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## The Power of Pretending

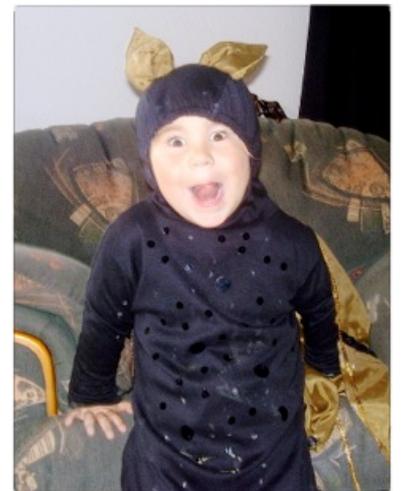
While visiting an early childhood centre recently, a small boy dressed as a little dog crawled towards me, panted, and stopped before me for a pat. I patted him on the head and commented on what a quiet, friendly dog he was. He nodded, panted again and his eyes shone. It was mat time at this centre, 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 explore their feelings and emotions while engaged in play with others. 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.

Pretend play fits well within a sociocultural learning environment where relationships with "people, places and things" 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 gaining 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 (Tloldt, 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?

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)

*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).

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?

Carol Marks

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## The Nature of the Suburban



*"Nature is imperfectly perfect, filled with loose parts and possibilities, with mud and dust, nettles and sky, transcendent hands-on moments and skinned knees."*

- Richard Louv

Since becoming involved with ELP, I have noticed a number of Kindergartens and Early Childhood Centres immersing their ākonga in nature, similar to the Nature Kindergartens of Europe. Some examples of this are:

Roskill South Kindergarten, who take their tamariki over the back fence to 'Bush Kindergarten' every week and are engaged in action research challenging a risk-averse culture, while Glengarry Kindergarten also run 'Bush Kindergarten', continuing on from a pilot programme run by Kindergartens South which looked at nature's influence on children's social competence. Matapihi Kindergarten has its very own 8 acres of beautiful nature, complete with lake, for the children to explore and enjoy regularly, and Stanmore Bay Kindergarten regularly takes a small group of ākonga on a meandering stroll to Stanmore Bay discovering the richness of nature within their local area.

Other centres might not have access to such special resources but Richard Louv (2010) suggests it is worth searching out areas of nature within the urban. In his book "Last Child in the Woods" he argues that children desperately need to be able to play in nature. They need it for the healthy development of their senses, learning and creativity but he says "The young don't demand dramatic adventures or vacations in Africa. They need only a taste, a sight, a sound, a touch [...] to reconnect with that

receding world of the senses." It is possible to offer children the experiences and advantages of nature at a local level. Louv talks about 'built', urban and suburban areas and the possibilities for connecting children to nature within them. We need to search out and provide children with free space and 'loose parts' which might include trees, water, sand, bushes, flowers and long grass. He writes, "Go beyond that play area, to woods, fields, and streams, and the parts become looser and even more potent to the imagination." If we look around, there will be parks, reserves, rivers, lakes and small bush areas within the urban and suburban.



This is exactly what the teachers at Melville Kindergarten in Hamilton, where I have been teaching, have done. Melville Kindergarten is in the heart of Hamilton and the teachers are very interested in connecting children with nature. We asked, "How can we connect children with nature in our suburban environment?" A key feature in our area is Ko Waikato te Awa, the Waikato River. The river is hugely important to our community, the local iwi and the history of the Waikato and is a mere 20 minutes walk.



The day of our first expedition, it was raining and following the lead of Norwegian Nature Kindergartens, who adhere to the saying 'there's no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing' (Knight, 2009, p.4), we were prepared with raincoats and umbrellas and set out regardless. Knowing that it takes time to experience nature in a meaningful way, the adults in the group had a loose idea that we would walk down to the rivers edge and back but within these boundaries, who knew what rich opportunities, characters and adventures we might discover along the way - that was up to the tamariki.

Tania Bullick



Our journey to connect with nature threw up many opportunities to learn about the immediate community. We met local community characters, visiting our community constable as we past; challenged the children's numeracy knowledge and skill with numbers up into the hundreds on mailboxes and road signs; enjoyed the physical challenge and risk-taking of playing on a 'playground' the road workers had left, of gravel mountains and concrete tunnels. And at the end of the street we found nature and climbed and ran around and through trees; puzzled over who or what had felled



some large trees, counted the rings and found creatures making their homes in the new landscape; stopped at a place where we could see the river from above and discussed it's colour, the taniwha that might live there and the legend of the river which ran away. Once we reached the river the children paddled at the shallow edge, explored the trees alongside the river and 'rode' a low branch which became a horse. The tamariki took their time and felt the sand on their hands and feet and threw it as far as they could and watched the splash again and again and on the way home met and helped Steve, a community member, collect and cut up wood for his fire place which had to be a specific length and 'dry'.



*"Nature is reflected in our capacity for wonder" - Richard Louv*

What became evident as the morning progressed was that the tamariki were fully engaged in their experiences and were fascinated by much of what they discovered. Claire Warden, of 'Mindstretchers', an educational consultant and founder of two nature kindergartens in Scotland, writes of the importance of this fascination to the meaning making and working theories children construct. She refers to Csikszentmihalyi's theory of Flow, and asserts that children need time to 'be' and to consider and process their experience (Warden, 2012). This was particularly evident when the tamariki discovered a dead rat carcass and examined it. The group of tamariki crouched over the rat

getting very close, fascinated by the bones and skin. They discussed it's demise asking questions "How did he die?" "How did he get here?" "Why has it got claws?" and tried out answers to those questions "A dog got it - a predator", "A car hit it and it ran here", "A bike ran it over here". Each child was experiencing wonder, curiosity and concern while being in a state of not knowing, a disposition Margaret Carr describes as persisting with difficulty, "It is about engaging with uncertainty, being prepared to be wrong, risking making a mistake - going on learning" (Carr, 1997). The children decided that the rat should be buried and set about digging it's grave. Once the rat was respectfully buried, they said a compassionate goodbye. "I love you Rat" said Alyssa. Warden (2012) notes, "In flow, the emotions are not just contained and channeled but are positive, energized, and aligned with the task at hand. This focus of awareness is an optimal state for the brain to retain information for deep level assimilation of learning."



Just as Te Whāriki requires that children learn through active exploration of the environment where they develop working theories for making sense of the world, Warden affirms it is these kind of fascinations that afford us all a deep level connection to nature and make it such a powerful and rich learning environment. You may not have Matapihi Kindergarten's 8 acres of nature or 'Bush Kindergarten' over the back fence but look around and search out the pockets of nature in the suburban and go explore it. You only need appropriate clothing, a bit of food and lots of time and you will find, as the Melville Kindergarten tamariki did, that time filled with fascination, wonder and learning.

*"If we deny them direct experience of nature, we deny them access to a fundamental part of their humanity". (Louv, 2005)*

Tania Bullick



## References for Tania's article *The Nature of the Suburban*:

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## Who is...Tania Bullick?

I am enormously pleased and privileged to be working with the ELP team. The professional learning of teachers to embrace contemporary and best theory and practice is an exciting area that I am very happy to be part of.

Personally, I am a daughter, sister, wife and mother. I grew up on farms in the Waikato, mostly near Cambridge, and married Rob who grew up on a farm in the shadow of Maungatautari Mountain. We are now proud 'townies' in the heart of Cambridge and our two teenage sons, Jack and Jonty, attend Cambridge High School - as I did. I am the youngest of 4 girls. My sisters and I have all been influenced by our mother's attitudes toward career and learning. Mum is a true life-long learner with a growth mindset and capacity for persistence and resilience like no other - Dad has also learnt to develop those skills as he accompanies Mum on her journey! Rob and my families are both within easy driving distance and we enjoy happy family times with them.

Professionally, I have been a Kindergarten Teacher in the Waikato since 1990. I chose to be a teacher, specifically of young children because as I was growing up I was drawn to babies and young children, loved spending time with them and especially enjoyed being in a relationship with them so as to witness, delight in and possibly be a part of their development and learning. I had fabulous role models in my sister, Chris Gower-Rudman and her friend Jo Colbert who, as kindergarten teachers, inspired me with their enlightened, post-modern views on children, families and education.

As a teacher trainee and new teacher I was fortunate to have a string of role models, including lecturers, Margaret Carr and Helen May, Head Teacher Jane Andrews, and the wonderful Wendy Lee as a Senior Teacher, all of whom held children and their families in high esteem, valued parents as first teachers and

partners in children's learning and saw children as the agents of their own learning and lives. It is those influences that strengthened my teaching and leadership to provide children with early childhood education that is socially just and democratic while working to build relationships with whānau which support their aspirations for their children and themselves. Though I have worked in six different Kindergartens in all and taken something special from each, I have very special memories of and associations with James Gray Kindergarten in Cambridge and Melville Kindergarten in Hamilton from where I am currently on leave. I have taken enormous pleasure and been extremely privileged to work within these two diverse communities and enjoyed fabulous relationships with the tamariki, whānau, teachers and community members in each.

I am looking forward to meeting and working with teachers on their chosen action research as we all make a difference to the early learning opportunities for the tamariki of Aotearoa, New Zealand.





## New computer survival tips. From one who knows.



It's sometimes hard practicing what you preach - a growth mindset, perseverance for instance. Over the last week I have had to walk the talk - and it has been a test. A computer. A new computer has been the challenge. It's a beautiful thing, silver and shiny with no scratches, celloptape or coffeestains (yet). I knew it would not be plain sailing, nothing ever is with technology and me. I have numerous stories of my ICT journeys so I wasn't expecting instant success.

I approached my new computer carefully with respect, even followed instructions (eventually) so that the change over from my old dutiful and celloptapy computer went relatively easily.

It did; only 3 days! A few attempts, a few phone calls, a couple of discussions with those that know - colleagues, computer people, even my husband. It all worked eventually. That was probably the problem. It worked. It caught me off guard and had me thinking that I was the new ICT queen (sorry Jo). Too much confidence can be a bad thing.

However, through my 'growth mindset' I have learnt some interesting and maybe useful things. I learnt that "Alex" (the 'speech' feature built into Macs, which reads your texts aloud) who wouldn't stop reading my text can't pronounce Māori words and he also tells me all the punctuation whilst reading. He is quite funny actually. It took me a long time to find the shortcut keys that I kept hitting which kept activating him. In one of my attempts to stop him reading my text I started another one reading as well. Two men reading different parts of the same document at the same time. It should have been hilarious, but at the time I failed to see the funny side.

Of course it is funny now. But I have beaten Alex and replaced him with Kathy! And what is more I now know how to turn them on..... And off! I can now replicate the stereo proofreading as a party trick - in my own time and at my own direction.

I have learnt numerous other things over the past few weeks. Here are my new computer survival tips:

- **Breathe** - this is particularly useful when faced with a recurring, seemingly insurmountable problem. Holding one's breath whilst waiting for the internet to connect or the email to finally GO is not healthy!
- **Space** - Allow a metre between self and computer. This has helped, distance has made me focus on something else and get things back into perspective. The view out the window, the weeds that need sorting, the dust on the window sill etc. Distance has also meant my computer has survived another day!
- **Multitask** - Opening numerous documents and programmes all at once takes one's mind off the bits that aren't working. By the time you close everything down - sometimes - sometimes - it all works out!
- **Ask a question** - Someone somewhere out there in internetland has had the same problem. It is quite liberating reading other people's computer difficulties.
- **Find something funny** - This is the most useful survival tip. FISH! Philosophy. Finding mad photos or thinking of ways to get even with my computer put me in the right frame of mind to tackle the next problem!
- **Coffee, chocolate** ..... - Need I say more?

What I have learnt most importantly is that my trusty pencil and lovely notebook, which are forever by my side, will never be replaced, and flicking through the pages of a real book is still one of the loveliest things in the world to do. So whilst Kathy and Alex may still inhabit my computer, I am in charge of the real stuff!

### Would you like to 'meet' Alex or Kathy or even Bruce or Vicki?

- Click on the Apple icon at the top left corner of your screen.
- Go to 'Preferences'
- In 'Systems' click on 'Speech'
- Go to 'Text to Speech' and select Alex or one of his friends.
- Click 'Speak selected text when the key is pressed' (Option + Esc)
- Select a section in a document, press Option + Esc
- To disable this feature, simply uncheck the 'Speak selected text when key is pressed' box.

Alison Brierley



## *Tuia te rangi e tū iho nei, Tuia te papa e takoto nei* Join the sky above to earth below, Just as people join together

I've just returned from Dunedin where I was taking my youngest son to enrol at Otago University. The challenge wasn't so much the trip to the Mainland with five enormous suitcases holding all his life's possessions, including skate boards, but the prospect of leaving him in the hands of the university, of which I knew almost nothing and so far from home!

Now you'd think that this might be the first time that I had done this but that was not the case as, last year, my eldest son had ventured to The Big Smoke to study too. James was not studying at AUT but a small, intimate boutique facility. He wasn't going to be one of 20,000 but one of 40, therefore my anxiety levels were incrementally diminished.

As part of the orientation process at Otago University, parents were invited to attend a session with Vice Chancellor Harlene Hayne. I debated the value of this session, would she have anything of value to share, would she be able to allay my fears or should I just do a little shopping instead? My anxious heart made the decision for me and off I trotted and I was so glad that I did. This woman, during her 1-hour address to parents, put to rest most of the concerns I'd had floating around inside of me and this got me thinking about what parents of preschoolers must feel when they are enrolling their child and then leaving them to go through the transition process by themselves.

Harlene's words reinforced to me the value of being honest, open and the importance of sharing your own life experiences with parents. I connected with Harlene when she started to share what she had felt when she had taken her own two children to university, one in the USA and the other here in NZ. She had felt what I was feeling! I could tell that she really cared for her students and that like me, she wanted them to succeed. She didn't sugar coat her messages, she acknowledged that this 'transition' process was going to be challenging for our children but she spoke of all the facilities and people that were already in place to support them if they stumbled. She spoke of our role as parents in facilitation of the process of change, how we needed to work with the university to support our child to develop the independence they needed to paddle their own waka.

Whether it's a centre of 40 or 20,000 students it doesn't matter, transitioning is transitioning no matter the age of

the child. I was reminded of the need to think not only of the child in this process but of the parent too. They need to feel that the staff really do care for their child's well-being and that they also acknowledge parents' very real concerns and anxieties. They need to share with parents all the processes that they have in place to support this journey and they need to give parents information about how they can work collaboratively with the staff to support their child through this process.

Let us think a little further than just the transition into or out of our centres. The skills that we share during this time will be able to be used by parents through the multitude of transitions their child goes through in their lives. If we start off this process well, in early childhood, by the time the parents get to my stage in the journey they will have a kete full of strategies that they can call on.

There are some excellent reflective questions, articles and research on the MoE website that can support teams who want to revisit their transition processes: <http://www.educate.ec.govt.nz/learning/exploringPractice/Transitions.aspx>

Gillian Fitzgerald





## Upcoming Events

## March - April 2013

**02.03.2013**

Seminar, Hamilton  
Te Oriori: Traditional Māori documentation for children

**11.03.2013**

Workshop, Ponsonby  
Jo Colbert: Being a learner in the 21st century: A closer look at Building Learning Power and Dispositions

**12.03.2013**

Lecture Series, Hamilton  
Wendy Lee: Art matter - A site of powerful learning opportunities

**12.03.2013**

Seminar, Kaukapakapa  
Alison Brierley: Learning Heroes - Guy Claxton

**14.03.2013**

Workshop, Papakura  
Jo Colbert: Being a learner in the 21st century: A closer look at Building Learning Power and Dispositions

**14.03.2013**

Seminar, Te Awamutu  
Kathryn Delany: On the mat - Wrestling with the BIG ONE

**14.03.2013**

Seminar, Gisborne  
Alison Brierley: "Remember you have to share" - How do teachers grow children's social competence?

**14.03.2013**

Seminar, Gisborne  
Alison Brierley: Waking the third teacher

**15.03.2013**

Seminar, Gisborne  
Alison Brierley: Documenting Learning

**18.03.2013**

Workshop, Ponsonby  
Jo Colbert: Learning Environments

**19.03.2013**

Lecture Series, Auckland  
Wendy Lee: Art matter - A site of powerful learning opportunities

**19.03.2013**

Seminar, Hamilton  
Robyn Lawrence: Companionship

**21.03.2013**

Workshop, Papakura  
Jo Colbert: Learning Environments

**21.03.2013**

Seminar, Kaukapakapa  
Alison Brierley: Ready for school? Ready for what? Asking the big questions

**23.03.2013**

Big Day Out with ELP in Whakatane

**25.03.2013**

Workshop, Ponsonby  
Jo Colbert: Building a culture of self review

**26.03.2013**

Seminar, Palmerston North  
Alison Brierley: "Remember you have to share" - How do teachers grow children's social competence?

**26.03.2013**

Seminar, Palmerston North  
Alison Brierley: Waking the third teacher

**27.03.2013**

Seminar, Palmerston North  
Alison Brierley: Documenting Learning

**28.03.2013**

Workshop, Papakura  
Jo Colbert: Building a culture of self review

**08.04.2013**

Workshop, Ponsonby  
Alison Brierley: Learning Stories '101' - Getting to grips with the essentials

**08.04.2013**

Workshop, Ponsonby  
Alison Brierley: More than just an EC Curriculum. Te Whāriki in the 21st century.

**09.04.2013**

Lecture Series, Hamilton  
Lynn Rupe: Ane leid is ne'er enough - One language is never enough

**10.04.2013**

Seminar, Kaukapakapa  
Alison Brierley: Learning Heroes - Carol Dweck

**16.04.2013**

Lecture Series, Auckland  
Lynn Rupe: Ane leid is ne'er enough - One language is never enough

**17.04.2013**

Seminar, Hamilton  
Jo Colbert: The language of learning

**18.04.2013**

Seminar, Te Awamutu  
Tania Bullick: Social Competence

**29.04.2013**

Workshop, Browns Bay  
Alison Brierley: Making learning leap off the page. Expanding Learning Stories.

**30.04.2013**

Seminar, Kaukapakapa  
Alison Brierley: Reconceptualising planning

**30.04.2013**

Workshop, Browns Bay  
Alison Brierley: Wheer has all the green grass gone?