Early Childhood Curriculum in Home-Based Settings: Embeddedness, Relationships and Identity

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Abstract

The lived experiences of children and adults in home-based early childhood settings, both in New Zealand and internationally, is an under-researched area, and very little is known about the culture of early childhood education in these settings. I undertook a small-scale ethnographic research study, for a master of education thesis, in order to provide a rich description of the everyday experiences of the children in two exemplary home-based settings in urban New Zealand over a period of five days. This paper draws on that study to provide a starting point for deepening understandings of home-based settings as early childhood curriculum sites. The concept of the home-based early childhood experience being firmly embedded within the wider community, and within a network of intense and interconnected interpersonal relationships is illustrated through the experiences of the children in this study. Multiple sites within the community, everyday occurrences, contextually relevant materials or 'tools' and deep interpersonal relationships acted as catalysts for children's developing sense of themselves as persons with multiple identities or 'ways of being' as well as developing understandings about their world.

Introduction

In New Zealand, "home-based early childhood care and education", or "family day care", is described as an early childhood service provided for preschool children either in their own home or that of another adult caregiver (Ministry of Education, 2003). It is distinct from informal arrangements that families might have for child care.

Formalised home-based models of early childhood care and education provision have been rapidly growing in number since their emergence in the mid 1970's (Everiss & Dalli, cited in Mooney & Statham, 2003; May, 1991), when they provided a cost-effective response to the growing need for childcare facilities: a result of the social and economic climate of the times. In July 2003 there were 190 home-based services that catered for 9587 children (Ministry of Education, 2004). This is approximately 5.9% of children enrolled in all licensed early childhood services. Whilst 5.9% is not a large number, it represents a 495% increase in the number of child enrolments for home-based services since 1990 [the beginning of the implementation of the "Before Five" Government policies designed to increase accountability, quality and participation, and decentralise government responsibility within the early childhood sector (Lange, 1988)]. Although

statistically still a minor player in the overall provision of early childhood care and education in New Zealand, home-based services have clearly emerged as a rapidly growing, distinct and recognised option in the early childhood sector.

Home-based networks are regulated by the *Education (Home-Based Care) Order* (1992) and, like other early childhood services, may sign a charter with the Ministry of Education and seek to receive funding for the children under their care. All government-funded early childhood care and education services are required to meet the standards of quality care and education conveyed in the *Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices for Early Childhood Services in New Zealand* (1996b) and to develop and implement a curriculum consistent with *Te Whariki* (Ministry of Education, 1998, p. 40).

There is little research in New Zealand specifically focusing on home-based settings, and especially on the experiences of children, or the nature of curriculum, within those settings. Both internationally and in New Zealand, research has tended to focus most strongly on professionalism issues such as training, qualifications and caregiver working conditions (Everiss, 1998; Foote, Davey & Ewens, 1999; Kontos, Howes, Shinn & Galinsky, 1995; Taylor, Dunster & Pollard, 1999). The purpose of my study was to provide some descriptions of the lived experiences of children in these two settings, as a starting point for deepening understandings of home-based settings as early childhood education curriculum sites.

Methodology

In order to understand the nature of the lived experiences for children and educators in home-based settings, and to find a way to describe the culture of early childhood education within these settings, I undertook a small scale ethnographic study to investigate the happenings in two home-based settings in urban New Zealand (Wright, 2003). I chose to use ethnographic methods that would capture the complexity of day-to-day life in these settings. I drew on the methodology used by Podmore and May, with Mara (1998) who carried out week-long ethnographic studies in seven ‘effective practice’ centres as part of their Government-funded research project on evaluating early childhood programmes using the strands and goals of *Te Whariki*, the early childhood curriculum of New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 1996a). Podmore and Craig (1991) used a similar approach to immerse themselves into everyday life in six childcare centres for a week to observe the day-to-day experiences of infants and toddlers.

I spent five days with two exemplary home-based educators and the children in their care (six in one setting and five plus two children receiving before and after school care in the other), living their everyday lives, doing what they did. During my time in the settings, I paid attention to interactions and relationships, between people and with materials, and documented the commonplace as well as episodes

of significance. My focus was to "portray the richness of children's lives across the many contexts in which they find themselves" (Graue & Walsh, 1995, p. 140).

I was aware that my very presence in the setting would constitute a change to the environment and that it was impossible for me to take a role as complete observer. To be as flexible and unobtrusive as possible, I made a conscious decision to respond to children but not significantly initiate or direct their focus. I spent time in the settings prior to the data collection phase so children were able to familiarise themselves with me and the equipment I intended to use.

I wrote field notes steadily throughout the day and ran an audio tape recorder as continuously as possible, drawing on the approach used by Vivian Gussin Paley (1986) to "capture the unheard and unfinished murmur, the misunderstood and mystifying context" (p. 123), of children's voices during the day. I also took digital camera photographs to complement the written data. The field notes were written in A4 exercise books, on single sides of a double page. This provided me with blank pages, much like a journal, where I made notes about significant details, possible trends, questions to ponder and other additional comments.

After the field-work phase was completed and I had begun to identify emerging themes, I conducted a semi-structured interview with both educators. The purpose of these interviews was to provide another forum for the educator's philosophy, values, beliefs, experiences and insights to find a voice and I used the emerging themes as a starting point for discussions.

The statement in *Te Whariki* that the early childhood curriculum arises from the "people, places and things in a child's environment: the adults, the other children, the physical environment, and the resources" (Ministry of Education, 1996a, p. 11), provided an initial framework from which to consider the data collected in the study. In a socio-cultural approach to learning and development, learning is seen to be about individuals and groups becoming increasingly able to develop relationships with people, places and things (and the accompanying knowledge, skills, working theories and dispositions) that allow them to contribute to, and participate in the particular setting or community (Carr, 1998; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Smith, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998). This approach, together with a 'post-modern' emphasis to question taken-for-granted assumptions, influenced my approach to the study as well as my interpretation and understanding of the data.

Introducing the Home-based Educators and the Children

The educators in the study were part of two different, urban-based chartered Family Day Care networks and were identified as 'exemplary' by the co-ordinators of those networks. The decision to include 'exemplary' rather than randomly selected educators stemmed from research suggesting that the adult as teacher is a

significant component of good learning environments for children (e.g. Podmore & May with Mara, 1998; Podmore & Meade with Kerslake-Hendricks, 2000).

Both Maria and Robyn, the educators in the study, held recognised early childhood qualifications. Maria held a Playcentre Federation certificate and equivalence to a Diploma of Teaching. Robyn trained as a kindergarten teacher in the mid 1970's and was very experienced in family day care. This is not necessarily the norm for home-based settings though; in the *Education (Home-Based Care) Order* (1992) the requirement to hold a recognised early childhood qualification falls on the co-ordinator of the network, not the home-based educator.

Maria's home-based setting

Maria, her husband and sons had been involved in family day care for the past two years. At the time of the study, Maria was a home-based educator for seven children: five boys and two girls. During the fieldwork phase of the study one girl was away so the data relates to 6 children. Ages of the children were 5 months, 22, months, 2 years 6 months, 3 years 1 month, 3 years 5 months, and 4 years 8 months. Two siblings attended over 3 days, about 5-7 hours each day. Three children attended 1 day each, and one child alternated 1 to 2 days per week.

Robyn's home-based setting

Robyn, her daughter Karen, and Robyn's brother, lived in house within walking distance of a large shopping centre, community sports field and recreation ground, and the beach. Robyn was home-based educator for five children: two boys (2 years; 4 years 6 months) and three girls (14 months; 16 months; 3 years). One came for 2 mornings and 2 whole days; one for 3 days; one for 2 part days, and two for one day each. Robyn also provided before and after school care for two girls (7 years 3 months; 5 years 11 months).

Findings: Key Themes

The home-based experience as firmly embedded within the wider community and within a network of intense and interconnected interpersonal relationships emerged strongly from the data as influential components of these settings. These components contributed to the culture of these settings and acted as catalysts for children's developing sense of themselves as persons with multiple identities or 'ways of being' as well as developing understandings about their world.

Embeddedness within the community: Multiple sites

Everyday involvement within the local community, such as going to the supermarket or library, is a characteristic that is already readily associated with home-based settings, but I was struck by the significance of the community as an integral part of these learning environments. The focus of the home as a primary setting for the children is not in dispute. However, a theme that became evident

very early on in my study was that of the home-based early childhood environment as consisting of multiple sites and contexts. This has not been strongly articulated in the home-based literature and is in contrast to the characteristic of the more dominant centre-based model, where the majority of the provision occurs in one centrally-based site (Singer, 1996).

Moving out of the home environment and into the community was a daily occurrence in both settings. There was a wide range of sites that constituted the two research home-based settings (Figure 1) and there were also unique sites and different emphases within settings. The multiple sites of the home-based settings offered rich and diverse environments for children to explore, practise skills, and develop working theories, dispositions and attitudes, and with a range of people.

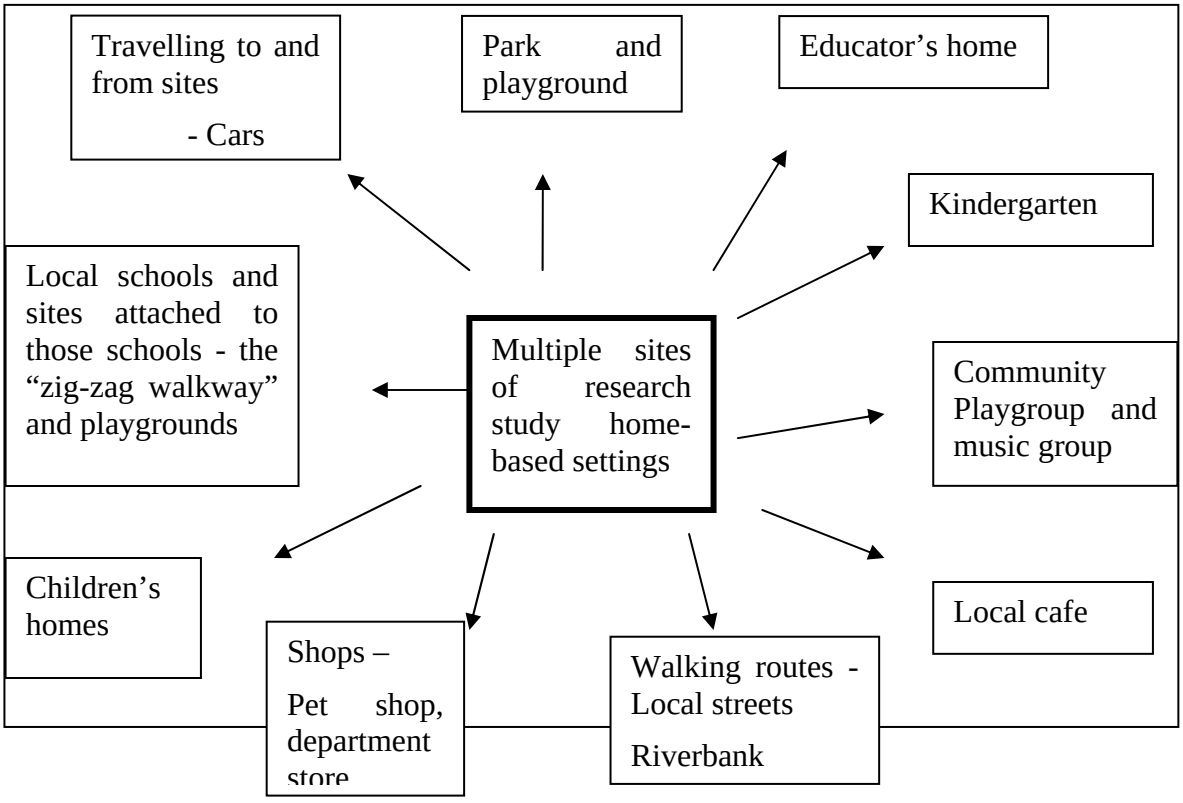

Figure 1: Multiple sites of home-based settings identified in study

An example of the ways in which these multiple settings, and the experiences and relationships within them contributed to the understandings that children were

constructing about themselves and their world can be seen with 16 month-old Steph's determination to physically challenge herself and gain mastery of her body. Steph was intent on becoming an upright mover during the study period. Every day she found places and materials that she could use to practise her skills. At music group, she used the plastic chairs and other children to balance on. At Robyn's home, she stood up against the mini-trampoline, the table, the couch, or Robyn's leg. She made her way independently up the path to the front door, and used a trolley as a push-along. A nearby school playground provided a particularly challenging environment for her and it was in this place that Steph put her body to the test. Despite having only been walking independently for a few days, she set herself the challenge of walking the substantial distance from the lower playground, up the slope, to the upper playground, using Robyn's hand as a means of support. Steph side-stepped her way along the length of the wooden edge bounding the upper playground. On reaching the corner, she climbed over the edge and into the bark chips – no mean feat given her experience and the differences in the levels on either side of the wooden edging. The playground contained a slatted wooden tunnel that joined two platforms together, and stood about 2 metres high. Steph directed both Robyn and Robyn's eleven year-old daughter to assist her in getting up the ladder to the platform and the tunnel so she could climb through it. Steph's resolution and her desire to repeat the experience several times indicated that she was constructing an identity of herself as a capable physical being, willing to take risks and set challenges for herself. She utilised the resources or 'tools' within the multiple sites of her home-based setting to explore her physical prowess.

The multiple sites of Robyn's home-based setting also provided Alice with opportunities to focus on developing her sense of self as a social participant. Alice explored being a teacher as she supported Thomas, a younger boy, in mastering the art of drinking from a school water fountain after they had climbed the 'zig zag' track to a nearby school. She took responsibility for providing Thomas with some critical pieces of information, as she modelled pushing the fountain's handle up, noticed the problem in Thomas's approach and gave him specific feedback in her instructions to "push it up". In the car, she responded to Steph's attempts to initiate a singing episode by finishing the song when Steph sang "row row row" then paused. In Robyn's home she collaborated with Stuart, (age 4yrs 6 months) to sustain the impetus of a game that started with Stuart's idea of listening for heartbeats with a stethoscope, shifted to developing the art of cutting 'plasters' (sellotape) with the difficult scissors and placing them on different parts of the body in increasingly complex ways. This culminated and with Stuart and Alice (aged 3 years) taking turns to take photographs of Robyn and the other child having a cuddle. For Alice, holding specific information was not the primary role

in this collaboration, as it was with Thomas, instead, being a contributor of good ideas to enrich and sustain play was more relevant.

Embeddedness: Everyday occurrences and contextually relevant tools as a component of the environment

The resources and material objects that were available in these settings and formed part of the children's daily experiences were also of interest to me. Although there is growing recognition that the 'tools' children use are socially and culturally determined and will differ in different settings, centre-based practices have influenced what particular tools and experiences are commonly associated with early childhood education provision. It is possible that the emphasis on engaging in 'activities', and using 'educational' materials such as paint, collage, puzzles, and dress-ups as the primary source of ways for children to learn has served to overshadow other 'cultural tools' for learning, such as engaging in conversations, watching others, contributing to the functioning of the setting (or community, or household), or engaging in routines and other care-related tasks (Cole & Wertsch, 1996; Fleer, 2001; Singer, 1996; Stonehouse, 2001; Tizard & Hughes, 1984; Vygotsky, 1978). Anne Stonehouse (2001) has challenged the early childhood sector to consider what the word 'activities' implies in relation to early childhood education provision: the activity becomes synonymous with 'learning' at the expense of other parts of, or occurrences during, the day that are not 'activities'. Whilst both home-based settings in my study included some activity-based experiences (such as painting, stamping, threading) and 'educational' materials such as blocks, musical equipment, dress-ups, puzzles and books were readily available, equipment and activities more reflective of everyday home-life also played an important part. The stepstool was an object for construction as well as climbing, making up your own bed on the couch was a self-initiated desirable task, as was mopping up spills and sweeping up spilled birdseed.

An example can be seen in events around a pantry. A pantry is not usually considered an essential part of an early childhood environment but in Maria's home-based setting it was a well-utilised. It provided a catalyst for exploring the notion of object permanence and theory of mind, a place to situate surprise and a setting to develop collaborative relationships with peers.

> Jack starts the game. "Ta-ta" he says to Maria as he disappears inside the pantry and closes the door. Maria plays along: "Joey, have you seen Jack?" Jack can hardly wait to be found and opens the door to pop out. The game continues with Jack more rapidly opening and closing the door, being greeting by Maria each time. Joey joins, asking "Where did he go?" Now Joey has a turn and stays hiding for a much longer length of time, Maria follows the same

> pattern: "Joey, where are you? Jack, where's Joey gone?" Joey's extended hiding allows time to elaborate on other possible hiding places: "Maybe he's hiding in the lounge behind the green couch? Maybe he's in the laundry. Do you think I should look in the laundry?" Although Maria is suggesting these as a possibility, Jack doesn't take them up. He knows that Joey is in the pantry and peeks through the gap between the doors. At this point Joey pops out with a burst of laughter. "I hiding!" The game continues.
>
> Later in the day Jack revisits the hiding game. He shuts himself in the pantry and when Maria doesn't call out for him straightaway he takes it on himself to initiate the playing out of the script: "Where's Jack gone?" he calls out. Maria responds "Where *is* Jack?"

Household items were also used to facilitate exploration of traditional educational foci such as mathematics. Maria told a story that involved demonstrating the use of the pot cupboard as a puzzle (making pieces fit back in again) and the utensils as mathematical equipment.

> And we also had the pot cupboard and there was this lovely fantasy play around being a baker and the scenario went that it wasn't actually baking but what he really enjoys doing is sorting and organising and seriating the cake tins and the pot lids and all that kind of thing and then loading them all back into the cupboard, and there's a very tidy pot cupboard that Maria hasn't seen in her home for a long, long time!

I have come to describe the materials more traditionally associated with the home as 'contextually relevant' tools, an elaboration of Rogoff, Mosier, Mistry and Goncu's 'culturally important activities' (1993). They reflect essential elements of the environment, in these cases, homes where communities of people reside together and are part of the experiential milieu. In an early childhood centre, where the primary purpose of the setting itself is to provide an environment solely dedicated to focusing on children, the essential elements of the environment are likely to differ. Identifying these 'contextually relevant' tools as fundamental components of home-based environments acknowledges that whatever children encounter within their 'milieu' (the objects, people and underlying discourses), provides a basis for their experiences and is a source of learning.

Everyday occurrences and engaging in authentic experiences (those that were purposefully connected to the child's social and cultural context) also provided a catalyst for learning and an impetus for conversations. Children engaged in the process of day-to-day living: they spoke to their parents on the telephone, watched while nappies were changed, wiped up accidents, shared food, unlocked doors in order to get inside and accompanied children to and from school.

Just as Singer (1996) identified the desire of children to be engaged in 'real-life' experiences and Rogoff (1990) highlighted learning through involvement in culturally important activities, this study has also signalled the inclusion of a number of authentic experiences associated with being in a home-based environment. On one occasion, Joey and Jack helped to bake cheese scones because a visitor (the co-ordinator) was coming and on another occasion the purpose of Ben and Mikey's baking was to provide a nice afternoon tea for everyone. The number of 'big' and 'small' chocolate muffins that were baked was discussed and enough saved for the members of Maria's family who were not present at the time. A focus on doing things for other people was also evident in Joey's visit to a pet shop. One reason for the trip was because it was a favourite place for Joey, but a second reason was to purchase fish food and stones for Brian's new fish.

The interplay between the people, places and things in these two home-based settings and the need to consider the comings and goings, needs, desires and requirements of others within the group contributed to a sense of being socially embedded as well as physically embedded within the community.

Intense and interconnected interpersonal relationships

Social interactions and relationships were significant features of the environments. Early on in my journal, I wrote the phrase 'up close and personal' as a way of describing the closeness of the interpersonal relationships in the settings. This phrase reflected the emotional connection and commitment of the children and the educators to each other, as well as their depth of personal understandings about each other. Children and educators demonstrated a depth of knowledge that came from shared experiences and mutually respectful relationships – they were developing a history together.

There were a number of factors that contributed to these enduring relationships and supported children as they constructed understandings about the world and themselves. These factors included the small group size, the continuity of educator and children; the amount of time educator was able to spend with the children; the educator's home as a site; connections with the children's families; involvement of the educators' family and the value placed on relationships and getting on with others.

Small group size, continuity and time

The small group size and continuity of the group over time was seen by the educators as a positive factor in developing relationships and understandings about the children. The presence of one adult with sole responsibility for the care and education of the children in the setting for the entire time is an unique feature of home-based services. In these settings, this continued presence, coupled with the small group size, contributed positively to the amount of time that was potentially available for the children and educators to engage on a one-to-one or one-to-two-or-three basis.

The educator's home as a site

The positioning of the educator's home as a significant site within the home-based setting had the effect of **'**laying the educator bare', enabling an insight into her as a person and providing close contact with members of her family. The passions, practices, values and beliefs of the educator and her family were evident and exposed. The children showed a keen interest in engaging with materials and experiences that were passions for the educator or members of her family. I found myself wondering if the passion for cars evident in several of the children at Maria's house was due to the same passion being displayed by her husband and son, or whether these children fitted in so well because they already came with that passion. In a similar vein music was a passion for Robyn and 'myself as a musical being' was constantly explored by the children in her setting.

Connections with families

The educators had a rich knowledge and understanding of each child and of their family, and the children and their families also had a rich knowledge of the educator and her family. Coming into the educator's family environment was one way in which the children and their families came to know the educator and her family. Both Robyn and Maria strengthened these interpersonal connections by sharing about themselves and their families and finding opportunities to bring their own family into the daily occurrences. However, they also made a point of finding opportunities to bring the child's family and other children into the conversations and happenings of the day. Non-working telephones were frequently used at Robyn's house, by Alice and Steph as a means of making connections with their own families but use of the real telephone also occurred. At Maria's place, Larry came into the kitchen when he realised that his mum was on the phone. He took the phone when Maria offered it to him and walked off into the lounge, sitting at the bottom of the stairs to continue his conversation. He ended the conversation by wishing that his mum and baby brother would "have a good day" and brought the phone back to Maria.

Involvement of the educator's family

Both Maria and Robyn had children of their own who were around 11 years of age. Maria's son and Robyn's daughter were significant contributors and valued members of the home-based settings, much loved and sought after by the children. Maria described her son as "an intricate part of what I do here" and Robin's daughter's involvement was equally valued by Robyn. Both children demonstrated close emotional relationships with the children in care at their home – they worked hard at initiating and maintaining relationships with the children and were rewarded with a return of affection.

Placing value on relationships

A key factor that contributed to the intense interpersonal relationships, I believe, was the value that was placed on developing the knowledge, skills and dispositions that support successful relationships and getting on with others by both Robyn and Maria.

Perhaps because of the emphasis placed by the educators on the value of relationships, the children also demonstrated a desire to build relationships with others. As mentioned earlier, three-year old Alice's drive to engage socially with others was strong and she put a lot of energy into finding ways to initiate and maintain relationships with others. Data on Alice showed that she often initiated games that encouraged social engagement. In this episode, the focus was musical, a passion shared by Alice and Steph (16 months) and the intent was definitely social:

> Alice and Steph are playing a game. Alice bangs on the back of Steph's highchair. Robyn asks "Who is it Steph?" Steph looks round, then turns back and looks straight ahead. Alice comes around the side of the highchair, her face close to Steph's. They both laugh. Alice goes back and starts again. The game continues in this vein for several more sequences. Alice stops the musical peek-a-boo and starts singing "'Round and 'round the garden went the teddy bears", using Steph's leg for the actions. Steph vocalises with the rhythm of the chant. There is heaps of squealing and laughter, with Steph indicating very clearly that she wants Alice to continue by putting her leg out for more.

This emphasis highlights the collaborative and socially oriented nature of learning; learning with and through people, places and things.

Constructing identity: Meaning – making and multiple identities

The foundational aspiration of the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whariki* is for children to "grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure n their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society" (Ministry of Education, 1996a, p. 9). This aspiration emphasised the importance of children perceiving themselves as role-holders and contributors within their environments. In an approach to learning that focuses on relationships, participation and contribution within settings, developing working theories to make sense of the world goes hand in hand with the development of personal theories about the 'self' within that world (Dweck, 1999; Katz, 1988; Wenger, 1998).

Larry (age 3 years, 5 months) explored trajectory, speed, and direction with water hoses, sprinklers and cricket balls. He also explored concepts of containment, size and number during the course of the morning: digging a hole in which to fit the big truck, playing a ball game on the trampoline with Maria (wherein Larry 'jumps' all the balls off the trampoline, then sits down with his legs opened sufficiently to create a receptacle for the balls as Maria retrieves them), inserting the handle into the jack and using a container to create his own ball catcher. The concept of fitting into a particular space was explored in a more abstract way during a conversation between Maria and Larry over morning tea. Maria's knowledge of Larry, his home and his grandparent's home allowed her to interpret the assumption behind his comments. She clarified her interpretation and offered a subtle challenge to his assessment of how many vehicles would fit into the area of his driveway by mentioning "mummy's and dad's" cars.

> Larry: (talking about the vehicles at his grandparents home) Eddy's got a car and a van and a truck. I can't have that. I only can have a van and a truck
>
> Maria: At your house?
>
> Larry: Yeah
>
> Maria: Is that all that will fit on your driveway?
>
> Larry: Yeah
>
> Maria: (pause, thinking) And mummy's car, and dad's car - the red one. Is the red one there too? If the van and the truck are there, maybe the red one's not there.

Just as Alice used the people, places and things within her environment to construct understandings about herself as a social participant, Larry's exploration of a variety of mathematical concepts and of himself as a mathematical being

illustrated the ways in which the physical environment and the interpersonal relationships can combined to act as a catalyst for learning.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to provide some descriptions of the everyday experiences of children in two exemplary home-based settings in urban New Zealand, as a starting point for deepening understandings of home-based settings as sites of early childhood curriculum. The data revealed home-based early childhood settings as involving dynamic multiple sites, firmly embedded within their local communities, both physically and through relationships. Children and educators in these settings actively used multiple sites, contextually relevant tools and deep relationships as catalysts for learning. Through their environmental milieu, the children constructed understandings about their world and perceptions of themselves in a variety of roles within that world.

The nature of the lived experiences of the children and educators in these two home-based settings has contributed to the body of research on family day care in New Zealand and has thrown some light on these home-based settings as early childhood curriculum sites, providing a starting point for articulating home-based pedagogy and broadening understandings beyond dominant notions of early childhood education provision. The study suggests that overall, home-based settings offer the potential of operating as rich learning environments where children can make choices, engage in challenges and collaborate with others to support them to make sense of their world, construct understandings of themselves in multiple ways and see themselves as valued, contributing members of communities.

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