

Encouraging notions of social justice through young children's play

Experiences in Pasifika Early Childhood Teacher Education in Aotearoa New Zealand

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When I think of the word 'play,' numerous ideas come to mind. Play has meant different things to different people across different cultural, historical, and social spheres. Play, within Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Aotearoa New Zealand, continues to be the driving force for curriculum planning decisions, and predominantly features in the educational programmes offered to young children (Hedges, 2003; Leaupepe, 2010). The national Early Childhood Curriculum, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996) recognizes the contributions play provides to the holistic development of the child, and emphasizes the need for Early Childhood teachers to create spaces and environments where children's play is valued as meaningful learning. The acceptance of play within ECE settings appear to have been uncontested and unchallenged with reference to its relevance (Ailwood, 2003; Leaupepe, 2011a). Since its early developments within the kindergarten movement, Frobel's idea of children playing within natural environments as free-spirited beings has been influential to the kinds of practices evident within ECE environments (Leaupepe, 2011a; May, 2001). We have seen shifts in pedagogical paradigms that now challenge early childhood teachers to reconceptualise play in relation to its purpose and nature (Hill, 2006; Leaupepe, 2011b).

It is important to interrogate the notion of play because the very idea is what justifies the existence of educational institutions, sports associations, and professionals like myself. Furthermore, our visions of play are very much connected to our image of the child, or the so-called 'universal child,' and the essence of childhood (Burrows, 2000) and are coupled to historical, political, social, and cultural concerns. In response to such concerns, many scholars have now turned their attention to the ways in which the idea of the universal child has been challenged by seeking a deeper understanding through a sociocultural lens (Fleer, 2003; Carr, 2001; Duhn, 2006; Rogoff, 2003). By viewing children from a sociocultural lens, an emphasis is placed on how the image of the child

is socially constructed (Duhn & Craw, 2010). Context therefore, becomes a crucial element when exploring the often multiple, and contradictory theorizing of play (Dockett & Fleer, 2003; Leaupepe, 2011b).

Rationale for case study

I had been working within the early childhood sector for over 15 years in private, community-based, and state settings before entering the teacher education scene. As a practitioner, I often heard comments by parents/adults about their concern for their child who appeared to 'play all day' and 'didn't really do much learning.' These types of comments were particularly prevalent amongst Pacific Island families. As a teacher I understood the need to be able to articulate and justify what I did with children, and this was not always convincing, as little was understood about how Pacific people viewed play (Leaupepe, 2010).

Driven by my Western theorizing and understandings my approach to such concerns could have easily been deemed 'culturally insensitive'. My own personal childhood play memories and experiences were fun-filled moments of adventure, risk-taking, and were always on a social level involving some aspect of competition. To some extent, I could not fully relate to the concerns of my Pacific parents and families, as our lived experiences with reference to play differed. It was from these experiences, I knew without a shadow of doubt if I was going to engage in any form of research, it would involve play and Pacific people.

Background of case study

The case study discussed in this chapter draws attention to the impact of Pasifika student teacher's, notions of play. It considers how such views have influenced the ways in which ECE teachers can support children's conceptual understandings and knowledge of Social Sciences education. Reference to Social Sciences Education strands identified in both Te Whāriki and The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1997; 2007), are used to highlight teachers' responsibilities in the delivery of curricula.

At the time of this investigation I was the Course Coordinator for the 'Pedagogy of Play within Pacific Islands Context' course at the then Auckland College of Education. This course was designed for student teachers enrolled in the Pacific Islands Early Childhood Education (PIECE) Diploma of

Teaching programme. The programme was administered and delivered through the School of Pasifika Education. All of my research participants were within their Second year of their Three-year Diploma programme, and were born and raised in the Pacific Islands. The sample consisted mainly of Samoan and Tongan females and is therefore, not representative of all Pacific groupings. For many enrolled in this programme, this was their first time studying at tertiary level.

The framework of my research was underpinned by a qualitative methodology seeking the opinions, ideas, views, and experiences of the research participants (Sarantakos, 2005). Two Pasifika research approaches were adopted and considered relevant for this case study. The first research approach used was the *kakala* model, adapted by Thaman (1999) and it is used within this research to describe the art of Tongan traditional fragrant garland making. The *kakala model* was used as a metaphor to describe the process of selection, data collection, analysis of information, and the dissemination of knowledge. *Toli kakala* is used to explain the seeking for, choosing, and the bringing together of the most suitable flowers to make the garland. This describes the recruitment and interviewing procedures. Selection was based on a class listing, as this was considered to be the most applicable approach to use at the time. To gain an understanding of the research participants' views of play, a focus group was initiated prior to the introduction of the course. This provided an opportunity for the research participants to share their childhood play memories, and to unpack what play had meant for them as children. Individual interviews were conducted before and after completing the course about play. This established initial ideas of how the research participants had understood play, any changes that might have occurred after the completion of the course, and what relevant links to the essential learning and curriculum areas had been made.

The concept of *kau tui kakala* illustrates the process of gathering and analysing the data collected. This requires the interpretation of data, and how best to organise it to design the garland. Emerging themes were identified, and critical factors influencing the research participants' views were categorized. *Luva e kakala* describes the final process in the making of the garland. This is about the responsibility and accountability of the researcher for the new knowledge and information received from the research participants (Anae, Coxon, Mara, Wendt-Samu, & Finau, 2001; Leaupepe, 2011a). It considers the significance of disseminating information based on a mutual understanding, and makes reference to how this should be carried out. The completed garland is returned to the research participants to check for accuracy and is given their blessings for it to be shared with others. The sharing of valuable knowledge and insight becomes a gift to all.

The second Pasifika research approach used within this case study; is the notion of *talanoa*. The word *tala* is to “inform, tell, talk about” and *noa* means “nothing, or void” (Fa’afai, Parkhill & Fletcher, 2006, p.105). *Talanoa* describes the types of conversations occurring during the focus group and individual interviews. Conducting both the focus group and individual interviews, sometimes involved unrelated talk which had nothing to do with the research topic. ‘Otunuku (2011) describes *talanoa* as “talking about everything or anything that participants are interested in” (p.45). He asserts that, “Making connections is an important part of building relationships and locating your participants in their own context” (p.47).

It is important to acknowledge the cultural values, beliefs, and practices of the research participants, as this incorporates a shared understanding and ownership of the research (Anae et al., 2001; Leaupepe, 2011a). This point is strongly emphasized by Sauni (2011) who maintains that consideration toward the cultures of the research participants is crucial, and the need to incorporate such values “into the methodological framework and written text should be embraced by Pasifika and non-Pasifika researchers” (p.55). *Talanoamālie* is an extension of *talanoa* and refers to the critical and reflective thinking occurring while engaged in dialogue. This type of conversation is what Manu’atu and Kepa (2006) refer to as “critical thinking and action that gets under the skin” (p. 171). The concept of *talanoa-talanoamālie* integrates an oral interpretative approach to the case study (Leaupepe, 2011a).

Why Play?

The plethora of literature from the past and the present, from national and international research about the benefits of play, and the associations made to children's learning, are numerous. Through play children learn to communicate, express their feelings, and develop important social networks to construct the necessary knowledge and skills required of them (Wood, 2009). Play-related research has documented the importance of play in relation to young children's holistic development (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales & Alward, 2003; Bruce, 2001; Dockett & Fler, 2003; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002; Saracho & Spodek, 2003; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Children engage in many forms of play that assist in their understandings of their social and cultural worlds. This provides opportunities for children to expand their awareness of how they understand and make sense of themselves in a constantly changing world. Play has been described as enjoyable, pleasurable, free from external rules, and intrinsically motivated (Ailwood, 2003; Perry 1998). Through play, children are able to enhance their socialisation skills as they negotiate and

problem solve with each other (Dockett & Fler, 2003; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002).

However, play can also be painful, both physically and emotionally. This can be potentially distressing for children, and is an area that is seldom written about (Burman, 1994; Monighan-Nourot, Scales, Van Hoorn & Almy, 1987; Moyles, 1994; Perry, 1998). It is within these types of play that the nature of play becomes problematic. Children can experience rejection from other players, and social isolation. The taunting, practical jokes and games that involve forceful physical contact, and racist and sexist joking, portray the harsh realities of play (Bishop & Curtis, 2001). A caution, for many who advocate for the rights of a child to play, can be echoed through the wise words of Burman (1994, cited in Ailwood, 2003, p.292) who argued that: “the glorification of play as functional, voluntary and co-operative soon turns out to be idealised, since this ignores the coercive, cruel and dangerous aspects of many forms of play, both in the form of personal hobbies or institutional school activities” (p. 166).

This requires a call for Early Childhood teachers to become responsive to children's natural curiosities through types of play that encourage greater conceptual understanding and knowledge of social justice, equity, and gender issues. “Throughout the Early Childhood Education play literature there is an almost constant reference to the pleasure and fun of play, while the potential for pain and distress is marginalised” (Ailwood, 2003, p. 291). Some may question whether children are too young to be thinking about such issues (Pelo, 2006). However, it is through play, the purpose of social sciences education becomes clearer. As teachers, watch, observe, and listen to children discussing many differences, ‘that’s not fair’ and ‘he can’t do that,’ demonstrates to adults, children are exploring relationships, fairness, gender issues, and social justice. “A child’s subjectivity—that is, their idea of who they are, their framework for understanding the social world and their place in it—is developing” (Dockett & Fler, 2003, p. 132). Play as described above informs teachers that children are in fact exploring their place within different relationships. Children construct knowledge based on their own direct experiences of the world and create images and meanings that are bounded in and by culture (MacNaughton, 2002).

The next section of this chapter provides examples of discussions from the focus group interview, and practicum experiences, by way of reflective statements, which illustrate how student teachers are confronted with the notions of social justice, fairness, and gender.

What did student teachers have to say?

The following examples are statements taken from the focus group interview. These conversations occurred in a relaxed atmosphere, filled with laughter when student teachers were asked to reflect on their childhood play experiences. All quotes and statements used are exactly how the student teachers expressed themselves. English is a second or third language for many of the student teachers reported in this case study.

I can recall one time, my friends and me were playing in the plantation, we were suppose to do some work, you know, I was wanting to play with my brothers and boy cousins. You know things like climbing trees, skimming the stones off the water, the rough games with the boys. I just like doing that. But if my mum sees that, she really gets angry and say, that I have to stay with the girls. I knew what I had to do, the chores inside the house, collect food from the plantation and other stuff, but I try and sneak out to play.

In this next account of some play activity within a centre, a discussion between children is held about the roles and expectations of what girls have to do and why. Often these discussions can be understood within a knowledge of parental expectations:

A group of girls are in the family corner playing doctors and nurses. The following conversation occurs between four children.

A = "This won't hurt, I'm gonna put the needle here"

S = "Can I have a lolly after?"

A = "Yes of course"

P = "I'll hold your hand ok, it's alright"
{H [boy] joins the girls}

H = "I can be the nurse and help you A"

A = "No you can't I'm the nurse, you have to be the doctor"
{H insists}

H = "No I can be the nurse"

A = "Only girls can be a nurse, you're a boy and you are the doctor" she turns to me and says "Aay [teacher] he can't be

the nurse, he has to be the doctor" I hesitate to what she has said then agree with her and say

"That's right, only girls can be nurses"

In the situation described above, there is an attempt made by *A* to reposition *H*, in accordance with her understanding of gender roles. *H* has deviated from the role assigned to him because *A* believes the 'doctor' role is appropriate for him. His efforts to reassert himself are not taken seriously as in this case, the student teacher agrees with what *A* has said. It is only upon reflection and *talanoa-talanoamālie* that she realises her response; she is confronted with her own deep-seated beliefs about gender. In a discussion with her she explains, "*I don't even know why I said that, I had hesitated when H wanted to be a nurse. My hesitation – what was that about? My actions could have been interpreted that only boys/males can be doctors, it's not like I haven't seen male nurses. This would have been a good opportunity to explore their perspectives further.*"

Children can be at risk of developing biases about others, and inaccurate images about self and others, if not supported by caring adults who are aware (Pelo, 2006). Children and adults need to think critically about what is fair and unfair in relationships between people, and about the assumptions of what children may possibly be capable of understanding (MacNaughton, 2003).

Another example from the focus group interview concerns what student teachers encourage young children to engage with in their play experiences, and why. I had presented them with a picture [see Figure 1] and posed the following question: What learning can you identify here that relates to Social Sciences education?



Figure 1:
Shows children playing with a kitchenette set. The two boys are engaged in their play while the little girl is seated on the chair.

The group fires answers at random

"They are building positive relationships, negotiating, problem solving"

"Oh, those boys are not being inclusive to the poor little girl"

"They learn about what mum and dad do in the home"

"Exploring different roles and responsibilities, how their families get on with each other - relationships"

"Why are the boys in that area?"

This final comment sparked different perceptions and understandings for students. I followed this with a lead in question: *"What are your concerns regarding what you see?"* Responses to this question provide valuable insight into cultural influences, and prompted more robust discussions.

"This is something that I find hard to encourage in the centre. We don't say to the boys to go in the family corner. There have been times when I see the boys walking around in the centre with the dolls, I tell them to put it back, go play in the block area or go outside and play"

"You know Manutai, it's like if our parents see this kind of play, boys in the family corner, wearing dresses, playing dress up, putting on high heel shoes, putting the finger polish on, or even just being where girls are, for some parents they worry about their boys being, you know, fa'afafine [trying to be like a woman]. That's a real concern. They think that these types of play might make them become something else"

"I remember this little boy, he likes to push the pram around the centre but there's one girl who tries to get the pram. One time she said to me 'Teacher, that's not fair, he can't play with that, that for girls, he's a boy' I remember thinking, she's right in some sense"

Young children are aware of, and curious about, differences and similarities. They bring to the Early Childhood environment, their own life experiences, including their questions and uncertainties. From the age of three, children are beginning to demonstrate signs of societal norms and biases (Derman-Sparks & the A.B.C. Task Force, 1989). As teachers, one must consider how children's rights are being respected and protected when they are engaged in

play that has the potential to explore social issues. Under the Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2011) – Article 4 (Protection of rights): Governments have a responsibility to take all available measures to make sure children's rights are respected, protected, and fulfilled. The challenge for teachers is recognising social justice exists where there are equitable rights for all, by which, such rights are respected and protected (Williams & Cooney, 2006).

Teachers must help young children foster attitudes, knowledge and skills in order to grow up with an accepting, positive view, of self and others, in a diverse world. In order for teachers to be able to successfully support such learning, subject-content knowledge about Social Sciences education, and children's play interests become critical (Hedges & Cullen, 2005). Pedagogical documentation becomes a crucial element in making visible the lived experiences and realities of young children through play. As an advocate for children, understanding notions of social justice Pelo (2006) contends that:

The only way we can avoid these issues is by deliberately ignoring them when they arise – ignoring children's observations of differences and the cultural biases that accompany those differences, ignoring children's observations of unfairness, ignoring children's requests for our help in understanding the communities in which they live. And this would be terrible violence, this denial of children's right to think critically about and engage with their world. Children will call our attention to social justice issues and when we practise pedagogical documentation, we will partner with the children around these issues (pp. 175-176).

For the student teachers in this case study, opportunities to explore and examine their own values and beliefs about social justice, fairness, and gender issues were found to be both confrontational, and an empowering exercise. When they had completed the 'Pedagogy of Play within Pacific Islands Context' Course, the majority had reported how their reflective statements, required for their practicum experiences, showed how their views of play had changed. Reflective thinking could lead to a deeper understanding of experience, and can direct and influence subsequent experiences (Smyth, 1989). The importance of reflection has been recognised as an important element of teachers' professional growth and development, there is a need for it to be ongoing and intentional (Leaupepe, 2011b).

"Vygotsky's theory about imagination, that children imaging play, they create their own script and they do their own play, it's amazing. Playing doctors and nurses, and I'm pretending to be a sick patient. They are caught up in their play: tablets,

prescriptions. I can understand those theories of play and can support children in their play

"I am now able to support and encourage learning through their play. I know when children are given opportunities to explore different roles, be exposed to different learning experiences that they learn about who they are, what they can do and be"

"I want to encourage experiences where children are not stopped from doing what they are trying to find out. I can see the benefits of children being involved in other areas of the centre, not limiting them"

"I try my best, I want to create an environment that they can learn alongside each other, be empowered, be safe physically and emotionally. I have learned so much from children, I see them as capable and competent learners. I also want to pass this on to our parents, to my families"

The student teachers in this study realise that they have their work cut out for them. However, they are determined to make a difference. To what extent however, continues to be a challenge for them, as they persist in their academic journeys and practicum experiences. They understand they may be confronted with issues that oppose what they personally believe. What is understood from this study is the ability to recognise those tensions when they arise. Their professional obligations as developing Early Childhood teachers require them to address such conflicts. Reflection within *talanoa-talanoamālie* is one way these tensions can be resolved.

Conclusion

This chapter outlines the need for teachers to seriously consider how their actions, behaviours, attitudes, and what they say or may not say, contribute to the ways young children make connections to Social Sciences education. The challenge for Pasifika Early Childhood teachers is to consider how their values and beliefs have impacted on how they relate to children, what they do and do not endorse and encourage. Decisions regarding curriculum planning require creating opportunities and learning environments, which are safe for children to explore further, their perceptions of social issues. Listening attentively to children's conversations is an important starting point. The ability to listen with our ears and our eyes, to read, and to take cues, from children's play, may provide valuable insight into what children are thinking about in regards to issues of social justice, fairness, and gender.

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