

Border crossing and the problem of play-based curriculum: Intercultural research on philosophies of play and experiences of migrant families

Rita Huang (Manukau Institute of Technology) and Andrew Gibbons (Auckland University of Technology)

When families migrate to New Zealand they are 'welcomed' to participate in the nation's early childhood education system and provided guidance in their choices with a summary of types of services and links to further information. We wonder what questions migrant parents might have about the nature, purpose and value of early childhood education as they consider whether to enrol their child in a service. In particular we wonder about their views on a central component of early education in New Zealand, clearly acknowledged in the national curriculum, of play-based learning. This is not to suggest that all services offer the same kind of play or that play-based curriculum is easy to define and implement. Of interest to our research is this very question of the nature of a play-based curriculum and in particular the ways in which a play-based curriculum will be interpreted by a migrant whose understanding of the nature and purpose of education is informed by different ontological, and epistemological, positions. Play as an educational experience has, in New Zealand typically been supported through reference to the philosophical work of Rousseau and Dewey. More recently play has been questioned as a construct and critiqued in education policy and practice through application of continental philosophy including the work of Foucault, Deleuze and Heidegger. Our interest is engaging the work of philosophers whose thoughts on play may challenge the borders of play discourse in ways that support early childhood education in understanding more critically the knowledge and expectations of migrant families, with a particular interest in the philosophical work of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. One of the purposes of education in Confucianism is to foster one's virtues and moral goodness. Confucius believes everyone can be educated and moulded to a Saint or Sage, hence early childhood education plays a critical role in one's development and education. Similarly, Buddhists believe everyone has a Buddha Nature, including children. The purpose of education is to uncover one's original nature and to attain enlightenment. There are a wealth of parables and Buddhist stories which have been used to inspire and educate children (and adults) to explore their true Nature. Equally, Tao in Taoism is a path to find one's original Nature and the principle of the Universe. The educational philosophy in Taoism emphasises the importance of the teacher who is enlightened and understands the learner's needs. Similar to Buddhism, there are countless profound parables and stories in Taoism to help the learner's learning in exploring Tao. The value of play and how it assists learning has been noted by the Chinese philosophers and educators in the ancient time. For example, Li Ji – Xue Ji (禮記學記篇: is one of the oldest Chinese documentation which discuss children's education) recommended that a person should commit himself in learning when studying, and concentrate on play when taking a break. Play here is a tool to relax oneself, which of may then also help with the quality of learning. This paper explores the nature of relations between these different positions on play and education in order to develop philosophical tools with which to research the experience of migrant families. The session presents some key ideas on play through ancient texts and art works and briefly explains the nature of the empirical research project.