Searching for play in Early Childhood Care and Education policy

Sophie Alcock
Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland

Abstract

Children (and adults) across all cultures play in culturally reflective ways (Goncu & Gaskins, 2007; Rogoff, 2003). Play is one of the most interesting characteristics of groups of children. Despite play being a preoccupation of most young children, and a desirable disposition for creative adults (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Sawyer, R.K., 2003) New Zealand Ministry of Education (MoE) Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) policy and curriculum documents make little or no mention of play (1996, 2004–2009, 2011, 2012). This paper explores the invisibility of play in official Ministry of Education (MoE) ECEC curriculum, assessment and policy documents and discusses possible reasons for this invisibility.

Keywords: play; early childhood curriculum policy; early childhood assessment policy.

Introduction

Play policies and UNCRC

This paper addresses the invisibility of children's play in current Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policies, curriculum and assessment documents in Aotearoa New Zealand. In contrast, academic learning with measurable outcomes is a growing global phenomenon in ECCE policies (and practices) despite the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) identifying play as a *right*. Article 31 states: "1. Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts" (United Nations, 1989). A recent report on the implementation of Article 31 carried out by the International Play Association (2010) identified the neglect of children's play as a global issue with "excessive pressure for educational achievement" (p. 38) being identified as infringing on play in every country. A major reason for this neglect of play was described as: "adult's lack of awareness of the importance of play in children's development" (p. 27). From a democratic rights perspective, play is noticeably the only UNCRC right which explicitly defends and asserts the right to be a child.

While this paper has been written in response to observations of the neglect of play in New Zealand ECCE policy, curriculum, and assessment documents, play and playfulness are also viewed as attitudinal processes that may include, but do not prioritise, rights. Instead, both the activity of play and the attitude of playfulness are viewed here as ways of relating and being open to the present while also responsively 'playing along', feeling free, creating meaning, and feeling feelings whilst coming to understandings of self in relation to others and the world.

While researching and writing about the neglect of play I also became aware of the demise of the related ECCE words *care* and *development* from policy and curriculum documents and their replacement with a discourse around *learning* with measurable outcomes. This replacement of *care, development* and *play* with *learning* outcomes is highlighted in the flow-on effects to the ECCE sector of the introduction to the school sector of narrowly academic National Standards designed to assess children's literacy and numeracy skills from year one onwards.

Difficulties defining play

New Zealand Ministry of Education (MoE) ECCE policy, curriculum and assessment documents make little or no mention of play (1996, 2004–2009, 2011a, 20011b, 2012a, 2012b). This neglect of play in ECCE seems illogical when we know that play, particularly imaginative and imitative play, has strong associations with young children's learning and development (Gopnik, 2010; Piaget, 1962; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). However, these associations tend to not be linear but rather to be more lateral, complex, distributed, and systemic, like play itself (Alcock, 2009, 2010). Thus, part of the reason for play's neglect lies with its elusive nature, its complexity, and consequent difficulties in defining and pinning it down.

Play (the activity) and playfulness (the attitude) are difficult to define and probably impossible to measure as has been pointed out by play researchers and theorists from across a wide range of disciplines including philosophy, psychology, anthropology, the arts and sciences (Caillois, 1961; Gadamer, 1994, cited in Grondin, 2001; Huizinga, 1944; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Winnicott, 1971). Play research is a vast domain, its breadth being summarized in the title of the historian and cultural theorist Huizinga's (1944) classic: *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-element in Culture*. As Huizinga unintentionally showed, categories, definitions, and words can both constrain and assist understandings of play by what they do and do not include (Caillois, 1961). This defining dilemma reflects the nature of play as complex relational activity that involves shifting, contradictory, paradoxical processes that are often positioned around dialectical themes such as real and unreal, good and evil, inside and outside; play has strong links with similarly challenging concepts and positions such as power, freedom, improvisation, agency, work, love, aesthetics, and creativity (Corsaro, 1985; Huizinga, 1944; Sawyer, 1997, 2003; Sutton-Smith, 1997). The complexities that are inherent in defining play and playfulness as relation, process, and attitude add to the difficulties of understanding and conceptualising play in relation to narrow understandings of future-focussed learning outcomes.

This paper builds on the rationale developed for my Phd dissertation over a decade ago: the lack of relational play research had inspired that interpretive investigation into young children's experience of playfulness in their communication. Ethics permission for the research was obtained through a university ethics committee and used ethnographic methods reflecting the qualitative nature of the research focus (Graue & Walsh, 1998). Thus the field-note data was presented as framed events (Bateson, 1972; Goffman, 1974) intended to illuminate the diversity in children's many ways of being creatively playful together. Socio-cultural activity theory provided an analytic framework, a methodology and a complex systems context for

the events (Engestrom, 1987). Despite the growth in educational play scholarship over the past decade (Brooker & Edwards, 2010; Lester & Russell, 2010; Lillemyr, 2009; Wood & Attfield, 2005) young children's freedom to engage in such free-play in ECCE settings seems to be even more endangered now than it was in the 1990s. As I observed and studied playfulness my curiosity deepened and my play-lens broadened; I became hooked on the complexities of play and playfulness as ways of relating, creating, understanding, connecting, being-open and being-with others for children and for adults.

I began to understand play as complex continually emergent frameworks, or matrices, mediating young children coming together, making meaning and coming to understand themselves in relation to, and with, others and the environment. I became intrigued by the subversive and agentic dimensions in play; young children frequently and creatively made un-playful (tedious) routines playful (Alcock, 2007). Play bubbled up even when not planned.

This unpredictability accords with the philosophically paradoxical and dialectical nature of play activity; it emerges and moves matrix-like across domain and discipline boundaries, co-existing, integrating and transcending different modes of perception, representation and expression. Open-ended playfulness is integral to scientific curiosity and artistic creativity (Gopnik, 2010). Artists play with ideas and media. Jazz musicians and performance artists together create improvisational plays (Sawyer, 2003). Understanding play as activity and playfulness as attitude that crosses over, creates spaces and potentially connects yet also disrupts domains also helps explain its neglect. Yet as Burghardt (2005, cited in Lester & Russell, 2010, p. x) pragmatically points out, young children everywhere, like other young animals, play unless severely stressed or traumatised. Play always reflects culture adding to the definitional challenges (Goncu & Gaskins, 2007). Humans as a species are particularly interesting; this neotenous ape plays for life; pretend play has also been described as lifespan developmental activity (Goncu & Perone, 2005).

Play as paradox also exists in the tensions that arise in descriptions of play as involving work, development, love, and learning: play has been described as the opposite of 'work' or as 'child's work'. If play could have an opposite, 'no-play' would be nearer to it than work. Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) has also suggested that the opposite of play is depression, which could also be a consequence or outcome of no play! In a similar vein, learning has also been presented as work rather than play with phrases such as 'learning through play'. Play, work, development, care, love, and learning are integral to play as a verb and as a relational process. Such paradoxes exemplify and add to the complexities in play. While this paper touches on some of these aspects, play, and playfulness are here positioned relationally and attitudinally. This relational view fits with a view of ECCE settings as places where activity mediates children's ways of being playfully curious and creatively imaginative together.

Divisions among ECCE play theorists

Early childhood theorists advocating for children's play add to the paradoxical complexities around defining and understanding play and playfulness. They tend to

be divided into two broad, overlapping, sometimes contradictory camps: those who intentionally focus on educational pedagogical play and those who enthusiastically endorse and value all or most forms of play. Theorists across divisions have tended to categorise the activity of play as a noun rather than emphasising playfulness as a relational attitude, more akin to the activity described in verbs.

The educational play enthusiasts tend to emphasise the importance of conditions and environments that offer rich opportunities for social pretend (imaginative) play that supports children's learning and development. Teachers play an important role in planning for such 'developmentally appropriate' play by creating enabling environments, such as literacy-rich play spaces to support children's imaginative play while also anticipating broad learning outcomes. Teachers may also become players with children, further facilitating teachers' pedagogical agendas (Lillemyr, 2009; Roskos & Christie, 2011; Van Oers, 2012; Wood & Attfield, 2005).

Other play theorists defend children's right to play as a fundamental freedom and assume links between emotional and physical development, learning, and all forms of play (Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pask, 2006) while not discounting the educational value in play. Rather, play is regarded as involving more than learning. It is integral to most, if not all, creative processes.

Educational play theorists may be accused of misrepresentation by promoting narrow understandings of pedagogical play that accord with curriculum and policy trends that, in turn, emphasise academic learning and cognition too frequently devoid of emotion. Examples of such play could be socio-dramatic pretend play focussed on literacy and numeracy themes such as 'shopping' where cognitive skills are prioritised over the socio-emotional dimensions that drive the play; skilful teachers can shape play easily towards this type of pedagogical play. However, controlling play runs the risk of transforming it into pedagogically 'play-less' processes by restricting the free choice that is fundamental to play. Also rough and tumble and lucid free-play do not easily fit pedagogical agendas. But play theorists who accept and promote all forms of play may also be accused of placing children's right to play at risk by not bending play to fit within pedagogical frameworks. Children's right to play is in danger when positioned simplistically as a right and a natural way of being for all children.

The divisions and difficulties in defining play and playfulness may help explain the avoidance of play in recent MoE policy, curriculum and assessment documents, despite research endorsing broad links between learning and play (Lillemyr, 2009; Roskos & Christie, 2011; Singer et al., 2006; Wood & Attfield, 2005). Consequent challenges for play advocates include spreading theoretical understandings of the rich breadth, depth and complexity in the activity of play. Conceptualising play and playfulness as attitudinal, relational, emotional and cognitive processes that both connect and create spaces for being, rather than as fixed categories, may assist theorists in developing these understandings.

The MoE website: where assessment meets National Standards

The New Zealand *Early Childhood Curriculum, Te Whāriki*, includes play implicitly with its very inclusive definition of curriculum as "…the sum total of the experiences, activities, and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster children's learning and development" (1996, p. 10). In contrast, the MoE's official 'ECE home' webpage presents curriculum narrowly. The website itself is confusing; however, it does present the MoE's position on ECCE (which is also confusing as the following few paragraphs will explain):

Two main sub-portals confront the reader on the home page for ECE (http://www.minedu.govt.nz/NZEducation/EducationPolicies/EarlyChildhood.aspx). One sub-portal is called 'ECE Lead'; it opens the way to a large number of menus related to the management and administration of early childhood services. ECEC is a big business. The other 'ECE Educate' sub-portal leads to pedagogy and curriculum. It greets the reader with the bold headlines: "Welcome to early childhood teaching and learning".

On the ECE Educate webpage, under a menu called 'learning', sits the section heading 'curriculum and learning'. Within this section are five sub-sections:

> Te Whāriki;
> Assessment for learning;
> Learning environments;
> Learning resources; and
> National Standards and ECE.

One of the four headings under 'Assessment for learning' is 'learning outcomes'. Click on this and the title 'learning pathways' appears with a diagram illustrating links from Te Whāriki to the New Zealand school curriculum. The New Zealand school curriculum appears to be the only pathway offered under the 'learning outcomes' of assessment in early childhood. The reference to National Standards and ECE as another sub-section within 'curriculum and learning' adds worrying weight to this positioning of assessment in early childhood as being exclusively focused on preparation for school. These worries are confirmed in the explanation recently added to this sub-section which reads:

> *How do the National Standards relate to early childhood education?*
> National Standards aim to lift achievement in literacy and numeracy by helping teachers, students and families be clear about what students should achieve and by when. They come into effect in 2010 for English-medium schools with pupils in Years 1 to 8. National Standards in reading, writing and mathematics will be used to assess children's learning progress after the first 12 months of attendance at school. The development of National Standards in schooling has not changed Te Whāriki the early childhood curriculum. Te Whāriki the ECE … curriculum links to the NZ curriculum in schools. Parents can expect children to develop early skills in literacy and numeracy while their children are enrolled in

ECE. Last updated: 24 May 2012. (http://www.educate.ece.govt.nz/
learning/curriculumAndLearning/NationalStandardsandECE.aspx)

The future for ECEC curriculum looks play-less. Not only is play totally absent but the broad definition of curriculum as presented in Te Whāriki is also missing. The principles of Te Whāriki have been replaced by a one-page diagram of the school curriculum that overlaps school competencies with the strands of the early childhood curriculum, while also narrowly focusing on literacy and numeracy that accord with National Standards for schools. Again, preparation for a narrowly academic school curriculum appears to be the MoE focus for early childhood curriculum. The current ERO review of the implementation of Te Whāriki increases concerns over curriculum and assessment in ECEC beyond just the neglect of play and playfulness, which was originally the exclusive focus of this paper.

Other key omissions in the MoE early childhood web pages and documents include the words 'development' and 'care'. These words are integral to fundamental early childhood concepts expressed in the phrases 'early childhood care and education' and 'learning and development'. A distinctive feature of early childhood is the integration of care with education. The term 'educare' has been used to describe the blending of care as education, which characterizes young children's learning, growth and development (Smith, 1993). Te Whāriki also blends care with education by using the phrase 'care and education' rather than the singular 'education'. At a political level the concept of educare was endorsed in 1986 by the shift of responsibility for child care services from the then Department of Social Welfare to the Department of Education. However, increasingly, 'care' is being ignored in official discourses and in ECCE practices. MoE early childhood publications usually refer to 'education' as 'learning' without 'care'. Despite an early childhood curriculum that prioritises links with family and community as a core principle, responsibility for early childhood programmes that prioritize family involvement such as 'Parents as First Teachers' (PAFT) has shifted from the MoE to the Ministry of Social Development. In 2006 entire staff teams changed Ministries moving from Ministry of Education offices to Ministry of Social Development offices. One gets the impression that 'development' too has shifted away from Education to the Ministry of Health who now hold responsibility for administering the B4 five 'developmental' checks on young children.

Within MoE documents and on the MoE website, 'development' – a process that can fit with understandings of play as well as with learning – has been removed from 'learning'. The broader phrase 'development and learning' which was common in early childhood talk and texts has been replaced with the singular 'learning'. This omission might not cause concern as the concept of 'developmentally appropriate practice (DAP)' has received bad press for promoting narrowly normative and linear interpretations of child development (Fleer, 1995). However, development need not be interpreted so simplistically; 'development' adds physical bodies to head-minds by situating growth, and learning within physical bodies. In contrast, 'teaching and learning' are traditionally viewed as cognitive in-the-head processes. But 'development' also refers to holistic processes of change as children develop and grow in all domains: emotionally, socially, cognitively, physically, spiritually and

culturally as human beings. Development and learning are embodied processes that evolve and change continuously. 'Development', 'care' and 'play' with all their complexities have been misrepresented by being interpreted in reductionist ways that are likely to have contributed to their demise in documents that matter, such as MoE curriculum and assessment policy documents. Interestingly, while a learning discourse now dominates ECCE policy and curriculum documents, understandings of 'learning' too, seem to have become simultaneously reduced, simplified, and stretched over a shrinking domain of narrow, academic learning.

Play in Te Whāriki (1996) and Kei Tua o te Pae (2004–2009)?

Te Whāriki, the early childhood curriculum, emphasises both care and development by explicitly referring to age groups of infants, toddlers and young children as well as in the principle of holistic development and learning. However, te Whāriki mentions play only superficially and minimally as one of its 22 curriculum goals under the strand of 'exploration'. The goal reads: "children will experience an environment where their play is valued as meaningful learning and the importance of spontaneous play is recognised" (MoE, 1996, p. 84). Play and playfulness encompass more than future-focussed exploration. Many of the remaining 21 goals could equally well be interpreted as involving play without naming it. As far as I'm aware no play scholars were included in the core group of curriculum developers which may explain why play and playfulness are invisible words. Through wide consultation and collaborative processes, practitioners at a grass-roots level were heavily represented in the development of Te Whāriki, which perhaps explains how the phenomena of play and playfulness live between the lines of text, in the eyes of the reader. Thus the principles and strands of Te Whāriki can be interpreted as pointing towards play.

'Kei Tua o te Pae, Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars'

"Kei tua o te Pae, assessment for learning: early childhood exemplars "are examples of assessments that make visible learning that is valued so that the learning community (children, families, whanau, teachers, and others) can foster ongoing and diverse learning pathways" (MoE, 2004, p. 3, Book one). They consist of 20 booklets on a range of curriculum topics published in groups between 2004 and 2009. The exemplars have continued the Te Whāriki tradition of neglecting play by avoiding naming it, despite many exemplars showing 'play' in photographs and in written 'learning stories'. Each booklet focuses on a domain such as the strands of Te Whāriki: belonging, exploration, wellbeing, communication, and collaboration; infants and toddlers; and socio-cultural assessment. However, all the books in the series prioritise an assessment for learning focus on individual children's 'learning dispositions', thereby avoiding potentially more complex interpretations of children connecting and playing together while making and creating meaning relationally.

Furthermore, the image of children on the MoE website and MoE documents is of individual rational citizens in the making, 'human-becomings' governed by a regime of learning goals, dispositions, and outcomes that might make them compliant

citizens. Collaboration, connecting, feeling and being, as qualities of play and playful activity are missing on the Ministry of Education website, and exist only between the lines in the curriculum and assessment documents Te Whāriki and Kei Tua o te Pae. The image of children presented in the aspiration statement of Te Whāriki is also not one of freely playful children. Rather it is a vision of: "…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, p. 9). These words pay lip-service to an idealistic concept that, as Duhn (2006, p. 191) points out, is "…an assemblage of educational and neo-liberal discourses… a global citizen in the making" fitting with the neo-liberal-political flavour of 1996 which continues in 2013.

The ECCE curriculum framework, Te Whāriki, is open to interpretation which is both its strength, and its weakness (Cullen, 1996). Te Whāriki shows a weakness in neglecting to name 'play' thereby putting play in a vulnerable position. However, naming 'play' may have put Te Whāriki in a vulnerable position with play being viewed as trivial activity, 'just child's play', while seemingly also endorsing a simplistic 'learning through play' ideology that has dominated ECCE. Te Whāriki provides an approach and framework for curriculum that can include play as activity, particularly if playfulness is also conceptualised relationally as attitude and process.

Example of playfulness as process and attitude

Play may be understood and interpreted as process and as involving dynamic complex systems of activity on both macro and micro levels. From a micro perspective, playfulness is an intersubjective attitude and way of coming to understand through 'playing' together with other people and/or with things. This view of playfulness as attitudinal process resonates with the concept of flow which also views players as intensely engaged in the present, in being, in flow, in the activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). It also resonates with Winnicott's (1971) concepts around transitional phenomena and transitional space where:

> inner psychic reality has a kind of location in the mind or in the belly, or in the head or somewhere within the bounds of the individual's personality, and whereas what is called external reality is located outside those bounds, playing and cultural experience can be given a location … (p. 62)

This location is the play space; it emerges between players and whatever they are engaged with in play and includes them in it. As with complex activity systems this third play space changes in sync with the evolving play (Alcock, 2009, 2010).

Playfulness viewed as an attitude of coming-to-understand encompasses ways of relating, connecting, communicating, creating, and being with meaning for young children as well as for older people. Gadamer (referred to by Grondin, 2001) presents play as drawing players into play. Similarly, children at play are drawn into the emerging evolving play. Sense, meaning, or some sort of understanding emerges in and out of their playfulness. Play and playfulness understood in this attitudinal way

are systemically connected improvisational processes of coming-to-understand which young children (and adults) commonly practise.

The following event presents an ordinary example of playfulness as this following and drawing-in attitude that emerges and frames young children relating and enjoying being in spontaneous un-planned free-flow play. This event is presented because it does not fit with pedagogical understandings of play and narrow understandings of learning. Rather playfulness and laughter connect these children in feelings of togetherness and belonging.

Laughter connects

Background: Southbridge, outside

Beside the wood-work table, three four-year-old boys have built catapult contraptions which operate by jumping on one end of the plank of wood which is balanced on a fulcrum in the middle (like a see-saw). The other end then flicks up and sends the objects (bottle-tops) balanced on it flying. None of the children has English as a first language and only Lau speaks some English. They are all recent immigrants with three different first languages.

> Ali arranges 3 bottle tops on one end of the plank.
> Mal gives high-pitched squeaks as he sees Ali do this. Mal then fetches two more bottle-tops, which are lying nearby on the ground, (possibly they've fallen off the nearby carpentry table).
> Lau is also watching: "Uh ooh".
> Meanwhile Ali uses one leg to stamp firmly on the upright end of the plank, sending the three bottle-tops flying; he laughs; Mal giggles and watches. Ali repeats the jump three times and the hysterical laughter increases with each jumping turn. The three boys' glances at each other seem to increase their laughter as they bend over in the grip of their loud laughter. No words are spoken. Their togetherness is expressed physically in contagious laughter, connecting glances and their energetically bending, almost-dancing bodies. They move synchronously together. (Southbridge, 2.11.2000)

Teacher Cath:

> Yes, they laugh as a way of talking. That's where humour's great, because it breaks down the barriers... These children are all Muslim and all play together, yet they speak three different languages. (Interview, 2.11.2000)

Analysis

Free-play connected these children intersubjectively through both the catapulting activity and by their laughter. The inherently humorous (and incongruent) activity of jumping on a plank so that it fired bottle-tops contributed to the tension which, in turn, motivated the activity that drew the children in. Wooden planks and bottle-tops mediated the activity on a material level. Energy expressed in laughter, gaze, and moving bodies further mediated and connected the children, so that

consciousness, imaginations, minds became distributed (Salomon, 1993) across the three players in this transitional play space (Winnicott, 1971). Playful laughter, with associated body language (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), connected them instead of a common spoken language. They did have religious backgrounds in common. I was the only watching adult, but teachers had created the conditions enabling this free play to emerge. And the play in turn enabled the children to feel some closeness and shared sense of belonging together. It possibly also involved some unplanned implicit learning of concepts around physics and motion (Gopnik, 2010). However, such unpredictable spontaneous physical and joyful play does not sit comfortably with an image of children that is governed by future-focused learning and where the curriculum and assessment focus is on preparation for school and national standards in literacy and numeracy.

In a sense we are always in a state of improvisational play when we engage with each other intersubjectively and openly, like the children in this event. The connecting space between the players became a space of improvised play that shifted and changed in response to the children's jumping, laughing, playing rhythms. Play, like the process of coming to understand, never stands still but is always changing, shifting between the known and the unknown – the expected and the unexpected – dictated partly by the emergent rules and the roles of the situation. This is why play cannot easily be incorporated into narrowly predetermined learning outcomes; the outcomes of play are indeterminate. The same materials – bottle-tops and planks – could have been used to didactically teach physical concepts around trajectories and movement in a controlled way. However, such teaching would cut across the spontaneously joyful feelings that characterize this playfulness and make it so worthwhile.

This event represents a common everyday example of spontaneous free play which can emerge when enabling conditions exist. No adults were directly involved in the play. But teachers directly supported this free-play with the provision of time, space, materials, and a play-supportive ethos. In other events in the wider study teachers were sometimes players, and they were also engaged as mediators, assisting the children to negotiate the rules and roles of play (Alcock, 2006). In this event, as in others, the children co-created feelings of togetherness and belonging by being freely and creatively playful together.

Summary

This demise of play in ECCE is a global phenomenon, as the International Play Association (IPA, 2010) and others have pointed out (Lester & Russell, 2010). It accompanies the political rise of neo-liberalism with capitalist values that prioritise economic outcomes redefined as 'learning outcomes' in Ministry of Education documents (2011a, 2012a, 2012b). Play and playfulness are not as valued by educational authorities as are more visibly academic knowledges. Thus literacy and mathematics are strongly emphasised in ECCE documents while links to play are not promoted (2006, 2004–2009, 2011a, 2012a, 2012b). Yet, paradoxically, research supports links between play, literacy and maths (Roskos & Christie, 2011; Singer et al., 2006). Many of the desirable dispositions and competencies that are promoted in

educational documents such as curiosity, creativity, and collaboration are also inherently affirmed and learned through playful engagement with others. However, the process of learning these co-operative and creative qualities does not sit easily with future-focussed agendas of progress, products, and learning outcomes. As mentioned, play is also potentially subversive; it involves making nonsense as well as sense of meanings and feelings, by breaking and making, negotiating and playing with rules and roles. Play ignores narrowly focussed future outcomes by engaging players in the present moment, in feeling creatively free. This freedom can be challenging for the rigid and authoritarian regimes that sometimes rule ECCE settings.

Simplistic notions of learning and learners seem to have replaced complex concepts of play, care, and development in MoE policy documents which increasingly reveal a reductionist image of young children as 'learners' in the making, as incomplete 'human-becomings' (Uprichard, 2008). This image fits with a neo-liberal focus on production presented as visible measurable learning outcomes, as if visible 'learning' covers everything educated humans aspire to be (Duhn, 2006). The admittedly nostalgic freely-playing play-way child of the latter twentieth century, who played at school during 'developmental play-time' as well as in early childhood centres, homes and parks before starting school at age five, seems to have been replaced by a regulated learning-to-learn learner, an automaton to fit the industrial system.

This paper has explored the invisibility of play in MoE policies and documents including on the MoE official website. Difficulties in defining and conceptualising play and playfulness have been discussed and I have suggested that these difficulties may partly explain the demise of play in official ECCE discourses. In response to its neglect I have suggested that play and playfulness be more commonly understood and accepted as processual attitudes, as relational ways of being and coming to understand our selves relationally and freely in play. The philosopher Marcuse (1955, p. 195, cited in Kincheloe, 2003) viewed play in this way as a sort of liberatory Marxist way as 'virtue':

> Play, Marcuse maintained, is basic to human civilization. When such a premise is accepted, labour must be grounded on a commitment to the protection of the free evolution of human potentiality. Once we overcome our adult-centered bias against play as one of the highest expressions of human endeavor, we may incorporate its principles into our work lives. Play principles which may be utilized as means of democratizing work would include: (a) rules of play are not constructed to repress freedom, but to constrain authoritarianism and thus to promote fairness; (b) the structure of play is dynamic in its relation to the interaction of the players—by necessity this interaction is grounded on the equality of the players; (c) the activity is always viewed as an autonomous expression of self, as care is taken not to subordinate imagination to predetermined outcomes. Thus, in play, exhaustion is not deadening since the activity refreshes the senses and celebrates the person. Kincheloe (2003, p. 27)

A challenge for policy (and ECCE practice) is to acknowledge that play and playfulness are complex relational processes for human beings, learning, and feeling alive in the present while also 'be-coming' alive to living creatively in unknown and, like play, unpredictable futures. Policy that focuses exclusively on the learning outcomes of ECCE misses the processes in children's play.

Correspondence

Dr Sophie Alcock, Senior lecturer, School of Education, Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland. Email: salcock@unitec.ac.nz

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Biographical notes

Dr Sophie Alcock is interested in children's play from relational and creative perspectives. She has previously used ethnographic methods with socio-cultural historical activity theory to investigate playfulness in young children children's communication. She is particularly concerned with the lack of attention to play in early childhood curriculum and assessment policy areas.