Original Research Paper

Discourses of Happiness in Infant-Toddler Pedagogy

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Abstract

In a recent investigation of teachers' pedagogy with infants and toddlers in New Zealand early childhood care and education centres, the theme of happiness was identified as a pedagogical aspiration. This theme is a component of a two-year qualitative multiple case study research project in which five researchers worked with twelve infant-toddler teachers in five early childhood centres in two cities in New Zealand. The research project examined ways in which the teachers understood the infant and toddler as 'learner' and considered multiple pathways of early learning. The desire for children's happiness is often mentioned by teachers and parents as an important goal but left unexplored and un-theorised in regard to infant-toddler pedagogy. This article focuses on selected data from one early childhood centre.

Introduction

In early 20th century New Zealand, infants and toddlers were primarily cared for within the domain of the family. With the changing role of women in society, and changed attitudes towards shared care, there has been a rapid increase in the use of care and education services outside the home. In the early 21st century, participation rates for children under two year old in New Zealand grew by 36% from July 2000-2009, and it has comprised the fastest growing group of enrolments in early childhood care and education services (Ministry of Education, 2010).

In 1996, New Zealand introduced a national early childhood curriculum for the infant, toddler and young child (Ministry of Education, 1996). Despite the best intentions of staff to implement curriculum, there were few qualified teachers at that time with knowledge of relevant research in relation to infant-toddler education and care. The earlier emphasis on ensuring care routines were carried out efficiently now required new theoretical understandings for teachers to shift thinking to a pedagogical approach towards education and care (Rockel, 2009). Infant-toddler teachers are now beginning to look more critically at their practice and to articulate pedagogy (Gailer, 2010; Powell, 2007; Rockel, 2009) as they gain access to a broader range of research through gaining higher level qualifications and examining their own "espoused theories, beliefs, values and assumptions" (Gailer, 2010, p.

22). The Education Review Office (ERO) report in 2009 regarding quality education and care in infant and toddler centres endorses the need for ongoing professional learning and support for managers and educators to keep abreast of developments in early childhood education. The care and education of infants and toddlers in early childhood services requires specialised pedagogy (Carroll-Lind & Angus, 2011; Dalli et al., 2011; ERO, 2009) and consideration of new methodologies and theoretical paradigms that explore teacher-parent understandings.

One such understanding pertains to the ways in which happiness is associated with infant and toddler experiences. In the minds of teachers and parents happiness is a driving force which often emerges during conversations as the desired basis for the lived experiences of infants and toddlers; it is felt by parents that it provides evidence of a child settled in an early education setting. For example, in a national survey of parents' views of what they look for in a good ECE service, 96% wanted children who are "happy and settled" (Mitchell, 2007, p. 25). It is hoped that research into the notion of happiness will contribute to a growing body of knowledge regarding teachers' infant-toddler pedagogy, consistent with an expectation that children in their care are developing abilities that enable them to learn to "live well, flourish and be happy" (Aloni, 2008, p. 533).

In this paper theorising practice in relation to happiness is intended to inform curriculum for infants and toddlers. While goals towards a state of becoming happy are often espoused and valued in the sense of a folk-theory (Bruner, 1996), they remain somewhat under-theorised in early childhood pedagogy and practice. Hence understandings and interpretations of happiness discourses remain unexplored. The paper engages with theoretical and empirical contributions to the relationship of happiness to education, and then discusses the views of early childhood teachers that construct lived discourses of happiness.

While this article introduces the notion of happiness, the authors hope that this topic will also open up discussion on the risks of ignoring the concept of *unhappiness* which may lead to masking and overlooking the complexities of learning and learning opportunities for very young children. The topic of unhappiness will be the focus of future articles. However, in this article the term (un)happiness will be used to keep open the complexity of discourses associated with happiness. The ways in which happiness or unhappiness are constructed by teachers could mean that the interests of children or parents could become silenced or enhanced. Given the parental anxiousness that infants might remain unsettled and unhappy at the early childhood centre, the understandings of happiness may be based on teachers constraining children's emotions by insisting on quietness (no crying), along with a denial of children's feelings in separation and forced acquiescence to the wishes of the teacher (Gerber & Johnson, 1998; Leavitt, 1994). The emotional and social categorisation within institutional frameworks can have a powerful effect on the learning of very young children. In this sense, the opening up of understandings in how happiness is constructed is a valuable process.

Infant-Toddler Pedagogy

Discourses of (un)happiness emerged in discussions on pedagogy during the analysis of themes in the two-year qualitative multiple case study research project (2009-2010) from which this paper draws its data. Five researchers worked with two to three teachers in each of five infant and toddler centres in Wellington and Auckland in New Zealand (Dalli, Duhn, Rockel, Craw & Doyle, 2010). The wider project has examined how teachers construct the infant and toddler as 'learner', and how teachers express insights on the multiple pathways of learning as they explore pedagogy for infant-toddler curriculum in New Zealand.

In each infant and toddler setting, the researcher worked collaboratively with the teachers to investigate learning and teaching through the experiences of three children. This qualitative case study approach produced data (e.g. transcribed teacher interviews, video clips, learning stories) that was then shared by the group of researchers for the purpose of analysis. At the theoretical level, the data analysis was informed by concepts from phenomenology, poststructural discourse analysis and sociocultural frameworks.

The phenomenon central to this research was teacher understandings of the infant and toddler 'as learner'. As a philosophy, phenomenology is "concerned with the experiential underpinnings of knowledge" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000, p. 488). The project focussed on making visible the taken-for-granted pedagogical world of infant and toddler teachers as experienced by the children. Sociocultural theories emphasise the social construction of meaning. Within this perspective, meaning-making is explored as "a process of transformation through people's participation" (Rogoff, Baker-Sennett, Lacasa & Goldsmith, 1995, p. 46). The teachers were equipped with video cameras to enable them to capture what they perceived as significant learning moments for children.

In this article, discourse analysis is understood as a process that reveals how social relations, identity, knowledge or power (Luke, 1997) can shape different understandings of what it might mean to teachers' practice for children to be happy (and unhappy) in the early childhood context; this consequently becomes embedded in everyday practices. A discourse analysis framework enabled the researchers to investigate how 'curriculum', 'learning' and 'professional practice' are currently constituted in infant and toddler centres. Discourse analysis opens up space for discussions on social practices with infants and toddlers without regarding them with one lens, for example, as a 'vulnerable' child (Sorin, 2005) where the power over a child is solely decided by adults. As stated by MacNaughton (1995): "meanings of discourse derive from the way in which the relationship between language, meaning, emotion, the body, social practices, the individual and society are understood" (p. 42). The meanings therefore are variable and respond to negotiation through discussions on the different understandings by those involved.

Happiness

The discourses of happiness can be interpreted as motivating forces that bring teachers, parents and children together in a shared endeavour. This shared interest comes together in the teachers', parents' (as well as children's own) aspirations for children to be confidently and actively involved in their learning during life inside the early childhood setting and outside the home environment.

There are several contributing influences to this topic currently offered in the literature for early childhood teachers. Csikszentmihalyi (2002) focussed his purposive investigation of happiness with the consideration of Aristotle's conclusion that "more than anything else men and women seek happiness" (p. 1). Aristotle referred to *eudaimonia*, translated as happiness, which he discussed as activity rather than an emotion – the activity of a virtuous life (cited in Ahmed, 2008). When looking at what made people happy within the framework of positive psychology, Csikszentmihalyi was striving to understand the ways people felt when they most enjoyed themselves. He developed a theory of optimal experience, based on the concept of 'flow': "'Flow' is the way people describe their state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for its own sake" (p. 6).

The notion of 'flow' has impacted on discussions of early childhood practice in New Zealand. For instance Carr (2001) draws upon Laevers and colleagues' connections between

involvement and wellbeing in discussing a child's sense of involvement. Their explanation is that wellbeing can refer to "feeling happy" (Carr, 2001, p. 29). The domain of wellbeing is comprehensive and it would be useful to further deconstruct a discourse of wellbeing and happiness in discussions related to pedagogy in future research.

The field of psychology traditionally focused on removing depression and anxiety in a scientific sense in order to facilitate happiness. In discussing positive psychology, Seligman, Parks and Steen (2004) state:

> Even if we were asymptotically successful at removing depression, anxiety and anger, that would not result in happiness. For we believe 'happiness' is a condition over and above the absence of unhappiness (p. 1379).

The authors identify three constituents of happiness: (i) pleasure (or positive emotion); (ii) engagement (i.e. gratification); and (iii) meaning in life. They indicate that positive psychology is committed to investigating and cultivating factors that "nurture human flourishing" (p. 1380) and that intervention is now focused on increasing happiness rather than decreasing suffering. These constituents of pleasure, engagement, and meaning in life, are worthy of exploration for infant-toddler teachers in education and care.

The notion of intervention is considered part of the quest for solutions to alleviate suffering and learning how to gain satisfaction from experiences in daily life (as frequently evidenced in the media, e.g. Bearup, 2011). A study by Cohn, Brown, Fredrickson and Mikels (2009) on the resilience which mediates the relation between positive emotion and increased life satisfaction, suggests that happy people become more satisfied not simply because they feel better but because they develop effective resources for living. For example, in early childhood education, the overt focus by teachers on strategies that acknowledge children's feelings and emotions, whether negative or positive, provide ways of supporting young children to be resilient in handling the strength of their emotions in relationships.

There is diversity in cultural views on the discourse of (un)happiness in relationships, education, and life experience. As Gibbons (2010) explains "In some cultures happiness may be related to the wider social world and might never be expressed as an individual experience" (p. 145). Uchida, Norasakkunkit and Kitayama (2004) reviewed cross-cultural perspectives on meanings of happiness and motivation. In North American cultural contexts happiness was found to be defined more in terms of personal achievement and motivated through positive affect and self-esteem. Whereas in East Asian cultural contexts, the authors found that happiness tended to be defined in terms of interpersonal connectedness with individuals that was motivated to balance positive and negative affects within social relationships.

The ways in which culture and happiness are understood is additionally influenced by socio-political factors including the role of the market in early education. The expectation of children's happiness is a selling point in the market place. According to Rifkin (2010), the commodification of young children is impacted from outside the home with the commercial exploitation of "kiddy consumer culture" (p. 506) for young children and their families. This influence will impact upon parents' expectations of happiness for children within the consumerism of the marketplace as parents' insecurities may be exploited with a materialistic view of what brings happiness.

In addition, the market provides an underlying influence with regard to selection of a 'place' where an infant or toddler will experience his or her early life outside the home. It is commercially expedient to publicise that a particular care and education service and/or

context will promote an emotionally safe place for children to be 'happy' in lieu of parental care. Names of a childcare centre can reflect this somewhat romanticised and idealised view of happiness. In a general internet search for early childhood service names, examples included: *Happy Times; Happyland; Happy Days; Happy Kids; The Happy Rainbow*. Given these connections between childhood, education, and happiness it is important to explore the views of teachers in relation to happiness, and importantly the ways in which teachers engage in and construct the discourses of happiness.

Discourses of (Un)happiness in the Research

The authors recognise that the topic of happiness and unhappiness is often mentioned in relation to infant care without it being aligned to pedagogy, and argue that discourses of happiness make a valuable contribution to infant pedagogy that would benefit from more detailed discussion and negotiation between teacher-teacher and teachers-parents. The following section provides brief examples of the relevant discourses.

For the purpose of this article, the teachers' interpretations of parents' beliefs are presented from one of the Auckland partnership centres in regard to the theme of (un)happiness. This centre is a small, privately owned, urban centre. The teachers in this context are seeking to fulfil the conceptualisation of infant-toddler pedagogy as a specialism. In line with the centre's philosophical commitment, they have a primary care system with small groups. The basis for the philosophy in this centre had its origins in Gerber's philosophy of respect for children's emotional engagement with the world (Gerber & Johnson, 1998). The initial grouping in the centre (the focus of the research) consists of six infants (under 16 months of age) and two teachers; the next group has eight toddlers (from 16 months to two years) and two teachers; both groups share the outdoor area. The two teachers in the infant group hold post-graduate qualifications with an infant specialisation.

In the teacher-researcher interviews, an active, respectful parent/teacher relationship was found to be a strong component of the teachers' pedagogy in the centre. This mutually respectful relationship enabled teachers to open up dialogue with parents on an ongoing basis in regard to (un)happiness.

Doing the right thing

In the first teacher interview a teacher explained that during new parent evenings the teachers asked parents about their aspirations and values while at the same time presenting ideas related to centre practice and philosophy. The teachers interpreted parental concern for a child's happiness from their conversations and endeavoured to match this with their pedagogy. One teacher commented: "Parents want their children to be happy: we talk about a lot on our tour of the centre – our ultimate goal is for children to be really happy to be here" (Interview, 2009).

Furthermore, the idea of 'being happy' underpinned the challenge of teacher responsibility. This responsibility was reflected upon by the teachers in regard to pedagogy that directly impacts the experiences of the children. One teacher stated:

> I question myself 'Am I doing the right thing by these children? … what's actually happening for each individual child … how they are changing, how happy they are to be there?' (Interview, 2009).

Peace starts at the change table

One teacher elaborated on what was particularly important to her pedagogy, stating her personal belief and intent that children's happiness could make a difference in a challenging world: "… I would like to make a difference. Peace starts at the change table." (Interview 2009). For this teacher, evoking a pedagogy of peace with and alongside her goal for happiness was demonstrated in the calm and respectful attitudes she enacted in the interactive relationships she had with children during care moments. A belief in peaceful relationships perceived as essential for creating and sustaining peaceful living (Brion-Meisels, Brion-Meisels & Hoffman, 2007), and as being fundamental to advocating for empowerment for infants and toddlers, is revealed in this teacher's approach.

Feel free to learn

Discourses of freedom (and empowerment) are understood in one way or another as being fundamental to early childhood education. In recognition of perceived teacher responsibilities towards fulfilling parents' desires for children's happiness, one teacher believed she could play a part in empowering children to learn in their own way:

> Our ultimate goal is that they are really happy to be with us and that we can provide an environment they feel really safe in, can feel free to learn the way they want to – and that we can help them to prepare for next room space – for life too (Interview, 2009).

Here tensions occur when pedagogical discourses of (un)happiness, for example, sit with, alongside or collide with other discourses. For instance, how do teachers negotiate the tensions between expectations that early childhood care and education is both preparation for the next stage of life and at the same time a time and place to be happy? These tensions, rather than present insurmountable challenges, offer teachers rich opportunities for critical reflection.

(Un)happiness revealed – I cried; he cried

The notion of children being happy is intertwined with expectations that teachers be pedagogically prepared to be ready, willing and able to be responsive to children's crying. While crying can be understood as a socioculturally embedded expression that communicates (un)happiness or perhaps not-yet-happiness (Hall, 2011; Talay-Ongan & McNaught, 2002), it offers teachers a constant indicator of the potential vulnerability children might experience in the early childhood setting. Yet researchers interested in discourses of 'health and happiness' in relation to workplace wellbeing have explored how teachers themselves contend with a demanding occupation (Leavitt, 1994; Wood & McCarthy, 2002). One teacher's awareness of being responsive to her own expressions of unhappiness was revealed in the distress she recalled while searching for a satisfactory work context and potential teaching role. It was important to her that she felt able to contribute to children's wellbeing and learning in line with the pedagogical principles of respect she believed in; the conflict she encountered with these beliefs was a distressing experience:

> I cried at both my practicums, the first few days I cried … seeing a 4-month old spend a whole day in a bouncinette … a child who wasn't walking yet was called lazy … just the way they treated the children, they yelled at them. (Interview, 2010)

For the other teacher, referring back to the commitment of basing her daily practice on pedagogical principles of respectful interactions, this included reflecting on her interactions with parents as well:

> … generally you put a lot of effort into making sure that the children are having an enjoyable time that parents feel happy about them being there, and you ask about how their day was … (Interview, 2010)

Enacting pedagogical principles of respectful interactions for teachers in this research involved the challenges inherent in learning to live with discomfort. When selecting video footage for discussion, the expression of unhappiness was recognised as a valuable way of a child communicating. A teacher commented: "… another thing I wanted to add, discomfort – he was crying – important to show those rather than just the happy ones" (Interview, 2010).

Making 'Happiness' Mean Something

> We have somehow got this idea that we are all entitled to be happy. We deserve happiness and we can be happy all or most of the time. When in reality, life sucks a lot of the time. It's hard, it's boring, shit things happen (Latta, 2010, quoted in Clifton, 2010, p. 19).

While not theorised in relation to pedagogy, the repeated references to happiness in the data highlight the significance that discourses of happiness have in parents-teachers and teacher-teacher dialogue, and the contribution happiness makes to parents, and teachers' negotiated shared understandings that inform pedagogy and practice (Dalli et al., 2011). Such situations endorse the notion of teachers clearly articulating their beliefs and practices to families and all others.

Seligman's (2011) latest publication presents a shift in his theoretical discussion on (un)happiness emphasising the way a sense of accomplishment contributes to a feeling of wellbeing or 'flourishing', something that increases emotional resilience. Seligman attributes emotional resilience to having meaning and purpose; positive emotions; relationships; and accomplishment; for an approach to lifelong fulfilment. While positive psychologists' ways of thinking about individual resilience and capability offer a critical approach to theorising (un)happiness must always incorporate thinking critically about the social, cultural and environmental aspects that determine childhood, imaging the child and children's lives inside/outside early childhood education (Friedli, 2009; Moss, 2010). Engaging critically with theorising (un)happiness discourses will assist infant-toddler teachers in their pedagogical approaches beyond a romanticised or even punitive view of (un)happiness. Such critical analysis will lead to further dialogue on power relations and the ways in which pedagogy is shaped by the teachers' notion of (un)happiness which determines children's experiences in the early childhood centre.

The teachers' narratives from the research interviews illustrate a desire for children and teachers to be emotionally secure and empowered in order to find their own sense of powerfulness and identity. Empowerment as a principle of *Te Whāriki* the New Zealand early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996) is recognised by the participating teachers in the research project as guiding their practice.

The pedagogy of the teachers in this centre incorporated Gerber's views (Gerber & Johnson, 1998) to encourage a child to 'be', without placing expectations on a child's actions and feelings. For Gerber, a response that is based on sensitive observation will contribute to an

infant's growing sense of control, rather than being 'shushed', distracted or ignored where power relations are in place. Gerber and Johnson (1998) state:

> Don't encourage your child to smile when she doesn't feel like smiling. If she is sad, let her cry … When a child cries, she is not asked, 'What happened?" but is usually told, "You're okay". (p. 4)

This philosophy of respect expressed by the teachers in this centre, acknowledges a child's expression of feelings without judgement, in order to support a child's own confident 'self-help' strategies. The ways in which children will exert their own sense of agency and be confident and resilient, will depend on the power relations displayed during interactions between teachers and children. If children are organised and managed with an emphasis on compliance and completion of group tasks without consideration of emotional and social processes (Rockel, 2009; Carroll-Lind & Angus, 2011), the children's identity formation and on-going learning will be thwarted.

Final Thoughts

The discourses of happiness are constructed in many ways: the parent may desire 'a contented child' for reassurance that the place is contributing to their security; for the teacher an (un)happy child might reflect on whether or not they are seen as a 'good teacher'; and the early childhood centre employer wishes for the performance of 'happy workers' for a successful business. The state ultimately wants 'happy citizens' for social and economic stability as do employers (Leggatt-Cook, 2007). For example, Leggatt-Cook (2007) proposes that the foundation for subsequent learning begins in early childhood and that: "health, wealth and happiness for all – depends on the ability of people to acquire the knowledge, skills and attributes that employers require in a knowledge economy" (p. 41). In relation to early childhood pedagogy, the notion of (un)happiness involves complex desires by teacher, parent and child for an ethic of care in the 'here and now'. To clarify understandings of (un)happiness discourses, and their effects, the conversations that relate to the value-base for each person need to take place.

When the discourses of happiness are problematised in relation to the many images of a child in care outside the home, then other dispositions for learning are made visible – such as resilience, resistance, curiosity, imagination and perseverance (Carr, Smith, Duncan, Jones, Lee & Marshall, 2009). There are several discourses of (un)happiness that have been raised here by the authors, relating to being settled; having emotional resilience; enjoyment; being happy to be there; a sense of flourishing; and experiencing 'flow'. The authors believe that this is a worthwhile topic to explore in relation to infant-toddler pedagogy and future research. There are new theories and methodologies relevant to research for infant-toddler care and education (Dalli et al., 2011; Carroll-Lind & Angus, 2011) which are being brought forward for practitioner and researcher dialogue. The intention of this discussion is to open up space for complexities in teaching and learning to become more visible. The discourses of (un)happiness which remain unexamined may be problematic when considering how the learning experiences for infants and toddlers are shaped by teachers' pedagogy and practice in care and education settings.

The research on teacher pedagogy indicates that infants and toddlers require pedagogy based on a diverse knowledge base, and an ethic of care that supports reciprocal learning for all concerned (Dalli, Rockel, Duhn & Craw with Doyle, forthcoming). The theoretical framework in this project has opened up new spaces for questioning practices with infants and toddlers in education and care centres. The acknowledgement of children's emotions and social relations is a key aspect of pedagogy for such very young children in supporting

an infant's or toddler's sense of self-efficacy and identity. The discourses of (un)happiness are most significant in any dialogue about infant-toddler pedagogy.

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