

Original Research Study

Recognising a Child's Perspective of Time in Daily Practice

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Abstract

In this paper, issues of time are examined considering a child's point of view. What often happens within a child's day is dictated by the routines and schedules set by the adults in his/her life. Using Heidegger's notions of Being and Time, attention is given to children's being in time. Drawing on phenomenological research from my PhD studies, I have looked at the significance of daily life experiences and how time is used. The lived experiences of young children observed in this study reveal that their understanding of time differs to that of adults. Questions are raised about regulating a child's use of time with consideration to Foucault's theoretical position that power relations are embedded in our culture.

Introduction

Time is an important element when developing programs for young children. It has been suggested by James, Jenks and Prout (1998) that "the central organizing principle of any curriculum is the timetable" (p.42). In a timetable, the child's day has been broken into segments that allow for the every day happenings of eating, sleeping and playing. These routines and schedules map out what will happen in a child's day and position the content into locations, space and time. According to Jenks (2005) this can be problematic as "the whole being of a child is delineated and paced according to a timetable" (p.67). Time becomes organised by the clock and not by the personal rhythms of the children.

How children choose to spend their time is changing resulting from the combination of parents' busy working schedules and the regulating of time in the institutions where children spend a large proportion of time. This opinion is also shared by Dahlberg and Moss (2005) who suggest that "the institutionalisation of childhood is entering a period of acceleration ... children enter institutions at earlier ages, leave them (as young people) later and spend more of their days there too" (p.3). When children become a part of institutional life further constraints are placed on them and "routinely, children find their daily lives shaped by statutes regulating the pacing and placing of their experience" (Jenks, 2005, p. 122). The difference between home and institutionalised life is that the institution is structured and supervised according to pre-set schedules and procedures (van Manen & Levering, 1996).

Adults do, in many instances, direct the timing of events in the lives of young children and I question the imbalance of power in these situations. Regulating time in this way can be seen as a form of control as James, Jenks and Prout (1998) suggest:

The individual child, it would appear, emerges via the disciplined, spatial implementation of the timetable, which instils regularity and a rhythm in all the activities and tasks of children, including control of the material body through the performance of duty and style of life. (p.55)

As educators we dictate the routines and schedules of a child's day but this deliberation requires careful reflection from a child's viewpoint. This paper unpacks time from a child's outlook and examines giving presence to a child's being in time.

Conceptual Framework

By juxtaposing theories of Heidegger (1927) and Foucault (1977) I have re-examined and reconceptualised young children's experience of time. Heidegger's (1927) notion of one's being or existence, in relation to time, provided a starting point for my research. Using Heidegger's questioning of what it means to be, links to the possibilities of how time is experienced by young children. The post structuralist work of Foucault gave added insights into the use of time regarding power and control.

Heidegger (1927/1962) suggested that our understanding of human experience takes place within a horizon of past, present and future and that by living through past experiences we are able to find out something new which is really only possible in the now or the present.

Time, as discussed by Heidegger (1924/1992), is viewed through the phenomenon of our everydayness: "time is that within which events take place" (p.3E). In his writing he gave a descriptive account of how time is and what it is like in our everyday world (van Manen, 1990). This is what Heidegger called ontic knowledge – knowledge pertaining to the distinctive nature of particular types of entity. Ontological enquiry "is concerned with what it means to be, with the being of things or entities. Heidegger calls ontology the phenomenology of being" (van Manen, 1990, p.183). This means understanding that experience is situated in a world and in ways of being. Heidegger (1927) uses the word 'Dasein', meaning one's being or existence in the world. Dasein means our being is thrown into the world amidst other things and beings. Dasein is responsible for our existence and our potential possibilities.

Heidegger (1927/1962) argued that our existence is temporal and that Dasein, because it exists within the world, is also temporal. Our sense of being relates to time, which according to Heidegger is temporal. As such, time itself is nothing it exists only as a means of how we live in it. Time persists as the consequence of the events taking place within our lives. Time can go fast or it can go slowly, depending on our interpretation of the circumstances. Heidegger illustrated this point further when he used an example of another dimension of time. He compared waiting in a Doctor's surgery and how this time seems to move slowly, whereas if we were enjoying a table tennis tournament this time seems to move rapidly. Our perception of time changes as a consequence of events taking place in it. Time speeds up when we enjoy ourselves or slows down when we are feeling bored (van Manen, 1990).

So therefore what is time? It is only our perception of it that makes it important. It is possible that we could hurry through every aspect of our lives without even realising. As we encounter each experience we are already looking to the next, without taking the time to enjoy the pleasures of the moment. Heidegger (1924/1992) questioned: Where does time go? When reckoning time with a watch in hand, one constantly says, "I have no time" (p.15E). It becomes ironic to measure how much time is lost with the use a clock. Heidegger states "time itself is meaningless; time is temporal" (1924/1992, p.20E). Temporality cannot be identified with clock time, as our existence, which is comprised of our past, present and

future is a movement through a world as a space of possibilities. As beings, or Dasein as Heidegger would say, we define our own meaning in life.

Foucault (1977) offered a different perspective of time to that of Heidegger. Foucault was interested in institutional practices and power relationships in everyday life. Foucault examined time in relation to the dynamics of power structures. MacNaughton (2005) suggested “much of Foucault’s work explores the relationships between knowledge, truth and power and the effects of these relationships on us and the institutions we create” (p.5). Central to Foucault’s work was how institutional practices normalise social principles of modern society through the establishment of measurements, hierarchy and regulations (Ball, 1992).

Foucault believed life processes were shaped by the implementation of this power. Regulating time was recognised as one way of exercising power. Foucault (1977) described this association between time and power when he said: “power is articulated directly onto time; it assures its control and guarantees its use” (p.160). By restricting time one can exercise control or power. Covaleskie (1993) argued that the efficiency of disciplinary power is closely related to its invisibility. Timetables and their implementation demonstrate the exercising of disciplinary power as suggested by Foucault (1977):

The principle that underlay the time-table in its traditional form was essentially negative; it was the principle of non-idleness: it was forbidden to waste time, which was counted by God and paid for by men; the time-table was to eliminate the danger of wasting it - a moral offence and economic dishonesty. (p.154)

Foucault referred here to an economic use of time. When you are idle you are not being productive and therefore wasting time and also money. Economic resourcefulness can also occur by the use of efficient timetables. Through the control of one’s time, money can be saved. By implementing timetables, every minute can be allocated to tasks, which will in turn be more productive and earn more money. Linking economic efficiency to a person’s use of time can impact on the value or worth of that individual.

These contrasting and complementary points of view on time, as illustrated by the writing of Foucault (1977) and Heidegger (1927), offer a framework for the comparative assessment of time in the lives of young children - how they are influenced from within their own being and that of the context from which they are situated.

Methodology

I have used an Interpretative Enquiry paradigm to “understand the subjective world of human experience” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p.21). Phenomenology became the preferred method of enquiry to enable the study of the lived experiences of children, as they existed in their world. Phenomenology is a mode of enquiry through description, reflection and interpretation that explains the meaning of phenomena (Morse & Richards, 2000). This method differs from others in that enquiry is focused on seeing things as they really are, from the inside, and understanding the essence or true meaning. Heidegger took the approach of existential phenomenology, the lived experience in human existence and ways of “being in the world” (van Manen, 1990, p.184). I followed this methodology, as I wanted to find out how children perceived time through their lens and not just from the viewpoint of an adult. An analysis of children’s experiences is explained by van Manen (1990):

Our lived experience and the structures of meanings (themes) in terms of which these lived experiences can be described and interpreted constitute

the immense complexity of the lifeworld. And, of course, we can even speak of the multiple and different lifeworlds that belong to different human existences and realities. And so we know that the lifeworld of the child has different experiential qualities from the lifeworld of the adult (p. 101).

Using a naturalistic approach observations were taken of aspects of the lives of two families to give a multifaceted view of human behaviour. The families were observed in their homes to gain a meaningful perspective of the embodiment of everyday living amongst everyday contexts as they existed within relationships to things, people, events and situations (Morse & Richards, 2002). Regular visits took place in 2005 and 2006, over a period of four months on different days of the week and times of the day. Observations of the two families formed the basis of the study, but discussion and debate were not limited to these participants. van Manen (1990) recommended drawing on personal experiences as a starting point in describing the lived experience, which may possibly be the same experience for others and becomes a way of opening up the question of meaning. Therefore, anecdotes from my life experiences and work as an early childhood educator were also used. Perl (1996) suggested that in a phenomenological study the raw data are personal experiences, which can be gathered through observing, interviewing, reading, writing and living.

These observations of everyday events were written in a narrative way. The next step was a process of reflection, writing down my thoughts and further enquiry. This was necessary so as to engage with the deeper questions that were asked: to learn more from the children about being in the moment and to question our own sense of the present. Interpretation using existing preconceptions, pre-understandings or prejudices makes sense of the data in a forward arc (Ellis, 1998). Through recursive writing using a backward arc the information is then analysed offering different understandings to raise other possibilities. A backward arc is the evaluative part, to look for confirmation, contradictions and inconsistencies and to try out other conceptual frameworks (Ellis, 1998). The data excerpts used in this paper were selected to demonstrate how children view time. I reflected, wrote and read literature that illuminated my observations to get to the essence of the lived experiences of time for the participants. Informed by theoretical perspectives from Heidegger (1927), Foucault (1977), and van Manen (1990) I engaged in a recursive writing process. Articulating interpretations in this way is referred to as hermeneutic phenomenology as it is both descriptive and interpretive of the meaningful lived experience (van Manen, 1990).

Discussion

How Children Relate To Time

How do children know what time it is? Can they read a clock? Children are aware of the cycles of nature and can tell when it is dark and light. Page (2000) indicated that “at the ages of four and five, time remains closely bound up in the child’s actions and awareness” (p.17). Through repetition of experiences children become familiar with routines and realise what comes next. For instance when I work with children in a childcare setting they do not need a clock to tell when it is rest time because rest time happens each day after lunch. It may not be the exact clock time. The children cannot yet read twelve thirty. It could be twelve forty-five, but young children can recognise the sequence of the day’s events. They have an embodied sense of time. Children learn to read clock time at various ages depending on their experience of using time as interpreted by an adult or older person. To read a clock requires practice and a cognitive understanding of the relationship between numbers and the measured passing of time. The concept of distance in time in an adult sense is difficult for

young children as they still do not recognise that time can ever be fully separate from them (Page, 2000). The following passages provide examples of a child's sense of time.

On a family visit, Kristy aged seven years, asked me if I wanted to go to the playground with her. Her father Colin suggested that she had only ten minutes to play because she would have to go inside and get dressed ready for Girl Guides. I understood what ten minutes meant; I had a watch and could calculate ten minutes from now. I felt sure Kristy had a more limited understanding of the measurement of ten minutes than I had. Instead of going off immediately to play, she stopped what she was doing and looked at her father repeating 'ten minutes'? Her father explained to her: 'That is like one minute times sixty'. I realised that Colin's explanation was inaccurate. Kristy still looked puzzled. What sense did Kristy make of her father's explanation? Because she hesitated to think about this maybe Colin realised she did not understand it fully, so he said 'Off you go, I will call you when it is time'.

Such measurement or reckoning of time becomes a physical experience (lived time) that is determined numerically in terms of spatial stretches. This is where it became difficult for Kristy to comprehend the ten minutes. The lived time and the connection between space and time was considered by Heidegger (1927/1962) who wrote that: "The time which is made public by our measuring it, does not by any means turn into space because we date it in terms of spatial measurement-relations" (p.470). How we interpret time can be confusing. Even though incorrect, I could understand that Colin was trying to describe an explanation for ten minutes when he said it was like ten times sixty. If clock time can trick adults it must be much more confusing for young children. "Although our methods of keeping time are highly advanced, our methods of reckoning time are archaic, illogical and complex" (Grudin, 1982, p.19).

For Kristy the measuring of time was of no consequence as she went off to play at the playground. She had a turn on the monkey bars, swings and balance beam. It appeared that she was unaware of the passing of time. Kristy was busy taking off her shoes ready to go on the trampoline when her father walked across the yard to remind her it was time to go inside. Kristy just kept undoing her shoes. Her father coughed 'u-hum'. She then began jumping on the trampoline. Her father said 'Come on now, thank you'. Kristy kept jumping for a few more minutes. Her father persuaded her again. Kristy then climbed off and put her shoes back on. Her father praised her for doing what she was told. Why didn't Kristy acknowledge her father's request right away? Was she trying to squeeze in more time to play? It would seem that time is perceived differently for Kristy.

Kristy appeared to be absorbed in the now, or present moment. When we focus on the measuring of public time we sometimes forget the personal and temporal nature of time. Kristy, when playing on the playground equipment, enjoyed a sequence of nows. Our public interpretation of time covers these up. When these "nows" pass away we call it the past. This is then manifest in the stretching of time, where we become as a being in lived space and time. Sometimes when I am fully absorbed in what I am doing time tends to slow down and take forever. It feels to me that I am in a different dimension of time, one that runs parallel to the real world but is deeper and more meaningful. I liken it to reading a great novel and cannot put it down because it has me captivated in another place and time. Whatever happens around me is almost surreal, as I surrender to the pages of the book completely immersed and almost entranced.

When visiting Kristy two weeks after the visit just described I could see that she was still coming to terms with this nature of clock time as adults know it. She was playing on the monkey bars and had a new trick to show me. Kristy was able to hang upside down with only her legs strung over the beam. She told me that she could do this for a very long time. I

questioned 'how long' and suggested we count to measure it. Kristy counted very quickly to sixty and then had to pull herself up. She told me she could do it for longer, so I said: 'This time I will use my watch to count the time'. As she was hanging upside down I was counting in fives, according to the seconds on my watch so as to encourage her. Kristy was able to stay as long as one minute and fifteen seconds. She asked me if it was a long time, and I said it was. Kristy at this point seemed to need my affirmation that it was a long time. Does she have an understanding of the length of this time? Later when doing another trick she asked me to count the time again on my watch. This only lasted for fifteen seconds. Kristy when she jumped down described the length of time as 'that one was squishy' and said 'I bet the last one was longer'. This showed that she had grasped an understanding between a longer and a shorter time period. I do not think it was necessarily the seconds of time that I said from my watch that she related this to, but more from her own sense of being in time, and this "squishy" perception.

What was Kristy referring to when she talked about this squishy time? Is time important to children the same way as it is to adults? Do children become anxious about losing time? Many adults constantly look at their watches, trying to fit in busy schedules, worrying about whether they will be on time. Another illustration of time that occurred happened with a group of younger children, shown below.

Absorbed in the Present Moment of Time

It was Tuesday, Playgroup day, involving a group of two and three year olds in the home corner pretending to cook. Each child was engrossed in what they were doing yet they happily played alongside each other. Nothing else seemed to matter to them. This was just a time to become absorbed in the spontaneous rhythm of their play. They had been given time and space to engage in their activity and there was no reason to hurry. It was the pleasure of the moment that was completely satisfying.

From this example we see that the children were immersed in the present. Heidegger (1924/1992), referred to this as everydayness, the happenings of the world as encountered in time, in the present. The children were caught in a moment of unhurried time. Understanding another's experience, like the children in home corner, is helpful for us as adults to consider our own possibilities for being in the world (van Manen, 1990). Like Kristy and her games in the playground, these children were in the present moment, the here and now. The toddlers were completely absorbed in the process of cooking. The children were gaining pleasure from the moment and were not necessarily concerned with what would be happening later in the routine. Why do we as adults have a different sense of timing? What happens next is often on our mind, anticipating and preparing for the next event. Adults have the ability to think across time, viewing our lives in the past, present or future. It is through our experiences of living and being that we can do this. Our understanding of space and time are a result of our everyday living.

Can we learn more from children about being in the moment so as to better appreciate the here and now? As adults who have the power to dictate children's routines, do we lack their sense of the present or the now to comprehend their immediate needs? Grudin (1982) explained this further: "The child of two or three, who knows neither past nor future, sees, knows, becomes the present more than we can understand or remember" (p. 106). The child's concern with the now overrides his/her concern for the past or the present. If we remember back to Kristy and her description of squishy time, we see that she was developing a sense of time as understood in spans. Although she was very often caught up in the now or present moment, she illustrated that at seven years of age she was beginning to

comprehend the dimensions of the passing of time. Her experiences had led her to understand a stretching of time.

Kristy was learning how to compare time in relation to her experiences. This differed to the younger children playing in home corner who were more concerned with the present moment or the now. They were so engaged in the process of baking, they were not aware of the timing of the adult scheduling of an institutional program.

Interrupting the Embodiment of Time

The actions of children at play are often centred on the embodiment of the moment. However, it is important to consider how this sense of time fits into the schedules and routines of daily living. How do children know about transitions and when to move into morning teatime or group time for example? What happens when the here and now moments are interrupted? An illustration of this occurs in the following passage.

It was the end of the session at preschool and time for the children to begin preparation for going home. It was a bit of a rush as the children had been busily engaged in outdoor play on a beautiful day, and everyone had forgotten about the time. Some parents were already in the foyer waiting, so the teachers were hurrying the children to collect their shoes and sit on the mat in the centre of the playground. Sam was busy tidying the cubby house all by himself. He said it was a big mess and that everyone had been cooking but did not clean up afterward. He had been diligently emptying out bark chips from the oven and it was taking a long time. Sam ignored the requests of the teachers to come and get ready for home time. He was too busy and engrossed in his task. Sam was living in the moment of that particular place and time. One of the teachers came over to assist him and praised him for his efforts. Sam was genuinely enjoying this experience; it was not an arduous job for him. The teacher tried to encourage him to join the other children and said that she would continue the cleaning, but he refused to go. Sam wanted to make the cubby area tidy.

After a while the teacher thanked Sam for his efforts and encouraged him to start preparing for home time. He insisted that there was still more mess, but the teacher explained that she could clean it up after everyone had gone home. Reluctantly he went to find his shoes, but he would have stayed longer if he could. Sam was not at all concerned with the time. He felt a sense of responsibility to tidy the cubby house, and it was this that was most important to him. Even though Sam knew what the routine of the day was, he still resisted. This is the working of disciplinary power in practice. Without knowing it, Sam has been influenced and shaped through the social norms and expectations that operate invisibly. Covaleskie (1993) explained, “we are shaped through the coercion of disciplinary power, but unaware of the shaping” (p. 2). By conforming to the social expectations placed on us we are being brought to the constant working of invisible restraints that bring us all toward the same normal range of practices and beliefs (Covaleskie, 1993).

Our behaviour is influenced through social practices, which MacNaughton (2004) states: “through processes of normalisation and regulation we come to learn that certain ways of thinking and acting are natural, normal and preferred” (p.47). Power relations are embedded in our culture as seen here. Sam was constructing his own meanings on life, but these were being shaped by the cultural context of what was normal and proper. Critical constructivists believe that we have the capacity to construct meanings but these are bounded by our culture. We frequently reflect the meanings of those who have the most power within our culture (MacNaughton 2004). In Sam’s case it was the teachers who held the most power, he was refusing to go along with the group knowingly aware of his actions. Even at this young age of four, Sam had learnt the meanings of Western cultural practices but was also

constructing and manipulating his own meanings. According to MacNaughton (2004) children's meanings are often "distorted, limited and silenced" by conditions of power that are placed upon them as a result of the socio-cultural context (p.46).

Regulating Time

The example of Sam illustrates how sometimes the restrictions of time can be a dilemma. He was expected to fit in with the routines of the preschool. The enforcement of timetables can be associated with the notion of power and control over people's use of time. A timetable is a schedule of the times of things that are to happen within the day, it creates efficiency and does not allow for the wasting of time. This division of time was first introduced in monastic rule in the 1600s, but was later adapted to education in the form of a school calendar and a more-or-less formalised timetable (Ball, 1992). Regulating time is another way of exercising power and control, and Foucault (1977) suggested that: "it is this disciplinary time that was gradually imposed on pedagogical practice – specializing the time of training and detaching it from adult time" (p.159).

Exercising power through the means of controlling the use of time is in a way trying to normalise behaviour. It may be done unintentionally as a result of expectations placed on teachers that arise from our traditions and past history. Disciplinary power plays an important part in creating disciplined subjects who conform to certain standards through mechanisms of normalising (Covaleskie 1993). In Sam's case he attempted to resist the teachers by ignoring them and then by refusing to go and join the others. Sam through his actions demonstrated a sense of agency and an ability to make choices. Unfortunately Sam's efforts of resisting were disregarded. The power within the timetables could be what overrides an adult's perspective on how time is best used. Foucault (1977) described this as segmenting of time; drawing up of programs where events take place in a particular stage, as disciplinary time, imposed on children, but detached from adult time. As teachers we can become more concerned with timetabling and efficiency, than listening to what the children want to do. Looking at the clock and regulating ourselves according to this time allows us to be guided by the measurement of time according to public time. Such taken for granted practices need to be questioned. We ought to ask ourselves where is the now in this situation. How does adult perception of the timing of events contrast to that of a child?

James, Jenks and Prout (1998) question why it is that "over time, children learn to take on a more adult rhythm to their lives" (p.80). For Kristy, Sam and the children in the home corner, their whole being was caught up in the now or the present; they were losing themselves in time. However, they would eventually conform to the time patterns set for them by others. As adults we often use the expression 'I have no time' because we become so used to measuring time by the clock. However, such loss of time is often caused by others who quantify and regulate time. When working with young children it is necessary to question how and why time is assigned and regulated by others.

Conclusion

This paper has considered the regulating of time for children and how they respond. Timetables, routines and schedules are examples of blocks of time that are allotted to children's lives and it is adults who allocate these timeframes. It seems that too often we as adults are preoccupied with measuring time and become concerned with losing time. A young child's focus is different, especially when engaged in play and the present moment overrides all other aspects of time. As children enter early childhood services and school, the scheduling of time fits within the demands of the particular institution. Educators are in a

position to make changes to create an equitable balance in the lives of children. Consideration of a child's sense of time is necessary when scheduling experiences, and flexibility is required so the child is acknowledged and valued for who they are in the here and the now.

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