Towards a New Epistemology of Teaching and Learning: A Mixed Approach Pedagogy

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Introduction

How children learn and the best ways to teach them have long been a significant topic of psychological and educational research. There have been many theories of learning in the past decades that have shaped new pedagogies and renewed understanding among educators (Nolan & Raban 2015). Based on these theories, new ways of teaching and learning have evolved in early childhood education to arrive at the best outcomes. However, the practical experiences combined with the theoretical perspectives often provide educational practitioners a fresh perspective on how to teach effectively and drive learning successfully. The following discussion is about one such renewed understanding that I have developed through my experiences and participation in this unit. I have named this personal epistemology of teaching and learning as the CBCI approach, which is a mixed approach combining the socio-cultural, socio-behaviourist, critical and post-structuralist theories. CBCI stands for **c**ulture, **b**ehaviour, **c**hallenge and **i**ndependence – the 4 most important aspects of teaching and learning in early childhood, as I have gathered. This new epistemology is best achieved through group play-based activities in the classroom or outside the classroom. This CBCI approach also addresses the five principles of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) – respectful relations, partnerships, equity, diversity and ongoing learning.

Key Findings and a New Epistemology

The EYLF (Department of Education and Training 2009) suggests that the various theories shape the pedagogical approaches to children's learning and development. These can be primarily categorised in 5 ways:

- Developmental theories

- Socio-cultural theories

- Socio-behaviourist theories

- Critical theories

- Post-structuralist theories

Developmental theories

The developmental theorists believed that children develop in a stage-by-stage manner, where one stage leads to the next (Montessori 1936, Kohlberg 1958, Piaget 1962, Steiner 1965, Erikson 1993). Educators guided by these theories assess children based on certain developmental parameters. The underlying assumption is that every child goes through these developmental milestones and when exposed to similar stimuli will respond similarly. So teachers design activities that are developmentally appropriate. Play is also an important aspect of developmental theories and these theorists believe that young children learn by exploring and playing with concrete objects (CSU EYLF Consortium 2009). Therefore, they plan a rich classroom environment with play-based, teacher-led group activities.

Key finding

However, in my current research where children role-played as members of the house and behaved as a family in the "family ties" group activity, it was found that every child responded differently, irrespective of their age. Eva was particularly very engaged in the space. She brought in a walkie-talkie and contributed ideas to extend the play. This modified my prior understanding and led me to believe that there are factors beyond a child's developmental age that can drive learning and development. Therefore, the socio-cultural and socio-behaviourist theories have better roles to play in early childhood pedagogies.

Socio-cultural theories

The socio-cultural theories focus on the children's learning environment or the community (Vygotsky 1978, Bronfenbrenner 1979, Rogoff 1990). These theorists believed that a child learns from his/her immediate surroundings and people. That "zone of proximal development" in the presence of a "more knowledgeable other" (Vygotsky 1978) is the most effective learning pathway.

Key finding

The observations from the "slime making" activity proved these theories partly true. Bianca's role as the "more knowledgeable other" helped the other children successfully create slime. However, some children wanted to learn how to make play doughs and asked Bianca questions like "can you teach me how to make play dough?" Their curiosity was not adequately addressed as play dough making was not on the program. However, such instances helped me shape my own epistemology, which is a combination of the socio-cultural perspective with the socio-behaviourist, critical and post-structuralist approaches. Culture/environment alone or scaffolding with the "more knowledgeable other" alone will not help achieve remarkable learning outcomes in children. There needs to be more to that.

Socio-behaviourist theories

The socio-behaviourist theories hold that learning happens by reinforcing the right behaviours in children, where they are expected to "behave" in a specific way and rewarded too if they comply (Skinner 1953, Bandura 1977). So classroom activities are mostly teacher-directed with positive behaviours or actions rewarded and undesired behaviours punished.

Key finding

Although I feel reward/punishments are unnecessary for learning to occur, a certain amount of reinforcement of positive behaviours is necessary. So, for example, the

"afternoon tea" activity where every child was given a chance to serve afternoon tea is directed towards teaching them about the right food, right ways of food handling, efficient use of utensils, etc. These are teacher-guided social behaviours that can foster the children's life skills and independence in the future. Hence, I would like to partially include behaviour reinforcement in my epistemology, dropping the reward/punishment part. Reward/punishment, to me, appears in direct conflict with a child's freedom to explore and learn. So my epistemology excludes it.

Critical theories

Critical theories shift away from the above three and hold that curriculum can have hidden areas which establish certain ideas, while rejecting others (Nolan & Raban 2015). Critical theorists believe that children have the right to be heard in matters concerning them, they have the capacity to choose their own learning pathways (CSU EYLF Consortium 2009). So classroom activities need to be designed to challenge standards or assumptions, helping children question the existing practices.

Key finding

None of the group activities demonstrated influence of these critical theorists. Children were not encouraged to question the taken-for-granted classroom practices. They were provided independence and guidance during many of these play-based activities, but none helped them challenge the established norms. For example, the "jewellery making" activity was an all-girls activity where only Ana, Eva and Rani collaborated to make jewelleries, assuming that jewellery making is only a girly activity.

Post-structuralist theories

The post-structuralist theories hold that there is no absolute truth and knowledge can be developed in many ways. To them, children are capable of having their own agency within them that helps them to guide their own lives. So, these theorists (Foucault 1980, Canella 1999, Bourdieu 2003) inform educators to respond and react to the

diverse learning pathways in young children. Classroom activities should focus on explorations and independence, without scaffolding.

Key finding

Such approaches are very effective in addressing the diversity in young children, taking into account their individual interests, learning capacities and sense of ownership. It was observed while participating in this unit that allowing independence and freedom to explore in any activity yielded more positive learning outcomes. The jewellery making activity and the Sing a Star activity both allowed children complete freedom during the tasks. I observed some unique Aboriginal jewellery designs reflected in the end-products, as also children enjoying swinging their heads to music/songs from another cultural background.