

A professional commitment to play

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“[E]very child has the right... to engage in play”
(United Nations, 1989, article 31)

Early childhood teachers often find themselves having to defend the play-based early childhood curriculum to parents who may prefer a more traditional and skills-based approach to teaching and learning. This article will support teachers to understand current trends and perspectives in order to be able to articulate the value of play for children’s learning and development. It focuses on the four commitments outlined in *The Code of Professional Responsibility* (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, [EC], 2017) and also draws upon the New Zealand early childhood curriculum - *Te Whāriki He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) to discuss what is meant by a professional commitment to play. Our aim in this article is to empower teachers to be strong advocates for play and to be proud to share why and how they teach through play. Further, we highlight the role of teachers in advocating for play to families and whānau, the teaching profession and lastly to communities. In this article we also refer to Bronfenbrenner’s ecological system theory (as cited in MoE, 2017) to articulate the relationships between the child and the different contexts in which they are situated. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory places the child in the centre of all relationships and interactions with the world around them and underpins the focus on learning in *Te Whāriki*. Although based on *The Code of Professional Responsibility* (EC, 2017) our discussion begins with the commitment to learners rather than to the sector, as we feel that children should be the central consideration for play and a play-based pedagogy within early childhood education (ECE).

A play based curriculum

The early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), values the importance of learning through a variety of play experiences. Teachers have a role in facilitating play experiences that reflect the perspectives and contributions of children and their whānau (MoE, 2017). Teachers can actively support children to develop confidence, by joining them in their imaginative and dramatic play experiences to enhance their learning dispositions and emergent skills.

A number of research studies acknowledge the value of play during childhood (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff & Gryfe, 2008; Friedman, 2011; Gross & Cornelli Sanderson, 2012). Play in the early years is highly valued and should be “a rich array of play-based experiences” (MoE, 2017, p. 15), that engages children and prompts them to lead their own learning through play. In our former roles as ECE teachers, we can recall many instances of supporting children’s learning through play. Our fondest memories of teaching are of being invited by the children into their child-led play. It was in these moments that we were able to support children’s learning, by being intentional with our teaching and linking the play experience to learning outcomes from *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017). In addition, we were able to introduce to the child specific subject content areas as outlined in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (MoE, 2007).

A commitment to learners

The centrality of play in the holistic development of children is supported in *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017). It sees play as a vehicle through which children can be affirmed and empowered. Regardless of the children's age, abilities or cultural backgrounds, teachers should seek to respectfully acknowledge and affirm the aspirations of children as they engage in play (EC, 2017). It is through a play-based approach that children create rich and meaningful learning. For children, play is work and a means to develop their understanding of their world (Friedman, 2011).

Child-led play and guided play, unlike teacher directed play, offer immense benefits to affirm and empower children. Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff (2008) found that children who participated in guided play within an ECE context experienced lasting academic and social benefits which extended into later education. Findings from Gross and Cornelli Sanderson's (2012) study confirm this point, suggesting that play is integral to children's social and emotional intelligence, which support fundamental life skills.

By linking children's play to the curriculum, teachers can respond to children and guide them (MoE, 2017). Some of the most memorable times in our ECE teaching roles working with children were being able to affirm and empower children to lead their own learning experiences which also included our active participation within their play. If teachers do not engage in being playful in play itself, children miss out on understanding that play is work not only for children but also for adults. The teacher's role and commitment to children is to guide play to support children's content knowledge, their understanding of the world and their place in it, and empower them as capable and confident learners (MoE, 2017).

Reflective prompts

In your daily practice how are you able to model play?

For teachers in New Zealand, *Our Code Our Standards* outlines the standards that teachers should seek to promote and support inclusive practices that meet the needs and abilities of each child (EC, 2017). Through reciprocal engagement, teachers guide, encourage and support "children to participate in and contribute to a wide range of enriching experiences" (MoE, 2017, p. 18).

A commitment to families and whānau

A key aspiration of *Te Whāriki* (MoE 2017) is for teachers to ensure that they identify and respond to the learning taking place at home. Weir (2014) suggests that the key to successful partnerships starts with teachers encouraging parents and whānau to share information, thereby developing meaningful relationships with them (EC, 2017). The benefit of engaging with parents and whānau is to understand their aspirations for their child and empower them to be more involved in their child's learning. However, it is important to note that parent's aspirations should not overshadow the child's voice for their own learning (MoE, 2017).

Some parents and whānau place importance on their child acquiring formal learning skills such as reading and writing while others may prioritise the development of positive learning dispositions such as kindness and perseverance. The holistic nature of *Te Whāriki* supports teachers to show parents and whānau that their child can learn these skills through a variety of ways including in their play (MoE, 2017). However, some parents can sometimes misinterpret a play-based approach to mean that their child is not learning. As a commitment to families and whānau, teachers should

ensure that their teaching is intentional and clearly underpinned by curriculum in both their discussions and documentation of children (EC, 2017).

Reflective prompts

What ways do you currently engage with parents and whānau to communicate the value of play while respecting their aspirations for their child?

Key commitments of teachers are outlined in *Our Code Our Standards* to develop respectful relationships with whānau that engage them in their child's learning (EC, 2017). The principle of *Family* and *Community* supports this adding that the "...curriculum will value and build on the knowledge and experiences that children bring with them to the setting" (MoE, 2017, p. 20).

A commitment to the profession

During our time as ECE teachers, we saw a shift in pedagogical practices to a more structured and rigid environment. Play was sometimes interrupted with more emphasis placed on planned experiences for children, even extending this to infants and toddlers. In transition to school classes, children's play and exploration was restricted as more emphasis was placed on rote learning rather than developing social competence and key dispositions (Education Review Office, 2015). This perspective is shared by Gross and Cornelli Sanderson (2012) who comment that although play is essential, it is being overshadowed by more academic instruction in some settings.

However, *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) supports ECE teachers in New Zealand to promote learning through play but at the same time, does not prescribe against formal or more structured learning. Cutter-Mackenzie, Edwards, Moore and Boyd (2010) support this position by stating that while child initiated free-play is valued in ECE, there also needs to be consideration of content knowledge like literacy mathematics and science and its application. The teachers' commitment to the profession is to implement a play-based pedagogy and ensure they are providing high-quality and effective teaching for the children (EC, 2017). Early childhood teachers need to uphold their commitment to the profession by "demonstrating a high standard of professional behaviour and integrity" (EC, 2017, p. 10). This means highlighting and sharing these intentional connections in children's play by communicating with parents and whānau through learning stories while still understanding parents/caregivers priorities for their children.

Reflective prompts

How do you apply and share your professional knowledge with your colleagues to highlight the learning you see taking place through play?

Key commitments of teachers are outlined in *The Code of Professional Responsibility* to show that they are able to use the professional knowledge to provide quality and effective teaching, as well as showing integrity in what they do (EC, 2017). It is through "working together for the common good [that] develops a spirit of sharing, togetherness and reciprocity" (MoE, 2017, p. 36).

While we have moved from describing centres as child care to education and care, the term child care is still widely used in New Zealand to refer to early childhood education centres. Despite the progression of education reforms in

the 1980's aimed to raise the status of ECE which led to a national curriculum being introduced in 1996 (McLachlan, 2011), many ECE teachers still find themselves defending their role as professional teachers. Collectively, teachers need to advocate and share the value of play and recognise that this is formal learning for children. Early childhood teachers are often labelled as child care workers in the media rather than as teachers. Hall and Langton (2006) explain such labels as these can influence general society's viewpoint and that they "convey powerful messages" (Rockel, 2009, p. 2).

A commitment to society

Within an early childhood education and care context, the notion of care implies "watching over children who are away from their parents" (Rockel, 2009, p. 1). While the notion of education is that children learn, the notion of care implies that children are not learning as they play and are cared for. As teachers, we need to encourage children and their whānau to view teachers as professionals. In turn they too can advocate for their teachers within wider society.

With research (Friedman, 2011; Gross & Cornelli Sanderson, 2012; McLachlan, 2011;) advocating and supporting that learning through play for children has the greatest long-term educational and societal benefits, teachers too must share this message through their documentation and conversations inside and out of the ECE classroom. For all teachers, *The Code of Professional Responsibility* (EC, 2017) explains that "...how others see us and how the profession is valued" (p. 6) is important and something all teachers must positively contribute to. As authors of this article we both feel that ECE teachers are leading by example in their daily practice through their play-based approach which is now being offered to our primary colleagues through newly created MoE Initiatives (Education.govt.nz, 2019). With some New Zealand primary schools adopting a play-based approach to teaching (MoE, 2019), we wonder what the implications are for our primary sector colleagues, as they shift from traditional practices to support and build key competences of children through play. This demonstrates that a play-based approach is becoming more common across education sectors. Through highlighting and sharing with children and whānau the rich benefits of learning through play within an ECE context, we are ensuring that all become engaged in key societal issues.

Reflective prompts

How do you advocate for the social benefits of play?

Key commitments of teachers to ensure that children's rights are protected and consideration for social justice is promoted (EC, 2017). Based on children's developmental stages, teachers need to advocate for their right to play and for play as a tool to foster and build upon foundation skills. The ECE curriculum *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017, values "learning environments where uncertainty is valued, inquiry is modelled, and making meaning is the goal" (p. 23). This is why play is imperative within ECE environments.

Articulating the commitment to play

To change perceptions of the value of play, ECE teachers first must ask themselves how they advocate for play. Hence, there is a need to be able to articulate the value of the learning through play for children. With the support of both *Te Whāriki* and *The Code of Professional Responsibility* we encourage ECE teachers to share the rich learning that takes place through play for children through conversation, documentation and display of the learning. We recognise key stakeholders in our profession include the children, their families and whānau, other professionals and society. By applying a sociocultural approach to teaching in ECE, we hope teachers are empowered to recognise the role that each stakeholder has in shaping the daily curriculum. We have affirmed that a play-based approach can be rich in supporting

specific content areas that address the aspirations of all. The challenge for teachers is to make this clear in everyday practice and celebrate that.

Yes, I teach through play!

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