Original Research

Case Studies from the New Entrant Classroom: Children's Developing Repertoires of Participation

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Abstract

Two studies investigated the role of teaching practice that may 'transform' the participation of new entrant children in the classroom. This process is seen as developing social participation, negotiated in the classroom between teacher and child and peers (Dyson, 1997). Analysis of the systematic observations of the enacted curriculum in the second study highlights the importance of the teacher structuring activities to maximize participation and engagement with learning. The analysis may also contribute to a clearer understanding of each child's developing participation strategies, as well as how the teacher can extend children's repertoires and build on the social practices of the classroom and school. The relative absence of studies that describe the relationship between curriculum process and social development in facilitating a successful adjustment to school highlights the need for further empirical study.

Key Words: School adjustment; peer effects; learning curriculum

Introduction

The transition from early childhood education to school is an important transition and there are many opportunities for students to practise and learn the discourse features of school in order to participate as fully as possible. In New Zealand, where children normally start school on their fifth birthday, the transition to school period usually occurs sometime between five and six years old. The preparation for this transition includes diverse types of childhood experiences ranging from the richness of the home environment to a variety of formal early childhood education (ECE) options. The periods of transition can be further broken down into the time: (a) before entering primary school, (b) when they are starting school, and (c) after they have begun school. The period of interest in this study is (b) starting school and (c) through to the child's first year at school. Effective transition and adjustment to school involves several distinct features, including the influence of peers in the process.

Effective teaching and learning develops from joint participation from which, through shared understanding and co-construction, expertise emerges (McNaughton, 2002). The concept of the 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky, 1978) describes the distance between the actual developmental level, as determined by independent problem solving, and the level of potential development, as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. In this view, adults and peers stimulate the child's cognitive development through the collaborative dialogues that occur during the transition, and this facilitates the child's adjustment to school. Successful adjustment to school is about the quality of participation that enables children's expertise to

develop. The term 'adjustment to school' is used in this paper to describe these developing qualities.

In order for the child to successfully negotiate their participation in this new setting, a sharing of focus and purpose between children and their more skilled partners is necessary; a process that is called 'guided participation' (Rogoff, 1990). This potential for 'peer scaffolding' to support the child's transition to school has been described by Dockett and Perry (2003) as the potential for peers to bring insights to what is important for children to know, that adults might not be aware of. Hill, Comber, Louden, Rivalland and Reid (1998) proposed that learning about the culture of the school, and their role in it (i.e. what it means to 'do school'), is a necessary step before children can focus on the content of schooling. This sociocultural approach is also evident in apprenticeship models of learning, used to describe socialization processes in many cultures (Cole, 1996; Rogoff, 1990, 1997). Successful adjustment to school is not only about negotiation of participation in the first instance, but also about engaging with the curriculum content that focuses on learning.

The sociocultural perspective on learning and development provides a frame to view how the teacher-child-peer relationship can develop for the new entrant (Bruner, 1996; Cole, 1996). Rogoff (1995) has challenged the prevailing view that learning and development occurs through the transmission of information and ideas to the brain, either from the outside world or through acquisition of information and ideas by the brain. She proposes that people change through 'transforming' their participation in sociocultural activities – in which both the individual and the rest of the world are active. The boundary between individual and environment disappears if development is viewed as participatory, since it inherently means involvement (Rogoff, 1997). To analyse the process, Rogoff asserts that consideration be given to three 'planes', which are community, interpersonal and personal lenses or foci that frame these different contexts. From this perspective, one might consider how an activity, its purpose, and people's roles in it transform as participation develops. Another question could be how do people prepare, drawing on their earlier experiences, for participation in present activities in the light of later expectations?

This 'transformation of participation' (Rogoff, 1997, 2003) that changes the new entrant into a school pupil can be identified as classroom activities develop. There is also a strong link in the literature between early academic achievement and social behaviour, with less research on the influence of learning related social skills (McClelland, Morrison, & Holmes, 2000). The concept of 'apprenticeship' is also illuminated in the Maori practice of tuakana/teina, where an older child assists a younger one in his/her learning (Royal-Tangaere, 1997). The central question is about how the teacher and more expert peers facilitate that transformation, and also how children's participation changes as an activity develops (Rogoff, 1997).

Study Design: Teacher Perceptions and Participation in the New Entrant Classroom

Two studies were undertaken with the purpose of exploring the influences of scaffolding in the transition to school that occur between the teacher and child and other children in relation to the classroom activities and curriculum. The dominant themes from the first study were, firstly, what constitutes successful/unsuccessful adjustment to school for children and secondly, the role of peer culture and the learning of related social skills in facilitating engagement with learning. The latter theme included one of the interviewed teacher's view of the role of peer culture in the classroom relating more to the teacher's perspective rather than the child's. The second study shifted the focus to the children's processes in making the transition.

The second study attempted to answer the following two research questions about the role of teaching practice in changing and developing the new entrant's participation, and so promoting successful adjustment to school.

1. What are the characteristics and functions of peer interaction in the development of participation in the new entrant classroom setting?
2. How do classroom activities provide space for the 'transformative effect' of experiences that influence participation and interaction between the new entrant child and teacher and peers?

Data analysis relating to the second question was developed into case studies of different children's transformation of participation, and this data analysis, including teacher reflections, is the focus of the findings reported in this paper. The research explored the hypothesis that the success of the process of engagement of the students in teaching and learning depends on teachers and children using talk together with joint activity, and relating this talk and activity to previous activities in order to build a shared contextual framework (Light & Butterworth, 1992). In the context of this study, the activities and opportunities for interaction that were assumed to make a child's transition into a particular school context successful were observed in the classroom discourse environment. Discourse, or saying, doing, being, valuing, and believing talk and joint activities come from more an action orientation than just a narrow linguistic definition (Gee, 1989). One such example of an activity and opportunity for interaction was teacher management of peer interaction. Observation of this participation during the main morning activities of reading, writing and mathematics in the new entrant class required a careful plan to video aspects of sessions that would help to illuminate these interaction practices.

Participants

The primary school where the study took place had a roll of approximately 500 children (2002), and is in a largely socio-economically disadvantaged urban community in Auckland, with children from diverse cultural backgrounds. The classroom 'sites' for video observation of the daily morning classroom activities were developed from observation in the previous term. Activity settings are the varying contexts ranging from formal to informal aspects of the programme that foster participation in the teaching process. For example, literacy learning activities can range from 'assisted performance', (e.g. group recitation by reading aloud favourite poems) to more narrative styles of literacy tasks that foster comprehension (McNaughton, Phillips, & MacDonald, 2000; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Many of these joint tasks that enhance collaborative interaction occur in the more informal aspects of the programme.

In this study, the following contextual parameters relate to categories of participation and collaboration that describe the sequences videoed in the classroom. These are (a) routine activities, (b) teacher assigned curriculum tasks, and (c) child initiated curriculum tasks that occur under less supervision from the teacher, but usually maintain the intended curriculum activity and may include other children. Once the site for filming was chosen which gave a good view of child initiated tasks, peer interaction and children's participation were observed using a video recording for five weekly morning sessions. These included mathematics, writing and reading sessions. The classroom teacher was a new entrant teacher who also had responsibility for the junior teacher syndicate and had been at the school for over 14 years. Sometimes there was a teacher aide in the classroom who assisted with small group work.

There were 22 children in the classroom at the start of the term two video observations; 12 of whom were European, seven Maori, one Cook Islands, one Chinese and one Indian. When the video observations started in the third term, there were 25 children in the class and no new entrants came into the class that term. All the children stayed as members of the classroom after settling in during their respective first few weeks and up to two full terms at school. They ranged in age from 5 years 3 months to 5 years 7 months. The majority of children had previously attended a formal early childhood education programme. Their oral language age ranged from 3.1 to 7.7 years on the listening comprehension test (retelling task) from the School Entry Assessment (Learning Media, 1998).

Ethical Considerations

As part of the consent procedures that were followed, parents/caregivers of the children were consulted regarding any questions about the project. Setting observations in the classroom where the children were to be filmed were done in term two (week 5-6). These observations gave descriptions of the formal and also informal aspects of the programme, such as when large group and small group activities occurred and also when and where the usual curriculum activities happened. This helped to establish not only the context of these activities, but also the best position for the camera to record these events in the classroom in the main phase of the study. It was a time for the children to familiarise themselves with the researcher's presence in the classroom and answer any questions they might have. During week six, three new entrants started in the class, which made it possible to observe them as they started school. This helped to give some background to the class in this early stage of transition before video observation began the following term. The researcher had some knowledge of the school through previous practicum supervision of students, but had no prior contact with the classroom teacher before she was interviewed for the preliminary study about teacher beliefs regarding transition to school, which is not the focus of this discussion. The children who are referred to in the case study descriptions have been given pseudonyms in order to protect their identity.

Data Gathering and Analysis

Four children (2 boys and 2 girls) were selected by the researcher in order to provide a 'snapshot' of the class at that time, with three children having started school in the first term who were Mere, Kingi and Elena, who started toward the end of the term. The other child, Toby, started during the second term. One child was observed in the week he started school in term two during the preliminary (setting) observations to determine the best site to do the classroom filming. Two of the children were Maori and two were European, which were the two main ethnic groups in the class. The researcher also chose 'target children' so that that they and the children surrounding them could be more easily filmed from the range of view towards the back of the classroom as they moved from activity to activity. This allowed the researcher to have at least one of the four children in view and within sound range during these activity sessions.

The three main categories of joining, maintaining and excluding used in the analysis of peer interaction were derived from the categories developed by the researcher and colleagues in an earlier study (Jones-Parry, Hagan, & Anderson, 2000). These three main categories were further expanded with the use of Verba's (1994) categories of collaboration in peer interaction (see Table 1).

TABLE 1: Categories of Collaboration

Category	Sub-Category	Definition
Joining	Joint interest	- in partners object or action
	Repetition of (partner's) action	- with same object or strategies
	Social bond	- reciprocal attention, establishing or sustaining interaction, showing of joint pleasure
Maintaining (receiving)	Information gathering	- observation of partners activity, request for information
	Request for help	- appeal to partner
	Expression of ideas	-information, clarification, questioning
Maintaining (guiding)	Involvement	- directing partners attention
	Facilitation	- helping partner reach goal (demonstrating, correcting, suggesting)
	Feedback	- giving feedback
Exclusion	Conflicting action	- opposition or 'off task' behaviour
	Aggression	- verbal or physical

The categories of collaboration between groups of children in the classroom were then coded from the video transcript for the three final days that included morning mathematics, writing and reading sessions. This helped the researcher to gain an understanding of the extensiveness of peer interaction and also the quality of that interaction, as each interaction was rated as positive or negative in relation to the child's intent to participate. A reliability check for the analysis of peer interaction using the above categories was completed. Independent analysis from another researcher was compared to the original analysis for approximately 10% of the total tape time in the classroom. Overall, the check showed that the categories used for instances of collaboration and the definitions for coding were reliable, and could consistently infer the intent of the child's action or verbal utterance.

Profiles from the four target children provided detailed case studies which gave a more descriptive and qualitative account of their adjustment to school, as well as providing data to interpret individual strategies used by the children in their attempts at collaboration. These case studies centred on the child's experience, both from the analysis of observations of participation that provided a more intensive insight into the enacted curriculum, especially since much of the peer interaction occurred in 'small group' tasks. At the end of the video filming, selected episodes of video were shown to the classroom teacher in order to provide analysis of these sessions from a teacher perspective.

Findings

The patterns in the language use and actions of the four children around collaboration showed that they had developed strategies that could be described as a 'new discourse' that related to the activities at hand. The categories of collaboration observed between the target children and their peers usefully described their developing participation. The meanings that are created between the child, peers and teacher develop in their interaction, which is about the 'activity' of language (Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001).

Different curriculum activities fostered different participation strategies. During reading activities, for example, the children had a greater opportunity to use a wider range of strategies, especially involvement, facilitation and giving feedback. This can also be explained by the high numbers of joint activity tasks in reading, possibly as a result of

having five different ability-based reading groups and using rotating activities. This teacher management of peer interaction strategy of ability grouping in reading tasks, reported elsewhere (Wilkinson, Parr, Fung, Hattie, & Townsend, 2002), may encourage more collaborative participation in small group work. From this perspective, successful adjustment becomes not only a 'mediating' process between the teacher and the new entrant, but also between the child and peers in terms of social participation. There is also a mediation of curricular 'space' or alternative discourse (Bernstein, 2000) that links the way in which children participate in activities relating to their social relationships and cultural tools and traditions.

Snapshots of Collaboration and Participation

Analysis of the systematic observations of more informal (small group) activities, showing what categories of collaboration children used, helped to develop a clearer understanding of each child's developing strategies. The categories related to whether the child joined in, maintained, was excluded or acted to exclude others in the activities relating to reading, writing and mathematics during the sessions observed over the term.

Kingi and Toby, overall, used more joining strategies (joint interest and repetition of action) than maintaining ones, except for Toby's high use of feedback. Toby's range of strategies of collaboration was broader than Kingi's, showing he was developing confidence in participation, especially during most maths and reading activities. For example, given the opportunity, he introduced new rules into a game. During writing time, his conflicting actions were higher, possibly because activities that were more self-directed were a challenge to him.

An example of Kingi's joining strategy was during the individual blackboard addition activity where he was counting aloud, sometimes using his fingers. When he found he 'ran out of fingers' to use in adding up, he observed Mere using counters to make up the numbers for adding, and joined in sorting them out alongside her. He later picked up that the counters were the best way to do addition, and commented to another child that she was not allowed to use fingers for counting. Kingi produced very few conflicting actions, and another often used maintaining strategy for him was involvement, or directing a partner's attention to him or the task. This response brought a group made up of the four target children back on track during an addition/subtraction game, which involved playing with a large dice on the floor. They moved from the teacher instruction to do subtraction, taking turns rolling the dice, to an addition activity, and then Elena withdrew her hands up the sleeves of her long sleeved sweater and leaned over to Mere making noises like an elephant. The children laughed.

> Elena: I've got no arms, I've got no arms. (leans over Mere making elephant sounds)
>
> Mere: Yes, you have.
>
> Elena: That's my head and my legs. (play acting continues)
>
> Kingi (leans over and says): You've got zero arms!

When viewing this later, the teacher at first saw Elena's behaviour as 'off task', especially considering she was giving directions to the group previously with Mere at her side, and only wanted to do addition, not subtraction with the dice. The teacher's view of this changed somewhat when she heard Kingi's "useful comment" about 'zero arms', as she said zero is a difficult concept.

Mere, however, used a broader range of strategies, and began to use the language of scaffolding to guide others, but often got frustrated when there was a lack of reciprocity with others, which was compounded by vision and hearing difficulties. She struggled initially learning the card game of 'memory' even when the teacher gave her some help, but toward the end of the filmed sessions, she was using more maintaining strategies such as expression of ideas and feedback.

> Boy: That one. (pointing to a far card)
>
> Mere: Yeah. (it matches, the next two don't match, and her partner picks another two matches, and so on, then Mere has a set that doesn't match)
>
> Mere: That's not a bear? (her partner turns over a card Mere has just used and matches it)
>
> Mere: Oh, you're thinking. (claps her hands, and then her partner fails this time)
>
> Mere: Oh, lucky, lucky. (claps her hands again)

She is modelling the instructional language of the teacher and also developing skills of interaction.

Teacher Reflections on Taped Sessions

At the end of the video filming, selected episodes of video were shown to the classroom teacher in order to provide analysis of these sessions from a teacher perspective. One of the main themes that became apparent from these discussions with the teacher was her own enhanced awareness of peers as 'scaffolders'. This was evident in her feedback, after viewing the selected sessions, which either supported or discounted her views of the role each child plays in developing participation in the classroom. Another interesting aspect discussed was her view of 'bending the rules' for small group activities that the children engaged in, which was usually coded as 'conflicting action' in the observations. There was some discussion around 'bending the rules' during the reading activities tasks, such as reading poem cards, for example. She was upset the children were not even reading the poems, but were making up their own words after they had read them together previously. This she saw as off task behaviour, but she was unable to get them back on task since she had five or more reading groups to attend to and could not watch them all the time. However, by the end of the term after the observations had finished, she said they are actually coming to read the task board now, and it didn't throw them when there was a new one. This may have occurred because of the evaluations and feedback she gave after each session that helped to improve their performance.

The teacher decided to substitute a child with a 'better' or more suitable model of peer collaboration in a paired writing activity as a result of viewing the sessions on tape. She was also pleased to find that a child whom she previously had not seen show any leadership skills, was able to demonstrate leadership when given an opportunity to work with a new child in the classroom. These insights came about through access to classroom episodes that were more child-directed and further away from her gaze, opening up alternative ways to view the children's discourse.

Discussion and Conclusion

The discussion with the teacher around what is 'bending the rules' proved interesting, as this became the area where 'negotiation' of what behaviour is expected in different classroom

activities, and sometimes between peers as well, was not often in agreement with teacher intentions. Children's instances of face-to-face discussion with the teacher or teacher aide about tasks were limited to times when she worked either individually or with small groups. This meant the informal or 'unofficial curriculum' negotiation had not only teacher input, but was often agreed upon with peers. Knowledge of how important peers are in negotiating curriculum is often not acknowledged by teachers. The joining and maintaining strategies the children exhibited in their activities can be seen as 'cultural repertoires' (Rogoff, 2003) or dispositions that facilitate participation and ultimately success in tasks in the classroom. For some children, Toby being a good example, the limited opportunity for adult direction/discussion that is a fact of life in a classroom of 22 children often hindered his confidence and ability to develop successful strategies in daily tasks. As a consequence he often sought attention through opposing actions. It cannot be assumed these interactions were all negative, however, since they sometimes resulted in the development of self-motivation and the internalising of classroom routines, especially in more self directed activities such as writing that require children to work more independently.

Participation and Successful Strategies

The focus of the children's social participation and peer scaffolding in this study at the small group level does support the importance of the effects of peer interaction observed in the development of collaborative skills in the classroom (Nuthall, 1999; Wilkinson et al., 2002). This was validated by the teacher's comment about the class developing a good 'grounding' by the end of the term, and that peers and the teacher were negotiating the ways of participation in class activities. Her comments and the data collected in the classroom help to delineate the main aspects of collaboration that the children in the classroom were developing as far as successful participation is concerned.

These single case studies show the categories of action that describe children's developing patterns of collaboration. Activities that promote classroom collaboration in reading and maths, for example, help to not only provide opportunities for socialisation and problem solving, but also provide curriculum spaces to help children engage with these activities. In general, the broader the range of strategies that a child has available for them to use, the greater the transformative effect for them in regards to participation. These repertoires of strategies develop with practice and support, and opportunities for their development are facilitated by teachers and other children in the classroom. Claxton and Carr (2004) suggest the concept of a 'learning curriculum' which can strengthen valued student responses to learning opportunities. The dimensions in such a curriculum include increasing the frequency and robustness, and also deepening the complexity and competence of, valued responses to learning opportunities. The teacher can foster broadening repertoires of participation by creating "potentiating learning environments (where) teachers explain, orchestrate, commentate on and model learning responses, and frequently the children do too" (p. 95). Mere's demonstration of maintaining strategies that promoted quality interactions and learning to play the card game 'memory' was a result of the teacher modelling learning responses, and a good example of this was her comment "oh, you're thinking" to the boy. Kingi's comment "you've got zero arms" also gave direction to the group at the right time and gave an indication of the importance of reciprocal learning strategies.

Teachers need to consider ways to alter the structuring of activities to promote these forms of collaboration that are most useful for the child in their adjustment to school. This involves a deeper understanding of children's worlds from a perspective of them as capable and confident learners. Even though there are different views and perspectives that come from

listening to children, their collaboration can add richness to interactions and to curriculum, especially where children and adults are respected as important participants (Dockett & Perry, 2005). Fostering children's dexterity in choosing strategies that develop participation with peers has lifelong implications in promoting successful relationships both in the classroom and communities in which they live.

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