

Play and the professional e.c. teacher: A personal reflection

By Sue Stover

There is more than a little danger in holding on to an idea. The willingness to innovate, to be creative, to consider critically – these all niggle away at the value in holding firm to an idea. This has been one of my dilemmas as an academic in early childhood education. A child may still build sand castles or dig tunnel; but whereas it might be understood in the 1950s or the 1980s as ‘playing’, in the 2010s, it is likely to be interpreted as ‘educational’. So should I let go of the primacy of play in my understanding of how children grow and learn?

I’ve wondered whether play has become problematic because of the educationalisation of early childhood (Stover, 2011); play and education can be awkward companions. But also awkward is the relationship between play and the perception of professionalism amongst early childhood (e.c.) teachers. Fromberg (2003) described the professional status of e.c.e. teachers as a “public relations nightmare” (p. 177) in part because “most exemplary” teachers appeared playful.

This article draws together some reflections on play and professionalism in the historic context of the educationalisation of early childhood. Looking historically, I suggest that they are both issues whose visibility and vitality seem to vary in response to major social and political drivers. It also looks ahead and considers what a review of Te Whāriki could include, especially the inclusion of greater emphasis on learning through play. So it is worthwhile considering the idea that play and professionalisation have been tools – perhaps still are – tools of the larger reform projects.

My personal awareness of the tension between professionalism and ‘learning through play’ relates to one day in the late 1990s when I was working in a professional development contract. Our project director came into the office and said in passing that the next application for government funding could not use the word ‘play’ as the emphasis needed to be on learning outcomes. At the time it seemed a pragmatic and sensible way to navigate the politics of funding. We who worked in PD knew that we were part of a professionalising project – arguably a reform project. The force behind out PD work was the link between funding of services and the introduction of quality assurance systems articulated in the revised ‘Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices’ (the ‘DOPs’) (Ministry of Education, 1998). However, I did not consider that that professionalising project was problematising how centres understood children ‘learning through play’ because play, and learning through play remained visible in the then new early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, especially in the Exploration strand (Ministry of Education, 1996).

But when one of the kuia of playcentre pointed out to me that the first substantial commentary on *Te Whāriki* (Nuttall, 2003) barely mentioned play, I realised there had been a significant shift in how children were understood to be learning. When I started researching, I realised others had already noticed it. Ten years earlier, Lex Grey, one of the pioneers of e.c. teacher education (especially in playcentre but also kindergartens), had noticed that the tenuous place of play within teacher education. Already in retirement, he told an audience of e.c. student teachers that he was worried about the institutionalisation of children “cooped up with adults who did not know how to play” (Grey, 1993, p. 43). The shift was also noticed by Helen May (2004). During the years between first and fifth Early Childhood Conventions (1975 and 1991), she identified a paradigm shift in thinking away from ‘free play’ and towards a greater emphasis on the teacher’s role in ensuring all children were learning.

Drawing on material obtained under the Official Information Act, I found that in the lead up to *Te Whāriki*’s launch, there was still debate about whether ‘free play’ should not be given greater visibility within the e.c. curriculum. Advice to the Minister from his officials in 1995 argued that while many e.c. teachers believed that “child-centred environment and plenty of free play” would enable children to establish their own suitable learning objectives, this was “too vague” as a basis for a national curriculum (McMahon, 1995, p. 3).

Looking back at my decade in professional development, I can now see that a deliberate discursive shift was occurring. This involved new language but also new understandings the DOPs introduced the language of ‘quality’ and of ‘education’ (Nuttall & Edwards, 2007). Although foregrounding of play, ‘learning through play’ and ‘free play’ maintained currency outside of early childhood (for example, within physical activity initiatives and health advocates, see Ginsberg, 2006; SPARC, 2007), in the context of early childhood education in this country, from the late 1990s onwards, learning through play, and especially ‘free play’, was an ‘old’ discourse. It had limited vitality within a professionalising ‘quality-driven’ educational systems. I also recognise that holding on to the idea that children ‘learn through play’ meant that I would also be labeled as old fashioned, or out of date.

The other point to make is to ask what are the drivers behind this shift in discourse? In other words – what reforms were being pursued through the professionalisation and educationalisation of the sector? The major reforms that I witnessed have been the two-headed drive for quality; one head being the feminist-linked drive to provide widespread easily available quality childcare so that mothers of young children have real choices (Browne et al., 1978; Cook, 1985; May, 1992b; Stover, 2011). The other ‘head’ was introduction of neoliberal managerialist systems of governance, foreshadowing their controversial introduction in the compulsory education sector (Jesson, 2001; Scrivens, 2002). Across the new e.c. sector, the drive for professional

status of its teachers has its origins in this shift (Adams, Vossler, & Scrivens, 2005; Duhn, 2010; Scrivens, 2002).

And yet recently, the professional status of early childhood teachers has lost its political momentum. Regulations and policy have continued to make space for the amateur working in e.c. services. When the new Licensing Criteria appeared in 2008, the word ‘teacher’ is hardly visible. The non-professional term “adult providing education and care” is used throughout (see for example, Ministry of Education and New Zealand Government, 2008, p. 5). Two years later, a national report charting a future for teaching as a profession did not consider the e.c. teachers (Education Workforce Advisory Group, 2010).

From 2002 with the rollout of the 10 year strategic plan, professionalisation of e.c. teachers continued. Until it stopped. That was in 2010 when the government removed incentive funding for centres to hire fully qualified staff (Ministry of Education, 2010). This was the result from not only a change in government but also the flow on effects of the global financial crisis of 2008, and the likelihood that that the target of 100% qualified by 2012 would not be met (Ministry of Education Data Management Unit, 2010).

So while new professional paradigm is evident, it is not a convincing shift. In this space of professional ambiguity, a new critique of Te Whāriki suggests that it is deficient in several areas, including its inadequate emphasis on play (Taguma, Litjiens, & Makowiecki, 2012).

Looking further back into early childhood history, there are also patterns of reforms which have shaped and re-shaped what eventually becomes familiar to contemporary early childhood participants. Arguably, it was during the 1930s in this country that the first national project to raise the relative status of learning and especially the value of play during children’s earliest years. The 1930s was the decade when as the new director of the New Zealand Council for Educational Research, C.E. Beeby brought Susan Isaacs to New Zealand and gave her a platform to share her common sense ideas about how children learn through play (Alcorn, 1999; Gardner, 1969; May, 1992a; McDonald, Goldblatt, & Barlow, 2003). The basis for her ideas was both her training as a psychotherapist and her experiences running an innovative English free play programme at Malting House. As the president of the English branch of the New Education Fellowship, Susan Isaacs was on her way to Australia. Her practical suggests and humanistic ethos embodied the ideas of international Progressive Educators, including C.E. Beeby who went on to become New Zealand’s Director of Education in 1940 (Mason, 1944; May, 2009; Prochner, 2009).

For very young children, what Progressive Education meant pedagogically derived from new psychological insights; watch for children’s expressions of curiosity within spaces that enabled movement and choice of meaningful activity. Susan Isaacs

articulated systems to support these ideas, advocated for well-informed parents and illustrated how psychoanalytic insights could be used to analyse observations of children busy at their freely chosen play (Isaacs, 1929/1968; May, 2009). Arguably, during this period, if there was a reform project, it was to reform the child – to allow the child to develop in a psychologically healthy way (May, 1992a, 2002).

During this period, the early childhood education professionals were kindergarten teachers. While they had been Froebelian-inspired for several generations and spoke in terms of play, children's activities were often channeled into a narrow range of activities (May, 2009; Prochner, 2009). Although adventurous kindergarten teachers were experimenting Progressive ideas, including project-based pedagogies (Sewell & Bethell, 2009) in 1930s and 1940s, this was not necessarily a widespread phenomenon and when the first preschool advisor was appointed in 1948, one of her main projects was to encourage kindergarten teachers to give children more time and space to play (Alcorn, 1999; May, 2009).

In 1970, some visiting US academics wrote a report on the state of early education in New Zealand, and unsurprisingly found a strong emphasis on learning through play, which they said, was understood to be a medium of “self realization, focusing on the present interests and abilities of the children and encouraging any emerging behavior, so long as it not destructive beyond reasonable and safe limits, as judged by the observing adults” (Birch & Birch, 1970, p. 11). They described the children they observed in childcare services as being kept “safe and sound”, and “occupied” (p.12). While no service had a national curriculum, kindergarten sessions were “remarkable” in their uniformity, while playcentre supervisors “utilized principles learned while in training” supported by a “substantial body of curriculum literature” (Birch & Birch, 1970, p. 13). This is not surprising because although playcentres were largely run by volunteers, their pedagogical leaders – people like Gwen Somerset and Lex Grey – were professionally recognised and it was they that provided several generations of parents, kindergarten teachers and childcare workers with accessible, locally developed ways for ensuring how best to enable children to learn through play (Grey, 1958, 1974a, 1974b; Somerset, 1975, 1987).

Yet the relationship was distant between the diverse services – they were not yet a ‘sector’ – and academics and educational leaders in government. Again the visiting academics reporting in 1970 provide insight. They wrote that government “education leaders”, saw playcentre “folk” as “very nice people but they are also very much befuddled” (Birch & Birch, 1970, p. 9) because in part because of the limited interest in what academics might be able to provide. Parents were seen by playcentre leaders as “perfectly competent to help themselves” without drawing directly on academic expertise (Birch & Birch, 1970).

This suggests not only was learning through play a vital and progressive idea, but also that the knowledge base to support it was accessible to (relative) amateurs; for example, playcentre parents. According to Barney (1975), it was a knowledge base which was not easily available to the tertiary sector. One reason could have been the because there was amongst those active in early childhood services, a degree of mistrust or even animosity toward ‘the academy’; in their textbook on childcare, Smith and Swain (1988) addressed this directly when they wrote: “We do not regard ‘academic’ as a term of abuse” (p. xi). So historically there is an association between play and especially ‘free play’ with an era when there were not strong bonds with the tertiary education sector (the ‘academics’).

Arguably, the traditional services – kindergarten and playcentre – which were following free play programmes, became the reform project of the 1980s. When they were considered through a feminist perspective, sessional provision and demands for voluntary input limited these services were seen as limited (McDonald, 1980). When the movement began towards a united sector with professional leadership and teachers, its research base came from the sociological focus of the new e.c. research community (especially the New Zealand Council for Educational Research) and from the rise of tertiary-based professional e.c. academics with status sufficient to influence policy. The importance of the research and tertiary base provided an alternative authority to the voices of the traditional services. When appointments were made in 1991 for the writing of the proposed early childhood curriculum, it was important that it should be seen to not come from any particular service. Those chosen had close links to childcare and kindergarten, but their professional affiliations were more strongly with the university sector (Te One, 2003).

So Te Whāriki’s genesis is in a relatively new power structure – the interlinked tertiary and research sectors. It provided a broader picture of the sociocultural context in which children learn and grow. Children continue to learn through play, but whether teachers choose to talk in terms of play and learning – that is another question. What would happen to raise the relative status of ‘learning through play’? If it is being encouraged (see Taguma et al., 2012), is there yet another reform project that travels with it?

DISCUSSION

Educationalisation’ is ‘container construct’ of historic and sociological inquiry which broadly focuses on the interplay between education and society (Depaepe, 1998; Depaepe, Herman, Surmont, van Gorp, & Simon, 2008; Depaepe & Smeyers, 2008).

In this discussion, educationalisation is helpful as it draws strong connections between teachers’ quest for status and social reform projects. Drawing on US

experiences, Labaree (2008) identified how the process of educationalisation provides an effective mechanism not necessarily for solving social problems but for responding to and neutralising their potential to disrupt the social problems; an overriding purpose of education is to maintain social order, including by using education to channel disruptive influences.

So - said another way – the status of the e.c. teacher is not fully dependent on the teacher. It also reflects political and economic contexts. What is enabled by offering professional status for e.c. teachers? Yes – there could be better social outcomes for children. However, the creation of the professional early childhood teacher in New Zealand is a neoliberal construct (Duhn, 2010) reflecting and its origins in the educational reforms of the 1990s (Farquhar, 2008; Jesson, 2001; Scrivens, 2002). Moss (2010) maintains that neoliberal drivers that are pushing for greater professionalism and accountability for e.c. teachers are the same drivers that threaten life on earth. He described as “dire” the consequences of a “generation of growing neoliberal influences” founded on a “mythical belief in the self-regulating markets” which fuels a “novelty-driven turbo-consumerism” depleting the environment (p. 12).

While compulsory e.c.e. remains a radical suggestion, the recent early childhood taskforce provided the theoretical justification for such a move: that investment in e.c.e. is an investment in future productive citizens “who give more than they take”; and that high quality teaching is pivotal in this (ECE Taskforce, 2011, p. 4).

In contrast, foregrounding learning through play foregrounds children’s adaptive meaning making capacities (which may be adapting to undesirable social influences), rather than their need for professional teachers. Children don’t need to play with well qualified adults; they can play with unqualified adults, too.

Arguably, if e.c. teachers are to be governed to support a social order based on the marketplace, it is to be done through their professionalisation. That children can learn through play continues to trouble that order.

Holding firmly to the idea that children learn through play is a problematic position to hold in contemporary early childhood settings. Yet holding firmly to the value of professionalising the early childhood workforce is also problematic. Unless we can define a form of professionalism in which playful adults are not a PR disaster and in which, as Moss (2012) says, commercial imperatives are in the backseat, rather the driver’s seat. Worth thinking about. How can we do it?

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