



Enjoyment and intentionality in early childhood education

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores teacher enjoyment and the notion of the intentional teacher in early childhood education. The research is part of a wider interrogation challenging existing discourses associated with the intentional teacher. A mixed-method research design was used to gather perspectives from early childhood teachers in relation to their experiences of enjoyment in their teaching practices and the connection with being an intentional teacher. Findings from participant responses highlight important aspects associated with early childhood teacher enjoyment and intentionality. The connection between enjoyment and intentional teaching was reflected in reports of ways of doing or acting, as well as in ways of being associated with teacher identity. Connection was made between experiences of enjoyment and intentional teaching through contributing, adding value, and personal impact. Association was also made with promoting social justice. Whilst small in scale, the research highlights the importance of challenging existing and potentially limiting discourses of the intentional teacher by giving attention to how intentional teaching is generated, as an internal encounter associated with ways of being and becoming and the role that enjoyment plays within this process.

INTRODUCTION

This small research project emerged from initial teacher education curriculum redesign in which the concept of the intentional teacher was problematised. In early childhood education understandings of the intentional teacher are often associated with the concept as defined by Epstein (2014). Whilst a beneficial starting point, we the authors suggest that the discourse of the intentional teacher **risks becoming limited and limiting if the concept of 'intentionality' is not invited** for critique and examined more deeply. We suggest that, through such critique and examination, early childhood teachers can be supported in developing their own internally informed sense of self as an intentional teacher informed by the

context in which they teach, rather than taking on an understanding of themselves as intentional teachers defined externally by others.

This article specifically explores the role of enjoyment in the practice of early childhood teachers and the connection with being an intentional teacher. The article begins with an examination of the notion of the intentional teacher, followed by the perspective of being and becoming an intentional teacher as a form of identity work. The focus of the research and methodological approach are then presented before a deeper analysis and discussion of the research findings.

THE INTENTIONAL TEACHER

Within early childhood education the notion of the intentional teacher is predominantly accredited to the work of Ann Epstein, Senior Director of Curriculum Development at HighScope Educational Research Foundation in Ypsilanti, Michigan. According to Epstein:

To be “intentional” is to act purposefully, with a goal in mind and a plan for accomplishing it. Intentional acts originate from careful thought and are accompanied by consideration of their potential effects. Thus an “intentional” teacher aims at clearly defined learning objectives for children, employs instructional strategies likely to help children achieve the objectives, and continually assesses progress and adjusts the strategies based on that assessment. (2007, p. 4)

Within this comprehensive text, attention is given to teacher interactions with children, particularly that the role of the intentional teacher is to have a repertoire of instructional strategies at hand, as well as specific outcomes and goals in mind to **inform planning for children’s learning. The book pays significant attention to intentional teaching in relation to curriculum areas including language and literacy, mathematics and scientific inquiry, social skills and understandings, physical movement and the visual arts. It is important to acknowledge that Epstein’s perspective is culturally situated within Western discourses of early childhood education, learning and teaching. The approach also focuses predominantly on what teachers ‘do’, with little or no attention to ‘who they are’ within this process.**

Grieshaber et al. (2021) identified the continuing contested discourse associated with intentional teaching in early childhood education, which is largely associated with traditional child-led approaches within the sector. In the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, Denee and Cherrington (2023, p. 7) identify that **research into intentionality “has consistently highlighted tensions around how children learn, and the consequent role of the teacher”.** For example, they discuss how strongly held attitudes towards the value of play in early childhood education have the potential to make it difficult for teachers to reimagine ways of being intentional within play based and child led pedagogies. This aligns with the views of McLaughlin and Cherrington (2018) who identify the tension between **‘intentional teaching’ and teacher facilitation of children’s learning in play-based curriculum where “extensive teacher engagement within children’s play may be perceived as undesirable interference.”** (2018, p. 33). Meanwhile, Hedges (2022) adds a different dimension in discussing the place of teacher interests within

intentional teaching practices and the competing discourses of child-centred and teacher-led practices within a play-based curriculum.

In addition to the tensions associated with different pedagogical approaches within ECE, Grieshaber et al. (2021) identify the challenge in defining intentional teaching given the diverse contexts that make up ECE. They state “achieving definitional clarity regarding IT [intentional teaching] is complex. The complexity is related to the wide age range and diverse settings that are characteristic of ECE” (Grieshaber et al., 2021, p. 2).

As a sector, early childhood education (ECE) in Aotearoa New Zealand exists across diverse contexts and meets a range of societal needs and functions (May, 2019). Whilst desirable, in Aotearoa it is not compulsory for children to attend early childhood education, despite engagement in ECE being associated with enhanced social capital, ongoing schooling and social success. Access to early childhood education services is influenced by factors such as income, poverty, ethnicity and the ongoing impacts of colonisation (Tyler et al., 2018). Therefore, ECE is not a neutral and equal space for all. It is a politically and socially contested space, despite many teachers’ best efforts to challenge and right such injustices (Ritchie, 2020). In addition, the education and professional standing for early childhood teachers reflects the complexities of the sector. For example, action continues in the realm of securing pay parity with teachers from other educational sectors (Child Poverty Action Group (NZ) et al., 2020). The impact this has on the intentional teacher is reflected in the responsibilities, expectations and requirements associated with quality provision (Education Review Office, **Te Tari Arotake Mātauranga, 2020**) and what this means in terms of teacher workload (Bates, 2018). Such contextual factors have the potential to influence experiences of being an intentional teacher within the early childhood sector.

Teacher identity and intentionality

In this article it is proposed that the act of intentionality within teaching, whilst subscribed by external forces such as curriculum documentation, is inherently an internal, intra-personal process. It is a form of identity work.

Identity is the organisation of self into multiple parts, which relate to the different roles and positions held within society (Stets & Burke, 2005). A sense of **identity is shaped by contexts to influence action associated with knowing “what to do, what to value, and how to behave” (Oyserman et al., 2012, p. 73)**. Teacher identity is informed by the contexts in which teaching occurs, which can be regarded as an ecology of systems that relate both to the immediacy of the centre and to the wider extensions of societal socio-political influence (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). This acknowledgment of the context in which identity emerges gives credence to the agency involved in identity development; a view supported by Baumeister and Muraven (1996, p. 405) who state:

History, culture and the proximate structure of human relations create a context in which the individual identity must exist. People have individual wants and needs that must be satisfied within that context. Individuals actively choose, alter, and modify their identities based on what will enable them to get along in that context.

From the perspective of identity work, attention is given to how intentional teaching is internally generated, as opposed to externally derived. As an internal encounter, intentionality becomes an authentic practice associated with ways of being and becoming. This authenticity comes from the alignment of teaching practices with teacher identity. An authentic teacher is one who is attentive to their practice and how it reflects the way that they want to be as a teacher (Tse et al., 2017).

As identity work, being an intentional teacher is an ongoing process; an act of continual becoming through the impact of ongoing lived experience (Deleuze, 2014). Becoming reflects the continual (re)imaging of self as a teacher through unravelling the experiences stemming from the interplay between the personal and contextual (Schellings & Beijaard, 2023). The intentional teacher is **one who is genuine and true to their self, rather than imitating other teacher's thoughts, beliefs and teaching practices** (Beijaard et al., 2022).

Within early childhood discourses of the intentional teacher, attention to teacher identity is limited. Within *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, being an intentional teacher is predominantly associated with knowledge acquisition, cultural competency and **building relationships. Brief mention is given to teachers being “thoughtful and reflective about what they do”** (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 59). Within such discourse, more attention is given to what teachers do, as opposed to who they are.

Enjoyment and intentionality

One way in which the self is represented is through experiences of enjoyment. **Enjoyment is defined as a “positive impression due to positive stimuli, or otherwise feeling of satisfaction”** (Hernik & Jaworska, 2018, p. 508). Enjoyment is a deeply personal experience. It is an embodied experience manifest at a visceral level. Whilst enjoyment can be influenced by external and contextual factors, it cannot be ascribed by the demands of others. Additionally, the desire to enjoy is not a guarantee of it actually occurring. However, through lived experience we can gain a sense of being able to predict and actively seek out enjoyable experiences as well as create new ones.

Enjoyment has been identified as having positive effects on learning (Ekman, 2007) and is associated with motivation and self-determination theory (Graves et al., 2012). Enjoyment is also associated with feeling more passionate about, engaged and able to be innovative at work (Laurence et al., 2020). Research into work engagement highlights the **“importance of enthusiasm, vitality, and personal enjoyment, which drive individuals forward in their job performance”** (Xiao et al., 2022, p. n.p).

Interest in enjoyment and work aligns with self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1995); defined as **“An individual's sense of being able to manage a task effectively and successfully in a particular domain”** (Krause et al., 2003, p. 75). Self-efficacy is related to skills as well as prior experiences, which may be positive or negative. Higher self-efficacy is associated with higher levels of self-confidence, both of which are important for managing challenges and stresses. High self-efficacy has also been associated with a personal sense of agency, influence, and control to attain successful outcomes. Conversely low self-efficacy is associated with feelings of powerlessness and inadequacy. Research has identified that teachers

with higher self-efficacy experienced higher work engagement and feelings of joy (Burić & Macuka, 2018).

Recent research into teacher experiences has shown a desire to move away from exploring negative variables such as stress and burnout to instead explore more positive emotional states and their effect on teaching (Xiao et al., 2022). For example, Proietti-Ergün and Dewaele (2021) explored the role of enjoyment in the practices of foreign language teachers. Within their study they highlight that interest in teacher enjoyment appears to be limited to the realm of foreign language teaching and as such more research is needed to better understand the role of enjoyment across wider teaching contexts including early childhood education. Furthermore, there is a lack of research which specifically explores the role of enjoyment in relation to being an intentional teacher.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The aim of this research is to investigate how teachers' experiences of enjoyment inform understandings of intentionality within early childhood education. Human ethics approval was obtained from *Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha | University of Canterbury* Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC 2022-49 LR-PS). The research questions are

1. What is the nature of early childhood teacher enjoyment within their professional practice?
2. What is the significance of early childhood teacher enjoyment within their professional practice?
3. How is enjoyment related to intentionality for early childhood teachers?

The research questions focus on gathering accounts of teacher lived experiences of enjoyment in their role as early childhood teachers. This aligns with the use of a mixed method approach to data collection. The anonymous survey was developed using *Qualtrics* software. Data was analysed using the principles of grounded theory to identify emergent themes (Goulding, 2002).

A survey was used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative questions utilised a five-point Likert scale format ranging from strongly agree through to strongly disagree. These questions focused on regularity of experiences of enjoyment in their teaching, the connection between enjoyment and motivation, **engagement with children's learning and teamwork**. The remaining qualitative questions provided an opportunity for participants to share their experiences of enjoyment, examples of intentional teaching in their own practice, and enjoyment in relation to work satisfaction and teacher identity.

Participants were required to be qualified early childhood teachers in current employment. Qualification type, time in employment or registration status was not regarded as relevant to the focus of this particular study. Potential participants were identified via publicly available ECE lists. The ECE lists contains a database of all the early childhood centres operating within Aotearoa New Zealand, at that time. Information about the research was distributed to approximately 4450 centres, asking for centre managers to share the information

with their teaching staff. From this process 18 participants (n=18) completed the survey.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this section the findings from the survey are presented arranged around overarching themes emerging from the data analysis. Anonymised verbatim quotes from survey responses are included in italics for clarity.

Experiences of enjoyment

The findings from the survey identify the majority of the participants experienced a sense of enjoyment in their work as an early childhood teacher and that this **supported their sense of motivation, engagement and curiosity with children's learning and their teamwork**. Experiences of enjoyment were reported as being associated with making connections, new achievements, relationships with **whānau (family), and cultural affirmation**. For example, one participant described an experience of enjoyment as *“When you see a child make a new discovery. The enjoyment of the sense of achievement when a new skill or goal has been achieved.”* Another participant discussed how for them enjoyment was **associated with** *“Advocacy for Māori children's rights in education - making sure mokopuna Māori know that their culture is valued and promoted in their puna reo”*. A further participant stated that for them an example of enjoyment **consisted of** *“Watching a child achieve something they have previously been unable to do. Having wonderful conversations on all sorts of subjects! Hearing whānau feedback about how much their tamariki are enjoying kindergarten”*. Finally, another described a sense of enjoyment through

*Being there for the moment that a child /whānau make a connection with something new and seeing the light in the eyes get brighter.
Being able to assist whānau/tamariki out of a situation and into a better place (mental/ physical / emotional).*

According to the data, just over half of participants strongly agreed with regularly experiencing a sense of enjoyment in their practice as an early childhood teacher. This sense of enjoyment was associated with keeping them motivated in their **work**. For example, one participant stated enjoyment *“It's my motivation for how much effort I put in”*. Enjoyment was positively associated with teacher **engagement with children's learning and supported their sense of curiosity in relation to children's learning**. Only 11% of participants reported no connection **between enjoyment and engagement or curiosity with children's learning**.

Descriptions of teacher intentionality

Within their responses participants provided insights as to their personal understanding of intentionality as an early childhood teacher. For some this was associated with technical aspects of teaching, as represented by one participant *“being able to access tools strategies or support that is developing or supporting the growth of the ākonga [learner]”*. **Furthermore, the notion of thoughtfulness**

was identified as important and being able to rationalise why a certain plan was being put together. For example, one respondent identified the importance of

Thinking about why we are doing what we are doing, why we are setting up resources the way we are and what we hope to happen. Responding in ways that are thoughtful and with the child in mind. Talking with teachers about what we hope for with each tamariki.

Connection was also made between intention and planning, which emerged from the constant cycle of according to one participant **“observation of the individual child, planning or facilitating their next step and encourage them to be more complex in their play”**. Another respondent **stated** **“Through our planning we set up our environment to provide lots of experiences and extensions to experiences”**. For one respondent, the ongoing attention to intentional teaching was associated with the ability to achieve **effective outcomes** **“It is a constant. With the necessary setting, resources and support an informed teacher’s intentional planning and teaching shows results”**.

Contextual factors such as being aware of surroundings as well as working as a team were also identified as important in terms of making plans come to life. However, there was an acknowledgment that intent did not always mean that plans came to fruition, as **identified by one participant** **“planning is based on our intentional practice - implementation of our intent is another thing”**. Finally, in one of the responses there was a direct connection made with teacher identity in which they stated that for them, intentional teaching related to **“What I choose to do and be”**.

Enjoyment and intentionality

The relationship between intentional teaching and enjoyment was associated with aspects such as making a contribution, adding value, and personal impact. For example, the following respondent stated

*I come to work each day happy, knowing that I make a difference in **the tamariki’s world at our kindergarten. We work hard as a team to communicate openly, support each other, and have the deeper conversations as obviously we can’t always be enjoying our work. We share quality practice and use heart-based practices in our philosophy. Visitors comment how calm our environment is, how happy and busy the tamariki are and what a pleasure it is to visit.***

A connection was made between identifying and utilising knowledge of children and teacher interests to inform learning and teaching. The potential for a multi-directional influence between enjoyment and intentional teaching is evident in **the following response detailing the process used in the participant’s centre**

We start our day with a mihimihi and karakia, which we also do in sign language. These talk about having fun, and laughter in our day. We ask the children every morning what will you do today with your friends that will be fun? and respond from each of the teachers “today I’d like to plant the pumpkin seedlings into the garden, or, today I

think I'd like to get the cook books out and do some baking with my friend Ella, I wonder who would like to come and have fun with us baking? I love gardening and one of our teachers loves baking with the children, another loves it when we have a sunny day and we have the clay set up outside under the trees. These are intentional practices that we set up to encourage our children as well as our teachers to relax, unwind, and have fun.

Enjoyment for the following respondent was associated with being able to promote issues of social justice within the workplace. This holds particular significance within the bi-cultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand. They stated “*Pono ki te kaupapa Maaori, Maatauranga Maaori, challenging the narratives of non-indigenous ideologies of Ngai Maaori! Tino Rangatiratanga mo ake tonu*”.

Finally, externally defined, or mandated interpretations of the intentional teacher were deemed to be contentious when they impacted on teachers' enjoyment with intentional teaching practices. For example, this respondent identified tensions with formal processes of evaluation and review. Their personal interpretation of the Education Review Office expectations of intentional teaching were regarded as “*stripping me of my enjoyment of teaching as a whole. I operate as a teacher with a constant back log and worry about paperwork which prevents me from truly engaging in the enjoyment of my intentional teaching moments*”.

DISCUSSION

This study explores the role of enjoyment in the practice of early childhood teachers and the connection with being an intentional teacher. The findings identify that teacher enjoyment influences motivation, interest and curiosity in **children's learning** and as such plays a role within intentional teaching. In addition, the capacity to draw on personal interests to inform intentional teaching aligned with experiences of enjoyment and using joyful encounters to support **children's learning. The capacity for teachers** to draw on areas of personal interest in providing curriculum and learning experiences aligns with the work of Hedges (2022). Interest-based pedagogies also highlight how ECE curriculum, particularly in Aotearoa New Zealand, draws on relational pedagogy (Ministry of Education, 2017). Furthermore, the findings from this study suggest that the presence of enjoyment in enhancing teacher motivation and interest provides opportunity for deeper relational encounters.

No matter the sector, teaching is a deeply contextualised and relational encounter, which does not take place in a vacuum. Teachers and teaching are not context neutral and this needs to be acknowledged and responded to within the practices of intentional teaching (Dunham & Delaune, 2022). The multiple forces that influence and inform intentional teaching include the child as individual, children as a collective or group, other teachers within the teaching team, **whānau/family and the wider societal** forces. Within the discourse of relational pedagogy, such multiple forces align with Gergen's (2011) notion of co-action, which is described thus by Aspelin (2011, p. 7):

Whether individuals are together or physically alone, their actions are coordinated. All meaning emerges from co-action, i.e. human beings create meaning in collaboration. Relationships are processes that individuals cannot be separated from. Thoughts, intentions, experiences, memory, creativity – all kinds of traits that we usually associate with individual consciousness – are expressions of our relational existence.

Aligning with this notion of co-action, this study identifies the need to examine the nature of the connection between the external context and the internalised self. For example, participants identified that enjoyment in teaching was not a constant feature, however it would seem that there needs to be enough of a sense of enjoyment in teaching practices to maintain interest and motivation.

Contextual factors identified as impacting enjoyment included the demands associated with discourses of accountability and quality when demonstrating intentional teaching. It is argued that the objectification of education through neoliberal discourses of accountability and quality caused tension for teachers (Aspelin, 2011; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). Such objectification can be associated with governmental policy, regulation, standards and documentation, which have the potential to distract teachers from intentional teaching as an experience of being and becoming; positioning it instead as a product, outcome or measure of effectiveness. This objectification of intentionality may draw teachers to more rigid structures, strategies and tools that can be pre planned, prepared and acquired practices. This study highlights that enjoyment is impacted by such tensions and can result in anxiety and feeling overwhelmed.

A further distraction to experiences of enjoyment and intentional teaching align with societal influences pertinent to ECE. Within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand there is an ongoing need for teachers to attend to bicultural practices. These are an important feature of intentional teaching. Furthermore, attention to bicultural practice, cultural competency and associated matters of social justice invite critical pedagogy into discourses of the intentional teacher. Critical pedagogy promotes the potential for conscientization through critical **awareness of “one’s social reality through reflection and action”** (Freire Institute, n.d). **The importance of promoting Māori ways of being, knowing and doing** highlight cultural differences in pedagogical approaches, which add to the richness of ECE (Ritchie & Rau, 2008). This research shows that enjoyment can be found when engaging in culturally respectful practices.

Finally, it is suggested that this research highlights the importance of moving beyond limiting the intentional teacher to one that plans, organises resources and holds a kete (basket) of strategies; of looking further than the parameters of academic curriculum areas as a place for intentionality to emerge, evolve and thrive. This research highlights the connection between desired ways of being and how enjoyment can enable teachers to be who and how they want to be. Whether that is through seeing their efforts reflected in the outcomes of **children’s learning, or by challenging injustices and fighting for important causes** close to their hearts. This research highlights the importance of exploring intentional teaching as a form of identity work. One which is embedded in social, political, and cultural narratives.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a snapshot into the relationship between enjoyment and intentional teaching within ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand. Despite its limitations, this study adds to the discourse associated with the intentional teacher and calls for a more critical exploration into what and how it may be represented in the lived experiences and practices of teachers. Such an endeavour provides opportunity to expand rather than limit understandings to those mandated through policy, curriculum, and other official documents and broaden the literature available. This study suggests that being an intentional teacher is so much more than one who plans and records and has a raft of strategies to apply to teaching and learning situations. Seemingly, within ECE, an intentional teacher needs to also be self-aware, self-critical, and self-challenging and open to continual change to better support, contribute to the children, families and communities that are early childhood education.

It is fitting to close this article with the voice of one respondent who sums up the significance of enjoyment for teachers as they engage in intentional practices and highlights the value of this small research venture:

This is a job of care and passion. Without these things it is almost impossible to be an effective teacher. In my eyes an effective ECE teacher needs to have enjoyment.

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