

Playgrounds of learning

Valuing competence and agency in birth to three-year-olds

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IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD education and care (ECEC) sector there has been a plethora of literature about practice with children in the birth to five age group (Arthur, Beecher, Dockett, Farmer, Richards, 1995; Dockett & Flear, 1999; Flear, 2003, 2005; Hutchins & Sims, 1999; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Press & Hayes, 2000; Stonehouse, 1988). There is also literature about how particular types of ECEC practice assists in promoting intellectual competence, agency and resilience in these young children. However, current research about how to scaffold and value metalinguistic and metacognitive competence and agency in the birth to three age group appears to be scant (Page, 2005).

This paper uses data from interviews and videotaped observations of young children and their families to begin to unpack how learning experiences for birth to three-year-olds happen within particular social contexts. An interpretive and theoretical bricolage (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Levi-Strauss, 1966) of theory and literature is used to interrogate this data, acting as a means of informing epistemological understanding about how practice within particular social contexts constrains or enables children as competent and capable learners. The authors argue that a tendency to underestimate the metacognitive and metalinguistic ability of infants and toddlers delimits understanding of what is possible for them within play and learning contexts. Finally, a model of practice is developed that focuses on appreciating and enhancing such abilities in this age group.

Introduction

THEORY AND LITERATURE that underpins practice with infants and toddlers in various ECEC settings often privileges notions of sequential development, in terms of how infants and toddlers learn to communicate and understand. Certainly there is a plethora of literature that speaks to this point (Petersen, 2004; Berk, 2004; Press & Hayes, 2000; Bredekemp & Copple, 1997). However, much of this literature is underpinned by the view that there are certain milestones to be achieved in order to gain competence in these areas, positioning the child as subject to, and produced by, their own limitations in this respect.

This paper provides a different perspective. By taking an alternative view, one that positions children as agentive individuals (Davies & Banks, 1995) and contributors to their own learning (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998), a different understanding can emerge (Flear et al. 2006; Rolfe, 2004). Furthermore, the authors argue that individuals who work with young children,

in any capacity (i.e. formal and informal), require an understanding of how such agency develops and of how it contributes to the way that young children learn. It is this understanding that enables the development of a framework for practice and care that transcends disciplines and creates space for agency to be enacted throughout the process of growth, learning and development. The authors go further to argue that the ability to exhibit agency is tied to the development of resilience. As children learn to exhibit agency within supportive environments, then they also learn about negotiation, compromise, success and failure to some degree, developing skills and abilities to deal with these concepts and to cope with their consequences. So it is vital that professionals, practitioners and parents scaffold and develop opportunities for children in this respect.

The features of this argument are demonstrated by examining data collected by the authors in play and learning contexts for children birth to three years—in particular, the play context of Bailey, a child who has

become known through attendance at a university playgroup. This data is examined in ways that expose how understanding of agency in the learning process not only enhances the quality of young children's experiences but also adds richness to their relationships. The authors use an interpretive and theoretical bricolage to conceptually unpack how play and learning is occurring in this particular example. Bricolage (Levi-Strauss, 1966) is understood as a 'pieced together set of representations that are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation' where 'the choice of research practices depends on the questions that are asked, and the questions depend on their context' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 6). The researcher, as bricoleur, utilises whatever resources—cultural objects, signs, texts, practices, theoretical perspectives—are available in addressing the task at hand (Levi-Strauss, 1966). Such a process allows for an 'emergent construction' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 5; Weinstein & Weinstein, 1991) to be produced, adding 'rigour, breadth, complexity, richness and depth' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 8) to theorising (Macfarlane, 2006).

The use of bricolage in theoretical work is a complex process. Although bricolage creates a patchwork of conceptual understanding, it should not be seen merely as a licence to bring together antithetical information to make an argument. Rather, the theory and literature used, while disparate and diverse, should also display a level of epistemological coherence. Thus bricolage provides an opportunity to examine and analyse information through coherent lenses that highlight multiple perspectives. In this paper, the bricolage of theory and literature used is taken from disciplines such as early childhood education and care, education, sociology, human services and psychology. Additionally, the authors use applications of poststructuralist theory, particularly that of Foucault, to seek to understand how practice with infants and toddlers might be seen from different perspectives. Recently, such theory has informed practice in early childhood (Ailwood, 2003; Davies & Banks, 1995; MacNaughton, 2005; Moss, 2006), allowing researchers to reconceptualise approaches and unpack taken-for-granted assumptions. The characteristic approach to truth and governance (Ailwood, 2003; Tyler, 1993), indicative of this theoretical approach, will add dimension and rigour to the bricolage of theory and literature that will be used in this instance.

The aforementioned theoretical tools, then, provide a new perspective on the notions of play and learning for the birth to three age group by highlighting how play and learning are actually enacted as opposed to how it is perceived that these notions 'should' be enacted or be expected to be enacted. Thus, the authors seek to demonstrate how 'playgrounds of learning' might play out 'in the real' (Foucault, 1981, p.13).

Problematising practice

Sarah and Bailey

Sarah is a teenage mum who lives with her partner Adam and her daughter Bailey. Bailey is four years old at present, but the authors' contact with this family has been in place since her birth. Bailey has always presented particular skills in terms of language and literacy development. Observations of this family have indicated that the communication between family members is sound and that Bailey and her parents have a relationship that privileges listening, explanation and communication. Bailey's attachment to her parents is also extremely positive.

Sarah reported that from an early age—around 18 months to two years—Bailey had shown an interest in spelling. Sarah would sometimes observe Bailey with her alphabet puzzle, spelling out her own name, 'mummy', 'daddy', 'gran', 'grandad' and the names of her friends. As she approached the age of two she began to be very interested in spelling names on a computer keyboard. She would ask someone to detach the keyboard from the computer, ask an adult how to spell a particular name, and then hit the correct keys with a finger.

Bailey had been attending an organised weekly playgroup since she was 11 months old. Observations of Bailey and her family had been collected in the playgroup situation and at her home, as part of a wider study into the play and learning of birth to three-year-olds. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with her parents, Sarah and Adam, and with her grandparents, in order to gain a focus on the adults' perceptions of Bailey's play and learning at this stage of her development.

This particular observation of Bailey began on a Sunday afternoon in her grandparents' lounge room. Bailey had asked for the computer keyboard to be detached and her uncle had obliged. She sat in front of her mother, asking her to spell particular words, and typed the letters as her mother spelled. This went well until she asked her mother to spell 'daddy'. Sarah spelled 'd-a-d-d-y'. When Sarah came to the 'y', Bailey began to scream, shout 'No!' and throw a tantrum. Sarah asked her what was wrong, to which she replied, 'Spell daddy'. Sarah went through the process again, and was again faced with a tantrum. Sarah tried a couple more times but still had the same result. She tried to talk to Bailey about why she was distressed, using her communication skills and the good relationship with her daughter in an endeavour to find out what the issue was. However, Bailey still only said, 'Spell daddy'. At that point the observer intervened, asking Bailey what was wrong, but again she replied, 'Spell daddy'. The adults then engaged in conversation and spelled out 'd-a-d-d-y', to which Bailey said 'No – m'.

The adults then realised the problem. Bailey's daddy's name is Adam. She was confusing the spelling of 'daddy' with the spelling of 'Adam'. Sarah explained the situation to Bailey, stating that 'Adam' and 'Daddy' were different words and were spelled differently. Bailey asked Sarah to spell 'daddy'. Sarah complied, saying 'd-a-d-d-y'. Bailey threw another tantrum. Sarah then said, 'Bailey, if you want to spell "daddy" d-a-d-d-m, then you can, but that is not right so I am not going to spell it that way'. Bailey threw another tantrum, saying, 'No, Mummy—spell with me.' Sarah again spelled out 'd-a-d-d-y'. Another tantrum. Sarah said, 'OK, Bailey; you spell it your way but I will not play, because "daddy" is d-a-d-d-y'. Bailey then became distressed again and asked Sarah to play, but Sarah would not. Eventually Bailey was forced to renegotiate Sarah's participation in the game.

Playgrounds of language

As part of this interpretive bricolage, it could be beneficial to examine the events and circumstances of this scenario by using some elements of poststructuralist understanding to unpack or deconstruct these points, positioning them as problematic, breaking down taken-for-granted categories and thinking about how things might be otherwise (Foucault, 1984). To do so, particular aspects of theoretical understanding about how young children learn and think are opened up for scrutiny.

First, it is intended to explore notions of competence in very young children. In the aforementioned scenario, Bailey is spelling words at the age of two, which demonstrates a reasonably high level of metalinguistic and metacognitive ability for a child of that age. These words include not only those that might be expected, such as her own name, but also other more complex terms such as 'mummy' and 'daddy' and, in some cases, her friends' names. It could be argued that this represents an unusual situation and challenges taken-for-granted assumptions about the literacy development and learning of children of this age. For example, Piagetian theory would attest that Bailey would be too young to be able to comprehend and construct words in this way. Similarly, researchers such as Bredekamp and Copple (1997) and Elkind (1981) would argue that developmentally-appropriate practice with such young children is necessary, and that to expect and promote practices and understandings outside of this developmental realm creates stress for children and hampers rather than enhances development.

These theories have been heavily critiqued in early childhood circles, and other theoretical approaches are now privileged in relation to practices with very young children. Certainly, Fleeer (2005) and Mosier and Rogoff (2003), have focused heavily on the importance of sociocultural theory in their research, citing this approach as providing a more complete picture about how young children might think, learn and develop.

Other theorists, such as Bronfenbrenner (1979), seek to highlight the importance of sociocultural context and the impact of the different social and systemic practices that might influence the rate of development of these very young children. Using these approaches, it could be argued that Bailey's parents might simply be responding to her interest in the most positive way.

Both developmental and sociocultural theoretical approaches have their proponents and all still demand respect in the field of ECEC. While there is contention about these approaches, such perspectives are still used to determine what constitutes effective practice and care for very young children. In considering the above scenario, all aforementioned approaches can be used to help us deconstruct what is happening for this mother and child and to determine what this tells us about practice and care.

While the perspectives of Bredekamp and Copple (1997) and Elkind (1981) would highlight concern about young children being stressed by the participation in activities that some might consider developmentally inappropriate, in this scenario Bailey does not appear stressed by the spelling itself. In fact, the reverse is true—she actually appears to enjoy it. However, she is stressed by the fact that her mother will not play the game the way she wants it to be played. Her mother does not appear concerned by this stress but uses it to communicate with her child. Untroubled by the constraints of propriety in early childhood practice, Sarah's communication tells us that she has particular expectations of Bailey and of her interaction with her. These expectations include the following:

- An understanding that Bailey's activity, spelling, is perfectly appropriate. There is no assumption that Bailey should not spell or could be stressed by the process. Bailey has the right to spell if she so chooses.
- The notion that Bailey is entitled to express her frustration in an age-appropriate way. For toddlers, this could be tantrum-throwing.
- The notion that Sarah had the responsibility to find out what Bailey's problem was. She did not demonise Bailey's attempts to communicate or become upset with her in the communication process.
- An understanding that Bailey had the right to disagree with her mother, even at age two, but a concomitant expectation that Sarah had the right to disagree with Bailey and that it was not her responsibility to necessarily make Bailey feel better about the experience.
- An acceptance that Bailey had the right to choose but that Sarah also had that right. Bailey could choose to play the game her way but Sarah could

also choose to remove herself from the game, letting Bailey know why she did not want to play.

- A view that it is okay to be wrong, and that being wrong did not necessarily mean that the game was over. It did, however, mean that individuals had the choice to proceed.
- A realisation that spelling is a game, and that learning can be fun but it also can be a struggle.

Developmental theorists might argue that Sarah's response was stressful for Bailey, and that a child of that age need not be exposed to this distress and could be more appropriately engaged in an activity that 'properly' demonstrated her success (Macfarlane, 2006). Bailey might be categorised as not developmentally ready for such a situation (Foucault, 1979, 1984). Sociocultural theorists might argue that Sarah is privileging interaction with Bailey and that she is taking Bailey's interests and context into account by engaging with her in this game. They may or may not agree with Sarah's approaches to Bailey in this instance. However, whatever the theoretical underpinnings here, it is clear that communication and learning are taking place, and that particular aspects of practice are impacting on the way this is playing out 'in the real' (Foucault, 1981, p. 13). It is also clear that the above-mentioned expectations are underpinning this 'playing out'.

Understanding agency and resilience: Deconstructing the expectations

These expectations should be deconstructed and considered in terms of what they bring to the notion of young children's learning and, in particular, how they might contribute to an understanding of agency and resilience. The notion of agency is an interesting and well-researched concept (Davies & Banks, 1995; Malaguzzi, 1993; Mosier & Rogoff, 2003). This notion has its roots in the discourse of social justice where it is produced as an essential component of a just and equitable existence. Agency is seen as the ability to assert subjectivity and to exercise power. Thus, it is likely that those individuals who adhere to such a discursive position would argue that Bailey's rights were imposed upon in this scenario and she was not able to exercise power or exhibit agency. As authors, we choose to take a different view, arguing that Sarah's approaches to Bailey—allowing her to use the computer keyboard for spelling, drawing her mother into the game, and renegotiating her mother's re-admission to the game—are examples of Sarah's desire to give her daughter agency and allow Bailey a level of choice in determining how she learns and interacts. Therefore, it becomes essential to understand agency in terms of its position, not only in relation to social justice discourse, but also to how it exists in relation to other discursive positions—perhaps those of adults' and children's rights, parenting, early childhood education, sociocultural theory

and developmental psychology. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that to understand agency in terms of one discursive position is delimiting and will likely lead to ignorance about the learning and development that may be occurring.

The authors' position is that, in this scenario, a sound level of practice is being undertaken. Not only is Sarah allowing Bailey to exhibit agency, but she is also consolidating her child's ability to be resilient. Such a notion is highlighted in the work of researchers from the fields of education (McWilliam, 2006) and psychology (Rolfe, 2004). By exploring their perspectives on this subject, much can be learned about the play and learning of very young children, which will assist in developing an interdisciplinary position that is less delimiting and will thus inform practice 'in the real' (Foucault, 1981, p. 13).

For example, in her work relating to performance and schooling, McWilliam (2006) refers to Carol Dweck's (2000, 2006a, 2006b) theories about social learning and resilience. McWilliam cites Dweck as arguing that there needs to be a balance between learning and performance so that children are encouraged to try and, McWilliam argues, to risk. If children are only encouraged to perform rather than to negotiate the processes of learning and understanding, they can quickly revert to a state of 'learned helplessness' which ties them very quickly to failure. Such a situation impacts substantially on a child's sense of self and ability to succeed. In the scenario highlighted here, it was Bailey who chose to perform—she chose to spell. Sarah encouraged this performance but also did not inhibit Bailey's learning. While allowing choice and negotiation, Sarah pointed out to Bailey that there was a right way and a wrong way. Although this upset Bailey to some degree, Sarah did not overreact to this upset or try to make it go away. She focused on her own position without denying her child a position. McWilliam (2006) supports such a standpoint, stating that children need to 'fail without shame' and become resilient learners. Thus, they need to be told where there is an error and be encouraged to try again.

Claxton (2004) supports the notion of the resilient learner, stating that, when learners don't know what to do, they need to learn what to do. Claxton (2004, p. 2) speaks to this point in terms of teaching children to develop 'learnacy'. He suggests that:

growing more intelligent is not just a matter of learning a few techniques, or even mastering some new skills, like 'critical thinking'. It is as much to do with attitudes, beliefs, tolerances and values. And these change more slowly (Claxton, 2004, p. 2).

Moreover, Claxton (2004) states that the way we think of intelligence tends to lead people to feel ashamed when they find things difficult. Children's understanding of themselves as learners can be viewed in negative terms if they are ashamed, rather than challenged, when they do not know the answer (Macfarlane & Noble, 2006). The

development of resilience becomes an important factor in determining how children understand themselves as intelligent. Understood in this way, intelligence is viewed in terms of resilience and determination rather than in terms of performance success (Macfarlane & Noble, 2006). As such, resilience can be viewed as a skill that can be taught in terms of 'attitudes, beliefs, emotional tolerances and values' (Claxton, 2004, p. 2). Sarah is teaching this to Bailey, as her expectations show. This is particularly evident where she behaves as if it is 'OK' to be wrong and where she demonstrates that 'learning is always a risky business' (McWilliam, 1999, p. 7).

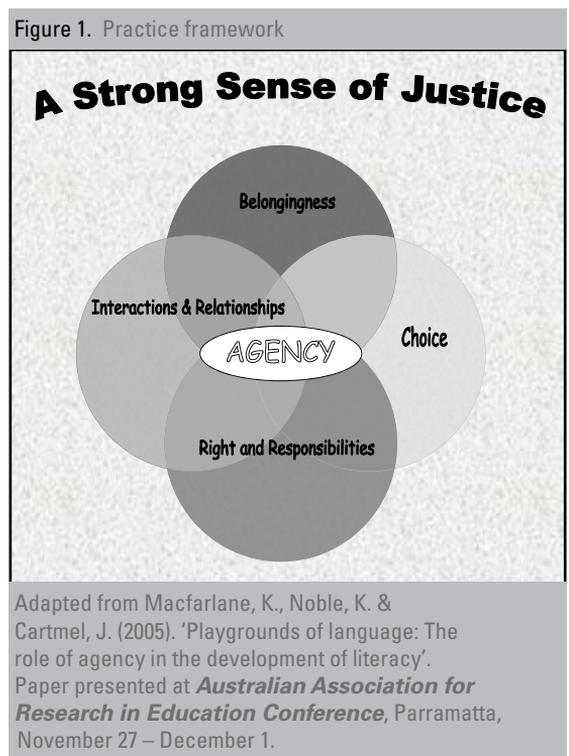
From certain early childhood education and care perspectives it is possible to argue—and indeed it has been when earlier versions of this paper have been presented—that Sarah's reactions to Bailey were perhaps inappropriate. Did Bailey's distress come from being incapable of understanding or communicating her position? Is she unable to comprehend at her age that she can fail but still be thought well of? It can be argued that to consider Sarah's responses inappropriate is to perhaps underestimate the metalinguistic and metacognitive ability of such young children. It may not be that young children are incapable of understanding, but that adults do not always understand their competence and so delimit what they can do. Clearly, what matters most in such a scenario is the quality of interactions and attachment (Rolfe, 2004). If Bailey is positively attached and her interactions with her mother are sound, then Bailey will know that she is loved (Rolfe, 2004). She will not be as likely to view failure as devastating, but as part of learning. In Rolfe's (2004) terms, there are clear links between secure attachment and resilience; and professionals, practitioners and parents can be confident that securely-attached children can 'bounce back' from disappointment.

Further early childhood education and care perspectives may situate the rights of the child as paramount, and so there might be some discomfort about Sarah's position. In contrast, it can be argued that the rights of the child should be understood in relation to other discursive positions. Social and systemic practice with infants and toddlers requires a focus on, and an acknowledgement of, the variety of discourses that produce practice. Such an acknowledgement allows space to be created for multiple perspectives to enable learning, rather than adherence to taken-for-granted notions that are never challenged and constrain how young children might learn.

What can be seen from this research is that certain elements of practice become imperative when privileging the notion of agency in this way. These include the following:

- The possibility of choice and negotiation for children and adults. This is highlighted in the scenario, as both Bailey and Sarah are making choices and Sarah is attempting to negotiate a solution with her daughter.
- Notions of rights and responsibility. Bailey and Sarah have rights here but they both also have responsibilities. Sarah has the responsibility to negotiate a solution to the problem with her daughter, to communicate and to engage. Bailey has the responsibility to understand that the spelling game has a particular framework that includes rules. Here choice is not eliminated but it is framed.
- A sense of 'belongingness' where both mother and daughter belong in the game and seek pleasure in being together.
- A focus on interactions and relationships. Both Sarah and Bailey have the responsibility to privilege these. Sarah has to engage and Bailey has to learn how to engage.

Additionally, there is an unspoken communication between these two individuals that underpins how the interaction 'plays out' in this case 'in the real' (Foucault, 1981, p. 13). There is a sense of justice (not necessarily social justice) in Sarah's responses about what Bailey could and should do and is entitled to, and what she herself is entitled to. It is this sense of justice that represents the essence of the whole interaction. This is illustrated in the following figure.



Deconstructing the 'sense of justice'

The notion of a sense of justice is more closely examined in analysing an interview with Sarah. Sarah was asked how she managed interactions with her daughter. She replied:

She gets frustrated if you can't interact with her properly, like turn around and look at something. Or she wants a cuddle in the car and you can't really do that. I think one day I had to drive with one hand the whole way to playgroup because she wanted to hold my hand.

Here, Sarah clearly understands the importance of interaction and communication. Sarah privileges interaction and sees it necessary to respond. In Sarah's eyes, Bailey is entitled to this attention. However, Sarah also 'thinks otherwise' about how to give this attention. She is unconstrained by 'taken-for-granted' and so she drives with one hand so that she can hold Bailey's when Bailey needs her.

This understanding of 'just entitlement' is also present in responses from Bailey's father, Adam. He states:

I go to playgroup often and I tend to follow her around and try to get involved with what she is doing. I talk to her while she is doing things. I guess it is a different kind of need for playgroup from my perspective as opposed to the mother's perspective. Traditionally, a lot of the mothers would be doing most of the care and the fathers don't get involved as much ... I try to make time on Friday to specifically have that morning off so I can go to playgroup, so that I can have that interaction time with her and just to see how she is going. A lot of the other kids know me too.

These young parents, despite their age, have a confident understanding of how they need to relate to their daughter. Their relationship with her, as represented by the scenario and these comments, is strongly driven by choice, notions of rights and responsibility, a sense of 'belongingness' and a focus on quality interactions and relationships. These characteristics are producing results—in the eyes of some, accelerated results. It is not whether this acceleration is good or bad that is at issue. Rather, it is how particular understandings underpin practice and how relationships actually play out 'in the real' (Foucault, 1981, p. 13) that determines outcomes and understanding in many crucial areas of young children's development and learning.

What is also apparent in such an argument is that notions of justice naturally privilege agency. Agency cannot exist in relationships and practice unless there is a balancing of power relations. This is demonstrated in the scenario and in the interviews with Sarah and Adam:

She needed more space, so we ended up moving the lounge chair around to give her more ... Now

the whole room is kind of set up for her to play happily and to make sure she has the space that she needs ... After all, we all share this space and her needs are no less important than ours. There are three people who live here, after all.

The parents rearranged their residential space so that Bailey could have full access to space for play. They are balancing their needs with Bailey's needs in a democratic way. It is apparent from the data that, in this family context, each person is considered to be of equal importance. The child and her needs are no more important than the parents' needs, but neither are their needs any more important than those of the child.

This sense of justice is what is underpinning all of Sarah and Adam's expectations in the scenario. A focus on choice and negotiation, positive interactions and relationships, 'belongingness', and rights and responsibilities all stem from the notion of a strong sense of justice. However, this notion of justice requires further deconstructing. Here, justice does not refer to social justice, or necessarily to rights. Rather, it is more aligned with 'suspension of judgement' (Penross, 2006, p. 1), which suggests that professionals, practitioners and parents are not able to view young children as capable learners unless they can work within and against taken-for-granted notions, understandings and positions (Lather, 1996). A suspension of judgement enables an opening of the mind, promotes tolerance, and thus enhances the possibility of becoming informed by multiple perspectives and understandings. In McWilliam's (2006) terms, it allows adults to become 'meddlers in the middle' rather than the 'sage on the stage' or the 'guide on the side'. It creates the possibility of enablement rather than constraint (Foucault, 1979, 1984). These notions are illustrated in the authors' diagram of practice. This diagram does not represent a fixed or immovable model. In this model, it is the sense of justice that presupposes constant evolution and flexibility.

Conclusion

This paper argues that parents, professionals and practitioners can underestimate the abilities of young children when assisting with their learning. The authors take the position that young children are capable contributors to their own learning and development and should be acknowledged as such. There is a focus on the role of agency in the learning and development of young children and on its relationship to building resilient learners. Finally, a model of practice is suggested that takes into account these notions and allows space for multiple perspectives to inform understanding about new ways to enhance practice with young children and their families.

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