

The Power of Pretending

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While visiting an early childhood centre recently, a small boy dressed as a little dog crawled towards me, panted, and stopped before me for a pat. I patted him on the head and commented on what a quiet, friendly dog he was. He nodded, panted again and his eyes shone. It was mat time at this centre, and a teacher reminded this wee dog that he needed to be back on the mat. He obediently joined the group, sitting at the edge of the mat, filling in time while the teacher decided on the learning that was to happen. The little dog disappeared and wasn't seen again that day.



Later, I reflected on this episode and how there is too little opportunity in many centres for such pretend play to flourish. Sometimes this is because routines dominate the day and children do not have uninterrupted time that is needed for this play to develop. As a result, children are unable to take on new roles that evolve from their imagination. Often, it is because of restrictions placed on children, such as not allowing 'dress-ups' outdoors. But mostly it is because of the teachers' lack of understanding about the importance of pretend play and their giving other routines and activities higher priority.

If we are to fulfill the goal of 'Empowerment' as a guiding Principle of Te Whāriki, then surely pretend play needs to be recognised as a powerful pathway for this to develop. It is very meaningful learning for children. Guy Claxton (2004) reminds us that children learn by watching others around them and soon learn what is acceptable and what is permissible in an early childhood centre. Will children be accepted if they take on new roles such as super heroes? Will teachers allow them to take props and dress ups to new areas and to use resources in ways other than what they may have been intended for? Pretence is a key component of play and vital for a child's empowerment. An opportunity to dream and imagine their own lives, to experience other possible selves.

Re-enacting actual home situations can allow children to make sense of their lives, form their own beliefs and theories and can become serious drama for both boys and girls. Super hero play can also have a positive impact for children as they learn to understand emotions and feelings. However, often super hero play is not permitted in early childhood settings as it is sometimes perceived as aggressive and disruptive to the programme. But if teachers explored possibilities of play alongside children, encouraged co-operative play, offered ideas for both re-direction and turn taking, and refrained from interfering unless necessary, super hero play could be intense, yet very prosocial.

So, why is pretend play so valuable to children's development? Engaging in pretend play, taking on characters and developing themes, allows young children who are not yet able to internalise their thoughts (like older children or adults) to explain their thinking. Through pretend play, they are using more oral language than any other activity. It comes so easily to them, it is

their way of making sense of their world. Pretend play allows children to experiment with relationships and possible interactions and plays an important part in social and emotional development. In turn it leads to development in other areas such as intellectual skills, an opportunity to develop working theories.

Unfortunately, due to the demands for greater accountability in schools today and pressure to accelerate young children's 'academic' learning, time for play in some early childhood settings is either being eliminated or limited, and play is much less often child-initiated or free from the constraints of adult control.

But it is important to recognise that it takes purposeful play for cognitive functions to fully develop, such as problem solving, making rules, higher levels of attention and imagination. Because children's play is self-directed — and therefore meaningful and purposeful to them — they are highly motivated to maintain their engagement. Children who aimlessly wander around during free play are not developing these higher-level thinking skills. Likewise, when children's play activities are directed by adults, initiative is taken out of the children's hands, interest is diminished, and their actions may be aimed at pleasing others rather than thinking about and learning from their own experiences.

Consider the skills and strategies that children need to join in a game with a group of unknown children and the abilities needed to carry out these strategies:

- the language of negotiation,
- the language of persuasion,
- the strategy of who to approach and when,
- the level of involvement to keep everyone happy,
- the ability to avoid, deflect, or defuse conflict (should it arise).

Pretend play fits well within a sociocultural learning environment where relationships with "people, places, and things" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9) strengthen learning for children in social situations. When play involves other people, opportunities arise for children to become aware of others. When there is conflict

in play or when children want the play to continue, some level of negotiation or compromise often needs to occur. This is important learning of life skills. What can be more important than learning to interact with other people and gain an understanding of them?

This could well be some of the "tricky stuff" that Guy Claxton says that young people need to learn to face an uncertain world (Tlold, 2010). Or the "much more" than reading and writing that Amelia Gambetti (2004, p. 39.) talks about as being necessary for the full development of children.

Gambetti talks about this "much more" as having to be visible. But do we make learning in 'pretend play' visible in our assessment practices? Are we able to communicate the thoughts and strategies of children as powerful learning and the outcomes for children as learning dispositions and working theories (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 44)? Clearly, this is important and relevant. How can we encourage and support such pretend play in ECE settings?

Dramatic play areas in early childhood settings are often too structured and pre-planned to fit the theme of the curriculum rather than children's interests and needs (Hyson, 2004). Hyson further notes that,

these efforts often result in play that, while pleasing to adults and easy to manage, is emotionally flat, allowing few opportunities for children to express, experience and construct a genuine understanding of the rich tapestry of human emotion (2004, p. 58).

Sadly, many centres force pre-school children into inappropriate activities and many educators face pressure to start teaching academic skills at a progressively younger age at the expense of traditional early childhood activities. However, research shows that the effects of academically orientated preschool programmes do not guarantee future academic success, especially in the long term, and may even exacerbate children's problems in social and emotional

areas (see e.g. Singer, Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, 2006)

Bodrova (2008) refers to Vygotsky when she argues that pretend play should not be seen as competing with academic learning but rather as enhancing it, and literacy learning in particular. She writes about 'real' play where:

- children create an imaginary situation
- take on and act out roles
- follow a set of rules determined by specific roles.

Children will always set rules for themselves in pretend play according to the role they are playing and it is fascinating to watch and listen to the often unspoken understanding between children as they do so. This is great learning for 21st century learners. Guy Claxton states,

Through pretend play, children are enabled to try out actions and roles that would be either impossible or dangerous in the real world Putting out feelers into the future is a way of mapping out your own possible lines of development, goals and ambitions (2006, p. 72).

Learning in the Making, by Carr et al. (2010) reflects on this powerful learning of children as they explore possible worlds and possible selves. The authors argue for the value and importance of teachers providing opportunities that will stretch children's thinking, encouraging them to collaborate, and exploring what is like to walk in the 'mental shoes' of other people (Tomasello, 1999). Bodrova and Leong (2003) found that:

As we worked with preschool and kindergarten teachers on scaffolding children's literacy development [...], we noticed that teachers achieved the best results when they focused on supporting mature play. Children in these classrooms not only mastered literacy skills and concepts at a higher rate but also developed better language and social skills and learned how to regulate their physical and cognitive behaviors [...]. By contrast, in the classrooms where play was on the

back burner, teachers struggled with a variety of problems, including classroom management and children's lack of interest in reading and writing. These results confirm our belief that thoughtfully supported play is essential for young children's learning and development.

Is it now time for teachers to reflect on the practice in their centres, review the practices that are supported and refocus on the value of play that provokes imagination and allows children to explore possible worlds and possible selves?

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