

## Images of young boys' identities: Disrupting developmental discourse

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Over the past three decades, the image of the child in early childhood education, in Aotearoa New Zealand, has undergone a transformational shift; from a deficit view (the teacher focuses on what the child cannot do) to a strength-based pedagogical approach (the teacher focuses on the competent child). The early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) promotes the image of children as competent and capable, including the capacity for “making decisions and encountering different points of view” (p. 9). Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), has disrupted dominant western human development and learning discourses. This article discusses a research project that explored the extent to which this disruption to developmental discourse had impacted on teachers' images of boys; by examining the images of three to four years old boys described by early childhood teachers in one region of Aotearoa New Zealand.

### Literature review

Vagle (2012) argues that early childhood teachers have had robust debates about the limitations of age-stage developmental theory. He states, such theories “recognise that human development stages are raced (white), gendered (male), classed (middle class) and sexed (heteronormative)” (p. 20). Despite these debates, social language sometimes portrays a stereotypical developmental image of boys, commonly reflected in descriptions such as: ‘boys will be boys’; ‘boys are immature’; ‘boys develop later than girls’; and they are just not interested or ‘ready’ to learn literacy. These socially constructed images measure boys using a perceived developmental norm, against which judgements about them are formed and often in a binary positioning to girls.

Constructivist principles inform us about the power of words to create our world (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010) and thus our identities and subjective realities. They highlight how these identities are formed through our social relationships and communication. Consequently, how teachers speak about boys matters because language constructs and conveys particular images, where “personal assumptions and biases invade our image of children and have an impact on what we do and how we behave as teachers, as well as the way we speak” (Heald & Manuela, 2013, p. 85). In particular, researchers call for a re-imagining of boys that does not position them in binary opposition to girls (Gunn, 2012; Vagle, 2012).

That teachers' pedagogical responses to children's actions and behaviours are influenced by their personal values and cultural assumptions is well documented (Cunningham & Macrae, 2011; Major & Santoro, 2013; Riley, 2014). One way this manifests in practice is through teachers' perceptions and reactions to superhero play, gun play, physically active play, and rough and tumble play. Teachers' attitudes either encourage, deter or reject this type of play (Dockett & Fleer, 1999; Farmer, 2012; Logue & Detour, 2011). Logue and Detour's (2011) study recommended teachers discover children's intentions prior to intervention, regardless of the discomfort they may feel towards the play. They also reminded teachers that children “pretending to act aggressively is not the same as acting aggressively” (p. 1).

Teachers need to reflect on how deeply embedded developmental beliefs and bias may impact negatively on boys' learning. Such unintentional bias may position boys as problematic and result in blaming the individuals for failure to learn or for behaviour that is concerning (De Vos, 2007; Major & Santoro, 2013; Pansu, Regner, Sylvain, Cole, Nezlak & Huguët, 2016). Critically, Pansu et al. (2016) remind us that negative stereotyping causes lost opportunities for learning. Farmer (2012) encourages teachers to think about what messages they are giving boys about their

competence as learners, how teachers are valuing boys' energy levels and physicality, and how boys' interests are the starting points for learning journeys.

Vagle (2012) suggests two ways to free teachers' thinking from developmental perspectives. Firstly, he recommends thinking of learning and growth as contingent; that is profoundly contextual and dependent. Secondly, he recommends thinking of growth and learning as recursive, occurring over and over again. These two concepts encourage teachers to re-examine how learning is shaped by context and repetition rather than constraining learning to a linear progression with steps to be achieved. In *Te Whāriki*, children's learning and development are viewed as complex and an interaction of multiple factors, including "genetic, development and environmental" (MoE, 2017, p. 61). Hence, the idea of children 'being' rather than 'becoming' (Evans, 2015; Tesar, 2017). A child 'being' is a citizen of the present rather than what they may become in the future. Conceptualising the child as 'being' potentially transforms images of a child as complex, unpredictable and open to possibilities.

Aotearoa New Zealand has a strong history of play as foundational to young children's learning and development, where play is freely chosen by the players, along with a commitment to play in natural, diverse, outdoor play environments (Brownlee, 2016; Cooper, 2015; White, Ellis, O'Malley, Rockel, Stover & Toso, 2009). According to Cooper (2015, p. 85), a substantial body of research confirms how an outdoor environment "advances and enriches all of the domains relevant to the health and well-being of young children." Attention has also been given to the types of physical play common in boys' play, particularly rough and tumble (Jarvis as cited in Brock, Dodds, Jarvis & Olusoga, 2009). Critically, Bruner demonstrated that play, when freely chosen, is "more inventive, successful and persistent" (as cited in Brock et al., 2009, p. 90).

The curriculum *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) places importance on the emergent curriculum through following children's interests based on an understanding of sociocultural perspectives. Curriculum that follows a universal or prescriptive edict based on child-centred human development theories is potentially disrupted by using interests to build knowledge and understandings (Duhn & Craw, 2010). Interests, as the starting points for learning, focus on the child's funds of knowledge and includes family and community experiences (Hedges, Cullen & Jordon, 2010). Such a pedagogical approach adds richness to the play based curriculum. The research reported here was based in early childhood centres where interest based pedagogy is practised alongside developmental theory.

## Methods

The data method involved interviewing 14 teachers in three focus groups, in three different early childhood settings in one region of New Zealand - one kindergarten (Tui), and two care and education settings (Kiwi and Weka). The settings were selected from a range of locations based on socio-economic status and one differed in service provision. Kiwi and Weka are full day care and education settings that open from 7.30am to 5.00pm Monday to Friday and Tui is a kindergarten that opens from 8.30am to 2.30pm, Monday to Friday. Interviews of one hour duration were conducted in each setting, with each focus group. Participants were asked to describe, in general terms, the boys in their setting and how they played. The starter statements were deliberately open to generate discussion. The interviews were taped and transcribed and the transcripts were returned to participants for verification and authentication. The data was coded using Martalock's (2012) image of the child. Martalock's image "refers to what people think about children's capabilities, development, motivations, purpose and agency" (p. 3). A constant comparative method was then applied to "continuously compare the views and experiences" of the participants to consider not just similarities but important differences (Barbour, 2001, par. 9).

Purposive sampling is most useful when knowledge and experience is sought for a particular cultural phenomena and the participants are available and willing to contribute (Eitken, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). The research did not aim to

create generalisations but rather to generate insights that support conversations and reflections in early childhood settings about how teachers talk and position boys.

The participants were 14 female teachers ranging in ages from 23 to 64 years representing a cross generational perspective. There was also a range of teaching experience; three had two to five years, six had five to ten years, and five had over 10 years' experience. Thirteen teachers were fully qualified with either a three year diploma or degree in early childhood education and one was a student teacher. All the teachers worked with three and four year olds with the exception of one who also worked with two year olds.

One limitation of this research is that the participants are all female. This was not deliberate. The settings were selected for the reasons identified and the established relationships (whanaungatanga). Some may see the existing relationships as a bias but it may also be a strength as trust is already established.

The research procedures, ethical guidelines and protocols of a tertiary educational institute directed and informed this research. Pseudonyms are used for the ECE centre and chosen by the participants to protect confidentiality.

## **Results and discussion**

Farmer's (2012) three propositions: boys' capabilities and competence as learners; boys' physicality; and following boys' interests are used to frame the commonalities and the differences identified within the capabilities category.

### **Boys' capabilities and competence as learners**

The boys' capacity for leadership was evident in the way the teachers spoke of the trust they placed in the boys' ability to organise themselves, be responsible and make decisions. This capability was discussed in relationship to the boys' gun play, wrestling, rough and tumble, jousting and super-hero play, all described as popular and current play interests. Teachers described boys as active agents in their own learning. The teachers at Tui used the example of boys creating their own wrestling play, establishing the rules and then policing them. Elsa (Tui) stated: "Someone (another child) will usually facilitate that play...you know one of the older boys". She described how a mat, acting as the boundary, was set up by the boys and the rules, once settled amongst them, were monitored responsibly by the group designated leader. One rule was when a child stepped off the mat they were opting out of the game. This particular group knew all the wrestling characters of the television series, calling on what Hedges et al. (2010) described as their funds of knowledge and shared cultural experience. Evidence of the boys' responsibility involved ensuring no one was hurt and that the wrestling games were played with fairness. This image of boys as responsible disrupts stereotypical biological determinism (see Farmer, 2012; Vagle, 2012); the idea that boys' behaviour is seen as 'natural', both supporting and excusing boys' negative behaviour as 'boys will be boys'.

A different example of boys' leadership was described in the Weka centre when a boy became the teacher and the teacher the learner – showing the principle of ako in action. Ako is a Māori/Pacific education term meaning both to teach and learn (Pere, 1997). In this case, the boy's family was involved in kick boxing martial art and the early childhood teachers facilitated this interest in a constructive way. The child was appreciated as the expert and was encouraged to teach the kicks to the teachers and the other children. The teachers admitted the kick boxing could be challenging when it "turned quite rough, quite quickly" (Rose, Weka). However, rather than discouraging the play, it was supervised by the teacher using a punching bag where the children could learn and practice different kicks. The child's expertise was validated and affirmed as he shared his kick boxing identity.

Teachers viewed the boys as problem solvers, negotiators and helpers, and this impacted on the timing (or not) of teachers' interventions. Teachers believed it was important not to intervene too soon in boys' physical play or disputes,

but to wait to see how the children would manage the situation themselves: “I think most of the time they work it out for themselves...we try to let the children solve it themselves before we step in” (Tracey, Kiwi). I “just watch and see what happens (first) and it often ends, runs a natural course and...they go off and play” (Glenys, Weka).

Boys were also described as “enjoying real work” (Elsa, Tui) such as weeding in the garden, shovelling bark, and sweeping. This usually involved a team of ‘workers’ where negotiation and co-operation were required. It appeared that three and four year old boys, when given the opportunities for helpfulness and leadership, took on the roles willingly.

The boys’ love of literature was highlighted in Kiwi and Weka: “I’ve got to say they love books, (yeah), boys love sitting down with a teacher one on one or in small groups and having a story read to them” (Evie, Tui). The image of boys as readers is a powerful one, given the negativity sometimes associated with boys’ lack of achievement and their supposed ‘failure’ in this area of the curriculum (see De Vos, 2007; Gunn, 2012). Others commented, “I suppose it’s also about the book, finding books that entice them, anything (scary), that’s got an element of scariness they love (Chicky, Tui), “or poos (laughter) or bottoms” (Baker, Tui). The teachers delighted in the boys’ senses of humour. Pedagogically, they are intentionally selecting books that invite boys’ participation. It is vital that boys construct images of themselves as readers and that teachers play a critical role in fostering a love for books.

The teachers at Weka reported having some boys whom they considered emotionally immature and a few from unsettled family environments. These boys were easily frustrated and cried readily - “we try to encourage them to really calm down first, get them to a calm state before they can deal with what’s happening” (Daisy, Weka). A breathing technique was used for this purpose. Another described how important it was to “give them hugs, [so the children could] realise they’re still wanted and loved (Lee, Weka)”. These teachers, drawing on knowledge from neurology research, considered it essential to meet the emotional needs of the child first before any learning was possible. For this centre, filling the children’s ‘emotional tanks’ was a priority and they actively worked as a team to achieve this.

Commonly reported amongst the early childhood teachers was an acceptance of difference and a desire to avoid stereotyping. The way teachers avoided stereotypes was to discuss the importance of seeing each child’s individuality. “I look at their interests, it doesn’t matter if they’re girls or boys, there are ones who like climbing, there are ones who like drawing” (Glenys, Weka). However, Vagle (2012) argues that when teachers reference individualism they are placing emphasis on western developmental theory. In this view, individualism can be problematic because it reflects a specific cultural world view. For example, independence or interdependence. If teachers follow a sociocultural approach, then the focus must be on the relationships between individuals. That is not to say there is no recognition of the uniqueness of each individual but, “individual identities are formed in dialogue with others and encountered in relationships” (Rinaldi, 2005). This focus on relationships aligns with an indigenous Māori perspective where weight is given to interdependence (Pere, 1997).

Vagle (2012) argues that assumptions about developmental norms must be continually disrupted because such theories may create a bias that negatively and unintentionally impacts on boys’ learning. This is not to ignore developmental domains but to recognise their limitations and how they may be constraining opportunities for learning. When teachers focus on the boys’ capabilities, they are disrupting deficit age/stage developmental views.

### **Boys’ physicality**

Across the three focus groups, the physical nature of boys was mentioned 18 times. There was a strong image portrayed of boys as energetic and physically active, as “big movers” (Jane, Kiwi). Common physical interests included ball play, chasing, wrestling, jousting, gardening and superhero play. In all three settings, the boys’ learning and development was mainly located in outdoor environments. This was not surprising, in a culture with a long history of

physically active play, nature based learning and where emphasis is placed on the critical importance of outdoor play spaces, for healthy optimum learning and development (Cooper, 2015).

The physicality of boys was definitely valued by the teachers and, importantly, it was responded to positively and encouraged rather than suppressed. However, some caution is required with this image. Occasionally, boys who did not fit the normative discourse were mentioned as different, such as Glenys (Weka) stating, "It's usually the quieter boys" who participate in art experiences. One boy at the Kiwi centre was described as very artistic and creative, as if physicality and artistic ability were mutually exclusive. To avoid stereotyping boys, teachers need to reflect on the language used to describe identities and to engage with the idea that multiple diverse identities are probable (Gunn, 2012). Indeed it has been suggested there is more diversity among a group of boys than between boys and girls (Haller-Jordan, 2012). Critically, the image of boys as capable artists or nurturers was not foregrounded and the absence is worthy of reflection.

The opportunity to provide physical challenges within the outdoor early childhood settings was discussed. "We would like to have more risk here especially for our boys...and even our girls" (Baker, Tui). Tui has a tree that the children love to climb. Mats are placed under the tree and a teacher supervises. Baker (Tui) then stated, "And they climb to the top of anything, to the very top and leap. And half of us says, are they just pushing themselves, and the other half, oh what if they fall and we'll be in trouble. It's a real dilemma." Tension clearly exists between maintaining a safe environment and recognising that boys might experience boredom from having outgrown the physical challenges within the constraints of the settings' outdoor environment. Evie (Tui) recalled having high climbing bars in her centre that were removed. She commented, "They were really high and ...such a good challenge and no matter how old the children were or how long they had been here, they could always set themselves new challenges and new risks." There was regret that changed regulations required the removal of this particular piece of equipment. Tui and Kiwi centres accessed larger, open spaces that bordered their premises where their children could kick balls, run, and ride bikes more freely. Teachers, mindful of the need to provide for children's physicality and recognising the limited space in some early childhood outdoor environments, must actively seek regular opportunities available in the community.

Interestingly, physically active play was considered an important aspect of boys' learning and development, not so much for the development of physical skills but for supporting them to gain dispositions such as self-regulation and leadership. "When you allow it [wrestling] they learn their limits and they manage it [not hurting others]" (Chicky, Tui). When teachers focus on the potential learning dispositions involved, they shift the focus from the physicality and safety anxiety. Rather than potentially shutting down the play, teachers seek ways to embrace and provide opportunities for physical challenge. Overall, there was a consensus that action orientated boys needed action orientated opportunities for learning that were child-initiated. "I think we work quite hard at making it a good place to be for boys within the limitations [of early childhood settings]" (Baker, Tui).

At Kiwi, the boys' desire to be action orientated and outdoors was considered slightly problematic when literacy was mentioned. Tracey (Kiwi) commented, "Like, you've got to come up with ideas...to get the numeracy and literacy into their play ...you've sort of got to be a bit inventive, try to think of ways to incorporate that into their play outdoors." The binary oppositional positioning of girls and boys was visible because teacher-structured literacy experiences were provided in the hope that children would voluntarily engage with them. Girls engaged with the 'table top experiences' but these did not attract the boys who were usually outside. Gunn (2012) reminds us that such binary positioning is unhelpful. Teachers' knowledge is critical as wise practice requires firstly, understanding of the holistic nature of early childhood education and secondly, recognition of the opportunities that arise within children's play contexts where teachers' intentional intervention fosters literacy and numeracy. Rich conceptual language from the teacher is vital, along with sensitive intervention that does not rob the child of opportunities to play. These same teachers described an example of how the boys' interest in vehicles, when one brought a monster truck to the centre, resulted in the

construction of a ramp for it. The boys “connected the spouting together, didn’t they? To see how long they could make it” (Danni, Kiwi). Together, the boys and teachers were “measuring distances, how far, how high” (Tracey, Kiwi). Within the framework of *Te Whāriki*, sociocultural approaches require kaiako/teacher(s) to attentively notice the child’s interests and then, sensitively balancing contribution and intervention, determine how best to support and progress their learning (Te Kete Ipurangi, 2017).

The word aggressive or aggression was used in a range of contexts in the focus groups; twelve times by teachers at Weka, although none in Tui and only twice, in relation to play, in the Kiwi centre. The image of boys as being more aggressive and physical than girls was more prevalent at the Weka centre. Comments such as, “Yeah, I think a lot of boys are [more] on the aggressive side than girls or the more physical side than girls” (Glynis, Weka). The use of the word aggressive creates a negative image and may unintentionally position boys as problematic (De Vos, 2007; Major & Santoro, 2013; Pansu et al., 2016). “I think the boys are quicker at getting to the aggression stage than the girls” (Daisy, Weka). Again, positioning the boys as opposite and different from girls mostly works against the boys in terms of establishing a negative image.

### **Interests as starting points for learning journeys**

The teachers mentioned children’s self-initiated interests a total of nine times and provided examples of actively integrating the boys’ interests into the curriculum. Reflecting on a developing interest in large construction, the Weka teachers offered a provocation to the children by introducing large open-ended construction material to a large under-utilised outside area. Lee (Weka) described, “We provided pallets, big long pieces of wood, and all these materials that they could use to build to their hearts’ content. [They made] structures, huge, cars, houses... this construction went on for weeks.” This example demonstrates how growth and learning happens when children are able to revisit over and over again; recursive learning (Vagle, 2012). Scenarios such as this one reminds teachers that rich curriculum experiences, built on children’s interests, contribute to deep level learning (Laevers, 2005) especially when children have opportunities to revisit them. These experiences are inherently satisfying and absorbing to the child. Offering the provocation in this way, disrupts the developmental concept of learning as ‘moving forward’ in some pre-conceived linear fashion to reach a pre-conceived destination.

Teachers reported that gun play, a current interest in Tui and Weka, was just another interest that came and went. “Well we don’t discourage gun play so duplo blocks, anything can become a gun, a stick can be a gun...we just see that as an open ended resource...they’re being creative” Elsa (Tui). The teachers focused on the potential learning and mediated with rules such as holding a gun licence, learning about gun safety and the rules of hunting engagement. “Guns are just another prop...blended in to just about every imaginative game” (Evie, Tui). In the Weka centre, the children were required to construct their own guns for play because they were “not so aggressive with those kind of guns” (Lee, Weka). This response had occurred after a boy had arrived with a very realistic toy gun that had created issues (unspecified at interview) for teachers and children. Hunting and fishing are part of the cultural context in this region and the play highlights the highly contextualised nature of learning (Vagle, 2012). Clearly, the teachers respected the boys’ choices and worked with them rather than attempting to prohibit the play. They also recognised the children’s ability to know the difference between pretend and real play, as Louge and Detour (2011) confirmed in their study.

Play and projects based on children’s interests and shared community events is one way of disrupting developmental perspectives because it avoids thematic pre-determined curriculum that may or may not interest children. When teachers engage in interests as starting points for learning they open up potential learning “rather than close down complexity” (Evans, 2015, p. 35). The focus group teachers were not biased against the boys’ play interests but positively and intentionally worked with them. They supported the boys to explore and connect with their cultural

experiences, and what was important to them. This potentially creates more engaged learning. Team work in resolving potential tensions and challenges was also evident.

In all three early childhood settings, boys were consistently described by the teachers as busy, energetic and physically active. “I think boys innately want to go faster, go higher, and go further” (Chicky, Tui). They liked to be outside, their social rules were more flexible than girls’, they had wonderful imaginations, enjoyed constructive play, super-hero play and had great senses of humour. “Yeah, lots of physical games based on their form of dramatic play and superhero play” (Jane, Kiwi). The teachers spoke with a great deal of affection and enjoyment about their engagement with boys.

### **Conclusion**

From the discussion with teachers in three New Zealand early childhood education settings, a strong image of boys as active participants in their own learning was evident, with a definite focus on boys’ strengths that reflected sociocultural theory and *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017). A positive image of boys with diverse capabilities was revealed. Boys were viewed as leaders, problem solvers, helpers and, importantly, capable of taking responsibility. Teachers must foster responsibility at a young age as it disrupts biological determinism. Where context impacted on boys’ emotional capacity to cope, teachers recognised their role in filling boys’ emotional needs before learning was possible. The physicality of boys was embraced, even as the teachers acknowledged some of the limitations of early childhood outdoor environments where the outdoor spaces are considered inadequate. Teachers must actively seek regular opportunities within their local communities to provide for this physicality. When discussing boys’ identities, it is still imperative to reflect on the language used and to draw attention to unconscious western developmental norms and stereotyping. Overall, the teachers focused on dispositions for learning that supported boys as learners. When boys’ interests and capabilities are embraced, possibilities for learning are realised. Opportunities arise within children’s play interests for sensitive interventions that foster literacy and numeracy, but must not rob the child of their play. These images of boys were captured at a particular moment in time and while boys as readers was mentioned, boys as artists or nurturers was not foregrounded and that absence is worthy of reflection and future research.

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