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DEVELOPING IN A NEW LANGUAGE-SPEAKING SETTING

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This study investigated the effect of English-language acquisition on the learning experiences of a four-year-old Taiwanese immigrant child in a state kindergarten in New Zealand. Data was collected through child observations and parents' and teachers' interviews. The child's learning experience was analysed based on five behaviours—'taking an interest', 'being involved', 'persisting with difficulty', 'expressing a point of view' and 'taking responsibility'—adopted from the child assessment technique of 'Learning Stories' utilised in many childcare services in New Zealand. Results suggested that, regardless of his English-language incompetence, the child demonstrated learning dispositions under two circumstances: first, there was little interaction required between him and the English-speaking children; second, there was a teacher participating in what he was doing. It is suggested that the child's learning outcomes were contingent on the situations in which he found himself.

Introduction

Many children from non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB) are attending English-speaking early childhood services in New Zealand. At a time when educational practices with young children are premised on a holistic developmental view, the English-language incompetence of NESB children is likely to constrain these practices.

The aim of this preliminary study is to provide an empirical basis on which to formulate an enquiry into whether NESB young children have difficulties developing holistically in English-speaking childcare settings. The study describes the learning experiences of a four-year-old Taiwanese immigrant boy, through child observations and parents' and teachers' interviews. The 'Learning Stories' approach introduced by Margaret Carr will be applied to assess his learning experiences (Carr, 2001). This approach is derived from *Te Whāriki*, the national early childhood curriculum of New Zealand, a document that reflects a focus on children's holistic development (Ministry of Education, 1996).

The study background

Research tells us that, in English-speaking settings, NESB children encounter a variety of learning barriers when acquiring the English language (Barnard, 2000; Okagaki & Diamond, 2000; Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000). These authors indicate that, in respect of the children themselves, these barriers are usually

generated by their personalities, social skills and communication strategies. An inadequately-structured learning environment poses another challenge. Researchers claim that, unless NESB children are provided with a friendly and enjoyable learning setting, comprehensible learning activities, developmentally appropriate language input and helpful people, learning in a new language environment is very challenging (Arnberg, 1987; Baker & Jones, 1998; Brown, 2000; Rosenberg, 1996; Tabors, 1998). In Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke's opinion, this is because NESB young children need to deal with dual tasks, 'to practise language while trying out a range of activities' (2000, p. 34).

In Tabors' study (1998), the most identifiable stumbling block in the NESB learning environment was set by NESB children's interactions with other people. A common phenomenon, as Tabors observed, is that young second-language learners displayed difficulties in interacting with others. The lack of mutual language often 'results in the [NESB] child being treated as invisible, or like a baby, by other children, leading to frustration or withdrawal' (p. 22). This phenomenon leads to a 'double bind of second-language learning' (p. 22). NESB children, being socially isolated, are obliged to face linguistic constraints. Linguistic inability, in turn, further reinforces their social isolation.

NESB children may also face barriers at certain stages of English-language acquisition. Initially, young NESB learners often demonstrate a 'continued use of the

home language in the new language context' (Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000, p. 47) because 'they have not yet discovered that there is a new language being used in this new setting' (Tabors, 1998, p. 22). Gradually, some children begin to use nonverbal responses or single words and progressively learn to use new words. Others, however, may go through 'a period of silence' (Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000, p. 47). The silent period occurs after young learners become aware of the impossibility of using the first language to make sense to the second-language speakers. 'During this period, [NESB young] children refuse to speak in English' (Clarke, 2003, p. 193). They silently internalise a second language before attempting to articulate it (Fillmore, 1976, cited in Grosjean, 1982; Quiñones-Eatman, 2001; Mitakidou-Kokonis, 1995). The length of the silent period for young NESB learners varies from a few days to a few months (Quiñones-Eatman, 2001) and they will all gradually speak in English. Given the particular characteristics of young NESB learners, especially at the stage of home language use and the silent period, they are seen as subject to some challenges, particularly in terms of socialisation.

The study

Why this study?

This study was a response to the learning needs of young NESB children. Given that the discourses surrounding this topic in New Zealand have mostly, if not all, focused on children in schools (Barnard, 2000; Brooker, 2000; Thorpe, 1988), it was necessary that this study be based in a New Zealand early childhood educational context.

The study approach

A case study was used. Following this approach, it was decided to use child observation, and parent and teacher interviews to collect data.

This preliminary study did not aim at a definitive conclusion but was intended to discover specific issues to provide some insights into similar future studies. Since a case study approach helps researchers understand the particular, but not what is generally true of many (Merriam, 1988), I believe it is appropriate for this study.

In an attempt to substantiate the descriptive nature of the case, I gathered data by directly observing the child and requesting information from his parents and teachers. The considerations which led to the adoption of observations were based on their usefulness to

generate ideas, to answer specific questions, to provide realistic pictures of behaviour or events, and to more profoundly understand children's development (Irwin & Bushnell, 1980). The use of interviews was intended to clarify any uncertainty and to alert me to any other important factors which had not been considered (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). By using these two data collection techniques, an overall description of the learning experiences of the studied child was expected to be achieved.

The participants

This study, conducted in a state kindergarten in New Zealand, involved the participation of a four-year-old Taiwanese boy, Sam, his parents and his teacher. When the study commenced, Sam had been in New Zealand for six months and in the kindergarten for three months. Sam spoke fluent Mandarin.

The reason for the selection of a child of this age is that his first language was already established. Since the study subject is a NESB child, only one who has some linguistic foundations in their first language can be classified into this group. My choice of studying a Taiwanese child was based on consideration of our common first language. Knowing the child's language would be likely to facilitate the research work.

Sam's parents came to New Zealand with him. They were both educated professionals in Taiwan, and were looking for jobs when I was doing the study.

The teacher involved in this study was the head teacher of the kindergarten. She had a degree in early childhood education and had been working in this field for 30 years at the time I conducted the study.

The procedure

Observations in the study were made over four weeks, three days a week and three hours a day, during Sam's entire kindergarten stay. Field notes were taken in the form of running records, using pen and paper. Sam and all the things that affected him in his environment were noted, including other people, objects, language, events and activities. I aimed to see how Sam managed individual learning activities and how he played with others. The time taken for different episodes was also recorded.

Semi-structured interviews with the teachers and Sam's parents were held at the beginning and conclusion of the study and were supplemented by informal interviews throughout the data collection period. Each interview lasted for about one hour. The parent

