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Beyond 'hearing the child's voice': (the challenge of) making visible children's agency within an early years educational setting.

Jane Waters, Trisha Maynard

Swansea University, Swansea, Wales, United Kingdom

Background

Within the field of education participation and hearing the child's voice is encouraged, but despite this, within mainstream accounts of pedagogy there is minimal recognition of the agency of the child. This paper explores this omission in relation to empirical work for a doctoral thesis focusing on child: adult interaction within the early years. The grounded approach to data analysis allowed the agency of the child within such interaction to become visible and the findings demonstrate how children in one setting enact their agency to shape, direct and control some aspects of child: adult talk.

Research Questions

This paper reports on the analysis of empirical data that recorded all the child: teacher interactions taking place during an outdoor learning project with 3-7 year olds over the course of one academic year. The doctoral study for which this data was collected sought to explore the nature of child initiated interaction in the indoor and outdoor spaces of one early years setting, and to consider the contribution of the environment to these interactions. The grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Charmaz 2000) to data analysis involved coding of child-initiated episodes in terms of initiation type, content and subsequent moves within the episode. This allowed the ways in which the children enacted their agency during the interaction to become visible. The paper identifies a number of specific interactional moves that, once recognised, allow the agency of the child to become not only visible in data transcript but also prominent in the narration of interaction events.

Methods

There are a number of discourses at work within current conceptions of early childhood education in the UK. Concepts common within the field of the 'new sociology of childhood' (Corsaro 1997) are becoming more prevalent within the academic literature (e.g. Papatheodorou and Moyles 2009). Alongside this is an increasing consideration of the ways in which the rights of the young child may be established within early years educational practice, both at a theoretical level (e.g. Moss 2007, Alderson 1994) and a practical level (e.g. Clarke and Moss 2001). However, psychological child development theories maintain a dominant position within Western schooling (Wyness 2006). The constructs of childhood associated with such discourses may be seen as antagonistic: the 'new' child, a capable rights-bearer being at odds with the 'developing', normalised psychological child.

Pedagogy and curriculum content in current provision may reflect this tension. For example, the early years curriculum in Wales seeks to place the well-being of the child at its heart, reflecting some of the influences of the new sociology of childhood and the focus on the child as rights bearer. Curriculum content and assessment requirements (pre-determined outcomes) however, reflect underlying concerns about young children being ready for their next stage of education and prepared for their future as citizens. A balance of child- and adult-led activity is required (DCELLS 2008) - in order to value the interests of the child and yet ensure that appropriate curricular content is covered. A focus on children's play that can be 'enhanced' by the adult as a route to learning may be similarly viewed as an approach that sits uneasily between two opposing positions.

What is not so visible within current dominant educational discourse is the agency of the child. Important as a concept in the relatively new field of childhood studies, agency is the idea that 'children can be seen as independent **social actors**' (James and James 2008 p.9 original emphasis), having

the capacity 'to make choices about the things they do and to express their own ideas' and the ability 'to have some control over the direction their own lives take' (ibid.).

Frame

Wyness (2006) suggests that the omission of the agency of the child is attributable to theoretical constructs that dominate understandings about child development and socialisation (Corsaro 1997). These constructs have been dependant upon a model of the child as deficient of adult characteristics (James, Jenks and Prout 1998), or of 'childhood as a deficit model of personhood' (Wyness 2006, p.46). Wyness (2006) suggests that this deficit model has remained dominant in part because 'adults have resisted the notion that children themselves are social agents' (p.85). This idea is supported here and it is argued that the implications of the 'new' sociological ideas have yet to permeate into mainstream educational discourse and educational research. Indeed it is suggested that the dominant discourses of early years education in the UK, while superficially calling for attention to the ideas associated with the new sociology of childhood (children as citizens, rights holders and participants) may be so steeped in the notions of the child as deficient that opportunities for recognising children's agency may be missed.

Research findings

The educational effectiveness of specific episodes of interaction - 'sustained shared thinking' (Sylva et al. 2003) in particular - has been the focus of a considerable body of recent academic literature (e.g. Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002, Siraj-Blatchford 2009, Wood 2007). It is suggested here that this - and related - literature may not fully address or represent adequately the agency of the child within such interaction episodes. This paper reconsiders transcripts from published material concerning 'sustained shared thinking' in the light of the reported findings above. Viewing the transcripts in this way demonstrates that the child is a competent social actor and challenges the academic and practice communities to confront the lack of recognition of child agency that currently exists.

This study has risen to the challenge set out by Prout (2000) and articulated thus by Wyness: 'rather than romanticising child agency [being seen to 'hear' the voice of the child but doing little with this], we need to start from the basic assumption that children are of the social world and are, in a number of complex and not always readily visible ways, socially competent' (2006 p.237). The findings demonstrate that not only are children competent social actors per se but that their agency can be a powerful determinant of the direction, content and flow of child: adult interaction.