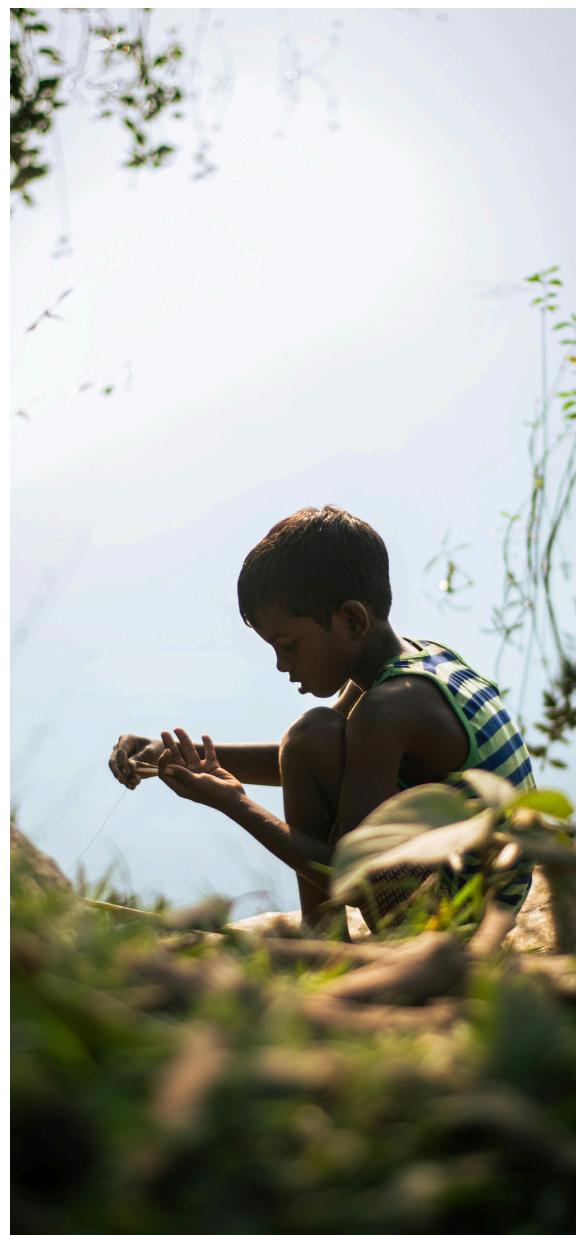
Show learning across contexts

Learning progression strengthens when children are able to transfer what they know and can do into new contexts. When learning is not tied to a single place, person, or activity, it becomes more flexible and meaningful. Seeing children apply ideas across different environments, routines, or relationships shows that their understanding is becoming more secure and adaptable.

Children demonstrate growing capability when they use familiar strategies in unfamiliar situations.

This might look like drawing on home experiences within the centre, applying outdoor problem-solving strategies indoors, or using social skills first developed with one peer when interacting with others. Documenting these moments of transfer helps make learning progression visible, showing how children carry their learning with them as they move through their world.

“Learning and development is a continuous process.”
— Te Whāriki (2017)



Use sequences to make progression visible



Language prompts:

- “*This builds on...*”
- “*Previously we noticed...*”
- “*Now we see...*”

Learning progression is often clearer when it is shown through sequences rather than single, polished stories. A sequence allows kaiako to make visible how learning unfolds across time, revealing shifts in confidence, strategy, or understanding that might be missed in a standalone narrative. Seeing learning side by side — what came before and what is emerging now — helps progression feel tangible and real. Importantly, documenting sequences does not require more writing. It simply requires connection. This might involve a short series of photos taken across several days, brief notes that are revisited and added to over time, or intentionally linking back to earlier learning stories. When documentation makes these connections explicit, it highlights continuity and growth, helping kaiako, children, and whānau see how learning is strengthening over time.

Focus on decision-making, not compliance

Te Whāriki places strong emphasis on children as active, thinking learners who have agency in their learning. Progression is not only visible in what children do, but in how they make choices, explain their thinking, and adjust their actions in response to people, places, and challenges. When documentation attends to these moments of decision-making, it reveals learning as intentional and responsive rather than automatic or compliant.

Language plays an important role in making this visible. Subtle shifts in wording can move documentation from describing outcomes to capturing thinking. For example, replacing 'completed' with 'returned to' highlights persistence and intention, while shifting from 'followed rules' to 'explained why' foregrounds understanding and reasoning. These choices help documentation reflect progression in agency, not just behaviour.



“Learning is integrated and holistic.”

— Te Whāriki (2017)

A Final Reflection:

Progression doesn't need to be neat

Learning does not unfold in straight lines. Children revisit ideas, pause, return, and strengthen their understanding in ways that are often uneven and unpredictable. These moments of revisiting and refining are not signs of delay, but natural parts of meaningful learning and growth.

Documenting progression is not about writing more.
It is about noticing differently.



Mā te rongo, ka mōhio, Mā te
mōhio, ka mārama, Mā te
mārama, ka mātau, Mā te mātau,
ka ora.

From listening comes knowledge,
From knowledge comes
understanding, From
understanding comes wisdom,
From wisdom comes well-being.

