

Belonging, being and becoming: Learning within early childhood education in a remote Aboriginal community

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The preschool

The community preschool was already well equipped with a wide range of materials before it became part of our project with its generous budget for resourcing remote area preschools. Nevertheless in carrying out the project we were obliged to order in even more equipment from suppliers. In fact the storeroom became so full that in the end, the preschool teacher's office was converted as a means to fit it all in. New puzzles, building blocks, games, soft toys, painting materials and so on were added to the play space after each delivery. In this remote preschool in an Indigenous community all but two of the children are Indigenous as is the Teacher Assistant; the teacher and we project personnel are non-Indigenous.

Although cluttered, the preschool room was organised both spatially and temporally. There were defined spaces, areas with equipment that was always present in the room: a mat, bookshelf and puzzles, construction and active play area. Three or four tables were placed down the centre of the room. The day was interspersed with strictly adhered to and generally rather lengthy routines (roll call, daily prayers, teeth cleaning and combing hair, songs and movement, story time). In addition, formal activities were arranged at the tables. These were planned by the non-Indigenous preschool teacher with the aim of developing knowledge and skills that would prepare the children for school. The organisation in a preschool expresses the curriculum, and pedagogy proceeds unobtrusively through arranged material and routines.

Sometimes I wondered if the quantity of resources available, all so thoughtfully laid out to 'greet' the children, and the careful organisation of lessons might not be overwhelming some of the learners here instead of calling them to learn, so to say. Typically, the youngsters began to play, paint or build then having their attention diverted, simply moving to another activity. Often the children did not engage with the conventional 'lessons'. They were not particularly uncooperative but sitting still and silent they waited until the teacher or the assistant allowed them to leave the table.

My job in the project was to collaborate with the teacher to support the preschool children in their emergent literacy and numeracy, with the aim of readying them for school the next year. The focus was on curriculum and pedagogy. On my regular visits to the community, I worked alongside each of the three preschool teachers (all non-Indigenous) who were in charge at different times across the two-year period of the project. I quickly got used to the routine times and would join in the singing and movements; help a child choose his or her toothbrush and comb; read books and tell stories. I would lead discussions about what the children might do that morning; join them in play and sit with them to lead particular tasks.

The childcare centre

Several of the same children who attended the preschool also attended the childcare centre in the afternoon. In this setting, I was training three of the five Indigenous staff, and the one non-Indigenous staff member toward a Certificate III in Community Services Children's Services. I was responsible for training and assessing to the nationally recognized Certificate III standard. Here my focus was on the carers and their routine practices in caring for children. Certificate III in Community Services Children's Services is designed to train carers to run childcare centres as places that nurture belonging, being, and becoming as qualities of children's experience, that is, centres that meet the standards of the National Early Years Learning Framework.

The thing that struck me when I first walked into the childcare centre was how the play space was arranged, especially in comparison to the stuffed-full preschool room. A mat on the floor and a bookshelf, with books askew and sometimes torn; a large laundry basket filled to overflowing with toys, many of which were broken; and child-sized home-corner furniture with few if any play materials. The child-sized table was placed at one end of the room and pulled out when needed for meals. The centre of the room was empty. So that while there was some equipment that was in general familiar to me from visiting and working in many other childcare centres, and indeed not dissimilar to some of the equipment in the preschool, the main impression here was of sparseness.

The children rarely sat and choose a book to read, or played with the toys on the mat. The infants and toddlers were placed in this area and they were returned there when they strayed. The children were more likely to bring equipment into the centre of the room and use it there, together. On other occasions they appeared to be moving around aimlessly. Each day when the children moved outside to play, one and sometimes two activities were arranged on the veranda. There might be painting, cutting, pasting, play dough or water play; all of which are quite typical in childcare settings anywhere in Australia. Bikes were brought out daily and proved to be by far the most popular piece of equipment; they were ridden up and down, up and down the veranda, adroitly manoeuvred around any other children, adults and activities that happened at the same time in the same space.

Typically the children and adults moved together as a group, herding from one activity or routine to another. It was quite common to see an adult complete a painting or construction for a child, particularly the youngest, taking his or her hand and literally leading the child's movements. Even the older children were given verbal instruction and assistance. No child resisted this, he or she

was clearly accepting and comfortable with the adult's help. At other times the adult completed an activity herself or sat playing with the play dough or building with the blocks, without overtly engaging with the child alongside her, but the child would sit contentedly watching the adult, listening to the adult conversation, 'hanging out' together. A very young child might use the smallest brush, attempting to paint, or more likely putting it in her mouth, or using it to paint her body. This was accepted by the adults with no comment, and certainly nothing was done that would divert the infant or toddler from this choice. Later the paint would be washed off as best it could by the adult. At still other times the adults would seemingly leave a child to his or her own devices, sitting apart from an activity and from the children while they talked together. A child might come and go into this adult realm, the adult nursing or kissing the child for short periods before she/he moved away again.

Frequently an adult would yell loudly at a child from across the other side of the veranda, usually when it involved a younger child being hurt or where the action seemed potentially dangerous, but she did not necessarily get up to attend to a situation unless it remained unresolved. For the most part her voice was enough to solve the problem. Sometimes an adult would talk to a four year old about looking after a toddler, allowing him/her to sit on the bike, or have a turn at a truck.

I rarely heard the Aboriginal staff overtly praising a painting, drawing or construction a child had completed, or for his efforts at activities or for other self-help tasks. More often the adults would talk to me about how much a child already knew and could do and this almost always related to their knowledge of relationship to others. Adults would seriously engage with the child in a dialogue about a family matter or a current, local issue such as who was visiting or where another family member was, and even more serious and complex matters such as a death in the family. The older children in particular (4 and 5 year olds) inevitably knew this information and would engage in conversation with the adults.

The children and adults cruised through the day together: noisy, chaotic, disorganized, happy, relaxed, connected and 'normal'. Whereas I found myself behaving in ways that even at the time I felt as 'abnormal'. There I was running around to and from activities engaging with individual children. At one moment moving quickly and quietly to 'resolve' a fight over a bike or to redirect a child who I thought was climbing too high; praising this child for her effort at a painting, arranging reading sessions with that small group, preparing additional activities, singing songs, sitting with children while they ate lunch and so on. I would end the day exhausted and occasionally catch both adults and children looking at me askance.

Moving between

When I visited this Aboriginal community I usually stayed for a week. I moved each day from the preschool to the childcare centre. Each day I found myself leaving a more or less familiar situation in which I had an established role affirmed by the room itself and the schedule, the carefully arranged materials and the routine engagements with the preschool staff and the children, only to arrive in a place where I was out-of-place. In the preschool, despite several reservations, I knew

what was expected of me: singing, dancing, helping children clean their teeth! In the childcare centre I was not seeing care and education happening in ways that I am used to. I was unsure of myself, confused; neither the adults nor children, nor the environment itself, seemed to respond to or know what to do with me, nor I with them. Yet clearly the children were content, they were receiving care and they were being taught and were learning in ways that confirmed and re-confirmed their place in their childcare centre and in their community.

I did not enter these children's centres blindly. I have worked in early childhood care and education including training in the Vocational Education and Training and Higher Education sector for many years. I have lived and worked in the Northern Territory including with Aboriginal people for 25 years. I do not expect 'quality' childcare and education to look the same in every context. I teach enthusiastically about socio-cultural construction and encourage pre-service teaching students to critically consider how their own views on children and families affects their vision of the role of education in society. But now the experience of the childcare has troubled a great many of my received truths: the truth of what a child is, what a teacher is, what education is, what a centre is, and indeed my own role as an academic teacher-educator.

In the preschool, my job, authorised by the enrichment project, was to engage in discussion, to mentor the teacher on practical ideas and philosophical underpinnings about literacy and numeracy in the early years. In particular my task was to emphasise the role of curriculum and pedagogy in promoting amorphous notions of increasing the literacy and numeracy skills of these preschool aged children in order to 'ready' them for school, and thus meet the local and National Curriculum. In the childcare centre, my roles were more strongly prescribed and more clearly delineated by outside authority. The fact that no member of staff held any early childhood qualification gave this engagement a sense of official urgency. I was both provider of educational services and assessor of compliance with standards of the routines enacted by the 'clients' enrolled in Certificate III studies. Being an academic specialising in early childhood in a School of Education I have credibility as quality control agent and consequently I am certified to witness compliance. I am entrusted to attest that carers and places offering care services meet the standards set down by the funding body that provides services for workforce development.

Together the students/carers gathered evidence against the attainment of competencies; evidence of already held skills and knowledge that could be credited as prior learning; we read and talked, took and analysed photographs. They completed written work. I observed them at their day-to-day practice, took notes and lead discussions on quality care as outlined in the training packages and the, at that stage, nascent Early Years Learning Framework. None of the students/carers actually struggled with the content of the training packages and ultimately they satisfied the standards required for the Certificate III. Their practical and written work met the standards across the period of the project, although little work was ever completed outside of my visits and the timeline for the completion of the project was renegotiated twice. The students were keenly interested in the content of the packages and especially in linking ideas they found in the pedagogical materials to their own expectations about children's needs and care. They were open to talk and thoughtful about how some of the ideas and practices presented in the training packages were different from how they might approach the same situations.

They did not reject or contradict the model of knowledge enacted in the national training packages, with its assumptions about what and where knowledge is and how learners and teachers are configured. They never challenged me for teaching to this model of knowledge. But at the same time they felt no obligation to account themselves to it, or to change how they ran their childcare centre in compliance with the spirit of its specific visions. So the carers were happy; they earned their Certificate III, the funding body was happy, the aims of the project had been met. But I am left disconcerted and puzzled. As the observer-analyst within the childcare centre and preschool I was tasked with the job of ensuring quality control. I had expectations of a conventional set of conditions; I took the presence or absence of those conventional conditions as signs of whether or not that centre promotes 'belonging, being, and becoming', and whether the teachers therefore would meet the national standards. This shorthand assumption operates on the view that all children be, belong, and become more or less identically. But this Aboriginal run childcare centre challenged all that.

Belonging, being and becoming myself

Australian childcare centres must be places that nurture 'belonging, being, and becoming' as central aspects of children's experience. The Early Years Learning Framework 'is built around a number of key concepts and principles which require educators to use particular understandings and practices effectively to achieve the desired outcomes... (and is based on the commitment of the Council of Australian Government)...to closing the gap in education achievements between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade' (2009, p. 3). In articulating the slogan 'belonging, being, and becoming' there is an assumption that all children should be subject to conditions that promote their belonging, being, and becoming, since children's growth and development characterized by those modes of growing are universally a good thing.

What is my problem? Both these projects—the funding of a 'professional' to attend to curriculum and pedagogy in the preschool, and the urgent development and offering of a programme of training in Certificate III in children's services in the childcare centre—were developed in the light of the understanding that in the Northern Territory, Indigenous early childhood education is a 'public problem'. As a professional in early childhood education I participate in that public problem. As Kathryn Pyne Addelson has it, as a professional I am a member of the 'ensemble cast' of that public problem (Pyne Addelson 2002, p. 119). The advertent revealing of the universal child who lurks inside the conventional collective practice of early childhood education that emerged as I explored my disconcerting experience of moving between a preschool and a childcare centre in an Indigenous community has me recognising that presumed universal child as also a member of the ensemble cast.

As a philosopher Pyne Addelson wants 'to encourage scientists and critical theorists to reflect on their own participation in the making of our world' (2002, p. 119). In particular she wants social scientists to acknowledge the role they have in constituting 'found' public problems like the public problem of Indigenous early childhood services in the Northern Territory. She suggests we need to examine the effect we have in determining the nature of the participants in the collectives of public problems.

I am interested in the way that the environment and the Indigenous teachers and their students worked together to repudiate the underlying assumptions about the problem and its solution. They did nothing to contradict or undermine the assumptions I brought in my bag and my flesh. They didn't need to. But they undid my own being, becoming and belonging. The public problem turned out to be *my* problem. If I am to go back and participate in good faith, I have to let them (the place and the people) teach me how I (may) have been found as part of *their* public problem, and how that changes me as the ethnographer, educator and quality controller in the flesh.

References

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