Playgrounds of language: The role of agency in the development of literacy

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Abstract

It is accepted that the development of competent literacy skills in very young children is contingent upon high quality interactions involving language and communication in a variety of contexts. As authors, we argue that taking such a view requires an understanding that children are competent and capable communicators from birth. Such understanding is integral to conceptualising how the skills of language and metacognition that contribute to the development of literacy actually play out 'in the real'.

This paper uses data from interviews and videotaped observation of young children and their families in their socio-cultural contexts. Rogoff's (1998, 2003) planes of analysis are used to unpack this data, as a means of informing epistemological understanding about how socio-cultural contexts constrain or enable children as successful in the formal learning context. It is argued that taken-for-granted understandings of how children learn can actually delimit rather than enhance their capacity to develop sound literacy skills.

Introduction

Theory and literature that underpins practice with infants and toddlers in various early childhood education and care 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; Piaget, 1937; Bredekemp & Copple, 19**). 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. The authors argue that such above-mentioned literature often constrains understanding as it presupposes a particular view of young children as receivers of information. By taking an alternative view, one that positions children as agentive individuals and contributors to their own learning, a different understanding can emerge. Such understanding can enable new epistemology to inform the practice of those who have an interest in the development of the literacy skills of such young children.

What we are arguing here is 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 remainder of this paper then explores these notions by examining data collected by the authors in a variety of infant and toddler learning contexts. This data is examined through the use of narrative that demonstrates how understanding of agency in the learning process not only enhances the quality of experiences that young children have, but also adds richness to the relationships that they engage in. Thus the authors seek to demonstrate how *'playgrounds of language'* might be enacted 'in the real' (Foucault, 1981, p.13).

Sarah and Bailey

Engagement in play and learning is represented by:
- **The possibility of choice and negotiation for children and adults;**
- **Notions of rights and responsibility;**
- **A sense of belongingness;**
- **A strong sense of justice;**
- **High quality interactions and relationships.**

Choice

Sarah accords Bailey a significant amount of decision-making power that she is able to exercise throughout the setting up process. Bailey happily participates and appears to enjoy both the interaction and the physical process.

Her response indicated an awareness of the need for children to contribute to the decision-making processes about their play:

Adam's (father) response indicates a similar line of thought, when he states:

She will tell you if you haven't got something out that she wants to play with ... like the slides she hates when they go away.

Clearly, both Sarah and Adam are considering the importance of children's choices in how they frame the play experiences for their own child.

group culture plays a significant role in how play is provided for children in particular environments. As the dynamics of the playgroup have changed and continue to evolve, different voices are being allowed 'the right to speak' (Ball, 1990), resulting in a change in culture for this particular playgroup.

the change in culture of the playgroup and the parents focus on the importance of choice, has produced the conditions of possibility for Bailey to make decisions about how she will play, what she will play with and how she will be directed in her play.

Developmental psychological analyses of toddler play often illustrate particular cognitive and physical characteristics as common to toddlers, using these to inform judgment about what toddlers may or may not be able to achieve (Fleer, 2000; Rogoff, 1990). However, using the three planes of analysis to inform interpretation, a quite different picture begins to emerge. What is clear is that toddlers can concentrate for quite lengthy periods if what they are concentrating on has intrinsic relevance. This is demonstrated by Bailey's attention to this particular painting activity and the amount of time and attention that she afforded it. Second, as Bailey's play within her contexts has been underpinned by choice and self-direction, her ability to adapt and be flexible was enhanced. She was able to understand 'what to do when she didn't know what to do' (Claxton, 2004). She adapted her play in ways that still gave her pleasure and interest, rather than be constrained by an inability to manipulate adult focused materials. Thus, Bailey was enabled by her ability to 'think otherwise' (Foucault, 1981; McWilliam, 1998) and problem-solve when she faced an unfamiliar situation. Such a process has significant implications for developing an understanding of toddler competency and learning.

Therefore, what becomes clear is that his right to explore and make choices is accounted for and his wants, needs and desires are considered in the process of the day.

Rights and responsibilities

these parents see that Bailey's play space is important and that her needs in this respect must be prioritized. Thus, for Sarah and Adam (parents), Bailey has certain rights and these rights must be accommodated in their day-to-day living experience. One specific example is the lounge room area, where the furniture is moved to the boundaries of the space, to allow Bailey a large play area. This action, and subsequent discussion about this arrangement with the parents, indicates that Bailey's needs are as important as her parents. As such, no individual needs, in this family, are privileged over another. Such an action is indicative of both a sense of belongingness in this family and a strong sense of justice, in terms of what is fair and equitable. What is occurring here is that the child's rights are important, no more important than the parents, but significant nonetheless.

It is reasonable to assume then that Casey (mother) is likely to privilege Kayden's rights in relation to choosing what he would like to do, in various play and learning contexts. Thus, for Kayden, choice and a respect for his rights as an individual, constitute, to some extent, how his play and learning environments are understood.

Play and learning can be impacted on, if childrens' rights are not considered.

this has enabled an understanding of the importance of secure attachments and high quality interactions.

secure attachment and high quality interactions are a part of how Kayden's play and learning experiences play out 'in the real' (Foucault, 1981, p.13) in his environment.

A sense of belongingness

there is a goal and a direction to what Bailey is trying to achieve by including Seth in this process. These attempts at engagement are indicative of notions underpinning friendship, that is, they are an attempt at securing a goal directed, engaging relationship – a notion not normally associated with young children of this age in terms of developmental psychology

She also appears to focus on the importance of meeting his wants and needs during his day and works to privilege these where possible.

This is illustrating Jemiah's importance in his family and their strong interest in what is happening in the other contexts in which he participates.

Christine (mother) acknowledges that Jemiah has friends and her attitude indicates that she does not consider it unusual for this to be so. There is an acceptance that friendship and relationships are a "natural" part of his experience. As such, there is no possible thought or suggestion that this would not be the case or that Jemiah is not capable of experiencing friendship.

A strong sense of justice

a strong sense of justice (in terms of his inclusion in family activities and an acknowledgement of the importance of his cultural heritage) are present within his play and learning contexts. As such, enriched experiences are present and greater epistemological relevance and understanding is possible in this case.

even though Christine (mother) is aware of the importance of safety, she is equally aware of the need for Jemiah to engage in exploration as part of his play and learning. Thus, she does not expect that there will be unnecessary restrictions placed on him at childcare or even in the home environment.

High quality interactions and relationships

the prominence that is given to personal and community analysis enables new and different information to be made apparent that significantly alters how young children's play and learning might be conceptualised

Bailey shows an interest in friendship and as such, interactions with others comprise an important part of her playgroup experience. Play and learning for Bailey includes interaction and association with others, underpinned by a willingness to allow others to share in her experiences to a point where she directs or scaffolds the process so that this is possible.

The focus on this context highlighted by Rogoffian analysis of the interview data with her parents, illustrates how these young people privilege relationships in their family context. Examples of this exist in comments such as:

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. She is starting to get really excited when she hasn't seen you, when you haven't been there. Usually it is ... oh yeah... but at playgroup, or at day care, she will run to you ...and want to give you a big cuddle (Sarah, mother).

I get to go to playgroup often and I think I tend to follow her around a bit and try to get involved with what she is doing. I follow her around and 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 to 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 (Adam, father).

These comments illustrate that these young parents are prioritizing their relationship with their child in particular ways. Even though they might be inexperienced, in terms of parenting, they have developed skills and understandings that are allowing very high quality interactions to occur between them and their child. These high quality interactions are, in turn, facilitating particular play and learning experiences that are also proving to be of significant quality. Moreover, these parents have particular views of play and learning, which they are privileging and making space for.

is highlighting how important it is for children to feel safe and secure and how the quality of their play and learning is underpinned by such a feeling. As such, she is directly referring to secure attachment with others and the importance of this in children's everyday lives. She is also indirectly referring to the quality of relationships and how these relationships impact on what children achieve from engaging in the processes of play and learning.

She privileges the play and learning that goes on at childcare as an important contribution to Jemiah's day-to-day life.

Moreover, Jemiah's family, allow space to be created for the possibility that a variety of relationships are important to him.

Other important comments

The use of Rogoff's framework allows space to be created for a greater understanding of toddler play and learning and allows new epistemological understanding to be possible. It is evident that it is possible to underestimate the cognitive capability of children in this age group if researchers do not allow space for the development of an understanding of the significance of the socio-cultural context.

Rogoff's (1998, 2003) framework, in this instance, enables an argument that, if these abovementioned characteristics are present, then high quality play and learning experiences for young children are possible.

analyse how such play and learning experiences play out in the real in contemporary contexts

What is apparent, however, is that it is not only the existence of the above characteristics that is important, but what is evident is how these characteristics are understood and applied to particular play and learning contexts, impacts upon the quality of experiences that actually occur for young children. Thus, it is the ways in which parents and practitioners understand engagement in play and learning and its characteristics that actually influences whether or not what occurs for children will actually represent quality, in breadth and depth (James & Prout, 1997; James, Jenks &

Prout, 1998; Jenks, 1996a, 1996b; Mayall, 2002; McKim, 1993; Moss, 2003; Moss & Pence, 1994; Moss & Petrie, 2002). Clearly, the way in which this data has been interrogated, has led to the development of an argument that curriculum is everything that children experience and that such experiences play out in particular ways as a result of the values, beliefs and understandings that are held by parents and practitioners, who interact and work with young children. What can be ascertained then, is that these values, beliefs and understandings constrain, as well as enable the types of play and learning experiences that children have, as well as the quality of such experiences? Both practitioners and parents then, need to be highly aware of how their own thoughts, feelings and practices work to limit as well as to open up possibilities for the young children within their care.

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