2 Whose goals and interests?

The interface of children’s play and teachers’ pedagogical practices

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Introduction

Much has been written about play and pedagogy, including the ways that children engage in play in differing cultural contexts (e.g. Pramling-Samuelsson and Fleer 2008). Defying an unproblematic definition, play is both a social and cultural construct and a social practice (Wood 2009) and, thus, the literature is complex and contradictory (e.g. Brooker 2002). Moreover, the adage of learning through play has never sat comfortably alongside the notion of teaching through play, and is unlikely ever to do so. The non-compulsory, non-prescriptive, unstructured and play-based nature of Western-European early childhood education exposes it to many viewpoints and debates. For example, Youngquist and Pataray-Ching (2004) suggest that in order for curriculum to be interpreted as educational and meaningful, a distinction between ‘inquiry-play’ in the educational setting, and ‘play-in-outside-contexts’ (such as in homes and communities) is useful. However, in this chapter I argue that all contexts of play involve inquiry, and that the relationship between these types of play, through the concept of funds of knowledge, is important. Further, defining play as including inquiry provides an analytical lens with which to examine the notion of children’s interests.

This chapter is structured by providing an overview of some considerations related to teachers’ pedagogical goals in Aotearoa/New Zealand (NZ). Following this, I draw on my study of curriculum co-construction in early childhood education (Hedges 2008), to provide an analytical perspective of children’s play and interests. Some theories resulting from contemporary socio-cultural perspectives are described and used to explain children’s experiences in qualitatively different ways to developmental theories that have traditionally dominated early childhood’s theoretical foundations. The chapter then proposes a continuum of children’s interests and inquiries which is constructed from their funds of knowledge-based
interests. The continuum represents the conceptual output derived from considering the data from my study in relation to theoretical perspectives about children's play. In this chapter, the continuum is used to raise questions about how teachers' professional knowledge, pedagogical understandings and practices are related to children's play and interests.

**Whose goals?**

The early childhood curriculum in NZ, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education 1996), emphasizes the principles of relationships, empowerment, holistic development, and family and community. The overall aspiration for children is 'to grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society' (1996: 9). Is this policy statement of teachers' pedagogical goals consistent with contemporary understandings of children's play and interests? *Te Whāriki* asserts that authentic play-based learning is situated in socially and culturally constructed settings and is mediated by 'responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things' (1996: 14). If curriculum is co-constructed spontaneously during pedagogical relationships, how might these relationships impact on children's experiences? Moreover, such a pedagogical view of curriculum suggests that children might actively participate in negotiating and constructing curriculum, and draw on experiences in outside contexts to do so.

A participative and interpretive view of a curriculum for young children is apparent within *Te Whāriki*. Yet teacher curriculum decision-making is not impulsive; it is a conscious process that draws on understandings about children, curriculum, pedagogy and context (Hedges and Nuttall 2008). Moreover, the knowledge teachers draw on to inform their interpretations is crucial in determining the authenticity of children's experiences. What understandings of children's play and interests might assist teachers to work towards *Te Whāriki*'s goal and co-construct curriculum with children?

**Whose interests?**

'Children's interests' are commonly cited as a significant source of curriculum. Yet, little academic literature exists to guide teacher decision-making about whose and which interests might be followed in co-constructing curriculum with children in both intentional and spontaneous ways. My study of co-constructed interests-based curriculum drew on sociocultural theory and interpretivist methodology. The study took place in two early
childhood settings in Auckland, NZ: one sessional public kindergarten for 3- and 4-year-olds, Takapuna Kindergarten (TK), and one full-day early education and care centre for children aged 6 months to 5 years, The No 1 Kindy (1K). Ten teachers and 35 children across both settings, along with the parents of 11 children, participated in the study. During year-long fieldwork, I generated fieldnotes about children's interests and inquiries, and teachers' engagement with these, during weekly half-day attendance in each setting. Individual and teaching team interviews were undertaken, along with interviews with children and parents in family homes. Curriculum documentation was an additional source of data. In the latter part of the year, the two teaching teams met to co-analyze the data and for facilitated inquiry sessions.

Drawing on Dockett and Fleer (1999), I defined play as ‘a meaningful activity that children choose to participate in, that involves children in physical, cognitive and communicative efforts in social and cultural contexts’ (Hedges 2008: 10); and children’s interests as ‘children’s spontaneous, self-motivated play, discussions, inquiry and/or investigations that derive from their social and cultural experiences’ (2008: 38). I noted that children's interests, which were stimulated by their experiences, were likely to be varied and broad. Conceptualizing these might offer a framework for socio-cultural curriculum and pedagogy that would assist teacher decision-making about whose and which interests to use to co-construct curriculum.

The data were analysed through progressive focusing of categories, themes and issues. Reflection on the descriptive and theoretical analyses suggested that children’s interests might reveal a deeper level of inquiry. This led to my interpretation of children’s fundamental interests, which might be viewed as the inquiries they bring to the co-construction of curriculum with teachers.

**From developmental to socio-cultural perspectives**

Multiple theoretical perspectives can co-exist to provide coherence to curriculum. A range of perspectives are evident in *Te Whariki*. Play as the basis of curriculum and pedagogy derives from the long-standing overarching theoretical framework of developmental psychology (Farquhar and Fleer 2007). Well-known theories such as Piaget’s genetic epistemology, Erikson’s theory of social and emotional development, and Bowlby’s attachment theory remain important informants to early childhood curriculum and pedagogy, despite developmental theories being critiqued, from a number of perspectives, for their failure to acknowledge the social and cultural dimensions of children’s experience (see Farquhar and Fleer 2007).
Contemporary interpretations view *Te Whariki* as primarily a socio-cultural framework (Cullen 2003). Originating with the seminal ideas of Vygotsky (1978, 1986) about the learning processes that enable humans to appropriate culture, socio-cultural theory provides further insights into learning. During social and cultural interactions, knowledgeable peers and adults, in multifaceted roles, may help children to experience, explore and construct new understandings, knowledge and skills in a dialectic rather than linear process of development.

**Learning through intent participation**

Vygotsky (1986) believed that children’s informal daily interactions in families and communities provide a bank of everyday or spontaneous experiences to draw on later to develop more formal, scientific, conceptual knowledge. Certainly, children choose to engage in many situations which are not primarily intended as educational. Learning through ‘intent participation ... [is] a powerful form of learning’ (Rogoff et al. 2003: 176). Rogoff et al. (2003) point out that such learning often occurs eagerly in authentic cultural situations, suggesting learners have some intrinsic interest in the activities they engage in. Moreover, collaborating in shared tasks is neither incidental nor passive. Language is a vital cultural tool employed when both information-sharing and inquiry occur to explore ideas.

From engagement in social and cultural activity, experiences are internalized by children, transformed through their participation, and re-created as opportunities arise to do so, including through play in an early childhood setting. Vygotsky (1978) regarded play, particularly socio-dramatic play, as a major source of learning. He viewed imaginative and symbolic play as a way in which children acted out understandings of everyday real-life behaviours. When children engage in socio-dramatic play, they assume the actions, language, thinking and emotions of the human roles they are engaging in.

**Funds of knowledge**

What kinds of informal, everyday experiences and understandings might children have greatest access to? Children’s foundational knowledge is based on their unique family and community experiences. A positive view of the diverse knowledge and experiences learned in families is found in studies of children’s *funds of knowledge* (Moll et al. 1992; González et al. 2005).
Moll et al. (1992) define funds of knowledge as the bodies of knowledge, including information, skills and strategies, which underlie household functioning, development and well-being. These may include information, ways of thinking and learning, approaches to learning and practical skills such as meal preparation. Further examples include economics, such as budgeting, accounting and loans; repair, such as household appliances, fences and cars; and arts, such as music, painting and sculpture (Moll 2000). Funds of knowledge are derived from children’s experiences of informal learning, and in turn, generate further informal learning opportunities for children. I argue that funds of knowledge provide a conceptual framework to recognize how children’s interests and inquiries arise in, and are stimulated by, their intent participation in everyday activities and experiences with others.

**Community of inquiry**

The concept of a collaborative learning community highlights participation, intersubjectivity, shared purposes and goals, but is not unproblematic (Edwards 2005). Being specific about the kind of learning community children and teachers might be involved in is vital to extending theoretical understandings. Wells (1999, 2002) focuses the notion of participatory learning on inquiry. The concept of a community of inquiry that Wells advocates began from observing the importance of children’s ‘real questions’ (1999: 91), and the ways that adults, in responding to these questions, co-constructed meaningful learning. This focus appears consistent with a view of learning as intent participation in everyday, funds of knowledge-based, activities and interests.

A community of inquiry is also consistent with further socio-cultural perspectives: children viewed as capable and competent, the significance of children’s prior knowledge, interests and inquiry, stressing the central role of language and the intersubjective nature of the reciprocal and responsive relationships highlighted in pedagogy. Further, it enables curriculum and pedagogy to explore co-constructed, dynamic and open-ended approaches.

**A continuum of children’s interests**

‘Adults, even the most ‘child-centred’, tend to trivialize children’s interests, making them out to be more mundane and egocentric than they really are’ (Bereiter 2002: 301). One way that children’s interests might be underestimated by teachers in early childhood settings is by shallow interpretations of children’s interests. Cullen (2003) suggested that the
tradition of the play-based, as in activity-based, learning environment has meant that teachers have been slow to seek stronger interpretations of children's interests.

A more analytical way of interpreting children's interests was derived from the data generated during my project. These data suggested a continuum for understanding and interpreting children's interests which is linked by their funds of knowledge (Figure 2.1). The interpretation represented by this continuum is supported by Wells' (1999) notion of the genuine inquiries that ought to be addressed in a curriculum and offers a diagrammatic perspective of children's interests in a socio-cultural curriculum.

Funds of knowledge feed forward and feed back into interests at each stage of the continuum. Play is a central way in which children demonstrate, re-visit and extend interests, representing these in all points of the continuum. However, it is vital for teachers to recognize that activity-based play area interests may be responses to the environment provided in early childhood settings, and may not necessarily be representative of children's wider home and community interests. Multiple, dynamic and complex interpretations of children's play and interests are required. Further important feed-forward and feed-back along the continuum occur as children make meaning from play-based experiences, particularly socio-dramatic play.

**Activity-based play interests**

In relation to children's interests, in all of the individual interviews, the participating teachers first talked about the children's favourite activities in the learning environment. The teachers revealed how steeped they were in traditional views of play as a key informant to early childhood curriculum. For example, one teacher, Vicky (1K), said, 'Danyela, she comes in every day and wants to paint and that's her big thing ... the same with Safiya, she loves painting as well and playdough.'

There is no doubt that the physical environment and learning resources provided in the settings offered children rich learning experiences and opportunities for experimentation, and supported their growing everyday and conceptual understandings. The equipment and resources,
coupled with new physical and cognitive capabilities, supported children's continuing learning and development. However, these represent the resources and tools of curriculum, not the curriculum itself (Wright 2004). Another teacher, Christine (TK), noted:

When I started teaching, you had the classic traditional areas of play, they called it curriculum ... which we still have today unless we make a huge big effort to change ... [our view of curriculum].

Further, these interests often appeared to be interpreted as activity or skill-based, rather than as combinations of skills, knowledge and dispositions that represented funds of knowledge-based interests. For example, Olivia and Imogen (1K) were siblings aged 4:11 and 2:4 at the time of their home interview. Their mother described how they enjoyed baking and cooking with her to prepare meals or for hosting social occasions. This interest was enacted in the sand and water resources of the centre environment with friends with shared interests, and in this context they demonstrated their current understanding and collaborated in knowledge building. However, teachers appeared to mostly attribute this interest to sand and water play itself. This demonstrated the prominence of teacher thinking about play as about activities, resources and equipment, rather than also comprising an opportunity to interpret what playing with these might represent. Similar findings in relation to other children supported that teachers' interpretation at this level sometimes impeded their understanding or investigation of deeper interests, and provided a somewhat narrow basis from which to extend curriculum experiences. Some teachers' recognition of and agreement with my interpretation led to changes in their thinking about both children's interests and curriculum.

Therefore, although the opportunities of the play environment remain essential, teachers might also organize space and equipment differently at times to recognize and respond to funds of knowledge. For example, after recognizing children's family experiences as sources of interests, TK rearranged their inside environment to represent the rooms of a home, positioning equipment and areas in a more logical manner to take account of these. One day, 1K teachers noticed Imogen clutching a 'car wash ticket', and talked with her about how important this experience with her father had been. They subsequently rearranged the water play in the outdoor environment for Imogen to direct others in cleaning the centre's wheeled equipment to assist her to represent and communicate her new understandings. While alert and sensitive teachers may do the latter spontaneously, I argue that the notion of funds of knowledge may provide a framework for understanding and choosing whose and which interests, of the myriad children have, might be selected for co-constructing curriculum.
Continuing interests

At a further point on the continuum, children revealed interests that continued over a period of time and sometimes involved them in early conceptual learning. Examples of these included children’s interests in the natural, physical and material worlds. A shared interest among many children was animals and insects. Drawing on their knowledge about caring for babies and pets, their initial interests were in looking after these. The toddlers were fascinated by insects, eschewing otherwise favourite activities. For example:

As Imogen digs, she finds something in the sandpit. It is a slug. With Barbara’s [a teacher] help, she tries to put it on a leaf several times. All thoughts of ‘cake baking’ [a favourite activity] have disappeared as she tries to do this. Several children come out of the art room calling to her that the lion hunt [another favourite activity] is on. But she perseveres trying to get the slug on the leaf. Eventually, she gives up and puts it in her hand and takes it to show Olivia. ‘Look what I found!’ … [She] takes the slug to the table where she puts it on a piece of paper and draws around it … She sits and plays with it. She tells Billie and Marcelia [also aged two] who are watching that it is sleeping, then puts it on her finger to show them.

This kind of response was not confined to very young children. Shannon (TK), aged nearly 5, found a spider in a tyre and made a ‘home’ for it that met its survival needs. While working on the spider’s home, he avoided teachers’ offers of conceptual information. Rather than explaining this in terms of Piaget’s concept of animism (Flavell 1963), a more sophisticated interpretation consistent with socio-cultural views of children and funds of knowledge is Inagaki and Hatano’s (2002: 2) notion of personification-based understandings in naïve biology which suggests ‘children exploit their relatively rich knowledge about humans to make educated guesses about other entities’.

Findings also exemplified that as children grow and learn, some of these ongoing interests change focus, but remain funds of knowledge-based. For example, Jack’s mother (1K) noted that boats, cars and trucks had been a major interest of his for some months. Later, while the focus on boats continued, he demonstrated an interest in language and literacy through books and visual and audio tools. This was followed by a focus on carpentry tools and activities, from which he later used the skills learned to build a small boat, revisiting and continuing his earlier interest. Much of this was prompted by intent observation and participation in home events such as a yacht restoration.
These interests were among those that could be usefully developed by project work. A notable example in both settings was children's involvement in the development of gardens, which continued throughout the year. Over the year, children were encouraged to draw on their funds of knowledge, and to actively participate and continue their exploration of interests, building everyday and conceptual knowledge:

The garden relocation and design project is well under way and documented in the display board near the entrance ... Theresia has been out in the garden with [a girl] picking broccoli. The girl is particularly interested in this because she is growing peas in her own garden at home. They have picked the broccoli because part of their healthy heart project is about trying new foods and Theresia will have the children try the broccoli with a yogurt-based dip at morning mat time ... Theresia now has a large group of children in the garden identifying vegetables and herbs and in particular looking for silverbeet ... The scarecrow [made by Theresia and the children] is now up in the garden. I compliment Theresia on it and she comments that it's great because it's all the children's own ideas and own work. She is delighted that the project is now into its third term as different ideas evolve ...

(TK)

Fundamental inquiry interests

A deeper-level interpretation of the data ascertained a further point on a continuum. Children were constantly engaged in inquiry and efforts to become 'life-theorizers' (Inagaki and Hatano 2002: 126). Underpinning the children's intent observation, participation in, and contribution to social and cultural activities in the home, centre and community settings, there appears to lie a fundamental inquiry about life as a human being. From an adult perspective, as the children did not conceptualize their inquiry in this way themselves, this might be worded as: 'How can I make sense of my world to lead an interesting, fulfilling and meaningful life as a participant in my family, community and culture?'

A link between this underlying inquiry and Te Whāriki's overall pedagogical goal is evident, indicating that children may perhaps share goals with their teachers. This inquiry was represented in children's interests through repeated dialogue and actions in many different ways in a range of contexts, through efforts to engage peers and adults in play and dialogue, and appears to encompass several 'real questions': What will I do when I am bigger?, What do intelligent, responsible and caring adults
do?, How can I make special connections with people I know?, How can
I make and communicate meaning?, How can I understand the world I
live in?, How can I develop my physical and emotional well-being?,
What is special about my identity in the place I live in? While each of
these questions comprised their own orientation and forms of action,
two are described in more detail here.

**How can I make and communicate meaning?**

The ability to communicate verbally and non-verbally was a powerful
stimulus to ongoing inquiry. For toddlers, expansion of their verbal lan­
guage facilitated adults' ability to respond meaningfully to their ongoing
interests and inquiries indicated initially through their intent participa­
tion. Vygotsky (1978, 1986) highlighted language as the most important
cultural tool children develop in their quest to make meaning, under­
stand their world and participate in it.

In relation to written communication, toddlers' interest in symbols
and mark making developed into an interest in early reading and writing
abilities. Both parents and teachers stimulated, encouraged and sup­
sported children's interest in literacy as a cultural tool and fund of know­
ledge that enabled access to meaning-making and knowledge-building.

Jack’s mother commented:

> He loves ‘The Very Hungry Caterpillar’ on DVD ... I've got *The
> Very Hungry Caterpillar* [book] ... It's really interesting listening to
> him ... he sat himself up on the couch and was reading it when
> the DVD wasn't on and he was reading it aloud ... and he'll cor­
> rect us if we read the wrong word in the story. He just remembers
> it. That's quite big at the moment.

Children's interest in literacy was represented in many play experiences
and formed a shared pedagogical goal with parents and teachers.

**How can I understand the world I live in?**

Exploration and understanding of the natural, physical and material worlds
were other strong interests. On the basis of their own life experiences, the
children were attracted by biological phenomena such as human bodily
processes, and the lives of pets and other animals. Children's inquiries
seemed to pursue questions such as: How do humans, animals, plants and
trees ‘get born’ and/or die?, How does this work?, What are the features of
the world I live in? These were most evident first of all in the domain of sci­
ence, specifically naïve biology (Inagaki and Hatano 2002), with an empha­
sis on small animals and insects such as snails, worms, cicadas, their own
pets, butterflies, sea creatures, and everyday phenomena. Second, these
occurred in the domain of technology, or naïve physics (Wellman and Gelman 1992, 1998), with interests such as cars, trucks, telephones, especially mobile telephones, cameras and computers, and batteries.

**Implications for teachers' professional knowledge**

I argue that it is vital teachers become more analytical about children's interests and recognize play area interests as an early point on a continuum and not necessarily representative of children's underlying interests: 'Children's inquiry acts provide a window to their thinking, allowing us to glimpse what they make sense of and how they are doing it, how they understand and how they use others to help them' (Lindfors 1999: 16).

In the early childhood years, children respond spontaneously to, and talk about, things that interest them, attempting to increase their understanding during play and interactions with others. Children's inquiry emerges from everyday funds of knowledge experiences, and activities in their families and communities, the latter including their early education centre. These experiences appear to reveal some fundamental 'real questions' about their humanity. As Bereiter (2002) claimed, children's inquiries are commonly about complex issues in their world. Therefore, consistent with *Te Whariki's* pedagogical goal, a stronger interpretation of children's interests is that of meaning-seeking about deep and serious issues of citizenship, culture and identity, rather than more common pedagogical interpretations which can focus on their interests using equipment or materials such as sand, paint and water. As children will find ways to represent these understandings in the educational context through play, teachers can use funds of knowledge as a framework with which to identify and choose interests to co-construct curriculum. As such, there is a need for teachers to access pedagogical strategies and skills to identify and support children's deep-seated interests as well as the ability to work with children's activity-based play interests.

Given that play is such a powerful way in which children represent, test and extend their interests, all three aspects (activity-based play interests; continuing interests; and fundamental inquiry interests) of the continuum presented in Figure 2.1 ought to be engaged with by teachers concurrently in a socio-cultural curriculum. Teachers' knowledge of children's family, centre and community funds of knowledge, along with the active involvement of families and communities in early childhood education, is vital to realizing a socio-cultural curriculum and pedagogy. A funds of knowledge approach may move teachers' pedagogical thinking from having *information about children* to *knowledge of children* at a deeper level. Furthermore, the particular systems that teachers put in place to ensure all children are catered for in curriculum planning need
to be flexible, and occur frequently enough to account for changes in children’s interests across the continuum.

Moll et al. (1992) believed that if teachers understood local funds of knowledge as a form of professional knowledge, this could inform curriculum through teaching and learning being organized around children’s interests and questions. One benefit of this approach is that it helps to build respect for diverse communities, thereby improving children’s educational experiences and outcomes. Further, in order to satisfy children’s fundamental inquiries, early childhood centres must not become institutions separated from the everyday worlds of families and communities. Visits from, and excursions into, the real worlds of adults that support children’s current inquiries are also vital components of early childhood curriculum, particularly in terms of supporting the third aspect of the continuum – fundamental inquiry interests.

**Conclusion: interfacing children’s play with teachers’ pedagogical practices**

Defining play as involving inquiry serves to move teachers’ thinking about children’s play and interests from predominantly developmental perspectives to socio-cultural perspectives. Theories of learning through intent participation, funds of knowledge and a community of inquiry, become useful frameworks to identify and explain children’s interests. In this chapter I have argued that children’s interests and inquiries may be usefully viewed as a continuum comprising three main aspects: activity-based play interests, continuing interests and fundamental inquiry interests. The elements on this continuum feed backwards and forwards as children’s experiences and interests grow and change and connect between contexts. Teachers’ awareness of the deeper nature of children’s interests through the framework of funds of knowledge and the notion of inquiry may enable them to co-construct curriculum and provide an environment responsive to children that is representative of their deeper interests. Teacher knowledge of this continuum may provide a sound theoretical foundation for choosing whose and which interests are followed in co-constructing meaningful curriculum.

As Wood (2009: 33) claims, ‘Practitioners need a more critical understanding of the meaning of play activities to children.’ The continuum proposed encourages deeper understandings of children’s play and interests by teachers, and thoughtful pedagogical practices. Research on funds of knowledge present in diverse communities and cultures and the applicability of the continuum are suggested as steps towards moving early childhood education forward in the twenty-first century.
Note

1. This chapter adopts the ethical principle of credit, and uses real names to acknowledge participation.

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References


