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Early childhood teachers’ beliefs and practices related to peer learning: a mixed methods study

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education at Massey University, Manawatū, New Zealand

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Abstract

This study investigated New Zealand early childhood teachers’ beliefs and practices related to peer learning, as little is known about how teachers support peer learning in play based settings. A mixed methods exploratory sequential research design was used. The first phase of the study consisted of case studies, which comprised interviews and observations of teachers in three early childhood centres. Filmed observations of teachers’ practices as they supported opportunities for peer learning were undertaken. Stimulated recall interviews were then completed to gain a deeper understanding of teachers’ intentions about this aspect of their practice. Constant comparative analysis was used to analyse the case studies, including the use of the NVivo programme for content analysis. The second phase of the study was a nationwide survey sent to early childhood teachers. The questions for the survey were derived from analyses of the case studies and extant literature. Survey data was interpreted using descriptive statistics and coding of open ended questions. Findings from both phases were used to answer the research questions.

The study revealed teachers’ beliefs about peer learning recognised the social, participatory nature of learning, alongside provision of opportunities for individual exploration and discovery. Balancing these beliefs created a tension for teachers and at times they struggled to express their role in supporting peer learning. The need for teachers to better articulate and deepen their understanding of their role in this type of learning is implicated in these findings. This study found the early childhood setting played a critical role in mediating teachers’ practices and beliefs about peer learning. Therefore children had varied experiences of peer learning as teachers supported children’s agency amongst their peers in different ways. This finding was of concern, as teachers who work in settings that do not actively promote peer learning may not effectively support children’s potential as teachers of their peers.

Participants espoused beliefs about child-led learning, however observations revealed teachers’ intentional support of peer learning. This finding highlighted a major contradiction between teachers’ beliefs and practices whilst revealing teachers’ inability to take ownership of their intentional teaching practices. Teachers used the curriculum guidelines from Te Whāriki related to wellbeing and a sense of belonging to support peer learning; the role of children as knowledge constructors was less closely aligned with teachers’ beliefs and practices. This finding draws into question teachers’ understandings of how to implement peer learning across the curriculum.
strands whilst implying the need for further investigation about how young children’s learning is assessed.
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Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. i
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................... iii
List of Figures .................................................................................................................... ix
List of Tables ..................................................................................................................... x

Chapter One: Introduction ............................................................................................ 1
  1.1 Explanation of the research topic and rationale for the study .............................. 1
  1.2 My own experiences as a teacher and researcher .............................................. 3
  1.3 Defining key terms ............................................................................................... 3
  1.4 The context for this study in New Zealand ......................................................... 4
  1.5 Study aims and overview of the thesis ................................................................. 7

Chapter Two: Literature review .................................................................................... 9
  2.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................. 9
  2.2 Constructions of childhood ................................................................................ 10
    2.2.1 Historical perspectives .................................................................................. 10
    2.2.2 The beginnings of a philosophy of play ....................................................... 13
    2.2.3 Summary ....................................................................................................... 16
  2.3 Explanations of learning and thinking ................................................................. 17
    2.3.1 Key definitions ............................................................................................. 17
    2.3.2 Behaviourism ............................................................................................... 18
    2.3.3 Constructivism ............................................................................................. 20
      2.3.3.1 Jean Piaget ............................................................................................. 20
      2.3.3.2 The neo-Piagetians and Information processing theories ....................... 23
      2.3.3.3 Lev Vygotsky ......................................................................................... 24
      2.3.3.4 Neo-Vygotskian research and theorising ............................................. 28
      2.3.3.5 Piagetian and Vygotskian perspectives of peer learning .................... 32
    2.3.4 Summary ....................................................................................................... 34
  2.4 Peer learning .......................................................................................................... 35
    2.4.1 Key definitions ............................................................................................. 35
    2.4.2 Empirical studies of peer learning .............................................................. 36
      2.4.2.1 Peer tutoring ......................................................................................... 38
      2.4.2.2 Peer collaboration and negotiation ...................................................... 41
    2.4.3 Summary ....................................................................................................... 44
  2.5 The role of the teacher in peer learning ............................................................... 44
5.2.2 Reflecting on children’s intentions .............................................................. 148
5.2.3 Summary .................................................................................................. 149
5.3 Teachers’ strategies ...................................................................................... 150
  5.3.1 Intentionality ......................................................................................... 150
  5.3.2 Supporting group entry ........................................................................ 152
  5.3.3 Children observing their peers .............................................................. 154
  5.3.4 Promoting expertise and leadership .................................................... 155
  5.3.5 Physical positioning ............................................................................ 161
  5.3.6 Using language to support children’s group play .............................. 162
5.4 Summary ..................................................................................................... 167

Chapter Six: Survey results .............................................................................. 169
6.1 Introduction ................................................................................................ 169
6.2 Who answered the survey? ........................................................................ 170
6.3 Beliefs about children’s learning and peer learning ............................... 175
  6.3.1 Defining children’s learning and peer learning .................................. 175
  6.3.2 Influences on teachers’ beliefs and practices ...................................... 182
  6.3.3 Summary .............................................................................................. 184
6.4 Teaching practices ...................................................................................... 184
  6.4.1 Supporting children’s engagement with their peers .......................... 184
  6.4.2 Children as experts .............................................................................. 188
  6.4.3 Summary .............................................................................................. 193
6.5 Peer learning and Te Whāriki .................................................................... 193
6.6 Summary ..................................................................................................... 196

Chapter Seven: Discussion .............................................................................. 199
7.1 Introduction ................................................................................................ 199
7.2 What beliefs and knowledge do teachers have about peer learning? .......... 199
  7.2.1 Belief in the social nature of learning .................................................. 199
  7.2.2 Children learn through active exploration of their environment .......... 201
  7.2.3 Peer tutoring and peer collaboration .................................................. 203
  7.2.4 Summary .............................................................................................. 204
7.3 How do teachers form their beliefs about how children learn? ................ 205
  7.3.1 Teaching experiences in the field .......................................................... 205
  7.3.2 Communities of practice ...................................................................... 206
  7.3.3 Summary .............................................................................................. 208
7.4 What do teachers understand is their role in peer learning? .................... 208
  7.4.1 Language strategies .............................................................................. 208
List of Figures

Figure 6.1: Distribution of survey responses by service type .............................................. 171
Figure 6.2: Percentage of responses by role within early childhood centres ......................... 172
Figure 6.3: Percentage of responses by age of respondents .................................................. 173
Figure 6.4: Percentage of responses by years of teaching experience ................................. 173
Figure 6.5: Percentage of responses by summary of teaching and academic qualifications ... 174
Figure 6.6: Ranking statements about how children learn in order of importance ............... 176
Figure 6.7: Definitions of peer learning closest to respondents’ understanding of this term . 177
Figure 6.8: Defining peer learning in relation to centre/kindergarten philosophy ................. 178
Figure 6.9: Influence of teachers and peers on children’s learning .................................... 179
Figure 6.10: Statements about how children learn from their peers .................................... 180
Figure 6.11: Influences on teachers’ understandings and practices in relation to peer learning ......................................................................................................................... 183
Figure 6.12: Reasons for teachers’ involvement in group play ................................................. 185
Figure 6.13: How often teachers provide opportunities for children to adopt expert roles amongst their peers .............................................................................................................. 189
Figure 6.14: Use of teaching strategies to foster children’s expertise ..................................... 190
Figure 6.15: Teachers’ promotion of opportunities for peer learning .................................... 191
Figure 6.16: Strands within Te Whāriki that are relevant to peer learning .............................. 194
Figure 6.17: Teachers’ use of Te Whāriki programme guidelines for peer learning .............. 195
List of Tables

Table 6.1: Teaching strategies used to support peer learning ......................................................... 186