Education for tomorrow or education for the individual: What works for the future?

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This theoretical paper explores current literature relative to challenges faced by early childhood teachers in relation to the increasing accountability to improve measureable literacy and numeracy skills in young children. This sits within a context which has a developing focus on preparing children for the role they will play in future society. The potential detrimental outcomes that more traditional responses to these challenges may have for young children, particularly those who have experienced early trauma, will be discussed.

There is a feeling of increasing academic 'push down', where, even for our youngest children, formal literacy and numeracy skills are becoming a measurable outcome of successful education systems and individuals teaching within them. Formal and external measureable assessment processes seem to be driving the shift from contemporary play based, child centred pedagogical approaches, recognised by early childhood educators as 'best practice', back to more traditional formal 'sit down' pencil and paper activities. This change is problematic for all children, but is perhaps of greater significance for those who have experienced early loss and trauma.

The negative consequences that trauma may have on the development of a child is well documented. The impact of early trauma can affect the way children make sense of their world and learn, particularly in the classroom environment. Teachers' responses to children in trauma, can have a lasting effect on a child's capacity to function and learn. Schools can be safe and predictable places, where learning occurs, or they can exacerbate the impact of trauma already experienced. Practice and pedagogy play a huge role in how school is experienced by the child. Thus, the choices teachers make in how they respond to the challenges they face can have far reaching effects on children and their success.

This paper discusses the potential options educators may have and suggests alternatives to more traditional formal approaches when responding to these challenges, where even our most vulnerable children can be given the opportunity to be successful learners who can become valued members of society and contribute meaningfully to the world of tomorrow.

Introduction

Early childhood education is currently in a climate that is experiencing what has been termed the 'global education race' (Roberts-Holmes 2015, 302). The focus in this race is raising the literacy and numeracy standards of children, both within the schooling system and in the preschool years. Globally, governments have made attempts to improve educational literacy and numeracy outcomes by implementing policies to address what are perceived to be diminishing standards (DfE 2013; Robert-Holmes 2015). Policies introduced to raise educational standards have created more academically oriented, data driven programs, where the need to demonstrate high levels of performance to satisfy system targets is driving pedagogy and practice (Fleer 2011). In the early years, what Lipman (2012) calls 'abusive top down accountability' and 'high stakes testing' have led to a narrowing of curricula, increasing accountability for teachers, and forced pedagogical change (Ball and Olmedo 2013; Buras, Ferrare and Apple 2013; Neaum 2016; Roberts-Holmes 2015).

The impact of these pedagogical changes in the early years is evident where schoolification is occurring (Moss 2012). Schoolification refers to the top down push of curricula, where the preschool years are being seen as 'preparation' for entering the school system. The narrowing of curricula challenges, disrupts, and undermines child centred principles known to advance cognition, literacy, numeracy skills and knowledge (Bodrova 2008; Fleer 2011). Schoolification aligns with historical perspectives on constructing childhood as a 'time of becoming' (Qvortup 2009), and as a consequence fails to recognise contemporary views of the child as having capacity, agency and rights.

Whilst the impact of these global changes are debated in terms of the landscape of early childhood education, the effects of such change on the teachers and children living and working within this landscape need to be addressed. The ways in which the changes are managed by teachers and the impact of this on their wellbeing are of concern. So too, the effects of tightening constraints on the children, their academic outcomes and their futures. This paper will consider these concerns and then narrow its focus further, to consider the impact on those children who have experienced early trauma. Here trauma is defined as "a psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of normal childhood experience and involves a sense of intense fear, terror and helplessness" (Perry 2002, 23).

Challenges for Early Childhood Teachers

The introduction of these educational imperatives places pressure on teachers working in the early years. Whilst it is noted that some, more experienced teachers working with older children are able to translate policy to meet the gaps identified in the 'schoolification' process (Braun, Maguire and Ball 2010), for many teachers in the early years, this is not the case. The nature of a data driven environment, means that early childhood teachers are under pressure to manage the daily tensions that exist between providing meaningful educational programs that focus on child centred, play based experiential learning, and data driven curricula that are outcomes based. Robert-Holmes (2015) notes that for some teachers the data itself, as opposed to authentic learning, has become the pedagogical focus.

The need to get children to 'perform to the test', influences pedagogical decisions made by early childhood teachers, who acknowledge that despite their best attempts to maintain a child centred philosophy, policies meant their pedagogy was data driven (Robert-Holmes 2015). This in turn has the potential to "destabilise teachers' early childhood beliefs and principles" (Robert-Holmes 2015, 305). In this way, says Robert-Holmes, the "philosophy and values of quality early childhood education are being eroded" (305). Such pressure that directs teachers to "teach to the test, is reductive of students and education" (Ball and Olmedo 2013, 89) and, according to Lipman (2012) degrades teaching.

The type of pressure experienced daily by early childhood teachers can penetrate their sense of self, as such, they report increased levels of accountability were "demoralising, depressing, frustrating and very stressful" (Ball and Olmedo 2013, 89). Where an imbalance exists between what is expected from a teacher and the control they have in regard to these expectations, teachers show high levels of stress (Schreyer and Krause 2016; Whitaker et al. 2015). For teachers under stress, time to work calmly in open ended, interest led, play based situations that support the development of genuine relationships is less likely to occur and moreover, conflict in relationships with children are seen to increase (Whitaker et al. 2015). Yet, relationships built in early childhood contexts are critical to a child's wellbeing and recognised as central to effective learning and teaching (Clausen et al 2015; Siegel 1999). For an early childhood teacher who is under stress, the capacity to be emotionally available for young children who may be feeling vulnerable themselves, is likely to be diminished and again the impact on wellbeing for both teacher and child becomes an issue of concern. The recognition of the connections between teacher wellbeing and quality outcomes for children are well documented (Cummings 2016; Hall-Kenyon et al 2014).

Challenges for Children

For children living and working in our current educational systems, the challenges of this 'top down push' are potentially far reaching. The pressure on early childhood teachers to work in a more formalised way leaves little space for the playful contexts, such as those mentioned above, where children are given time to work in a sensitive and supportive environment with a caring adult, and be given opportunities to learn and thrive (Bodrova 2008; Neaum 2016).

There is an evidenced based argument, says Neaum (2016, 3) that for young children, "a prescribed outcomes driven curriculum, focused on formal skills in preparation for the next level of schooling is misinformed, developmentally inappropriate and potentially damaging". There is also some concern that the accountability assessments used to gain such data have validity issues, since they only offer information on certain aspects of learning but not the capacity to learn. So potential outcomes for children are being misrepresented (Clausen et al. 2015). This way of working has the potential to "reduce the rich competent child to a measureable teaching subject" (Ball and Olmedo 2013, 92).

This idea of misrepresentation leads back to the concerns around the way childhood is constructed in such a climate. Where childhood is constructed as a time of being (Qvortup 2009) children are perceived as competent, co-constructors of knowledge, who are recognised for having agency and rights today. Environments that respond to this way of thinking, will demonstrate their appreciation for the culturally and socially constructed nature of learning and reflect this in pedagogy and practice (Anning, Cullen and Fleer 2004; Neaum 2016). However, where the dominant discourse perceives children as a 'work in progress', provisions made for children will reflect this (James and Prout 1997; Prout 2000; Whitbread and Bingham 2011). In this way, it is not only the rights of the child that is being compromised, but also their sense of self and ultimately their wellbeing.

There is a dynamic relationship between wellbeing and learning. Children who have high levels of wellbeing, are more able to engage with experiences offered within a learning environment and are therefore more likely to have positive academic outcomes (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1996; Stephenson 2012). Those children who have more positive self-beliefs about their academic capacity tend to have higher academic achievement (Clausen et al. 2015). Here again the significance of the relationship created with the teacher becomes an important one, whereby early childhood teachers have a unique role to play in the development of the wellbeing of the child (Keyes 2007; Krause 2011; Siegel 1999). When teachers have less time to focus on this aspect of their work, children's learning outcomes may be negatively affected. This is an issue for all children in early learning environments, but for those children who have experienced early loss and trauma, it can be devastating, not only to their immediate learning but to longer term trajectories of health and wellbeing (Walker et al. 2011).

Children in Trauma

Traumatic experiences happen to children of all ages in all parts of the world every day, the implications of which can be far reaching (Little, Akin-Little & Somerville, 2011). Children who experience trauma often require specialised help to alleviate the effects of such an experience or in the case of complex trauma, multiple and ongoing experiences. More than 80 percent of children in the western world are enrolled in preschool (Haraldsson, Isaksson and Eriksson 2016). So, alongside this specialised help, many children attend educational institutions and rely on caring adults to support their ongoing learning and development (Shonkoff 2009). A child's teacher may be the only source of stability in his/her life. Thus, decisions made about pedagogy and practice are critical to learning as they can either support the child's healthy development or can re-introduce aspects of the trauma experienced, triggering potential inappropriate behaviours and 'survival mode' in a child (Zakrzewski 2011). Whilst offering interventions or therapy for a child suffering the effects of trauma is not within the expertise of the early

childhood teacher, there are a range of strategies identified that a teacher can implement to support the work of specialists engaged with the child, and in so doing, help to create and maintain safe, predictable environments where children, regardless of their life experiences can thrive emotionally and academically.

It is identified that trauma can interfere with a child's capacity to engage successfully in learning and that children who have experienced trauma need a caring relationship with a supportive early childhood teacher (Walker et al. 2011). Building trust is an essential part of any relationship and there are many ways this can be achieved (Baylin 2015; Purvis, Cross and Lyons 2007; Zakrzewski 2012). Such a relationship takes time and energy to build, however, and for an early childhood teacher already under pressure to maintain or improve outcomes, the extra time and energy required can become an added stress.

Purvis, Cross and Lyons (2007) remind us that close relationships with children who have trauma related issues do not come easily. The early childhood teacher needs to take time to get to know the child as an individual by actively listening to him/her. Here, listening for meaning behind what the child is saying is important so that the understanding of essential needs can be developed (Zakrzewski 2012). This understanding will support a mindful, thoughtful and reflective approach to how the child is supported. In this way, everyday situations that can trigger responses in the child can be minimised and awareness of the signs and triggers that cause the child to go into what Zakrzewski (2012) calls 'survival mode' can be maximised. A classic example here is the misread behavioural outburst of a child under stress. Responding unthinkingly or without understanding can cause a child's fear and recurring behaviours to be intensified (Dorado and Zakrzewski 2013), whilst responding in kind and compassionate ways when a child finds themselves in such a situation, enables the child to regain a feeling of safety and resume learning.

It is not only explicit interactions with a child that a teacher needs to be mindful of when working to build a trusting relationship. The idea of the negativity bias (Baylin, 2015) is a significant one for teachers. When words do not match non-verbal signals given by a teacher, a traumatised child, (having a hypersensitive amygdala), is likely to read this communication as threatening and mistrust the adult sending the mixed messages. For the teacher who, under pressure to achieve specific outcomes or frustrated when the child does not do as well as expected in a test, shows incongruences between what she/he says and how she/he feels, the negativity bias can be created and mistrust can be a consequence. The developing relationship will be damaged as a result. Thus, the early childhood teacher needs to be aware of sending mixed messages if a healthy relationship is to be developed and the child is to feel safe and well in the classroom environment. It is not difficult to understand how an early childhood teacher under pressure could easily give these mixed messages, particularly to a child who has behavioural challenges, disrupts important precious lesson times that has the potential to impact negatively on assessment outcomes, for which she/he is accountable. It is not surprising then, that early childhood teachers report feeling under equipped to manage the many complex needs of a child who has experienced trauma and feel torn between managing the needs of such a child and the needs of other children in their care (Cole et al 2005). This can only be exacerbated when there is pressure to complete the teaching of set curricula and achieve outcomes required.

Since it has been identified above that children need to be well in their environment in order to be effective in learning (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006; Stephenson 2012), it seems that only early childhood teachers who have the understanding and time to build effective relationships with children in trauma and offer the types of environments identified as conducive to learning are likely to achieve the outcomes sought in the global education race.

What works for the future?

It seems that there is a mismatch between what is happening in early childhood education and what is needed for young children to be effective learners, particularly those who have experienced trauma. For early childhood teachers working in the pressured environments of data driven assessment based pedagogies, finding the time to build relationships and work with children in playful relaxed environments that create safe and predictable opportunities for learning can be difficult. Yet there are connections between these types of environments, good mental health and school success (Gustafsson 2010).

It is suggested that early childhood teachers need to be supported in a number of ways. They need to be given opportunities to enhance their awareness, skills and understanding of mental health issues in children, if wellbeing, and therefore learning are to be maintained (Haraldsson, Isaksson and Eriksson 2016; Renblad and Brodin 2012; Pramling Samuelsson et al. 2015). Early childhood teachers also need to regain the autonomy required to make pedagogical choices that will restore their sense of capacity and wellbeing as well as creating environments necessary for safe and effective learning to take place. One of the ways for this to occur is to enhance the visibility of conceptual development within early childhood pedagogies and practice for those outside of the field of early childhood education so that a clearer understanding of learning may be demonstrated (Fleer 2011).

Finally, whilst there is research and literature that identifies what children need in order to equip them to be successful in the early years of school (Blankson et al. 2016), a critical approach needs to be taken when exploring how the child can be 'developed' to fit what the system requires. Dockett and Perry (2013) guard against an international perspective that focuses attention on the individual to 'improve' what they do, as this is too narrow a view. Changing the system to meet the needs of the developing child, may be a more appropriate alternative.

Conclusion

When considering what works in education for the future; for our futures and for those of our children, the impact of the global education race cannot be understated. The pressures placed on teachers to work in ways that are in opposition to their values increasingly "frames their pedagogy" (Roberts-Holmes 2015, 313) causes "terrors' of performativity" (Ball 2003, 216), marginalises their work (Ball and Olmedo 2013) and has the potential to impact negatively on their wellbeing (Cummings 2016). This relegation of child centred principles is identified as "damaging" for young children (Neaum 2016, 3), both to their wellbeing and to their learning (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006; Stephenson 2012). Where the dominant discourse sees childhood as a 'time of becoming' (Qvortup 2009) young children are at risk of losing their sense of capacity, agency and also their rights (Prout 2000). For children who come into early childhood education having experienced trauma, the impact of the global education race has the capacity, not only to impede learning (Zakrzewski 2011) but also to cause a child's fear and recurring behaviours to be intensified (Dorado and Zakrzewski 2013). These issues have the potential to impact on both academic and wellbeing outcomes into the future (Walker et al. 2011).

To create literate and numerate societies for tomorrow, elements that allow such learning to take place ought to be taken in to account today. Early childhood teachers need to be supported to create safe and predictable environments, where strong and genuine relationships with children are at the heart of their practice and pedagogy. Early childhood teachers have the opportunities and the responsibility to put the building blocks for future success in place. If the focus is placed on what works to educate the individual today, rather than educating for tomorrow, outcomes that are required for tomorrow are more likely to be achieved today.

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