This is the published version

Kilderry, Anna, Nolan, Andrea and Noble, Karen 2004, Multiple ways of knowing and seeing: reflections on the renewed vigour in early childhood research, Australian journal of early childhood, vol. 29, no. 2, pp. 24-28.

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MULTIPLE WAYS OF KNOWING AND SEEING:
Reflections on the renewed vigour in early childhood research

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This paper reflects on the current state of research in early childhood education and proposes that there is a renewed interest in research evident at present. Multiple perspectives of viewing early childhood are increasing, with research stretching the comfortable boundaries wider than seen before in Australia. This paper discusses how early childhood research is changing the way we consider childhood, and how its methods are now beginning to really embrace the child. Also discussed are some of the thought-provoking initiatives recently taken in such research and how the early childhood sector can benefit from its richness.

Introduction

Back in 1994, Rodd stated that research is necessary for advancing knowledge and stimulating a change in practitioners' and policy-makers' attitudes, which are essential ingredients for the healthy growth of the early childhood sector. We propose that at present there is a renewed enthusiasm in the field of research in early childhood education, with the potential to set future directions for such education. Even in the short time since 1994, we have seen many developments in research that are changing the way we view children, families, teachers and practice.

Some argue, however, that the nature of research in early childhood education is not in an ideal state (Woodrow & Brennan, 2001). Woodrow and Brennan (2001) claim that research in early childhood 'often suffers from a need to gain credibility by the use of outmoded methodologies or empirical work' (p. 41). One suggestion they make to help overcome this problem is for researchers to continue to interrupt and resist dominant images of children, and to take up collaborative research where ethical issues can be explored. We know that research does not provide any magical answers for the early childhood sector, but can assist in advancing knowledge, sometimes challenging one's own theoretical standpoint and helping to find new ways to view and conduct practice (Rodd, 1994). According to Lingard (2001), research in education is a 'complex, multifaceted, multidirectional

phenomenon; it is most certainly not simply a one-directional and straightforward research findings-practice relationship' (p. 4). Given the complexity and the evolving nature of early childhood education, it may be asked, 'What are the new directions?'.

A new era: Room for multiple views
The notion of childhood

Embracing new ways of viewing the child is important in the renewal process. The 'history of childhood', along with other factors concerning the way society conceptualises infants and young children, influences how we define early childhood and early childhood education. The view of the child is at the core of what early childhood workers do professionally, and therefore we are asked to consider our image of the child (Page & Hammer, 2003). Fortunately, much discussion has taken place about the notion of the child in recent years (Cannella, 1997; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001a; Woodrow, 1999). Woodhead (1997) contends that Western perspectives have assumed that children are vulnerable and need adult care during childhood. This view that a child needs protection renders the child as powerless in comparison to an adult. Power relationships are illustrated with the formation of a specific view of childhood which is then used to determine what is best for children (Cannella, 1997). Dockett and Fleer (1998) suggest that a direct consequence of this is 'the ways in which adults

determine what it is that children need to know and then set out to meet these learning needs' (p. 109).

This is the role that early childhood professionals undertake as they try to plan a curriculum that meets the educational and care needs of young children. Decisions are taken which determine what is appropriate for these children to learn, assuming that 'they do not know enough, that they are not yet competent to make decisions for themselves' (Cannella, 1997, p. 6). In 1997, Steinberg and Kincheloe took up the theme of a changing childhood, stating 'new times have ushered in a new era of childhood' (p. 1). They base their statement on the fact that, because of changing economic realities and children's access to information about the adult world, childhood has dramatically changed. Woodrow (1999) questions whether we should talk about the child as one homogenised group at all, and more recently Moss (2002) asks if it is time to say goodbye to the concept of early childhood itself. He claims that 'the time may have come for adopting a broader perspective than early childhood, looking across childhood, or even sometimes across the life course...' (p. 435). These questions challenge our conceptions of childhood, leaving the discussion open for theoretical change.

Teachers and practitioners in the early childhood sector have expressed their need to have local evidence-based research to support their pedagogical practices (Fleer, 2000). We argue that this is beginning to happen, that there is a renewed vigour in early childhood research at present. For example, such excellent publications as those produced by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA), a series of research reports conducted by Fleer (2000), Yelland (2001) and Raban (2000), have contributed greatly to the early childhood collective knowledge base. Through the vision of DETYA's fellowship scheme these reports in the areas of literacy, numeracy, and the research agenda for early childhood assist in progressing practice and policy. It is collaborative studies such as these that generate much needed discussion about pedagogical practices in early childhood. Although the DETYA research reports have added to our collective knowledge base, questions such as 'Where does the child fit within the research agenda?' are being asked.

Embracing the child in research

New ways of researching *with* children are being explored within the early childhood education sector,

taking the position which views very young children as competent beings able to contribute to some of the research processes (Krieg, 2003; MacNaughton, 2003; Robbins, 2003; Sumsion, 2003; Woodrow, 1999). Jipson (2000), on the issue of the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the researched, considers how children can contribute to the making of meaning within educational research. Jipson (2000) raises poignant ethical and moral questions such as 'How has our research been constructed and how can it be reorganized or reformulated into analytic existence that acknowledges the co-participation of children in its process, including the process of representation?' (p. 175). Robbins (2003) has taken a sociocultural perspective when researching with young children, and recognises children as competent participants. Robbins talks about researching *with* children rather than researching *on* children. It is this shift in thinking that leads to questions about 'the status of pedagogic, representational, and research authority' (Jipson, 2000, p. 175). This transformation is not only changing the nature of our discussions about educational research in early childhood, but is also changing the positioning of such research. This reconceptualised view of early childhood research has the potential to change the way research looks, where *children* can benefit from being part of the process and can tell their own story (Krieg, 2003). Perhaps it is a way of devising a more relevant curriculum that becomes 'grounded in the reality of children's understanding' (Page & Hammer, 2003).

Practitioners and researchers who advocate for young children and their families also need to find new ways of communicating their commitment within the wider spectrum of early childhood. A new approach is needed whereby specialised knowledge about the child is communicated, while at the same time embracing other theoretical and critical perspectives, such as the work by Raban, Ure and Waniganayake (2003) that sets out to help practitioners develop a clearer understanding of their work with children, families and the community. It is felt that, by gaining a better understanding, early childhood professionals will be empowered to make advancements in professional, educational and service provisions.

Changes in perspectives

Not only are the research methods undergoing change, research perspectives and theoretical informants are similarly broadening and reconceptualising. Researchers such as Fleer (1995), Greishaber and Cannella (2001a),

Jipson and Johnson (2001), Robbins (2003) and Soto and Swadener (2002), amongst others, are making space for more theoretical informants than developmental theory alone. As greater attention is paid to the social constructions of childhood, it leads one away from the notion of developmental theory existing in isolation. Edwards (2000) states that, for research to really assist practice and manage the diverse contexts it attempts to inform, it has to be a complex process within itself:

> And so complex are the settings of practice that it is unlikely that one set of research lenses, whether shaped by, for example, psychology or sociology, can do justice to what expert practitioners have to take into account as they make informed judgements in practice. For research to be able to illuminate and clarify practice, it needs to be able to accommodate the complexities of practice and its contexts (Edwards, 2000, p. 186).

Early childhood settings need to be 'multifaceted, multifocal, multicultural sites that survive and thrive on multiplicity and diversity; their survival depends on vigorous discussion, debate, and argument about their moral and social purposes' (Smyth, 2001, p. 146). It is this diversity in beliefs that can help sustain a thriving diverse research culture in early childhood education.

Bridges not gaps

In recent times, researchers within the early childhood sector have begun to examine the dominant theoretical paradigms and to look at how these impact upon education and care. Traditionally, one of these has been the developmental psychology paradigm. The debate in early childhood, referred to as the DAP (Developmentally Appropriate Practice) debate (Charlesworth, 1998; Hatch et al., 2002; Lubeck, 1998), or as being DAP-centric (Fleer, 1995), has been controversial for many years now. Although this ongoing international discussion has assisted the early childhood sector by questioning the bedrock of the foundational discipline (developmental psychology) that has driven early childhood for many years as the main theoretical informant, the discussion is beginning to change in its nature. Some still argue that DAP provides a solid foundation from which early childhood practitioners and researchers can work, and they continue the discussion about the benefits of a developmental viewpoint (Hatch et al., 2002). Others argue the benefits of working outside this developmental discourse and recommend that researchers and practitioners 'pursue more personal, liberating, democratic, humanizing,

participatory, action driven, political, feminist, critically multicultural, decolorizing perspectives' (Hatch et al., 2002, p. 450) in early childhood education.

Grieshaber and Cannella (2001b) contend that there is room for more theoretical informants within the early childhood sector than developmental theory alone. But they also caution that this does not mean rejecting developmental psychology outright; they argue that a range of perspectives is required to encourage diversity in the sector. In her work, Edwards (2003) discusses the notion of practitioners 'bridging' the gap between their perceptions of developmentally appropriate practice and theory, by carefully considering the elements the teachers choose in their practice. Instead of theorising about curriculum practice from *within* the DAP discourse, or from being located exclusively *outside* DAP theory, Edwards contends that the perceived 'gap' between theory and practice can be replaced with a 'bridge'. This metaphor is significant as it has documented the way some early childhood teachers deal with the so-called theory and practice divide. These teachers ultimately have control over their programming, and acknowledge that they deliberately shape the theory to fit with their practice.

Genishi, Ryan, Oschner and Malter (2001) recently argue that research in early childhood, particularly with regard to teaching in early childhood, should include multiple perspectives to represent teachers in more expansive ways. Genishi et al. (2001) recognise the achievements of developmental theory but do 'not banish a perspective whose goals include the nurturance and education of competent and autonomous individuals' and are 'inclusive of goals other than competence and autonomy' (Genishi et al., 2001, p. 1204). One theoretical perspective compared to another just exemplifies the different values that researchers hold, and different beliefs about what counts as legitimate knowledge (Kessler & Swadener, 1992). To be caught up solely in the binaries of these discussions is potentially slowing down the research and educational possibilities within early childhood education.

Where to from here?
How to re-ignite the passion

What we can take away from these ideological debates within early childhood circles are the multifarious benefits of a diversity of belief and conviction. We enter the discussions from numerous theoretical, cultural, institutional and personal backgrounds that could help enrich the research culture in early childhood. These

different theoretical foundations should not polarise and restrict varying sectors, groups, or individuals, but rather collaborate and be a rich, complex and colourful foundation from which to theorise.

From her study, Fleer (2000) concludes that there are five main directions that early childhood educators and researchers can consider to assist in the renewal of the research culture in Australia. These are: to continue to work towards more longitudinal research, to be in a strong position with regard to the research infrastructure in early childhood, to continue to develop a cross-sector research activity, to build up the Australian-based research profile, and to re-envision the image of the early childhood professional. Lingard (2001) advocates that, as educational researchers and practitioners, we need to enhance the national research capacity and support the widest range of educational research of the highest quality if we are to move our position further.

Recent times have seen studies within Australia generating thought-provoking research (Edwards, 2003; Robbins, 2003) and new ways to involve young children in research (Krieg, 2003; MacNaughton, 2003; Sumsion, 2003). The degree to which the early childhood field is embracing new methodologies and contexts is evident in the presentations at Australian-based early childhood conferences. This is invigorating for childhood professionals and researchers and a healthy sign for the future of the early childhood field. The need now is not only to continue the work already under way but also to expand the existing research foundations and to enhance early childhood's research capacity. Another way forward is to promote what can be termed a 'culture of innovation' (Kress, in Smyth, 2001, p. 165) within the early childhood sector. One could argue that this is already happening, but too often we revert back to our overly narrow view on what early childhood should look like. Widening the range of research opens up new worlds of information that can be put to use in early childhood practice. Perhaps the days of one dominant theoretical paradigm governing research and practice are over, and practice will ultimately look and be different from that of the past.

Teaching and working with young children is political, and decisions about young children's welfare and education are being made all the time. This being the case, we want a sector that embraces diverse views. There is no need for all our research and practice to look the same. We must take the lead in curriculum

development and innovation, otherwise we face the risk of having to accept what is handed to us from those outside the early childhood field.

Conclusion

In conclusion, members of the early childhood sector cannot help but think that interesting times lay ahead. New ways of perceiving early childhood—including how we view the child, teacher, families, community, and the settings in which we work—are changing the traditional frames. As our support grows for broader agendas in early childhood research, both nationally and internationally, our research processes and practices also change. New spaces of intellectual engagement are opening up (Johnson, 2001) and allowing early childhood education research to move forward. In this new knowledge-based society (Knight, 2002) the early childhood sector needs to be cognisant of the multiple purposes, methodologies and agendas that research brings (Lingard, 2001) and be open to the multiple ways of knowing and seeing research or practice.

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