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FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD COMMUNITIES OF INQUIRY

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

Helen Dorothy Hedges
2007
Abstract

Inquiry is a fundamental human undertaking. The present study investigated interests-based curriculum and pedagogy in early childhood education, through the creation of a community of inquiry between children, teachers and a researcher. In two case study settings, it explored ways teachers and children co-construct interests-based curriculum and ways teachers might strengthen coherence between research, theory, practice and professional learning to support such curriculum construction. During year-long fieldwork, the researcher drew on participant observation techniques, interviews, documentation and co-constructed inquiry discussions as sources of data. Data analysis occurred on two levels: descriptive and theoretical. Sociocultural theory provides a foundation for the approaches to learning and teaching, inquiry, the research design and lenses of interpretation.

The study uses two frameworks to explain its findings, challenging and extending current understandings of funds of knowledge and communities of inquiry. In addition, it illuminates the concept of working theories. Discussion of the notion of evidence-informed inquiry explains some types of evidence teachers bring to the complexities of curriculum decision making as their funds of knowledge and working theories, thereby arguing against narrow interpretations of evidence-based practice.

This thesis argues that interpretation of children's interests, from a sociocultural perspective, requires a more analytical understanding of children's family and community experiences and their impact on children's inquiry, and of teacher interests and responsibilities in relation to culturally-valued knowledge. Further, the thesis contends that children's and teachers' co-constructed inquiry is dependent on reciprocal and responsive pedagogical relationships that provide meaningful responses during engagement in learning-and-teaching. Links between everyday knowledge and conceptual knowledge in children's learning may be brought together. In this way, participatory learning enables children and teachers to co-create a foundation for conceptual learning. Two inquiry continua and one model are offered to incorporate the key theoretical ideas and arguments of the thesis. It is argued that the model represents components of an interests-based sociocultural curriculum and pedagogy.
A funds of knowledge approach has the potential to transform early childhood learning-and-teaching environments, and implement partnerships with families, communities (including the research community) and cultures authentically. Implications for teaching practice, teachers' professional learning, research and policy are discussed to recognise and strengthen both an inquiry focus in pedagogical relationships, and an awareness of funds of knowledge in early childhood education contexts.
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I have no special gift. I am only passionately curious.

The important thing is not to stop questioning.

- Albert Einstein

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