

Seriously playful teachers: An intentional approach

Christine Vincent-Snow | *New Zealand Tertiary College*

Phoebe Tong | *New Zealand Tertiary College*

In Aotearoa New Zealand, children's play-based learning is fundamental for successful learning and development and is embedded throughout the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017). While play may be viewed as active learning, playfulness is the attitude that encourages, nourishes and guides play. The curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), describes playfulness as a life-long disposition (habit of learning) that combines knowledge, skills, and attitudes. As such, playfulness is a way of doing and being which stems from within (being) and influences our actions and way of life (doing). It is our view as authors that in an early childhood environment, playfulness is often reserved for children while the teacher's role is seen as supportive, informed and serious. However, the benefits of playful teachers cannot be overlooked, as early childhood professionals should not only promote play for children but also for themselves (Bruno, Gonzalez-Mena, Hernandez & Sullivan, 2013).

It is our belief that when adults reflect on their childhood, play is remembered as active, happy experiences where they were deeply involved in the moment. When growing older, play becomes less frequent and eventually restricted to activities such as sports, card games and online gaming. However, for early childhood teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand, *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) supports teachers' abilities to engage with children through their playful spirits, while at the same time bringing their knowledge and skills into both the environment and children's learning experiences. In this article, we seek to awaken in early childhood teachers the sleeping giant of playfulness, as the powerful effect this has on children's learning, the early childhood environment and the teachers themselves, is discussed. A playful approach to teaching is promoted, along with strategies to incorporate this pedagogy into teachers' practice.

Play and work, playfulness and seriousness

Can early childhood teachers be serious in their playful practice or is play at odds with our work? For many, being playful and having fun are viewed as frivolous, as if to work seriously is the only way to consider the world (Sansom, 2011). To address the perceived division between play and work, we need to first re-define early childhood teaching and whether play and playfulness should be included within that role.

John Dewey (as cited in Skilbeck, 2017), who was an influential educational reformer and philosopher, reminds us to harmonise seriousness and playfulness. He explains that "to be playful and serious at the same time is possible, and it defines the ideal mental condition" (p. 2). To further investigate the meaning of the ideal mental condition, requires us to re-conceptualise the nature of our work. What if early childhood education is not merely a job but an art of teaching? Dewey's ideal to harmonise seriousness and playfulness represents the best mental attitude of the teacher (Skilbeck, 2017). He suggests that incorporating a play attitude in work is art.

Playfulness needs to be taken seriously as "both play and fun deserve serious consideration as a valid part of a holistic education and as a way of life" (Sansom, 2011, p. 80). Playfulness acts as a "thinking device" for meaning making (Parker-Rees, 2002, p. 54). By allowing fun and playfulness, teachers can utilise the power of the imagination to open up new horizons and find alternative ways to live their lives (Sansom, 2011). After all, playfulness is an attitude of mind that drives behaviour and ways of working and living (Skilbeck, 2017). The spirit of playfulness in early childhood

education gives teachers a lens to view their professional practices in a holistic way while working becomes a way of living.

Benefits of playfulness

A playful environment is vital for children and teachers. Young children learn to adapt to the daily rhythms, routines, culture and language of their environment. Playful engagement between teacher and child brings joy into their daily routine experiences. Routines frequently divide children's day between play and necessary individual or group experiences such as lunch and sleep time (Singer, 2015). As young children bring their playful attitude into each area of their life, it is important for teachers to engage in a playful approach that breaks down these divisions (Singer, 2015). When children enter the bathroom to wash their hands before lunch, they may suddenly begin to laugh and playfully jostle each other. Teachers can be thoughtful of the level of adaptation required of the child and bring a playful approach into the moment. Teachers can make these transitions smooth and enjoyable by using playful strategies such as suggesting children tiptoe into the bathroom like little mice and then model this as they playfully support the child. Such creative teaching connects to the playful and serious art of teaching advocated by Dewey (as cited in Skilbeck, 2017). This approach reduces stress on all involved, and contributes to the positive harmony of the environment (Parker-Rees, 2002). This playful, positive environment then supports children's further joyfulness, creativity, and flexibility (Pinchover, 2017).

Teachers readily recognise their role in planning and resourcing children's play-based learning, using a playful approach, which includes playing with and alongside children. The involvement of the teacher increases the length, frequency and complexity of the children's play (Pinchover, 2017). This does not mean that teachers lead or dominate children's play. Rather, in our former roles as ECE teachers, we have frequently found that meaningful learning experiences have developed when we play alongside children. For example, children's block play is enriched when we crouch down, play alongside, create structures and extend concepts while engaging in a monologue alongside the child that verbalizes our actions, plans, and strategies. This playful strategy involves intentional teaching using language to support children's content knowledge and comprehension of concepts such as balance, gravity, geometry, and even physics as cars race down ramps. When children choose to merge their play with our own, the children will take over our resources and engage in deeper, longer, richer learning experiences. This experience often results in co-constructed learning. We could then leave them to engage in their own deepened, serious, play experiences.

Teachers' wellbeing is also supported by adopting a playful approach. Playfulness supports teachers' happiness, work and relational satisfaction and their ingenuity and creativity (Proyer, as cited in Pinchover, 2017). Playfulness and creativity also increase a teacher's sense of control as routines and duties become opportunities for seriously playful, creative, teaching and learning (Parker-Rees, 2002). Adopting a playful pedagogical approach affords both the children and the teachers a more joyous environment that promotes positivity and fun (Rose, as cited in Walsh, McMillan & McGuinness, 2017). Eventually, such positivity permeates the teaching team and thus nurtures healthy, strong work relationships.

Early childhood professionals

Playfulness is a "joyful readiness for anything" (Kane, as cited in Walsh et al., 2017, p. 199). It is the "disposition to engage in play and a personality trait that exists and is expressed across the lifespan" (Barnett, as cited in Pinchover, 2017, p. 2). To be playful encompasses the value to stay optimistic and it hones problem solving skills (Bruno, Gonzalez-Mena, Hernandez & Sullivan, 2013). Walsh et al. (2017) depict the key personal characteristics of a playful professional as humour, flexibility, warmth, affection, curiosity and love of learning. While these qualities form a

strong foundation to understand playfulness for teaching, we contend that there is a lot more to be unpacked. Each person has a unique style of playfulness. We acknowledge there are multiple ways for teachers to be playful and this diversity can be a result of contextual, social and cultural influences. Bruno, Gonzalez-Mena, Hernandez and Sullivan (2013) shares that she prefers to play in the head (daydream, pretend, imagine, and let thoughts flow), whereas others may find sports or dance more pleasurable. Likewise, as children our play was also full of imagination as we pretended, and creatively problem solved. Our curiosity underpinned our childhood wonder and continues to drive our serious playfulness, inquiry and learning. We challenge you to engage in authentic reflections on your childhood playfulness and its current manifestation.

Rather than being frivolous, playfulness in teaching is a highly skilled task. As early childhood teachers, we were privileged to be able to learn from children, who are the masters of play. For teachers, playfulness means to have light-heartedness when encountering the unexpected and non-linear developments of our lives. Children can teach us the power and enjoyment of process over product. When a toddler learns to walk, both falling and walking are exciting moments to be celebrated. Playful teachers smile and laugh. They are relationally skilled, warm and caring. Such teachers are light hearted and possess energy leaving space for spontaneity in their planning. Playful teachers are able to cope when children take their learning experiences in a different direction than expected. The teacher’s playful curiosity inspires curiosity in children, even in those children who show the least interest (Pinchover, 2017). Playful and curious teachers love to learn and inspire learning. The playful teacher is very aware, very prepared while still flexible. They are able to observe, plan carefully and organize skillfully; then engage with the play when appropriate, joyfully, showing their flexibility. The following figure summarises playful qualities for teaching young children drawing on Walsh et al. (2017) and Pinchover (2017)’s work.



Figure 1: Key qualities of playful teachers in early childhood education (adapted from Walsh, McMillan & McGuinness 2017 and Pinchover 2017) by Vincent-Snow and Tong, 2019)

Different approaches to playful teaching

Since teaching and learning are reciprocal, it is important for teachers to understand how children learn in order to refine their teaching practice. A reflection on different developmental theories is key for the development of playfulness. In a Piagetian approach, learners are seen as active explorers and an emphasis is on the optimal learning environment (Hill, 2011). Teachers tend to work with carefully structured environments, with specific resources, equipment and purposefully designed play areas, however observation is preferred over interaction (Hill, 2011). While a constructivist approach to learning is valuable, *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) encourages teachers to also consider other theories. There is more to learning than the environment. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory reminds us that relationships with people are vital. From this perspective, teachers co-construct, co-explore and co-play with the children. Playfulness creates a shared space for both adults and children.

From a critical perspective, teaching is an ethical and political process that seeks to understand children's learning (Hill, 2011) and promotes equitable practices (MoE, 2017). These three strands underpin our suggestions for practising playfulness in teaching. To take a playful approach to teaching is a courageous step towards equity in regard to the power imbalance between adults and children. Agency and rights are at the core of playful teaching. To empower children in adult-child interactions, teachers must move away from a hierarchical position and aspire to be equal partners with children. Playful teaching is ethical because we care about children's rights, their way of learning, their inquisitive mind, and their everyday experiences. Teachers observe and facilitate children's learning without segregating children from themselves. Different strategies and roles are embraced to adapt to children and their families' needs. In our opinion, teachers intentionally choose a light-hearted approach to address difficult situations to uphold the mana of children, teachers and families.

Strategies for playful teaching

The first strategy for playful teachers is to share their childhood games with colleagues and children. In the writing of this article when we discussed our childhood play experiences, we discovered that some games crossed cultural, global and generational differences. For example, hopscotch is played in China, Australia and New Zealand. Other examples included that we both folded paper to create chatterboxes and played jump rope. In early childhood settings, teachers can use these games to support children transitioning from diverse cultures, helping to create a sense of belonging as they recognise games similar, or the same, as those played in their homeland. It is important that teachers enrich these experiences by playing with the children, modelling the skills and emphasizing the shared joy. As they are multi-generational, parents and whānau may also recognise these games, which supports connections between home, culture, and centre. Parents and whānau can also teach children and teachers' additional games from their childhood and shared learning can occur.

The second strategy is creating a playful mat-time. Mat-times can be joyful experiences. Silliness can be used as a teaching strategy for mathematical estimation, for example, using humor to over and under estimate sizes with children. When the smallest animal is placed at the top of the sequencing order and the teacher identifies it as the biggest, strongest animal, children laugh and excitedly correct the order (Walsh et al., 2017). This can develop into rich discussions and peer based learning experiences where the knowledgeable child teaches those less knowledgeable. This strategy lightens the risk of achieving a pre-determined result.

The third strategy is to transform stories through dramatic play experiences. Playfully creating excitement through language and literacy is highlighted as children and teachers creatively act out the directions in the story. Many teachers are familiar with the joy of joining in the children's bear hunt, their excitement mounting as they follow the story. Another example is when a pulley system is placed across the room, teachers and children transport the

lighthouse keepers' lunch over their upturned heads. Playful reading-strategies can be used with purposefully selected books such as a funny book that warns readers not to open it. Following the instruction, we can slam the book shut with a silly face. As children gasped and questioned what we were doing, we can explain that we are doing what we are told. Do they really want us to open it again? Why? What could possibly be inside? The children are engaged in a meaningful dialogic reading experience where they hold power and guide both our actions and their own learning. In each of these experiences, children hold a central role and the literature is embedded in their play and language-learning (Walsh et al., 2017).

Playfulness in teaching shifts teachers' practice from an observing, even supervisory role to one of intentionally engaging in a community of learners (Walsh et al., 2017). Here power is shared and children learn expectations, routines, and co-construct knowledge in a creative, joyful, empowering environment (Pinchover, 2017). Early childhood education has progressed historically from adult-centred teaching, child-centred learning into the current trend of a co-constructed learning experience shared between children and teachers (Sellers, 2013). Through playfulness, power imbalances are reduced, stress is positively released, and the environment changes to a state of positive harmony. Being playful teacher takes courage and skill to de-construct past perceptions of roles and pedagogical practices in order to awaken the inner sleeping giant of playfulness.

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