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The role of peers in children's learning

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education (Early Years) at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

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Abstract

This study investigated the nature of peer learning within two early childhood centres in order to explore how children worked together collaboratively and as peer tutors. The research was framed within a post-positivist paradigm and a qualitative case study approach was adopted. The data collection methods included a series of observations of children's play, informal conversations with the children and semi structured interviews with two teachers from each early childhood centre. A research journal was kept in order to maintain critical reflection during the data collection phase. The case studies were analysed using constant comparative analysis to identify the emerging themes from within the data. The use of Rogoff's (1998) planes provided a further tool for analysis of peer learning.

The study found that young children are capable peer tutors who use a variety of strategies to work together successfully with their peers. The evidence gathered, highlighted the need for teachers to create empowering environments where children can direct their learning alongside their peers. An important finding was that routines impacted negatively on opportunities for sustained collaborative play. The study revealed the need for teachers to adopt a responsive teaching presence, interpreting their role in response to children's efforts to engage in collaborative endeavour. It is argued that teachers need to position children as experts who are capable of sharing their expertise with their peers to advance their understanding. This requires teachers to provide meaningful opportunities for children to take on teaching roles with their peers.

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