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Looking within to build strong foundations of personhood: The importance of Early Years Teacher's Reflective Practice in the formation of a positive sense of identity in the children they work with

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LOOKING WITHIN TO BUILD STRONG FOUNDATIONS OF PERSONHOOD: THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY YEARS TEACHER'S REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN THE FORMATION OF A POSITIVE SENSE OF IDENTITY IN THE CHILDREN THEY WORK WITH.

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Abstract

A collaborative research project between the Schools of Education at the University of Notre Dame Australia and the University of Western Australia has produced data that looks at how the Australian Early Years Framework is experienced in practice within Schools that deliver programmes for two year old children in the Perth Metropolitan area of Western Australia.

The data of this project was analysed and prepared for academic journal publication using the very themes upon which the AEYLF is built; Identity, Connection to the world, Wellbeing, Confident Learning and Effective Communication. Papers presenting the data within these themes are a central outcome of the collaboration and are currently in progress.

The paper which deals with the issue of identity formation within the two year old participants leaves the question of the importance of reflective practice wide open for debate and analysis. As such, this additional paper examines the relationship between a teacher's reflective practice and the formation of a positive sense of self-identity in the toddlers they work with.

The concept of identity formation and the pertinent role of the teacher are examined. The importance of reflective practice in establishing both the teacher's awareness of identity formation, and their attentiveness to their own role within the very nuanced variations of it that can unfold for children, as they develop a sense of self in partnership with the influential adults in their lives. The teacher's role is critical within this exchange and their engagement with reflective practice is essential to ensure the most positive outcomes for the children they work with.

Keywords: Identity, Reflective Practice, Early Childhood Education, Australian, Early Year's Learning Framework.

1   BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A collaborative research project between the Schools of Education at The University of Notre Dame, Australia and The University of Western Australia has produced data that looks at how the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (AEYLF) is experienced in practice within schools that deliver programmes for two year old children in the Perth metropolitan area of Western Australia. Five papers presenting the data across the five themes upon which the AEYLF is built are currently in process; these are identity, connection to the world, wellbeing, confident learning and effective communication. The data and analysis of the Identity theme opened up a further opportunity for additional discussion on the role that reflective practice could play in supporting children and teachers in the co-construction of a positive identify.

1.1 Methodology

Each school in the Perth metro area with a service for children aged two was visited for a full day of observation by two researchers, twice; amounting to approximately 32 hours of observation per school. Each researcher used an observational frame aligned to one of the five AEYLF themes of the study. These themes encompass identity, wellbeing, connection and contribution to the world, confident involved learning and effective communication.

During the observational visits, the researchers focused on the environment and the interaction between the lead teacher and the child/ren (where consent has been provided) within the contextual frame of a particular AEYLF theme.

The data was examined to identify a range of ways in which the outcomes of the AEYLF are evidenced in school-based child care settings. All data was coded for instances in which the interactions of the lead teacher contribute to the development of each of the five outcomes. Narrative accounts (vignettes) were created to depict and illustrate the range of ways lead teachers interact with children to develop the key AEYLF outcomes.

The study was situated in the interpretivist paradigm and seeks to understand the meaning that lead teachers in school-based care centres in metropolitan WA make of their world, through their beliefs, values, and behaviours. As such, the research is positioned in the narrative inquiry tradition, bearing in mind the debate about data representation in educational research (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Richardson, 1994). The writing and study of narratives is acknowledged as a theoretical and analytical tool to aid understanding complex issues of human behaviour and as such is an effective means of showing, in an integrated way, the complexity and context of human action and interaction (Wildy & Clarke, 2008a; Wildy & Louden, 2000). Narrative accounts are viewed within this tradition as creative reconstructions of information from observations. For the purposes of this study they were written in the first person from the perspective of the child, with a title, a theme, and some dramatic action over time (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991). The action is set in a context of the school-based care classroom and imbued with the emotion – feelings, attitudes, moods interpreted by the narrator.

As previously stated, the data itself as represented by distinct narratives is presented within a series of journal articles currently being prepared for print within peer reviewed journals. However, one central aspect of the analysis of the data through the lens of identity formation (a single theme of the five themed study) illuminated the importance of reflective practice as a key instrument of quality. This illumination provides both the context and the rationale of this paper.

2 UNDERSTANDING REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Reflective Practice is contemporarily defined as the ability to purposefully and deliberately think about our actions as teachers in order to improve our professional engagement and patterns (Sellars, 2014). As a concept, however, its roots within education are over a century old. John Dewey (1933) is often credited with developing the concept of reflective practice in education and Donald A. Sch*ön* (1983, 1987) is credited with coining the *reflective practice* phrase, however Rudolf Steiner's (1894) was the first educationalist to call on teachers to engage in reflective practice as an essential element of their pedagogy. He called reflective practice *thinking about thinking*. He placed great emphasis on a teacher's ability to reflect on their thoughts and reactions and consider how they perceive their own pedagogy

Steiner and Dewey's concept of reflective practice respects the child as a learner and respects their right to a mindful teacher. Donald A Schön popularised Dewey's theories in his pedagogy publications (1983, 1987) centering reflective practice as a key teacher competence. He suggests that reflection is the means by which teachers can avoid automation and disengagement. Schön theorised two methods: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action.

Reflection-in-action allows a teacher to reflect on the job, engaging their knowledge and experience to assess themselves, the situation and the possible ways of reacting. In these instances, the teacher can experiment with various potential solutions, gaining a new understanding of the circumstance while modifying that circumstance and also keeping their classroom a holistically supporting place. Reflection-on-action happens after an activity or maybe after the day's work. It can involves keeping a practice journal or discussing practice issues with colleagues. Reflecting-on-action is about exploring our motivations, other's responses to our actions, our reactions, feelings and our pre-programmed thought processes. Through reflective practice, the teacher develops questions and ideas about their practice that helps inform future situations in a proactive way.

Reflective practice is good for teachers; it is a form of self-development. It breeds awareness and attentiveness in the classroom and in life. As experience develops practice, so too does reflection. It helps the teacher to store experience in a more meaningful and engaged way. They can draw on their reflective bank throughout their career. Through the process, the teacher makes explicit their own thinking processes, clarifies it for themselves, and within their practice, both of which positively effects the children through the freeing up of tired responses to become fresh and clarified through reflection.

Brookfield (1995) maintains that uncritical and unreflective practice leads to feelings of frustration. He encourages critical reflection, as a means of informing actions, developing a rationale for practice, and avoiding self-criticism of a destructive type. He believes that critical reflection on practice grounds the teacher emotionally which leads to more balanced and happier classrooms where the identity of children can flourish.

Not all reflection is critical, there is also technical or pragmatic reflection, both of which can be useful. Reflection becomes critical if the teacher explores the assumptions that they carry around or take for granted. As people, we are defined by our assumptions and beliefs. They shape us and give us meaning and purpose. Brookfield theorises that we instinctively resist awareness of our assumptions, and it requires courage for teachers to critically reflect on the hidden dimensions of how they practice and become more aware of their pedagogy as a result.

Moon (2004) promotes the constructivist theory of learning as flexible and interactive by nature and purports that change is always possible within learning through reflection. The constructivist perspective espouses the principle of subjectivity in all things. In other words, there are always multiple perspectives. As teachers we operate within frames of reference which influence not only what we take from the world by way of experience but also how we internally assemble our experiences. In this way, new learning is possible even when the external experience is repeated, through adjustments to the internal perspective. Adjustments to the internal perspective are achieved through reflective practice which allows the teacher to grow as a person and thereby engage more meaningfully with the children and with their pedagogy. This cognitive housekeeping (2004) is Moon's take on reflective practice and she reiterates what other writers have also found- that reflection is the key to self-awareness and self-awareness is the key to a mindful, present and engaging pedagogy.

3   IDENTITY FORMATION

Young children are constantly forming a sense of self in active partnership with those around them (Gergen 1993). Identity formation, like much early learning, is socially based. Toddlers read intention in others (Meltzoff, 1995); focus on others, display joint attention (Bruner 1991) and engage in social referencing on a regular basis; all of which contributes to their evolving concept of themselves (Gergen 1993).

The relationship therefore, that a child has with their teacher is of pivotal importance in this process. Where children spend their day feeling secure and valued, they grow and develop a sense of themselves as valued, worthy of value and empowered within that value. This is the baseline of confidence and self-belief. A sense of security and identity, ability to read social cues, to understand and interpret the behaviours of others is facilitated through Early Childhood interactions (Vygotsky 1976). Vygotsky (1976) and Bruner's (1991) work showed us that through social interaction, children are responsive in managing relationships and reactions and come to understand themselves and their world within a social collaboration of identity formation and evolution.

John Locke's position on Identity considers it to be a matter of psychological continuity (1975). Under this definition, a new sense of self evolves from the previous one with every new experience. In this way, viewing identity formation through a convergence of Vygotskian and Lockian philosophy allows us to see it as a process of personal change where our self of personhood is incrementally influenced by those around us and the experiences we have within our perception of how others interact with us.

Gergen (1993) in a famous study on self and identity describes a process whereby people create a link between what they think of as themselves across an identity triad of past, present and future. Adults can bring a consciousness to this process that defies the childhood practice of simply being without recourse to self-analysis. These self-concept studies show us that people's sense of self is particularly fluid after a change in circumstances (Gergen 1993). People who are facing change look to others to help them to create new meanings. This adult based social interactionism as a medium of evolving personal identity is understandable when we consider that change can bring an uncertainty that makes us question existing assumptions about ourselves and we reach out to others in an attempt to bring new understandings into balance.

This process is also pertinent to the identity formation of a young child. It is perhaps even more potent for them as their baseline for an existing sense of self is naturally more vulnerable by the nature of its more limited time in existence. Meanings are created through experience and emotion, as lived in the context of everyday social interaction. Positive and nurturing interactions lead to positive identity formation. This is particularly important within the micro and macro times of change that affect children's lives. We tend to remember to be gentle and loving at times of immense change such as divorce, death, the birth of siblings; but perhaps less aware of the smaller changes that also awaken vulnerability within young children. For example, morning drop off to childcare and the necessary separation from a loving parent; nap times; peer altercations; changes in teacher rosters and others.

4 EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT. RELATIONSHIPS AND TEACHER INTERACTION

The relationship that a child has with his or her teacher, therefore has an immense impact on the child and on their evolving identity. Where a positive connection brings positive outcomes for the child (Libbey 2004; Roorda et al 2011; Runco 2012, 2013; Keddie and Churchill 2005; Cornelius-White 2007) conversely, negativity within this pivotal relationship becomes an obstacle to the child's developmental journey. (Cornelius-White 2007; O'Connor 2015).

Children, like all people, are emotional beings. They often experience and communicate their emotions openly. This is especially so in the early years before social conditioning has equipped them with the ability to place social harmony above emotional honesty. Sometimes they find the morning drop off an emotional experience, the teacher's response to these feelings is critical. It can enhance or debilitate a child's developing emotional processing abilities and ultimately influence their evolving sense of self. The motivation for this paper arose from an observation of children experiencing difficulties with their emotions during morning drop off.

The observation occurred within the same childcare facility and involved the same teacher in each instance. Two children, coded as Evelinia and Wexton both experienced anxiety as their mother left. Both expressed this anxiety loudly through crying and visibly upset communications. The teacher gave a pitch perfect response to Evelinea's emotions; affirming them, affirming her right to have them and supporting her understanding of the situation while offering comfort.

With Wexton, the same teacher offered annoyance and belittlement, undermining his emotions and drawing attention to his perceived inability to control them. It was clear that the same behaviour from two different children evoked a very different response and that this response was linked to the differences in relationship between the teacher and each of these children. The relationship with Evelinia was evidently positive and the relationship with Wexton was evidently problematic. This observation serves to illuminate the importance of the relationship between teacher and child. It was clear during these observations that the teacher liked Evelinea and found Wexton wearisome. Unfortunately the impact of the teacher's feeling towards the children resulted in drastically different outcomes for each child's evolving identity. Evelinia left the exchange with a sense that she was a rational person with appropriate emotions and the skills to work them through to a positive outcome.

Wexton on the other hand, was left with a sense of self that incorporated selfishness, disproportionate emotions, unjustified reactions and an inability to control, influence or contribute to outcomes.

What Evelinia and Wexton both experienced was cognitive development influenced by social interaction. De Lisi et al (1999) applied Piaget's theory of cognitive development to relational interactions and found that positive and negative cognitive change is brought about through shared experience. In seeking to understand this further they compared the process of cognitive change within both individual and social engagement and found that the growth was much more dramatic within social interactions. In essence, we are social beings and our relationship with significant others plays a massive role within our self-development. The reactions, interactions and communications of the people around us therefore, directly impacts on our developing cognition; including our cognition around identity and the self.

Osterman (2000) found that being with people who helped them to feel accepted greatly improved children's development across many spheres. Children have a deep psychological need for a sense of belonging and the development of a sense of belonging and acceptance leads to behaviour that results in a more positive sense of self and personal identity as well as greater overall well-being (Osterman 2000).

A sense of belonging and a strong sense of identity is very grounding for any child. This is just as important in an educational setting as in the child's home. A child who is supported to feel accepted grows into a stronger and more assured identity (O'Connor, 2015). The connection that a child experiences is something that a good teacher should be aware of and actively seek to support through attentiveness, reflection and positive action. Part of this requires a self-awareness on their part about how their own relationship with individual children shapes their communication and therefore the child's social experience.

Good teachers; those who adopt an attentive pedagogy informed by reflection and support the child by encouraging a positive relationship between themselves and each child and between each child and their classmates are essentially facilitating each child to develop a strong sense of self and a positive personal identity. The teacher's awareness and attitude is very important because it influences the child's belief in what he or she can achieve (Craft, Cremin, Burnard & Chappell 2007) and who he or she really is. In communicating a sense of belief in a child, liking for a child and patience with a child's emotions and pace, a teacher is facilitating the child to develop a sense of confidence in his or her ability.

In this way, a child's confidence and self-esteem evolve in tandem with their identity. This is inevitably influenced by the level of comfort and security they feel within their educational community. In turn, the level of comfort and security they feel is inevitably influenced by their relationship with their teachers. This relationship, is equally influenced by the teacher's ability to reflect on their practice, on their reactions to individual children and on their communications with them. These communications become the building blocks of how a child experiences themselves and therefore play a very important role within their evolving identity as a valued, likeable, intelligent person; or indeed within the evolution of alternative, less positive identities.

5   WHERE REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND IDENTITY FORMATION INTERSECT

If this paper's emergent theme of reflective practice was used as the basis of a pedagogical approach, a positive identity supporting teacher would emerge; this teacher would understand the importance of being aware and mindful of their own reactions in relation to individual children. They would reflect at the end of each day on their communications, emotions, tones and interactions to develop their own self-awareness of how that day was for each individual child. This reflective practice would acknowledge what he or she had brought, not just to Evelinia and Wexton's day but also to their evolving self of self and ultimately to their identity. The unreflective educator may consciously or unconsciously treat these two children in this dramatically different way on many occasions, thereby cementing a negative identity for the child with who they have a difficult relationship; in this case –

Wexton. The reflective teacher, on the other hand, would acknowledge this through their reflective practices, take measures to change it and thereby support the co-construction of a more positive identity for Wexton.

The reflective teacher would be mindful and aware of their relationship with each child. They would make efforts in the early days of the school year to establish a healthy and positive relationship with each child that is based on an appreciation of the child as an individual and seek to see their unique talents within a commitment and belief that every child has them and it is part of an teacher's job to recognise and support them.

Within daily reflections, they would recognise when this relationship has been damaged by a negative interaction and take measures to address this and mend the damage so that each child can continue to see themselves within a positive light that allows them to experience themselves as worthy, valued and esteemed. In this way the intrinsic machinations of identity are enmeshed in the social experiences of the child. These social experiences are laden with their interpretation of the self as seen through the eyes of the other. Teachers need to be aware that young children's evolving identity is a delicate and vulnerable thing. Their reflection on their contribution to the positivity of the interaction as underpinned by the relationship is pivotal.

6 CONCLUSION: ACHIEVING QUALITY REFLECTION

Every teacher will work differently on this. The results will also naturally be varied. The ability to reflect on their practice and how to improve it will be a key factor in the levels of success experienced by them in relation to the development of an identity supporting pedagogy.

As such, teachers need to be highly reflective in their practice. Reflective practice is an essential skill for supporting all forms of child development. It should be centralised within teacher and practitioner education and training programmes.

Self-reflection, reflective skills techniques and practices, commitment to reflective practice and practicing reflective practice are all key elements of educating teachers that will be equipped to support positive identities to develop within their learning environments. Becoming this type of teacher can be achieved through ongoing reflective practice as a key professional competency and commitment. This process starts with an acknowledgement that reflective practice itself is highly important in all desired outcomes for children, including such deep and important work as the co construction of identity.

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