

IT LOOKS LIKE FUN, BUT ARE THEY LEARNING?

Who said good is good?

Lynn Rupe, May 2020



It looks like fun, but are they learning? is a chapter written by Petrich, Wilkinson and Bevan in the book *Design Make Play* (2013) they write, "*Well, it looks like fun.... [pause]...but are they learning?*" This is a question they are often asked. It is strange that, because an experience looks like fun, it is harder for some to think that there is learning involved. I know many teachers in Aotearoa/New Zealand that would have had play questioned as relevant learning - comments such as, 'they are JUST playing and having fun?'. Petrich, Wilkinson & Bevan's words resonated with me and probably with many many teachers who understand and value learning that comes from tinkering with your own ideas.

Over the last couple of years I have researched and facilitated many workshops on tinkering and started a blog as a way to capture some of my ideas. Admittedly the blog has taken many different pathways over time and I attribute this to the notion of tinkering. Tinkering is ultimately about inquiry. For me one aspect of tinkering has been about taking an idea and letting it bounce around in my head awhile - shaping and reshaping my thinking - it's about being able to mentally take apart an idea, belief, tradition or way of being and then maybe putting it back together as it was, or totally reshaped by my new knowledge and thinking.

#CRITICAL THINKING

For the most part we inherit our opinions. We are the heirs of habits and mental customs. Our beliefs, like the fashion of our garments, depend on where we were born. We are molded and fashioned by our surroundings.

ROBERT G. INGERSOLL (1896)

www.all-about-psychology.com

Let me explain further.....

Last year I started pondering on a question and this question became the lens that I looked through personally and professionally.

My question was.....

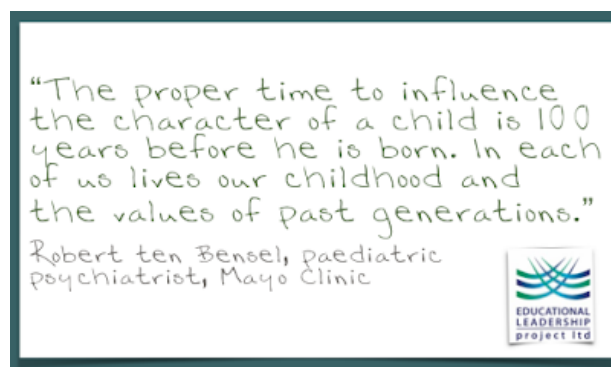
Who said good is good? I had somewhat naively always considered myself as a person who is free spirited with regard to having my own ideas and thoughts. However, this quote from Ingersoll started me thinking about my own thinking - for instance was my thinking really my own or was it shaped by a myriad of influences current, past and through generations of

traditions? Had I ever considered why I thought something was 'good'?

From tinkering with the idea of 'who said good is good?' I set about to inquire and critically consider my own bias and cultural knowledge of what I consider 'good' is. "The proper time to influence the character of a child is 100 years before he is born. In each of us lives our childhood and the values of past generations", is a quote from Robert ten Bensel. If I am influenced by the thinking of those 100 years ago what was happening then in education and beyond? What did teaching and learning look like? What were the social norms and conventional truths of the day?

Other than me tinkering with my own ideas of 'good', what does this have to do with my teaching practice and the conversation of 'but are they learning'? Well.... actually everything. If we are not open to new thinking eg. teacher's inquiry then we will be stuck in the past hundred years of thinking about what learning looks like. The question of 'it looks like fun but are they learning?' is influenced by people's own experience of education. They remember back to the day when, as a child they were tortured by education. Oh, maybe 'tortured' is too strong a word but at the moment I cannot find another to describe the meaningless hours spent behind a desk, being expected to digest information only to regurgitate it later during an exam. Now that does not sound like fun! There are those though that "...understand the difference between the pain of education and the pleasure of real learning." (Dougherty (Design, Make, Play)) For those that do not, maybe it is hard to

understand that fun can be synonymous with learning.



All teachers should be open to tinkering with ideas - putting their ideas of teaching and learning under the lens of 'who said this is good?'. The only way to shift education is to be open to possibilities, to be reflective practitioners and to engage with inquiry. To do unsettling work such as thinking about whether our teaching and learning practices are 'good', requires a preparedness to be unsettled or disconcerted. Learning is risky business because it can shake the ground we stand on. Inquiry and reflection involves asking hard and provocative questions, challenging our conventional truths and disrupting our thinking through considering other ways of being and doing.

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The worldwide lockdown brought on by Covid-19 has re-ignited the global conversation about an education revolution. During this time of Covid-19, when families have been home waiting to return to normal, many have thoughtfully considered what sort of normal they want to return to. Covid-19 has been a great disrupter, asking us all to think about the ideas of 'good', taken for granted. Sir Ken Robinson has joined the conversation in the online series Call to Unite.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QU4Q17t4muY>

Sir Ken talks about children's innate desire to learn saying, "there is a big difference between learning, education and school. Learning is the most natural process in the world. We love to learn, we are deeply curious creatures, highly creative, deeply compassionate and highly collaborative....The problem is not teachers, it is not children, it is not families it is how we do school. We think of schools as types of places that resemble factory life and there is no reason for schools to be that way, we can reinvent schools, revitalise learning and we can reignite the creative compassion of our communities if we think of things differently when we try to go back to normal." These conversations point to a growing understanding of a drive for educational change. Change will only come about when we start to tinker with possibilities, to question our norms and to be brave enough to be challenged through inquiry rather than to seek to be proven right through inquiry.

Te Whāriki, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, at its inception was a disrupter to curriculum norms of the day. It asked teachers to think beyond

individualistic achievements and teacher driven outcomes and moved teaching and learning into a space of ako, "promoting the importance of relationships between multilayered threads and stories, in the weaving of children, teachers, and families into the curriculum." (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015, pg. 106)

If we view Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa Early Childhood Curriculum (1998 & 2017) as a curriculum of resistance does this spur us on to continue the conversation about outdated educational norms that have created the pain of education and robbed children of the pleasure of real learning? A resistance to a culture of testing, ticking boxes, outcome-driven and emotionally flat learning, and into teaching to the embracing of play-driven learning, where children have agency and there is a partnership, ako, in learning.

The concept of **ako** describes a teaching and learning relationship, where the educator is also learning from the student and where educators' practices are informed by the latest research and are both deliberate and reflective. **Ako** is grounded in the principle of reciprocity and also recognises that the learner and whānau cannot be separated. Ka Hikitia, 2008, pg. 20

We have seen changes in curriculum design emerging throughout New Zealand primary schools as they have embraced learning through play. I would like to think that this

has come about, in part, through the disrupting nature of Te Whāriki, as the ECE curriculum pushes up into the other educational sectors. Our position in ECE is to hold onto our bicultural curriculum, the principles of Te Whāriki and the deeply embedded ideas of meaningful learning through play. Our position is to create partnerships with other educational sectors, knowing that we are standing on a whāriki for all, that has been grounded in theory, in current brain research and aligned to the Principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, giving us a curriculum that sets the stage for educational transformation.

Sir Ken Robinson said in his book *The Element*, “The fact is that given the challenges we face, education doesn't need to be reformed -- it needs to be transformed. The key to this transformation is not to standardise education, but to personalise it, to build achievement on discovering the individual talents of each child, to put students in an environment where they want to learn and where they can naturally discover their true

*Mā te ahurei o te tamaiti e
ārahi i ā tātou mahi.*

*Let the uniqueness of the child
guide our work.*

passions.” (2009)

Te Whāriki lifts our view to the uniqueness of every child, supporting their learning inside a community of learners. “Te Whāriki (1996, 2017) gives us a values-driven platform on which to consider our learning and teaching, and how children’s

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agency to learn is Empowered, through Relationships, Family and Community, and in meaningful Holistic ways. There’s a challenge here, for we must ensure children’s motivation to learn comes from deep within, and we must do this without hijacking children’s agendas, their energies, their passions and their spirits.” (Sands, 2020)



Final thoughts; as teachers we should enter into the risky business of learning, stretching our own thinking about teaching and learning, keeping up to date with research and not stuck in outdated ways of being. The goal is to grow learners who are resilient, who have grit and a growth mindset. We want young adults to leave the education system knowing that they are learners who are able to rise to new challenges with a positive attitude to learning and life. Growing this starts in early childhood.

Education has the possibility to shift from an industrial model as teachers reflect on worldwide research and models of education that are working well. There are growing conversations about continuity of

learning between sectors, which means we have to focus on the commonalities and create a shared understanding about wise teaching practice across all education sectors, in order to sustain meaningful and deeply embedded change. What is different about 21st century learning? Are we still using the same model that our great-grandparents used? “Play is imperative if children are to thrive in a 21st-century world. As the world has changed, so too have the knowledge and competencies needed to succeed - such as creativity, critical thinking, collaborations, communication, confidence, and content - all of which being in the sandbox during play and take us to the boardroom”, (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2010)

We need to ask provocative questions, like ‘who said good is good?’. Thinking about our taken-for-granted ideas of what normal should look like. When we are prepared to fully embrace the intent of Te Whāriki we will confidently be able to say YES, THEY ARE LEARNING EVEN IF, TO AN OUTSIDER IT LOOKS LIKE THEY ARE JUST HAVING FUN.

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