Getting to grips with working theories: Recognising, interpreting and supporting innovative outcomes.

Summary notes from Early Childhood Convention symposium October 4, 2015.

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Te Whāriki

- two innovative holistic outcomes: learning dispositions and working theories
- complex notions that require teacher knowledge, reflection, dialogue and partnerships with families to understand
- working theories is the “neglected sibling” of the two outcomes
- creative and critical thinking are key skills in today’s world

“In early childhood, children are developing more elaborate and useful working theories about themselves and the people, places, and things in their lives. These working theories contain a combination of knowledge about the world, skills and strategies, attitudes, and expectations. Children develop working theories through observing, listening, doing, participating, discussing, and representing within the topics and activities provided in the programme. As children gain greater experience, knowledge, and skills, the theories they develop will become more widely applicable and have more connecting links between them.” (MoE 1996, p. 44).

(Work-in-progress) definition of working theories

“Working theories are present from childhood to adulthood. They represent the tentative, evolving ideas and understandings formulated by children (and adults) as they participate in the life of their families, communities, and cultures and engage with others to think, ponder, wonder, and make sense of the world in order to participate more effectively within it. Working theories are the result of cognitive inquiry, developed as children theorise about the world and their experiences. They are also the ongoing means of further cognitive development, because children are able to use their existing (albeit limited) understandings to create a framework for making sense of new experiences and ideas” (Hedges & Jones, 2012, p. 36).
Working theories contain a combination of knowledge about the world, skills and strategies, attitudes, and expectations

Chloe’s working theories unpacked as combinations of knowledge, skills and strategies, attitudes and expectations (see Hedges & Cooper, 2014b)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Skills and strategies</th>
<th>Attitudes and expectations</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- intuitive knowledge of height, distance and trajectory</td>
<td>- memory of previous experiences to draw on</td>
<td>Attitudes</td>
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<tr>
<td>- safety sense</td>
<td>- risk assessment</td>
<td>- curiosity</td>
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<td>- body positioning to achieve a physical task (e.g., feet position, bent knees, draw shoulders in)</td>
<td>- ability to climb a ladder</td>
<td>- courage</td>
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<tr>
<td>- counting to three precedes an action</td>
<td>- bending knees to aid momentum and cushion landing</td>
<td>- risk taking</td>
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<tr>
<td>- adding ‘s’ for plurals – mat/mats</td>
<td>- observation of other children</td>
<td>- perseverance</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- making predictions/judgement (of height/distance)</td>
<td>- caution</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- counting and subitising one and two</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- trying different ways to achieve a goal</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- problem solving</td>
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<td>Teacher insights: Niky and Daniel</td>
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Why do we want to understand our children’s deeper interests?
- To respond more meaningfully to our children
- To tap into their areas of natural motivation
- To tap into their embedded thinking, memories, hopes, feelings, senses

How did we understand our children’s deeper interests?
- Not making assumptions, suspending judgment
- Providing time and space: - to be available; - to build relationships; to observe while engaging with our children; for discussion and dialogue – with our children, their whanau and other teachers

Recognising children’s working theories – some reflective questions

- How do we engage in multiple observations that look beyond assumptions, involve careful listening and that avoid hijacking children’s thinking?
- Look deeper... ask ourselves: - What do we already know about this child. Do we really know them well? - Why does this child return to this type of play/resource/toy? - What is it that they might be thinking during this play? - Does this type of play occur at home? What has this child’s family noticed?
**Fostering children’s working theories – some reflective questions**

- How does the structure of our day enable us to hear working theories?
- How does the structure of our day enable working theory development?
- What constraints hinder working theory development?
- Whose working theories are we more likely to notice? Whose might we not?
- As teachers do we value the knowledge or the process/formation of working theories?
- How can we tap into children’s thinking to understand their working theories?

**Further possibilities**

- Working theories are continually developing and being refined by our children
- Lily-Hinetu’s deep interests in caring may have been underpinned by even deeper interests that we didn’t get to.
- As teachers we never reach an endpoint therefore highlighting the processes of developing knowledge, skills and strategies, and attitudes and expectations

**References and further reading:**


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