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**Play at the heart – Inspirational  
Leading the way – Challenging**

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**Abstract:** In early childhood education, play is at the heart of many educational programmes offered to young children and is regarded as an integral part of the curriculum. This paper examines a case study that explored the views of Pasifika student teachers notions of play. The purpose of the research was to establish fundamental influences that have contributed to these views.

When undertaking any form of research with Pasifika people, it is important that the recognition of their values, beliefs and practices are integrated. Some, not all, western research paradigms appear to be confrontational to Pasifika people when addressing appropriate relational concepts that are often complex and multilayered. The research design used in the case study was based on two Pasifika research methodologies, talanoa with an extension of talanoamālie and the kakala model. Both favoured among Pasifika people and deemed important as well as being culturally appropriate and responsive. By incorporating a qualitative theoretical framework that seeks the opinions and experiences of the research participants, provided rich descriptions of biographical and reflective narratives.

The results have identified that childhood play experiences, cultural influences and parental and/or adult attitudes towards play were critical factors that featured prominently with the views held by the research participants. Of particular interest to the research, was how such views have motivated the types of play opportunities that have been presented to the young children in their care. Implications posed for Pasifika early childhood student teachers and teachers, when attempting to align theories of play and play-related requirements in accordance with both the New Zealand Curriculum and the National Early Childhood Curriculum framework, Te Whāriki with teaching practices are discussed. Teachers need to be able to articulate and justify why they do the things they do with young children to parents, centre administrators, staff and those involved in the sector. In doing so, a greater emphasis is placed on the relevance for children to be given opportunities to be supported in their endeavours to play.

The significance of this work contributes to the much-needed literature concerning not only student teachers views of play and its influences to practice, but also to Pasifika theorizing of play-related ideas. It is hoped that the discussions from this paper will generate a deeper awareness of Pasifika views of play and create a platform whereby robust debates concerning the place and role of play in the development of young children within the context of teaching and learning in early childhood education are encouraged and continued.

**Key words:** curriculum documents, early childhood education, play, student teachers and teacher education

**Introduction:** Play in early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand continues to be the cornerstone to curriculum developments for young children. High on the agenda of many who advocate the need for children to play and the benefits associated with play, concerns opportunities for children to play and are coupled with the nature and purpose of play. Early childhood teacher education programmes acknowledge the significance and role of play in the development of young children. This has been widely recognised in both Pasifika and mainstream programmes (Airini et al., 2010; Hedges, 2003; Leaupepe, 2011a). As part of my partial requirement in the fulfilment of a master's degree, a small-scale research project was conducted which explored the views of six Pasifika early childhood student teachers concepts of play. The women, aged in their early 30s to late 50s were in their second year of a three-year diploma of teaching programme. The qualification would permit them to work in both Pasifika and mainstream early childhood settings (Leaupepe, 2011a).

**The purpose of the research - A case study:** Play-related references are made explicit through the National Early Childhood Curriculum, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education [MoE],

1996) that sanctions the importance of play and its influence to the holistic development of the child. The emphasis is placed on teachers to value children's play "as meaningful learning" and where the acknowledgement to the "importance of spontaneous play" is recognised (MoE, 1996, p.84). The New Zealand Curriculum (MoE, 2007) that caters for the compulsory sector from years 1 to years 13 highlight the need for participation in active movement. The goals and learning outcomes are outlined in detail.

*Te whāriki: Exploration – Mana Aotūroa*

The child learns through active exploration of the environment.

Goal 1: Children experience an environment where their play is valued as meaningful learning and the importance of spontaneous play is recognised.

Learning outcomes: knowledge, skills and attitudes

Children develop:

- the ability to make decision, choose their own materials, and set their own problems;
- the attitude that not knowing and being uncertain are part of the process of being a good learner;
- an expectation that they take responsibility for their own learning;
- the knowledge that trying things out, exploration, and curiosity are important and valued ways of learning;
- increasing confidence and a repertoire for symbolic, pretend, or dramatic play;
- the knowledge that playing with ideas and materials, with no objective in mind, can be an enjoyable, creative, and valid approach to learning.

(MoE, 1996, p.84)

*The New Zealand Curriculum*

Health and Physical Education: Level One

Movement skills; Science and technology

- Develop a wide range of movement skills, using a variety of equipment and play environments.

Positive attitudes: Challenges and social and cultural factors

- Participate in a range of games and activities and identify the factors that make participation safe and enjoyable.

(MoE, 2007)

However, this becomes problematic when the views held by teachers differ. In the case study that is reported in this paper, Pasifika student teachers views of play have been influenced by their own childhood play memories, parental expectations-views of play and cultural influences. The research participants in the case study have struggled with the ideas that have been presented to them in a course that explores the value of play (Leaupepe, 2008).

With such responsibilities that inform what teachers do and why, much research has focused on practicing teachers' beliefs and perceptions of play in the early years (Bennett, Wood, & Rogers, 1997; Flee, 2003; Hedges, 2003; Leaupepe, 2011b; Rothlein & Brett, 1987). It can be considered that much of what occurs in the early childhood education learning environments are to some extent, based on teachers' pre-conceived notions of play and curricular expectations (Sandberg & Samuelsson, 2003; Ranz-Smith, 2007). It would seem imperative that in our teacher education programmes that prepare and equip student teachers to respond positively to children's play experiences, a greater need to become cognizant of play and its relevance to the holistic development of the child requires further exploration (Berg & Leaupepe, in press). Student teachers who gain a deeper understanding

and appreciation of play, are well positioned to becoming advocates that places play high on the agenda of educational programmes and recognises the rights of a child to play (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002; UNICEF, 2011). In essence, such a transitioning could support play in becoming more integrated rather than a separate or isolated aspect of the curriculum (Berg & Leaupepe, in press).

**The research design:** Two Pasifika research methodologies have underpinned the case study. The kakala model developed by Thaman (1999) and talanoa with a critical component of talanoamālie (Fa'afoi, Parkhill, & Fletcher, 2006; Manu'atu & Keepa, 2006; 'Otunuku, 2011) are used to describe the gathering and processing of data. It also describes the kinds of engagements and relational concepts that are expected from both the researcher and the researched. Both research methods are favoured by Pacific Island people and deemed culturally responsive (Anae, Coxon, Mara, Wendt-Samu, & Finau, 2001). The research uses a qualitative approach that investigates small areas in great depth. Sarantakos (1998, p. 47) explains such data as “detailed, thick descriptions” of what the participants have said. “The study seeks to understand what the research participants’ think in regards to the term play and how the participants came to think this way” (Leaupepe, 2010, p. 3). 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).

**What was said about play?** For the majority of the research participants, play occurred outside and within a social context. Play had been viewed as a way of having fun and making friends that fostered socialising skills. Some had recalled aspects of socio-dramatic play in their experiences. While some had thought that play had nothing to do with learning. For example, the following statements portray these ideas.

*“I like to play all the time, it was fun and I like making friends”*

*“We always play outside and not by ourselves, it’s better to play that way with our friends having so much fun. It was how we learn to socialise”*

*“I pretend to make a umu, cooking with the leaves, using the corn beef cans. I’m sad if I’m not allowed to play”*

*“Play is just you running around, climbing trees having fun, you don’t really learn”*

Reflecting on childhood play memories is necessary and deemed important for early childhood teachers. Sandberg and Samuelsson (2003) propose that such an exercise is useful in examining one’s own experiences of play and establishes whether play experiences may differ from the children in their care.

Parental expectations-views of play were related to what children’s responsibilities were in maintaining and contributing to sustaining the village life-style (Schoeffel & Meleisa, 1996). Household chores were more important. Traditionally in Western discourses of early childhood, the concept of play has often been positioned in opposition to work. Therefore, adults and parental views of play were regarded as being negative according to the research participants when compared with work.

*“My mum doesn’t want me to play. It’s the work, do your chores, sweep outside, never mind playing”*

*"Adults don't value play, they see it as a waste of time. I learnt from a young age that play is a waste of time. So I didn't encourage my children to play either"*

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"*

Cultural influences of play were associated with gender issues roles and responsibilities expected of children and that were socially constructed. This is best summed up by the following quote.

*"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 because of the respect"*

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 (Leaupepe, 2009).

**Critical reflection:** Upon reflection by the research participants' shifts have been made in their thinking, although to what extent is perhaps a further exploration of investigation. The impact of the research participants' views is of particular interest in this case study. For example, in relation to the gender issues as described above and as a consequence of a discussion between the university supervisor and a research participant, the following unfolds:

*"I know the benefits of play and how I can encourage further learning through play, but sometimes it hard for me, to let go. Even now as I am training and learning all these things, I think about my daughter. Because we don't wear the long pants, to me I was brought up in the way that only boys wear the long pants, my daughter is always in a skirt or a dress and I don't allow her to do things, like climbing the trees, it's a no no. That's my culture, that's who I am"*

While on the other hand, another research participant is confronted by her knowledge and comes to the realisation of her views.

*"I now know that children learn when they play. I stopped my children from playing, because it wasn't encouraged when I was growing up so I didn't do that with my children. Now my adult son is doing the same thing, it's hard cause he is only doing what I did to him when he was a child. I want my mokopuna to learn as much as he can and play is one way that can help him. I tell my husband about what I learn as well"*

Connections to learning are made and children viewed as being competent and capable of their own agency.

*"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. I can support children in their play, extend their learning by following their interests"*

**Implications for Pasifika early childhood student teachers – teachers:** Pasifika early childhood student teachers and teachers would benefit from examining their own attitudes and perceptions of play. The need to consider how such views may impact on the types of play opportunities afforded to young children is a crucial undertaking. Teachers have a responsibility to ensure that children are provided with experiences that maximises further learning and that views children as "competent and capable learners" (MoE, 1996, p.9). It is important to recognise the tensions that arise when conflicting ideas concerning play are presented and moreover find solutions that address such concerns. Preferential ideas of Western theorizing of play may not be favourable amongst some Pasifika early childhood student teachers and teachers, however, "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" (Leauepe, 2010, p.8).

It is clear from this study that play continues to be a notion that can be conflicting and problematic, and that still requires further understanding. The challenge for Pasifika early childhood student teachers is the ability to recognise how their own views of play impact on their practice. There would need to be a concerted effort to consider what has influenced such views which may require disrupting long held traditional beliefs or deep-seated assumptions about play and how children are socially constructed (Leauepe, 2009). The challenge for Pasifika early childhood teachers is the ability to articulate with conviction what they do with children and why. This may require the need to "revitalise neglected knowledge" (Leauepe, 2011, p. 24), a term that is used with the intent to uncover what teachers know and understand about the concept of play from their own childhoods which is key to understanding their contemporary professional practice and how curriculum documents are actually implemented.

**Significance of work:** The purpose of this case study was to explore the perceptions of Pasifika student teachers views of play and its impact. This work contributes to the much need literature and research concerning Pasifika student teachers views of play and provides a deeper understanding as to why this might be the case. Pasifika theorizing of play-related ideas continue to inform what teachers do and why. For the research participants in this study, their own perceptions of play prior to studying theories of play have meant that they were not able to recognise and value children's play as opportunities for further learning. The research participants were more inclined to offer experiences that allowed the teacher to direct the learning. What this work reveals is that play takes on different forms in different cultures. 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. For of the research participants in this case study there is evidence to suggest that there is a willingness to learn from children.

**Conclusion:** Children are creative beings full of curiosity and have an enthusiasm for learning with an innate desire to play. How children are afforded opportunities to engage in play and experience for themselves the benefits of play within early childhood settings, are to some extent reliant upon teachers' responsiveness. The ongoing quest for children to discover ways of learning through play that may incorporate elements of risk-taking and adventure requires teachers to be willing to share that journey with children. This becomes a powerful means of how children can experience through play their understanding of knowing how they fit in a world that is constantly changing. Robust discussions about the importance of play within the lives of young children need to be ongoing and that captures at the heart, play – that is inspirational, while acknowledging that leading the way may indeed be challenging.

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Correspondence with the author: If you wish to talk with the author about anything that has been raised in this paper please don't hesitate to make contact. Thank you to those who were present at the round-table discussion, your contributions and robust discussions are much appreciated. Meitaki atupaka.