

*Original Research Study*

## **“Pretend I’m Dead, eh”: The Place of Death in Socio-Dramatic Play**

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### **Abstract**

*The themes and purposes of children’s socio-dramatic play are well documented, yet little has been written about death as a motif in play. Within a research project focussed on the collaborative play of a group of 3 and 4 year old children “pretend I’m dead eh!” emerged as a significant theme. Being dead was part of the play in 21 of the 85 episodes documented. The play was situated within clear understandings of conventions of ‘pretend’ death, and it served as a starting point for more complex scenarios. It was always liable to be faced with resistance and competing scenarios, and gender differences were evident. The possibility that this is an example of children’s ‘hidden’ curriculum that acts as a counter to prevailing early childhood teachers’ hidden curricula is explored.*

**Key Words:** Death; socio-dramatic play; play research; themes

### **Introduction**

This paper describes and discusses the incidence and role of pretend death within the collaborative play of a group of 18 three and four year old children. The aim of the research was to identify factors that appeared to encourage the initiation of collaborative play and factors that maintained it. A greater understanding of how and why collaborative play emerges may enable teachers to provide environments and provocations that encourage and enhance this type of play. One way in which play was maintained was the introduction of new themes into the scenario. Pretending to be dead was a regular element in this process.

There is a reasonably large body of literature related to the benefits of collaborative play but little specific research-based literature. Much of the research literature is concerned with peer collaboration of primary and secondary school students in specific learning tasks (e.g. Fawcett & Garton, 2005; Murphy & Faulkner, 2006). Little research has focused on the factors that lead young children to initiate and maintain collaborative play episodes.

There is some research that focuses on children’s interactions during collaborative play events. Lee, Recchia and Shin’s (2005) study revealed the importance of relational and contextual elements to explain both style of leadership and nature of other children’s interactions. A clear gender difference in leadership style was also evident. Ghafouri and Wien (2005) identified four kinds of social literacy that frequently and successfully sustained play: leading and following the roles in play, supporting emotional well-being among the participants, collaborating by including others in play by sharing or adding props, and conflict resolution skills. These authors found that leadership and power negotiation are important in both developing and sustaining play.

Black and Hazen (1990) explored the role of communication skills in children's social interactions and the influence of this on young children's peer acceptance. Consistent gender differences were found in play behaviours of three year-old children. Girls were more likely to join in the activity of playmates whereas boys were more likely to pursue their own ideas for play. The play of girls was more likely to involve cooperative cohesive turn-taking, the play of boys was more likely to be characterised by abrupt shifts of topic, repeated reorganisation of play episodes and in general more dispersive social interaction.

Most of the literature on the theme of death in children's socio-dramatic play is related to Play Therapy and is focussed on using play to assist children to deal with actual death (e.g. Keith & Whitaker, 1981; Wilson, Kendrick, & Ryan, 1992; Gil, 2006). Within child development literature violent fantasy play has been explored (e.g. Dunn & Hughes, 2001; Howe, Rinaldi, Jennings, & Petrakos, 2002) but the focus has been on the development of social and moral understandings rather than as an integral element of children's positive collaborative play.

There appears to be little written about children's pretence of death as a theme in young children's play. What literature there is suggests that this theme is common within European cultures. James, Bearne and Alexander (2004) observe that the weaving of the fundamental issues of life and death with everyday concerns was a recurrent theme throughout their research in England. They report an episode in which children plan for a dog's death and decide who will play the role. In a second reported scenario a boy plays a dead father, who is soon dragged back to life. Guss (2005) in her research in Norway notes that a child acting as a wolf dying and coming back to life was a continuous theme in play studied. In the United States, West (1996) records a child introducing a new theme of being turned into a dog, being poisoned and pretending to be dead. Danger and death was the most recurrent theme in the play she observed, being present in all six site visits made to a kindergarten during the research. Sellares and Bassedas (1995) state that death was a theme strongly present in young children's play in their Spanish research.

Early childhood teachers have traditionally focussed on a physically and emotionally risk-free curriculum. The thwarting and redirecting of aspects of children's play that teacher's consider unacceptable can be regarded as defining the hidden curriculum (Eisner, 1994) of early childhood education (Brown, 2007). Within this context role play involving portrayals of death has been regarded as inappropriate for children in early childhood settings (New, Mardell, & Robinson, 2005). Religion and superhero play have also been seen as contested areas of children's play (Ahn & Filipenko, 2006; Giugni, 2006). These themes may be important contexts for children as they negotiate their identities (Guss, 2005). Other research has indicated that there seems to be some benefit for boys in superhero, war, and rough and tumble play in early childhood settings (e.g. Bauer & Dettore, 1997; Gottschall, 1992; Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 2006; Rich, 2003; Rogers & Evans, 2006). Marsh (1999, 2000) identifies the value of superhero play for girls. Parsons and Howe (2006) claim that boys have a higher frequency of character/fictive and exploration/negotiation role in super hero play, than when playing with other representational toys. Reed and Brown (2000) found that boys use rough and tumble play to express care for one another and to develop friendships, and recommended that early childhood educators should encourage rough and tumble play, provide outdoor space for it, and give children time to play in this manner. Holland (2003) provides a strong argument for allowing gun and superhero play into early childhood settings. She maintains that prescription of aggressive play impacts on the self-esteem of boys, and also affects the self-confidence of girls to engage in active and boisterous play scenarios.

## **Method**

The purpose of this interpretivist (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007) case study was to investigate the question 'Which factors appear to inspire and to maintain collaborative play between young children in Early Childhood Education settings?' Case study research involves the study of an issue within a bounded system (Cresswell, 2007). The cohesive nature of the group (18 children aged three and four-years-old) and the confined setting (an early childcare centre) lent itself to a case study approach. The case study approach rests on the assumption that the case being studied is typical of cases of a certain type (Kumar, 2005). The setting of this case study can only be regarded as reflecting children's play within one inner-city private owner-operated full-day centre.

If rich and meaningful data were to be gained, it was important that I earned the children's trust and became accepted by them as part of the usual centre environment. I spent one morning a week from the beginning of March until the end of November in the setting. When an episode of collaborative play began I recorded it. The Parten-Smilansky play scale categories (interactive-functional play, interactive-dramatic play, interactive-constructive play) were used to identify collaborative play experiences (Shim, Herwig, & Shelley, 2001, p. 154). I was an observer and I did not participate in any of the episodes observed, nor did I interact with any of the children involved in the play. Only those episodes that arose from the children's own interests were observed. I did not record any collaborative play episodes occurring around activities the teachers had set up, and I stopped recording any episode whenever a teacher intervened in the play in any way.

During the nine-month period 85 episodes were observed and documented, using a mix of field notes, videotape and audiotape recordings, and digital photographs. Not all episodes that occurred were recorded. While observing inside I could not monitor play that was occurring in the outside area located at the far end of the house, and the reverse also was true. Where two episodes were occurring simultaneously in the same setting normally the episode involving the more complex themes and interactions was more closely observed, and the other episode monitored to record the main themes and direction of the play.

Teacher participant feedback was obtained by means of a weekly meeting to discuss the data. If children approached me during a play episode to tell me what was happening I recorded this, but I did not break into the play, or interrupt the play that followed to question them about the episode I had just recorded. I would make available to the children photos taken of previous play episodes for them to talk about if they wanted to.

## ***Sample and Setting***

The research took place in a privately owned, full-day Auckland early childhood centre. At various times 21 children were participants in the research project. Initially there were 15 children (6 girls, 9 boys) in the group. During the year three children left to go to school and 6 children moved up into this group from a younger-age group within the centre. In November there were 18 children in the group (8 girls, 10 boys). The children were predominantly of New Zealand European ethnicity from middle-class families.

## ***Analysis***

All field notes, audiotapes and videotapes were transcribed and the 85 episodes yielded a considerable amount of data for analysis. On 21 occasions being dead was part of the play. Three girls were centrally involved in 13 of the episodes. Another four girls and six boys were also involved in some of these events. Originally analysis was done using categories of

gender, theme, type, play area (e.g. blocks, home area). Other categories emerged from analysis of the data itself. Examples of these were leadership roles, friendship groupings, communication strategies, and interventions.

The data is reported in regard to the episode it occurred in. The first two digits are the day, the second two the month, and the last two the number of the episode. 08/03.04 represents the fourth episode that was observed on the 8th of March. The research had ethical approval from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee. Pseudonyms are used for all children in this paper.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

Research with young children poses a number of important ethical issues that need to be addressed. Although the children, aged three and four-years-old were not able to give fully informed consent, which was gained from the parent/care giver, care was taken to explain to the children in terms that they could understand what was being observed and to make clear that they could ask not to be observed at any time. I also looked for non-verbal indications that children were withdrawing their consent. Building relationships with the children prior to commencing the research allowed me to be more aware of these situations. I also took time to greet all children individually and to listen to anything they wished to share with me prior to beginning the morning's observations. As parental consent was gained for all children in the group the exclusion of non-consenting children was not normally a concern when collecting data (however, at times the group shared the outside play area with other children in the centre). If non-participating children were playing with participant children then only field notes were used to record the play event, and the field notes only related to the participant children. Care was also taken to ensure that non-participant children were not captured in any video footage or digital photographs.

### **Findings**

Although playing dead occurred on 21 occasions, one child, Jenny, consistently initiated it. She normally used it as means to focus the play on herself, to move from the periphery of the play to the centre, or to move into the play of others. Occasionally the two other girls in her particular friendship group, Claire and Sally, would initiate the theme, but invariably it was Jenny who was to play dead.

### ***Establishing the Rules***

On nearly every occasion it was made clear that it was only a pretend death. For example:

Jenny came back into the area where Claire and Sally were playing, said "and pretend I was dead eh" and laid on the floor pretending to be dead. (15/3.07)

On another occasion Jenny entered a family scenario involving Sally, Susan and Sasha and said "Pretend kitty's dead" and rolled over on her back. Sally responded "Oh look, kitty's dead" and the dead kitty was incorporated into their family play. (05/04.15)

The dead person or animal was always brought back to life during the play episode. This was done in a number of ways. Often the dead person was regarded as waking up as though she/he had been asleep. This theme was consistently revisited. For instance it occurred on three consecutive weeks in March.

Example 1. Jenny and Chris had been playing with the toy animals, putting them onto a block stage they had built.

**Jenny:** But the mummy was dead and the babies were dead and the daddy was dead as well. (Jenny turns the animals over onto their sides)

**Chris:** And mum was dead, eh.

**Jenny:** And then she woke up. (She moved all the animals off the blocks and on to the floor). And then it's night time, and everybody, all the babies wake up. (She put the animals back on the blocks). (08/03.04)

Example 2. Simon pushes Sally who gets up and moves over and pushes Jenny.

**Simon:** Wake up, wake up!

**Jenny:** No I'm dead.

**Simon:** You have to tell her to wake up now.

**Sally:** Wake up sister, wake up sister. (Sally jumps up and down, calling out to Jenny. Jenny then wakes up). She's waking up, hip hip hooray, hip hip hooray, hip hip hooray. (15/03.07)

**Sally:** OK she's sleeping now. (22/03.11)

Another common method of coming alive was associated with medicines and being sick. This was clearly expressed by Jenny when she stated, "I'm sick now eh because after you are dead you are sick" (05/04.15). On another occasion Simon was pretending to be dead. When Sally returned to the tent Claire says to her, "Shh, he's dead eh". After a short time J says, "pretend he's alive eh." After some seconds Sally finally gets into the tent and says, "and I'm going to make a new medicine so I can wake him up." (15/03.07)

Often coming alive was associated with being treated by a doctor or going to the hospital.

**Sally:** Mary, and we turned into doctors, and she's going to be ok. (30/08.62)

**Chris:** Now King Kong is dead from the bat, and King Kong goes to hospital, eh. (Chris says this to Simon after a fight between their toy animals) (01/03.01)

**Sasha:** She's dead, doctor. (Sasha looks at Jenny lying on the floor)

**Sally:** Can you take her to the hospital? (Jenny is carried to the hospital to become sick). (22/03.11)

The most unusual way of coming back to life was to become younger. Jenny had introduced death into the scenario giving the reason as "Pretend I'm dead because I'm 20 eh." Later in the play episode the following exchange occurs:

**Jenny:** I can't come alive for ever and ever.

**Sally:** And Jenny, your parents came to see you.

**Jenny:** And when I turn back to 19 I come alive eh. (09/08.56)

### *Directing the Play*

As well as normally initiating the dead person scenario Jenny would often move in and out of role in order to keep the play going. Jenny has been lying on the floor pretending to be dead and the group has started to get sidetracked attending to a doll with a syringe. Jenny then directs the attention back to her.

**Jenny:** Someone has to carry me, someone has to carry both of my arms. No, two people, only. Sally, carry me this way eh, you take me feet eh. No, Sasha takes my feet. (Jenny is then carried over to the hospital and becomes the centre of attention as they work over her, the doll forgotten and discarded). (22/03.11)

On another occasion Jenny not only directed the dead play, but also carried on a separate conversation with her friend who was not part of the play episode while pretending to be dead.

**Susan:** I'm doing this because Jenny is dying and we're playing doctor.

**Jenny:** I'm the big sister and I'm dead.

**George:** Mum and dad are the doctors because that's their work.

**Jenny:** I don't need the eyeballs in here anymore, but I'm still dead eh.

George continues to doctor Jenny in the fireplace as she directs him what to do. Claire crawls to the fireplace and Jenny stands up.

**Claire:** Hey, Jenny.

**Jenny:** Hey sister, but I'm dead eh. (Jenny lies down again and Claire goes behind the curtain and they start to talk quietly to each other). (09/08.56)

### *Areas of Resistance*

Rarely did children kill each other in the play scenario. On the occasions where this happened it was invariably connected with a conflict over leadership of the scenario between two close friends, Sally and Claire. Sally and Claire were playing a sick baby scenario and were having a conflict over who would be the doctor. At that stage Simon entered the space, picked up the syringe from where Sally had left it, and began thrusting it toward the girls in an aggressive manner. Claire called out, "Kill her, kill her Simon," and he shot Sally with the syringe. (15/03.07)

In another example Sally had started the game by saying to Susan, "We're doctors, eh? And we have to go to the hospital." Sally goes over to the chimney, "There is an accident, come on doctors. You have to come in the ambulance, there's been an accident." Claire joins in the game at this point.

**Sally:** And you're dead and you're sick.

**Claire:** And I'm the kitty and you're my mum, eh.

**Sally:** You've got to pretend you're dead (She leaves the fireplace once more). You stay in there, stay in there. (She returns with a basket).

**Claire:** Every time I'm alive I turn into a monster, eh.

**Sally:** But you're not alive, you're dead.

**Claire:** I'm a monster.

**Sally:** But when I shoot you you're dead. (She pretends to shoot Claire with a piece of wood). You have to be dead. (Claire stands up). Are you playing with me?

**Claire:** I'm not now. (Claire leaves the space). (16/08/57)

Another time Sally and Claire began a new game with Barry, who had been playing at making guns and shooting baddies as policemen. After a brief disagreement Sally dragged Claire across the floor from the block area to the other room saying.

**Sally:** You're in jail now. Let's go and play Barry. (Sally left Claire lying on the floor sobbing quietly to her self and went into the block area room with Barry following her. Claire continued to lie on the floor). Go kill her. (Barry walked over to Claire and shot her the episode ended with Claire still sobbing). (05/07.44)

Being killed was acceptable if agreement was reached with the other person first, for example:

**Claire:** I'm going to poison you, pretend that you are dead when I do this. (Claire injected Jenny with the syringe. Katy moved over to the tent and talked to Claire).

**Katy:** Do that to me, I want to be dead. But don't do it hard because I will cry ok. (Claire then injected Katy). (15/03.07)

Occasionally being dead was resisted, for example:

**Claire:** Pretend he killed everyone and pretend they were dead, but when I call everyone like this (touching Katy and Sally gently on the chest) they are dead. (Claire touched Sally who fell on to the floor. Claire then touched Katy who resisted).

**Claire:** No, when I do that you've got to be dead."

**Katy:** No, you're not allowed to do that to people, then they'll hurt their selves. (She pushed Claire's hand away). (15/03.07)

### ***Developing the Theme***

Once the theme of being dead was incorporated into the play episode, the play then developed in a number of ways. The most common way was for the play to move into a doctor/hospital scenario. The death theme was usually introduced first and the doctor theme emerged later as a way to deal with the dead person.

**Sally:** Mary, and we turned into doctors, and she's going to be ok. (Sally and Mary had agreed first to pretend that the mother was dead). (30/08.62)

**Chris:** Now King Kong is dead from the bat, and King Kong goes to hospital, eh. (01/03.01)

Even the 'dead' person understood this relationship. The following discourse illustrates this.

**Jenny:** Pretend I'm dead, eh.

**Sasha:** She's dead, doctor.

**Sally:** Can you take her to the hospital?

Sally is carried to the hospital

**Jenny:** I'm sick now eh because after you are dead you are sick.  
(22/03.11)

Once the doctor had arrived, or the dead person was taken to hospital, often by ambulance, the children would undertake a number of remedies. There was frequently a focus on stopping the bleeding and bandaging the patient.

**Susan:** There's blood, urh."

**Sasha:** We need to put a bandage on it don't we? (Medicine was normally administered by injecting the patient, although at times it was seen as being a substance of some kind) A special cleaner to make you be not dead. (09/08.56)

**Sally:** We need some magic cream. (22/03.11)

The role of the ambulance often featured highly in these doctor scenarios. Sally in particular liked to introduce an ambulance into the play action, being careful to observe the appropriate safety precautions.

**Sally:** No she's dead, I think the ambulance is here.

**Susan:** Hello, hello, call the ambulance. (Susan pretends to ring on phone)

**Sally:** The ambulance is already here. We're the ambulance. (Sally sits in the chair). Let's sit in the car. (She makes a siren noise). Click, click, click Susan, click your seatbelt, click Sasha.

**Sasha:** I have clicked.

**Sally:** We're here, we're here. (Sally pretends to drive the ambulance).

**Sasha:** We're at the doctors aren't we. (19/07.50)

Family scenarios were a second common context for pretend dead play. This was particularly so when only girls were involved in the play. Death and loss were combined in some scenarios.

**Claire:** Mummy! (Claire took a train from inside the ramp)

**Sally:** She's lost, she's dead.

**Claire** (calling): Mummy, mummy, mum, mummy.

**Sally:** I think she's locked in the jail. (Sally looked in the ramp). No, no, where's she gone? (08/03.04)

There was no particular family member who was the focus of pretend dead play. At various times the mother, the father, the sister, the baby, and the kitten were all subjects of pretend dead scenarios. On no occasion was a brother the subject and this seems related to the apparent reluctance of the boys to pretend to be dead. That occurred only twice in the 21 episodes. On one occasion Simon had been a monster and was killed to protect the baby. On the other occasion Alex had been playing with Chris in the block corner when he said,



“Pretend I’m dead and you can fix me,” (11/10.69) and the block building play moved into doctor play for a short time.

A third common element was the introduction of monster characters into the play episode. This normally was used to explain how the death occurred and often led to a hiding from/being chased by the monster, particularly when boys were involved in the play episode.

**Sally:** Save us Sasha, Sasha here comes the monster.

Simon comes out of the tent and tries to wake Claire who has been killed by the monster. Sally gives the syringe to Sasha.

**Sally:** We kill the monster with this. (15/03.07)

There were occasions when the impact of death on the other characters was recognised, and ways of dealing with this were built into the play scenario. For example Ben, Claire and Peter were playing a family scenario with the doll’s house.

**Claire:** My cat died dad. When my cat died my kitten cried.

**Simon:** But the baby will miss her mum. Ok she can be dead, but only for a little while, not long, only this much. She can’t be dead for 10 minutes, only this much. (11/10.71)

### *Competing Scenarios*

Pretend death was only one possible scenario and was always being challenged by other alternative scenarios within a particular episode. In episode 50 (19/07) Sasha and Susan in the middle of quite a long doctor-dead person scenario became involved in a dress-up, going to a party interaction which prompted Jenny, the ‘dead’ player to ask “Why aren’t you playing with me?” to bring them back into her scenario.

**Sally:** The ambulance is already here. We’re the ambulance.

Sasha comes back wearing a dress from the dress up box.

**Sasha:** This is my party dress.

**Susan:** What can I wear to the party?”

**Jenny:** Why aren’t you playing with me?

**Sally:** We are. (19/07.50)

### *Gender Differences*

There was a clear gender difference in the type of play in which death was part of the scenario. In the examples described above the death element was introduced by a girl and it involved one of the participants playing the role of the dead character. In scenarios developed by the boys they more often tended to be the protagonist in the action, doing the killing, often of the baddie. Seven boys were involved in these shooting/killing episodes. There was no other child pretending to be dead in this type of play, which resembled more closely traditional play themes.

**Dean:** I’m playing policemen Sasha, I’m playing policemen.

**Peter:** We need some sirens.

**Dean:** Shoot the baddies, we all shoot the baddies.

**Peter:** Policemen's bikes have sirens.

**Dean:** We're good guys. (22/03.10)

On another occasion the baddie started the killing, providing the good guys with the chance to exact retribution.

**Chris:** Hey your baby is dead.

**Alex:** Yeh, because I shoot it, I shoot it up.

**Peter:** Get him, get him, get him.

**Chris:** You get him guys, he'll kill me.

Sounds of shooting and a cry of aahh!

**Peter:** Now he's dead. (22/03.09)

### Discussion and Conclusion

"Pretend I'm dead, eh" was a regular element of the collaborative play of this group of children. It was a long-term interest, occurring as often in October as it had in March when the observations began. The majority of the children in the group were involved in at least one observed episode during the year. Although Jenny was the lead character in many of the episodes recorded she was not particularly interested in the concept of being dead, but more in using a scenario which she knew would be picked up by the other children as a means of entering or taking the leadership of the play scenario (Ghafouri & Wien, 2005). The theme continued to occur regularly in the children's play after Jenny's departure for school in mid-August.

There appeared to be no real interest in the concept of death by any of the children. Having one of the group play dead was a means of bringing other more interesting elements, particularly playing doctors, into the play action. At no time was there any discussion about what it meant to be dead. Being dead was given no more importance than being the mum, the dad, or the kitten. None of the children had experienced the death of a family member or relation in the year prior to the research, nor did this occur during the data collection period, and this may play some part in the detached view of death on the part of the children.

In none of the 21 episodes was pretending to be dead the main focus of the play. None of the episodes started from a "pretend I'm dead" statement, this element was always introduced into an existing collaborative play situation, and served primarily to provide a stimulus to extend and enrich the play. It was a narrative that allowed them to explore other social and work relationships (Guss, 2005). The introduction of pretend I'm dead into a play scenario was only one of a number of other themes that these children used to extend scenarios that were running out of interest too them. Being lost and found was another common theme.

It did seem important to the children that they clearly established that playing dead was a pretend situation, and that the 'dead' player was brought back to life before the play episode was finished (Ma & Lillard, 2006). This was clearly different from the situations in the boys 'shoot the baddies' game in which the 'dead' object was an inanimate object and not one of the group.

Although it was usually introduced by the girls, and featured a girl as the 'dead' player "pretend I'm dead" provided an opportunity for boys to become involved in the girls

collaborative play. There were 22 mixed gender episodes of collaborative play recorded in the period March to October and on 10 occasions the pretend dead element was part of the play. Invariably the boys assumed the role of the monster or defender against the monster or became a doctor, roles they appeared to feel appropriate for boys to assume (Parsons & Howe, 2006). There was clearly a greater use of language in the play episode by the boys when playing in mixed gender settings than was evident when they were playing collaboratively in boy-only scenarios. Themes such as “pretend I’m dead” which encourage mixed-gender group play may provide opportunity for the growth of boys verbal skills.

Pretending to be dead was one of the main strategies used by this group of children to maintain collaborative play episodes. It was a consistent theme within the play of Sally, Claire and Jenny over an eight-month period. As a theme it appealed to most of the children and at one time or another they participated in one of these play episodes. The death itself was inconsequential; it was a mechanism for introducing new scenarios and roles into a play episode. There was no morbid fascination with death, everyone knew it was pretend, that the dead character would wake up, the monster be chased away, and that someone else would die again tomorrow.

Guss (2005) and Smith (2007) have discussed the way in which children find ways to subvert the adult imposed surveillance regimes and play restrictions in early childhood settings. The incidence of “Pretend I’m dead” may represent an example of children’s hidden curriculum; an opportunity to explore an area of play that they felt might not be acceptable to the teachers in the centre. The teachers in the centre were unaware of the significance of this theme in the children’s play (Group discussion, 24/6/07). Once alerted to it they began to report observing episodes of this theme occurring on a regular basis. The consistent interest of these children in incorporating pretending to be dead as an important theme in their spontaneous collaborative play would seem to reflect a commonality with children from other countries (James, Bearne & Alexander, 2004; Guss, 2005; Sellares and Bassedas, 1995; West, 2004). Further investigation would be useful to see how common this theme is in children’s un-directed, collaborative play in New Zealand early childhood centre settings.

Although the literature had led me to expect to observe other examples of children’s hidden curriculum, in particular super hero and gun play (e.g. Holland, 2003; Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 2006) this was not the case. The 85 episodes of children’s spontaneous collaborative recorded during the nine-months of the study contain only three occasions where guns were part of the play, and on no occasion was super hero play observed. It would be interesting to know if the non-occurrence of these themes was particular to this group of children or common to children’s play in other New Zealand early childhood centres. It would also be interesting to know whether the structure of the programme and hours that children attend impact on their spontaneous collaborative play and in what ways. The next stage of the project reported here is therefore to extend the study to a kindergarten setting.

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