Research Note

Challenging Developmental Theory in Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT: *Traditional views of child development are embedded in our understandings of the child and childhood and the way early childhood practitioners make sense of their practice. There is growing awareness among reflective practitioners that an understanding of what is 'normal' for one child and their family may be different for another, and therefore it is hugely complex and problematic to attempt to conceptualise what child development actually means for early childhood education. This article explores the way three kindergarten teachers described and justified traditional child development theory as foundational to their teaching practice. It illustrates the conflict between maintaining that there are individual differences between children and following developmental stages as a baseline for understanding children.*

INTRODUCTION

The way adults view child development is central to the way they perceive "childhood". Developmental theory has long been debated in Western psychology and philosophy. However, teachers tend to fall back on developmental theory as the basis for their practice with children, that is, 'to have in the back of their minds', the ages and stages for which learning and development occur.

These beliefs are based on various theories. In particular, in early childhood education, the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky provide a basis for many educators' practice. Piaget argued that it is the cognitive processes that affect the natural course of development, and these processes are progressive and stage–oriented (Morss, 1991). Key tenets of this age/stage theory is that each stage leads to a better one, and prepares for the next, and that development is regarded as a universal phenomenon (Morss, 1991, p. 10). In more recent years Piaget's stage-theory has become widely criticised for holding a limiting view of child development. An alternative view, that of Vygotsky's social-learning theory, has been argued to represent better practice for promoting child development.

Both these theories have contributed to the way teachers make sense of child development and help to reinforce how teachers view their roles. Beliefs about children are embedded within the rules of the child development discourse. Burman (1994) describes discourses of childhood as the key way in which we structure others and our own sense of place in the world, and are part of the cultural narratives by which we define who we are (p. 48).

I use the term rules to refer to the milestones and charts of 'normal' development evident within most texts on human development that set the stage for the child's progress, as predetermined, biological, and viewed through a Western paradigm.

According to Fleet & Patterson (1998), it is time for a shift in our thinking, to see with new eyes "[b]eyond the boxes" (p. 31). That is to see with postmodern vision which begins to deconstruct the paradox(es) of Western tradition. To give voice to this perspective, I will draw on the voices of three kindergarten teachers, and explore some of the literature emerging in the field of early childhood - to ask Alloway's (1997) questions, "What do we know?" and "What can we count as true?"

Current Literature on Child Development

Cannella (1998) reflects on visions of developing the 'whole child' in early childhood education, which emerged with the view that childhood and adulthood are dichotomous. This assumes that our lives can be divided up into discursive parts, and has placed adults in a more powerful position to children, as the ones who know best. This has lead to adults deciding what children need and has set the adult up as the expert. Cannella argues that such theories of childhood serve to limit our understandings of children, and ultimately produces the child as "other", as separate from adults and adult experience (p. 160).

According to current literature in the field of early childhood, deconstructing what we know is true is beginning to emerge particularly in regard to ideas about child development. Alloway (1997) questions what we have potentially counted as truth about childhood, such as ideas about child-centred pedagogy, the focus on the individual, the notion of developing the whole child, promoting independence, and ideas about the child and the family as essential entities. She argues against modern essentialities and encourages postmodern thinking, "which shakes and fractures the foundations of early childhood principles and practice" (p. 4).

Lubeck (1996) argues that child development theory is hierarchical, privileging adults over children, in the sense that children are viewed as moving toward a more adequate way of thinking. It is heavily problematic to assume a universal

child, as this fails to see knowledge about child development as a cultural construction and contextually-laden (Lubeck, 1996, p. 157).

Early Childhood Teachers and Child Development

Understanding child development is central to the daily work of early childhood educators. According to Robinson and Diaz (1999) if teachers believe that development is biologically determined, their ways of thinking about children in early education become focused around concepts of ages and stages, which they perceive as determining a child's behaviour. The writers argue that these views in effect silence those who have different ways of seeing and understanding children.

I believe it is in the deconstruction, the challenging, and the talking about the issues and the problems with a developmental approach that new understandings can emerge. It is from this basis that I began my action research.

METHOD

In investigating the issue of developmentalist ideology, I used a qualitative approach, interviewing three kindergarten teachers at a Dunedin kindergarten. My approach was interpretivist in that the attributed meanings and perspectives revealed by the teachers were at the core of the research. I first interviewed the teachers one at a time for around 20-30 minutes during a non-contact-with-children session, using a tape-recorder (with the teacher's permission) to record teachers' narratives. I asked each teacher questions regarding:

- Where they obtained their understanding of child development?
- Any recent professional development courses about child development they had attended?
- How they translated their understanding of child development into their practice?
- Their ideas about the usefulness of developmental stages for understanding children?
- How often they thought they used the concept of 'normal' development in their teaching?
- Their procedure for planning for individual abilities (needs) of children?
- Children's individual profiles (information gathered on each child, e.g. observations of the child, their progress, and interests, etc.)?
- What they noticed about parental interest in child development?

The tapes were then transcribed for analysis. For the purpose of maintaining the teachers anonymity I named them T1, T2, and T3. Children mentioned in the dialogues were renamed.

THE TEACHERS' REFLECTIONS

The teachers' gave detailed and reflective responses to the questions asked. All three teachers said they gained their understanding of child development through "College" (College of Education). T1 also mentioned being a parent as contributing to her understanding of child development, and T3 reflected on her upbringing as contributing to her views on child development, however, then said this had been overridden by the knowledge she had gained since then. When I asked T1 if she had been on any courses on child development, she responded:

> Um, not so much on child development...Because I think child development – the ages and stages and the general what children can achieve within so long – zero to five...Has been accepted as what you are already doing.

It appeared that T1 felt there was nothing more for her to learn about child development and that it was generally an accepted approach.

T2 described a course on toddlers she had recently attended. She explained how the course discussed providing an environment that allowed children who were younger to experience all the things that were provided for someone older. Although T2 acknowledged that all children should be able to experience similar things at any age, she then went on to say that the "wee ones" like to have a quiet space of their own, implying their needs were different to older children.

T3 reflected on how there had been a change in thinking from Piaget's model, where teachers were seen more as supervisors of children and the focus had been on children reaching developmental stages, to a Vygotskian approach where teachers were involved with children to build (scaffold) on what they already knew and were skilled at.

T1 translated her understanding of child development as:

> Time to practice skills that a three and a half year old is competent at, whereas two year olds are not. Simple skills. That could be jumping. Time to say "Oh let's do some jumping", actually told to get up, ready, and then do it, whereas if you've got three and a half year olds you're basically talking as you go...And they can just adjust but two

> year olds need a lot more time. You have to slow the pace down quite a lot.

T1's view of children at two years was evident during the interview, as is reflected in the above dialogue, that the two year old child is less competent and less capable than the competent, capable three and a half year old. This reflects a generalised image of the two year old as simplistic, needing more instruction and time to carry out activities at a slower pace than the "able" three-and-a-half year old.

T2 described her understanding of child development as emerging through their planning, finding something that will help all the children and at the same time extend or build on what other "stages" children were at:

> ...we've got to be catering for Natalie who is just two and a quarter, and Mark whose five and a half! ...when we first brought Natalie into our programme and I knew she was two and you kind of think well two that's fine but what does that mean!...You know, this could be a two year old who um acted like a five year old, it could be a two year old who is still very babyish...

T2 recognised that there were differences even within ages, and that development was not fixed to a certain age.

T3 described her understanding of child development in terms of how the current focus was more centred on what the child was going to learn out of a particular activity, rather than on the activities themselves. She further talked about the importance of needing to know when to intervene and when to let children's own play continue. She felt it was important for teachers to help support children in getting to "that extra stage". T3 tended to shift between a Vygotskian approach and a Piagetian approach.

The teachers' shared the view that developmental stages were useful as a guide in terms of milestones, or for a broad idea of what children could do. T1 tended to be more certain on the age at which you would expect development to occur, although also mentioned that there were variations. T2 felt it was not so important when milestones occurred but that it was important that they did happen at some stage. T3 felt it was important to keep ideas about developmental stages "in the back of your mind", to be aware of when children were not doing things they should be at a certain age, such as running, climbing, and for noticing any problems a child may be experiencing with their speech. Nevertheless, T3 recognised that some children were way ahead of what they should be, whereas others were a little bit behind, and that it was difficult to be good at everything.

In terms of the notion of normalcy, T1 felt there was definitely a 'normal', such as, if a child was unable to talk before they were four-and-a-half then she would be looking for some help for that child. Although, she acknowledged that there were huge variances within what could be understood as "normal", and that it may differ remarkably across families. T2 also believed there was a 'normal' and felt that she did refer to it, more as an expectation. To know whether a child was above or below what was expected. She emphasised that it was often really important for parents to know that their child is normal. T3 responded that they no longer worked from a deficit-model using a checklist. However, the notion of normal was kept in mind.

The procedure for planning was described by the teachers as involving the three of them sitting down together and discussing what they had observed about a particular child and where that child was at, and in conjunction with talking to parents, decide on a learning goal for that child. T3 also mentioned involving children in this process, enabling them to make changes to the programme and have the opportunity to choose something they would like to do for their learning goal.

The teachers' emphasised that there was a great deal of parent interest in their child's development. For example, parents frequently asked about where their child was at in their development, and with an emphasis on if their child was normal for their age. T3 mentioned preparation for school as being important to parents, that children can write letters of the alphabet and write their name. However, T3 said that they would talk to parents about other areas that were probably more important than knowing how to write their name, such as being independent, being able to look after their own belongings, separate from their parents, and get on with their peers.

What was apparent from the teacher's narratives was that having an idea of the stages of normal development was an important part of their teaching.

CHALLENGING THE DEVELOPMENTAL GAZE

After carrying out the interviews and reviewing the results I offered the teachers an article to read that linked in with new ways of thinking and seeing children and the developmental discourse. The article is by Alloway (1997) *Early childhood education encounters the postmodern: What do we know? What can we count as 'true'?*. It was offered to the teachers in order to challenge the developmental gaze "in the back of their minds" and to empower them to rethink dominant discourses and interrogate knowledge that poses as truth, such as "there is normal".

The central arguments of the article are that focusing on the 'whole' child is problematic as educators may be unclear about the parameters of professional responsibility, such as the focus on such dimensions as spiritual, cultural, and sexual development of each child, which Alloway argues are highly contentious areas of development for teachers to take charge of (1997, p. 2). Alloway also argues that the exclusive focus on the individual child neglects the complex ways in which children's development is constructed socially. Furthermore, she challenges the child-centred pedagogy which assumes there can be one set of best practices, culture-free and class-free pedagogies which enable all children to learn (Alloway, 1997, p. 3). She states that the goals of independence and autonomy, central to traditional goals of child development, are heavily Western attributes which are not necessarily sanctioned by other cultures. She then argues that notions of 'the child' and 'childhood' are assumed as essential entities in traditional views of child development, and that they exist outside of context. Alloway suggests that there are many childhoods that are historically and socially significant, and not one single truth about childhood (1997, pp. 3-4). Her final argument is that notions of what constitute 'family', change within and between social and cultural groups and over time, and therefore there is no essential definition of mother or father, parent or family, also assumed in traditional theory (Alloway, 1997, p. 4).

THE TEACHERS' RESPONSE TO THE POSTMODERN CHALLENGE

As a group, the teachers' informally discussed with me their ideas about the article. The teachers' felt they were already doing the things Alloway (1997) described as "postmodern". The teachers felt "They" (the academics) had now just given a name to an already existing perspective. The teachers' disagreed with Alloway's criticism of the 'whole' child approach, arguing that dimensions such as spiritual, cultural, sexual, and religious development all contribute to who the child is and that it was important to know what families wanted and valued for their child. They also criticised Alloway's view of the child-centred pedagogy as being culture-free, stating that although other cultures were embraced and accepted in their kindergarten, the children were expected to adapt to the rules and structures of the kindergarten, even if it was different to what they were use to at home.

In terms of essential entities of the family, identified by Alloway as a traditional view, the teachers argued that this was not a competing view, but rather one they were already aware of. The teachers expressed they were already aware of these issues and that they felt a lot of it was "common sense". The teachers interrogated Alloway's conceptualising of postmodernism, saying something

like "Is that all it's about. She makes out as if it is a daunting thing, yet, it is not that big a deal – it's not that scary, it's just what you do".

The teachers felt it was important as a teacher to be aware of their own limitations, to recognise who they are and their own culture as the framework for their teaching practice, and what they thought was valuable to learn about.

When I asked the teachers if they felt the article was challenging in any way, T1 responded, "Well no not challenged. I think highlighted some issues, rather than challenged". T2 agreed with T1 and also said that she did find some points interesting but felt they were already doing the things identified. They felt the information was not new to them. They questioned Alloway's statement – "we are compelled to forsake the comfort of certainty and to accept the discomfort and the humility of uncertainty". They argued "Well nothing is certain is it!"

I felt extremely challenged by the teachers' reactions to this article, as I had on first reading felt quite passionate about some of issues Alloway raises. It was clear to me that there were some contradictions with the teachers' arguments, for example, their views about having a baseline for where a child should be at in their development, reflected more of a traditional approach than a postmodern approach. Although they were willing to acknowledge difference to the norm, they also felt there were certain skills children should have already developed at particular ages.

CONCLUSION

Deconstructing the discourse of child development requires radicalising the field of early childhood, with reflective practitioners questioning their assumptions, and challenging traditional practice. The teachers in my study felt they were aware of alternative views of child development, even though they spoke in more traditional language about the goals of child development.

The issue of deconstructing child development knowledge is a complex matter that constantly needs rethinking, challenging, and reconstructing. However, as long as teachers are unwilling to look at their own traditional gaze of development and the way in which they reinforce the dominant Western paradigm, beliefs will remain trapped within modern ideologies that only serve to limit our understandings of younger beings.

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