

“Play...a waste of time”? Samoan and Tongan student teachers’ views of play

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Abstract: In this article the author reports on a research study that explores the views of Samoan and Tongan student teachers perceptions of the term ‘play’. The research undertaken with the students draws attention to how the students’ perceptions of play have been influenced. As developing early childhood teachers, what they know and understand of play will influence the ways in which they provide play experiences for young children in their care. The participants were interviewed before and after undertaking a course about the value of play in the learning and teaching of young children. Significant changes were noted in the students’ understanding of the term play. The findings identified several critical factors: (a) the influence of parental attitudes towards play, (b) how student teachers initially viewed play, and (c) the student teachers perceptions as developing early childhood teachers of play. Using critical reflection in conjunction with developing their theoretical knowledge and understanding of play enabled the student teachers to better understand theories of play and become advocates of play for young children in an early childhood education setting.

Keywords: culture; early childhood education; Pasifika; play; theory and practice

Introduction

In this study it was important to understand the participants’ views in relation to the term play and factors that have been influential to their way of thinking. Play is a universal activity among young children, but its nature varies across cultures in response to specific constraints and differential degrees of encouragement. Roopnarine, Lasker, Sacks and Stores (1998) suggest that the nature of play across diverse cultures needs to be explored in order to understand the cross-cultural variations of play. It cannot be assumed that play is important and valued in all cultures and societies (Fleer, 1999). Play continues to intrigue and challenge early childhood practitioners who are concerned with enhancing the quality of their provision of opportunities for play, understanding the meaning and value of play, and providing evidence of learning through play (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2001). It is hoped that an understanding of such views may assist the student teachers in their own awareness regarding play and the effects this may have in the way they work and interact with young children.

The research participants were enrolled in the Pacific Islands Early Childhood Education (PIECE) Diploma of Teaching programme, administered through the School of Pasifika Education, Faculty of Education, at The University of Auckland. Students had to undertake a course that explored theories of play and were interviewed before starting the course about their views of play and their childhood play experiences. Once they had completed the course they were interviewed again and discussed what they had learned during the course. Shifts in the students’ thinking about the term play were noted.

The research participants were recruited from a class listing. As this particular cohort consisted mostly of Samoan and Tongan students, the sample was not representative of all Pasifika groups. The participants were in the process of completing a teaching qualification that will permit them to work in both general and Pacific Island early childhood settings. For the participants, this was their first experience studying in a tertiary institution. The participants were born and raised in their homelands and migrated to New Zealand, therefore their childhood play experiences occurred in their respective islands.

Roopnarine et al. (1998) suggest that there are at least three reasons why it is crucial that the examination of play be considered within diverse cultures. First, they identify the need to recognise the shifting characteristics between intercultural and intracultural variations in children's play. This recognition will assist in discerning the cultural properties that are reflected in children's activities. Second, the dramatic progression in interest in early childhood education in diverse cultures around the world calls for an understanding of how different cultures incorporate play as a part of learning and development. Third, the dynamics of the family structure and social institutions continue to change in important ways.

What the literature on 'play' tells us

Play has been regarded as children's natural way of learning about themselves and the world around them. Play has been viewed as a cornerstone to children's learning and development and considered as the necessary core to curriculum for young children (Alward, Van Hoorn, Nourot, & Scales, 1999). Early childhood educators in Western countries have been greatly influenced by ideas about the value of play as an activity and by child development theories (Dockett & Fler, 2002). Reviews of play-related research highlight the importance of play to all aspects of children's learning and development (Alward et al., 1999; Bruce, 2001; Dockett & Fler, 2002; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002; Saracho & Spodek, 2003). Play has been described as a way of allowing children to explore "beyond what they are and what they know" (Bruce, 2001, p. 112). Young children's experiences of, and exposure to play are to a great extent influenced by the beliefs and perceptions held by early childhood teachers (Ranz-Smith, 2007, Sandberg & Samuelsson, 2003, Roopnarine & Johnson, 2001).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, early childhood education is underpinned by a strong and robust belief that play is fundamental to learning and development (Hedges, 2003). The National Early Childhood Curriculum, Te Whāriki, recognises the significance of play and its contribution to the holistic development of the child (Ministry of Education, 1996). Mandatory requirements call for early childhood teachers to acknowledge and value children's play as they "plan, implement and evaluate curriculum for children in which children's play is valued as meaningful learning" (Ministry of Education, 1998, p. 49). However, according to Dockett and Fler (2002), they strongly advocate that play cannot, and should not, be perceived outside the cultural, political and historical context in which it occurs.

Methodology: A Pasifika research approach

Pacific Island peoples have developed research methodologies that make reference to a particular term or metaphor that Pacific Island peoples are familiar with (Fa'afai, Parkhill & Fletcher, 2006). For the purpose of this study the concept of the *kakala* model was considered as being appropriate. This model was developed by Thaman (1999) and is based on Tongan values and principles that describe the traditional process of fragrant garland making. It is used in this study to illustrate the process of gathering knowledge, organising information and the dissemination of knowledge and information. *Toli kakala* is used to explain how the recruitment and interviewing processes are carried out which requires searching for, selecting and picking the most appropriate flowers, in this case, the research participants for the study.

In order to investigate the nature of students perceptions of play and the influence of the course on these perceptions, interviews occurred pre-course and post-course. The pre-course interviews involved initial focus group discussions where the research participants openly shared their childhood memories of play and current (pre-course) opinions of play. These focus group discussions lasted approximately an hour and a half. Individual interviews after the completion of the course took forty-five minutes. During these interviews research participants shared what they had learnt and discussed shifts in their thinking regarding their understanding of the term play. *Kau tui kakala* is the process by which the information shared by the research participants

are organised and interpreted to make the best design for the garland. The final process in the kakala is *luva e kakala* that is used to describe how the research information is passed back to the research participants. This becomes a gift as it is used to inform others.

Another research method favoured by Pacific Island peoples is *talanoa* (Anae, Coxon, Mara, Wendt-Samu, & Finau, 2001), which refers to “critical thinking and action” (Manu’atu & Kepa, 2006, p. 170). An extension of this concept *TalanoaMālie* involves critical thinking that “gets under the skin” (p. 171). Fa’afai et al., (2006) describe talanoa in this way:

Tala means “to inform, tell, talk about”, and *noa* means “nothing, or void”. This methodology provides a culturally appropriate setting in which the researcher and research participants can talk spontaneously about whatever arises. Conversation flows freely, without the intrusion of a formal structure with predetermined questions - such as a questionnaire. This helps in reducing the gap between the participants (the “researched”) and the researchers, and gives the researched shared ownership over the direction and focus of the discourse. (p. 105)

The concept of talanoa validates a qualitative approach (Anae et al., 2001) as the most suitable method to use in this research as it adopts an oral interactive approach. The use of kakala and talanoa—talanoamālie—makes this process explicit. Qualitative research therefore integrates an inductive approach that places a strong emphasis on seeking the views and perspectives of participants (Gray, 2004). The study seeks to understand what the participants’ think in regards to the term ‘play’ and how the participants came to think this way. At the beginning of the interviews the participants were asked to share their childhood play experiences. This enabled the researcher to introduce the investigation in general terms, to set the context and to put the participants at ease. The research questions framing the study focused on Pasifika student teachers’ views of play, with the main research question being: How do Pasifika student teachers’ view play?

The intention of the research is to represent the experiences and knowledge of the participants in ways that allow an authentic representation of their voices. The study incorporates an interpretive social science paradigm that seeks to understand the participants views (Sarantakos, 2005). The research uses a qualitative approach that investigates small areas in great depth. Punch (2005) describes qualitative research as empirical research where the data are in the form of words rather than numbers. Sarantakos (1998, p. 47) explains such data as “detailed, thick descriptions” of what the participants have said, encapsulating and communicating the full picture of behaviour being studied in context.

Decisions regarding sample size, access to the sample and the sampling strategy were carefully considered. The type of sample entailed a deliberate selection (Davidson & Tolich, 2003), identifying the setting, boundaries and aspects to be studied. This type of convenience sampling or, as it is sometimes called, accidental or opportunity sampling (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2002) entails selecting those who are easily accessible to act as respondents. Convenience sampling allowed the author to choose easily accessible participants. According to Stake (1995), this type of selection offers the prospect of maximising what can be learnt, knowing that time is limited.

What the research participants said

The information presented draws on the transcriptions of the participants’ interviews. English is the second language for the research participants; the statements or quotes are exactly as the participants expressed themselves. These participants’ comments identify the critical factors that have influenced the ways in which they view play. Comments have been presented according to these factors.

Participants' memories of play

When asked to share their childhood play memories the majority of the participants shared how play occurred outside of the home environment that involved groups of children playing together and the reasons for this. For example in the following quotes:

We never play by ourselves, we always play in a group, it's more fun to play together, we play as a competition.

We play under the tree.

Just only play outside is the place to play it's not inside because they make a mess around inside.

We hardly have any games indoors, back home no indoors; indoors we have to keep the house nicely for the visitors.

They shared about how chores and work became opportunities to engage in play. This is summed up by one of the participants in the following statement:

When we go to the plantation [to work, harvest] we use to cut the you know banana skin back home, the ones ready to die, so we just cut the lau sului we call it lau sului, so we sit in the lau sului and then we slide down it was funny and we really enjoy ourselves.

Influences of parental attitudes towards play

The research participants shared their accounts of how their own parents had responded to them when they themselves were children playing. This was often received by the participants as being something negative for them as children and had influenced the way they perceive play as adults. The following quotes highlight this factor.

I learnt from a young age that play was a waste of time.

Sometimes our parents don't want us to go play it's a waste of time.

Elderly parents don't value play.

My mum doesn't want me to get my clothes dirty.

I wasn't really allowed to play.

The research participants had no recollection of adults being involved in their childhood play experiences as children. The absence of adult participation may be contrasted with the type of play experienced by children in Aotearoa New Zealand. The following quotes illustrate this point.

No teachers, no experienced people or even my parents to enhance that [play] or give me that support.

I think that because it's the way that they were being brought up, now I am growing up and it's the same thing, I pass the same thing to my eldest child, play isn't important.

They shared about certain games or activities that as children they were not allowed to do and how these experiences have influenced them now as adults. Given that in Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood education is gender equal with gender mixing actively encouraged, this

tension that is created for the research participants in this study has challenged some traditional beliefs regarding gender issues. For example, as can be seen in the following quotes.

You know there are certain play that boys can only do and certain play that girls can only do, and there were times that boys and girls are not allowed to play together because of boys being rough and for the respect we have for each other. For example, we are playing marbles it would have been rude for me to play marbles, for me to play with boys because of the way we are kneeling down on the ground and then having exposed ourselves as a child. Climbing trees is more like for boys because of the respect that I was brought up with, that climbing trees would have been like I had to expose myself as a girl and that's why some of the play was limited for us. And that's why some of the play was limited for us because of the respect.

Back home I grew up in a home with the knowledge that girls' games are different from boys' games. We hardly mix.

At school mainly the girls go their way and the boys go their way, we hardly mix at school except for the game like kilikiti. Home the girls do their own stuff and the boys do their own, I guess that's the mentality that I have grown up with. When I come to New Zealand it was a challenge for me to see how play is inside the schools.

Participants' views of the term 'play' prior to research intervention

In the focus group interview the participants had identified play as a means of having fun and making friends. This was how they learnt to socialise. For example, as shows in the following quotes:

Fun, exploring, discovering, making friends with my peers.

Fun, time to explore.

We make lots of friends.

We're learning, it's fun.

Occupied that space, we had nothing to do or socialise.

Making friends, have fun with others.

Shifts in participants' perceptions of the term 'play'

The research participants were individually interviewed after completing the course about the value of play. Significant changes in their perceptions of play had been noted whereby play is associated to learning.

To me play is how we learn.

Play is really good for children's learning.

Play is how we learn and play is fun, we experience the outer world.

I teach my own children and teach even my husband, I teach my husband about the module [course] as well. I am spreading the word, I feel proud cause my husband doesn't speak English that much but he says, "let the child explore."

Digging in the sand, we don't call that play back home, but now that's child's play, they want to discover and explore.

I have my 8 year old who wants to be a teacher, my parents was never there, even though I am busy or even though I have other things to do because I am a student myself, I want to support her and just being there where I know that my parents weren't there during play. Your play is meaningful.

The research participants were able to make connections to theories of play and learning which is illustrated in the following statements.

Well I read this theorists and their perspectives of play, there is heaps that I don't really know that's play. I just think it's normal but to the theorists, their theory is more than play, it's play and at the same time children learn so to me the theorists have big knowledge about play.

Playing hop scotch, I didn't realise that I learn the numbers, the shape as well as hand and eye coordination, how you throw the stone, and according to some of the theorists that I've read about for example Piaget with his games with rules, I didn't realise that I am exploring and I am learning.

My own mokopuna [grandchildren] and all the young children under the age of 5 who come to my place, I start collecting those baskets that treasure basket. I use whatever I can find that is safe in my kitchen. I put it in [the basket] and observe, they [the mokopuna] concentrate.

Play is important in the child's development due to the fact that every time they want to know something, they go and play. Their thinking development, their holistic development is being foster through play.

What this means for the research participants: Critical reflection

Very little research has been conducted on Pasifika perceptions of play. It is important to understand how Pasifika early childhood teachers' views of play are constructed and explore the influences that have led to such beliefs. Sandberg and Samuelsson (2003) suggest that it would be beneficial for early childhood teachers to revisit their own childhood play experiences to establish whether such influences enhance or hinder children's learning and development. The provision and exposure of play experiences that children engage in are greatly influenced by the views about play held by early childhood teachers (Sandberg & Samuelsson, 2003). The study reveals how the research participants' childhood play experiences differ from children in Aotearoa New Zealand. For example this is illustrated in the following statement.

The way I saw children play in New Zealand, they are very smart, they are creative. I never image, you never thought what comes out of play and that shows how smart they are. I can now be able to use that knowledge like you know that symbolic play that Piaget was talking about. My experiences, my mum taught me from my chores, that's how I been brought up: different.

It is suggested that early childhood teachers' views and experiences of play will in turn have an effect on the types of play, amount of play, space for play made available to children and the

role of teachers in children's play (Fleer, 2003; Hughes, 2004; Leaupepe, 2008a; Newman, Brody & Beauchamp, 1996; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Riojas-Cortez, 2000; Roopnarine & Johnson, 2001; Rothlein & Brett, 1987; Sandberg & Samuelsson, 2003).

For the research participants in this study the concept of talanoa–talanoamālie assisted the participants in coming to an understanding of theories of play and policies that promote play opportunities for young children. This process has been both challenging and reflective for the participants. As adults and parents themselves they have withheld opportunities for their own children to engage in play using the same tactics as their parents. For example this is illustrated in the following quote:

When I told my children something to do [like some work-chores] but they didn't do it, I told them, you don't have to play. Yeah and sometimes I'm tired of cleaning up and say, "Stop playing". And after I spoke to them when I see them I think, I feel sorry for what I say to my children to stop playing.

While on the other hand, knowledge of theories of play has helped the participants make changes in their own practicum practices. For example the following quote highlights this point.

Vygotsky's theory about imagination, that children imaging play, they create their own script and they do their own play, it's amazing. Playing doctors and nurses, and I'm pretending to be a sick patient. They are caught up in their play: tablets, prescriptions.

Despite Pasifika early childhood teachers' commitment to play, attention to more formal activities is favoured (Hughes, 2004; Mara & Burgess, 2007; Mauigoa-Tekene, 2006; Tagoilelagi, 1995; Tanielu, 2004). For example, the teachers in Mauigoa-Tekene's (2006) study revealed that a common feature in many Pacific Island early childhood centres is for teachers to regularly engage in direct instructional teaching, whereby the teacher controls the whole learning process. Children are accustomed to the practices of teachers controlling and directing the learning as this reflects the practices in which children learn at home (Mauigoa-Tekene, 2006) and the experiences of the teachers themselves (Schoeffel & Melesia, 1996).

What Pasifika early childhood teachers understand and know of play has often been met with anguish. The anguish of trying to offer play experiences to children; the need to stay abreast with the demands of parental expectations, such as the maintenance of language and culture through traditional ways of learning (see for example Tagoilelagi, 1995; Tanielu, 2004; Tuafuti & MaCaffery, 2005); and government aspirations of increasing early literacy and numeracy skills of children (Hughes, 2004; Mara & Burgess, 2007; Leaupepe, 2008b; Mauigoa-Tekene, 2006; Ministry of Education, 1998; Ministry of Education, 1996).

Wood and Bennett's study (1998) focused on the beliefs and theories that teachers held of the role and value of play and revealed tensions between the rhetoric and reality of ideas about play. The evidence suggests that teachers did not always realise tensions relating to the provision of play. This became apparent through the practices that teachers adopted. For example, teachers defined play as child-initiated that stems from children's interests; however, time, resources, the learning environment, the planned or anticipated learning outcomes and downward pressure from the National Curriculum prearranged this type of provision for play. Teachers needed evidence of children's learning to illustrate development and achievement. Play did not always make available such data and, therefore, the provision of play opportunities was used as a reward for when children had finished their work, "Play becomes a recreational form of activity earned by the completion of work" (Parker-Rees, 1999, p. 61). When the provision of play opportunities becomes associated with children completing household chores and schoolwork, play is used as a reward to ensure such things are completed (Hughes, 2004; Leaupepe, 2008a;

Mara & Burgess, 2007; Parker-Rees, 1999). The message thus conveyed is that play is less important than work (Keating, Fabian, Jordan, Mavers & Roberts, 2000). Teachers' romanticised concepts about play were often in conflict with what they actually practiced.

Mara and Burgess' (2007) research revealed that Samoan early childhood teachers were more likely to allow children to play with their peers than participate in children's play themselves. The literature reveals that the differences between early childhood teachers' understanding of theories of play and what is actually practiced have been a key feature in several studies and is an issue for many teachers, both in mainstream, general early childhood settings (Newman et al., 1996; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Rothlein & Brett, 1987; Wood & Bennett, 1998) and in Pacific Island early childhood centres (Hughes, 2004; Leaupepe, 2008a; Mara & Burgess, 2007). However, through undertaking professional development, play opportunities and engagement of adults in children's play had significantly changed. As the teachers became more involved in children's play their skills in questioning children improved dramatically, to the extent that they were able to enhance children's learning and development (Mara & Burgess, 2007; Mauigoa-Tekene, 2006).

The attitude of Pacific Island parents still remains influential (Hughes, 2004; Leaupepe 2008a). If Pacific Island parents in Aotearoa New Zealand do not see the value in play it is most likely that children's play opportunities will be hindered. In Pacific Island early childhood centres, teachers may feel obligated to carry out the expectations of parents; that is, to produce evidence of children's learning by way of worksheets and other related tasks (Hughes, 2004). The provision of play opportunities for children in Hughes (2004) study were limited because parents considered play to be a waste of children's time when children could be engaged in something more productive and constructive. Play was not recognised as children's natural way of learning. The more preferred style of teaching was traditional instructional teaching and learning strategies, whereby the teachers are the drivers and instigators for learning.

Pasifika early childhood teachers would benefit from examining their own attitudes and perceptions of play and consider how such views may be developed in ways that enhance children's learning and development. As noted earlier, the Ministry of Education (1998) require early childhood teachers to "plan, implement and evaluate curriculum for children in which children's play is valued as meaningful learning and the importance of spontaneous play is recognised" (p. 49). Although Western theories of play may not be favoured amongst some Pasifika early childhood teachers, consideration must take into account others way of achieving effective learning for young children and, at the same time, appreciate and value that interpretations of play will vary from culture to culture.

It is clear from this study that play is a challenging notion that still requires understanding. This work reveals that play takes on different forms in different cultures. By learning as much as one can about socio-cultural factors children bring with them into the early childhood centre, and through careful observation, listening and understanding, teachers can enhance the learning and development of children in their care. The present study does not claim to have all the answers but, at least, it hopes to provide a platform for further discussion and research into the area of ideas about play. Pasifika early childhood teachers would benefit from examining their own values and understandings regarding play and consider how these views may be different to the experiences of children in their care (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2001). A crucial point to consider is the effect that such views may have on the provision of play opportunities, the nature of these opportunities and the relations between teacher and child.

Conclusion

Play has become an integral part of early childhood education and care and is highly featured in programmes offered to children in Aotearoa New Zealand. It has been argued that the notion of

'play' varies across cultures, not only in its content, in the types of social interactions experienced during play, and in the resources that are made available for play, but also in the relation play has to other everyday activities (Gaskins, Haight, & Lancy, 2007).

It has been established that much of the literature on play used in education today originates from research that has been carried out from Western perspectives and collected in Western contexts (Dockett & Flear, 2002). What is noted is that such research gives the impression that it is biased and limited in its overview when considering cultural variables. It is argued that Western research design, and the findings of such research, cannot be applied in cross-cultural contexts. The role and function of children in society and within cultures, the amount of play space, the time made available to children, and early childhood teachers' childhood play experiences need to also be accounted for (Leaubepe, 2008a; Roopnarine & Johnson, 2001; Sandberg & Samuelsson, 2003).

It is suggested that Pasifika early childhood teachers' views on play are under-represented and need to be explored in order to comprehend influential factors that contribute to such understandings which may provide insight into the practices carried out within Pacific Island early childhood centres. It is important for Pasifika early childhood teachers to understand the theories of play and how it has come to appear as being necessary to early childhood education (Ailwood, 2003) and to the development of the individual child.

It appears that Pasifika early childhood teachers need to become familiar with the concepts of Western views of play to be able to recognise the types of play that young children demonstrate. Mandatory requirements necessitate that early childhood teachers effectively respond to children's needs and recognise their play as being meaningful and important to children. Diverse cultures should take pride in the richness of their communities and that child-centeredness, which is highly valued in Western countries and in early childhood education, can have different meanings and interpretations to other cultures (Flear, 2003).

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