

Chapter 3

Pedagogic Cultures in Early Childhood: Framing Children's Experiences

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Introduction

This chapter explores the ways in which adults' decision-making through pedagogic leadership and children's interpretation of the physical and social environment frames children's playful experiences in early childhood. Elsewhere, I introduce these concepts with the specific focus on children's negotiation tactics (Arnott, 2018) and creative play (Arnott & Duncan, 2019); and I argue that these elements of experience are nestled in a *Pedagogic Culture* which children and practitioners inhabit in early childhood education. This chapter consolidates my interpretation of practitioners' and children's responsive planning and learning experiences as embedded in a *Pedagogic Culture*.

In a typically socio-cultural fashion, I recognise that my interpretation is not developed in a vacuum, but rather is born from key influential perspectives which have shaped my view of the world. I have previously drawn on the principle of Human Ecology which seeks to understand the interplay between humans and their social and physical environment (Arnott, 2016). This chapter extends my theorising by progressing the application of ecologies into practice, through children's and practitioners' interpretation of pedagogy and to explore how this insight can transform leadership in early childhood education.

To achieve this, I consider two threads of discussion – structure and dynamic cultures - which knit nicely together to articulate my overarching consideration of *Pedagogic Cultures*. I describe three key works which are inseparable in my thinking and shape my perception of the environment within which children are learning. The first is Bernstein's Pedagogic Discourse (1975; 1990), where we see the more structural nature of the playroom feeding into leadership planning and pedagogy. Indeed, I have been intrigued by his interpretation of the structural nature of visible and invisible pedagogies which classify and frame children's learning experiences.

The second and third do not relate directly to leadership and planning in a formal pedagogical sense but are authors who explore the cultures apparent in education and learning experiences. Barbara Rogoff is a prolific author, known for her discussion of *The Cultural Nature of Child Development* (2003) and *Apprenticeship in Thinking* (1990) and William Corsaro, is a sociologist who focuses a great deal on peer cultures (1988) and *Interpretive Reproduction* (1992; 1993; 2012).

This work starts from the child and very much presents an understanding of what it means to develop, learn and socialise in unique contexts. Some of the work looks especially at minority cultures, tribal living (Rogoff, 1993) and often in informal learning contexts (Rogoff et. al. 2016) but that doesn't impede us from translating this knowledge of informal learning as a cultural experience into a more formal setting.

Other elements focus on peer cultures and relationships and don't relate to adult-child dynamics explicitly (Corsaro, 1988), but in a society which advocates for children engaging in leadership roles and shaping their own learning, there is much we can learn from these peer cultural experiences.

Thus, the literature is not overtly focused on leadership and pedagogic planning in formal early childhood education. Yet much of the writings of this time focused on relationships and social processes in a broad sense as part of their characterisation of culture and that process, for me, is the very nature of pedagogy in early childhood education. It therefore has the potential to inform our understanding leadership in formal educational settings. These works have long shaped my understanding of children's learning experiences and consequently the role of pedagogical leadership in framing children's everyday learning. Drawing on fragments of each of these theories shapes how I see early childhood leadership delivered through pedagogic planning as a cultural experience, which is dynamic, evolving and heterogenous. This chapter will argue that because of the cultural nature of experience, pedagogies planned for in practices cannot be replicated or modelled but rather are inherently context specific. Thus, for example, play may be ubiquitous in early childhood education, but it is also unique because of the culture within which it manifests.

Pedagogy and Framing of Children's Experiences

To develop an interpretation of the cultural entity inherent in early childhood leadership planning and experience, requires first to understand the place of pedagogy in early childhood practice more generally. The notion of pedagogy in education is not new across the world, particularly in European contexts (Murphy, 2008). The challenge, however, is that pedagogy, like play, is intangible and abstract and is thus variously defined. Definitions range from encompassing phrases like, 'the act and discourse of teaching' (Alexander 2004, p8) to what, Murray (2015) describes as the literal translation of 'leading the child' based on the Greek origins of the word. The complex notions of idiosyncratic differences in pedagogy are also accounted for as the process is described as an 'adventure', involving lived processes with 'unique interactive aspects' (Tochon and Munby 1993; p207).

In some cases, more defined pedagogies have emerged, often bounded in philosophies of particular scholars who have advanced the work – a Montessorian or Froebellian pedagogy, for example. These approaches frame the ways that children's daily lives in education unfold. A degree of adult control, decision making and planning results in varied and unique experiences for each child, depending upon the philosophical assumptions that the staff and children adhere to; assumptions that cannot be learned but rather are embodied over time and space, but which are also bound by societal understandings of high-quality education.

In this case, Bernstein's Pedagogic Discourse provides a useful point of reference to understanding the structure inherent in pedagogical planning. In particular, Bernstein's work, which focuses on the conceptualisation of classification and framing and the visible and invisible pedagogy (1975, 1990, 2000) is really helpful to understand the dynamics of pedagogy. Much like generic definitions of pedagogy, Brooker (2002; 178) describes the Pedagogic Discourse as 'the entire process of bringing about learning in a setting'. This is codified by Bernstein as involving pedagogic practices that are the underlying rules which shape the social construction

of Pedagogic Discourse. The approach governs both how children behave as well as how children learn (Bernstein, 2000). Through his conceptualization of the regulative (social order) and instructional (how children learn) discourses, Bernstein considers how framing of the environment determines who maintains control in the setting. For example, when framing is strong, the teachers have control over the transmission of knowledge while when framing is weak the students have more apparent control. He argued that pedagogic practices can be described as either visible or invisible. The former has an explicit pedagogy while the latter is rather more implicit. The more explicit the transmission of knowledge the more visible the pedagogy is likely to be. With strong regulative discourse you would, therefore, expect the rules of behaviour and conduct to be explicit.

In progressive Early Childhood Education, particularly in the West, the notion of children leading their learning (Scottish Government, 2020) child-centred practices (Georgeson et al 2015), and responsive approaches (Wood, 2010) dominate the discussion. Thus, the pedagogic practices align more with Bernstein's invisible pedagogy. King (1979) suggests this includes implicit control where teachers are responsible for planning but children are able to manoeuvre the setting and make changes as they explore. The focus remains on affording children power to choose activities and manage social relationships rather than emphasising transmission of knowledge.

This approach applies to a particular notion of pedagogy which focuses around play, which Wood (2009 p 27) defines as:

“the ways in which early childhood professionals make provision for play and playful approaches to learning and teaching, how they design play/learning environments, and all the pedagogical decisions, techniques and strategies they use to support or enhance learning and teaching through play”

Play is often chosen as a medium through which children should learn because of key theoretical underpinnings, such as the work of Vygotsky (1930/2004) who advocated for imagination or the notion that play allows children to trial scenarios in a safe context, such as rehearsal for adult life (Bruce, 2018). Certainly, it is believed to add value to child development (Singer, 1994). Yet, casually linking play and learning can be problematic because it is not possible to say whether it is the play itself, the instructive teacher or some other social experience which has caused the learning or development to occur. This is particularly the case if you view the world from the perspective that the individual, their social world and development are inseparable (Rogoff, 1993; Sawyer, 2002).

It is for this reason that a focus on play pedagogy solely, or indeed any one pedagogy, becomes problematic and so an understanding of the various pedagogies apparent in early childhood education becomes more meaningful. In this sense, pedagogies have broadened and may be better defined by their features or dominant characteristics of early childhood education. Holistic definitions in this way characterise early childhood education by “play, wholeness, inner motivation, self-control, active child, starting where the child is” (Samuelsson and Carlsson, 2008, p630) rather than a pre-defined approach. They suggest the basic premise is that children learn “by doing, by talking, by experimenting, by trying and failing or trying and succeeding or by reflection and communication as well as in play” (Samuelsson and Carlsson, 2008, p630). In a similar vein Plowman et al. (2010: 53) suggest that pedagogy in early childhood is about “the

emphasis... on the whole child, play as a medium for learning, experiential learning and the crucial role of adults as supporting learning”.

This chapter builds on this broadening of perspectives, the focus on characteristics and the inherent flexibility in defining practice because ‘without great flexibility neither play nor learning is possible!’ (Samuelsson and Carlsson, 2008, p633). Such holistic notions, coupled with the understanding that context and learning are inseparable, fuels the need to better understand the cultural nature of pedagogy in early childhood practice. Although perhaps not as widely theorised as bounded approaches to pedagogies, I suggest the notion of wholeness and expansively dynamic pedagogies is important to consider and that we need to explore the characteristics of pedagogies rather than comparing and contrasting particular approaches.

A Culture of Early Childhood Education Pedagogies.

The discussion of culture in early childhood education offers a route to understand, and celebrate, the idiosyncratic nature of pedagogies across the sector. Despite agendas to standardise provision (Jarvis & Whitebread, 2018), the nucleus that drives quality early childhood practice is the emphasis on being responsive to children’s needs and interests (Wood, 2010). In this scenario, a one size fits all approach to pedagogy, standardised for largely political reasons, hinders the ability of staff to lead in responsive ways. The research is abundantly clear that children’s engagement and dispositions to learn are inextricably linked to their own interests and needs. We must reimagine pedagogy as a culture, inhabited by practitioners and children and that is endowed with defining characteristics, chosen by those directly involved in the context. This allows us to embrace a non-unified approach to early childhood education, which meets the needs of individual children.

Viewing playrooms and the pedagogies employed within them as a culture has been considered in the literature. For example, Shinegold et al. (1984) highlighted that “classrooms are well established cultures, with social organisations and work-related agendas embodied in longstanding curricula” (p.4). Similarly, Wood, (2010: 15) argues that “culture not only frames and pervades children’s ways of learning, it also powerfully influences their identities which, in turn, are constantly created and re-created in interaction between people”. Thus, by focusing on the wider culture it is possible to see how beliefs and values shape children’s experiences and the non-unified nature of pedagogy enriches children’s experiences, offering diversity, linked to the values and beliefs of the cultural group (Tudge et. al., 2006).

This work on culture has a real contribution to make because it moves our understanding beyond curriculum or regulatory process in formal settings. For example, Bang (2009) tells us that a sole focus on the functional, physical or programmatic environment is insufficient to understand how children’s interactions and behaviours manifest. I would go further to argue that a lack of understanding beyond this area impedes our perception of learning and educational experiences, which then hinders the ability to lead.

Instead, the environment must be explored in conjunction with the social space where behaviours are restricted by temporal and spatial boundaries (Brown, Shepherd, Wituk, & Meissen, 2007, p. 402), guiding children to act within the perceived rules of social order; creating a behavioural milieu (Heft, 1988, p. 31). Analysing the way children interpret and manoeuvre the structural element of the playroom is important

to understanding social interactions, not least because rules can be described as ‘the cultural resources to which members orient in order to make sense of their social worlds’ (Cobb-Moore, Danby, & Farrell, 2009, p. 1478). By exploring pedagogy as a cultural artefact in a social space allows us to better unpick the elements of the setting that frame experience. It also allows us to recognise the dynamic and changeable nature of pedagogy as something which is a living entity which grows alongside practice and continuously transforms as part of the culture.

This resembles the ideas put forward by Corsaro who argues that through interpretative reproduction children reproduce the adult world. They do this by becoming a member of the preschool and contributing to it, rather than merely appropriating or internalising the culture already established. Corsaro (1992: 161) describes this process as “children enter into a social nexus and, through interaction with others, establish social understandings”. Children’s positions within the community therefore contribute to their interactions and relationships, and then ultimately their own experience.

In this conceptualisation, the culture is not static but ever changing; perhaps even responsive. Corsaro’s interpretation of peer cultures offers some useful thinking to better understand this process. The work argues that as children become members of the culture, they use shared knowledge to manoeuvre the context and drive forward their experiences. (Corsaro & Eder, 1990). In doing so they ‘exercise agency in a mediating fashion, enabling them ... [to] challenge and transform the situational contexts of action themselves’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 994). Applying this thinking to a pedagogic culture, while assuming children and practitioners’ membership of that cultural group, shows how individuals can exercise agency and autonomy in preschool settings to offer divergent and responsive learning encounters. It also gives liberty to practitioners to continually manoeuvre their practice and build their pedagogy over time. From this perspective, pedagogy is not static. It is not bound by a labels or curricular. Seeing pedagogy as cultural allows for an eclectic manifestation of learning which draws on cultural historical experiences from a range of philosophies and approaches. Through this lens, pedagogic leadership is embedded in a relational approach, where practice is never viewed statically as high or low quality, but rather as a continuous journey through which practitioners and children alike strive for new adventures to spark interest and engagement with learning.

Pedagogic culture is fluid and dynamic

Building on this interpretation of culture and the invisibility of pedagogy in early childhood, it is clear to see that the framing gives rise to interpretation and individuality of experience. Inducting children into the rules and regulations of the preschool helps to create ‘strong framing’ which aims to guide behaviour (Bernstein, 1990), yet while the framing is created by adults, Alcock (2007, p. 281) argued that ‘children re-create their own culture meaningfully by playing flexibly with the rules that surround everyday practices’.

Here we begin to see the challenges with defining pedagogy as Murphy (2008: 29) argues:

“there has been recognition in recent years of the unique, interactive nature of pedagogy. This interactiveness makes it difficult to capture and represent professional expertise as practiced in classrooms”

Yet a conceptualization around culture allows for such fluidity and uniqueness in practice. Rogoff (1993: 6) suggests that “culture itself is not static; it is formed from the efforts of people working together, using and adapting tools provided by predecessors and in the process creating new ones”. Thus in education, perhaps there is an understanding that pedagogy should be replicable, linked to quality indicators and should provide a sufficient guide for practitioner leadership and planning. Yet based on the understanding of Rogoff and the notion of culture as dynamic, I would argue the opposite. Pedagogies are individualized to the setting and when regarded as a culture (Rogoff, 1993) and by drawing on Corsaro’s (1992) notion that children reproduce the culture alongside adults, conceptualizing pedagogies as culture offers freedom to move through learning experiences, dance across concepts and mindfully engage in meaningful experiences *with* children. It provides a context where practitioners and children learn together, shifting the traditional notions of expert and novice, towards the concept of a cultural ethos with varying strengths, rather than structuring learning for children in a top down fashion.

Vygotsky believed that traditions, practices and values inherent in any culture are passed down through generations. He suggests that these traditions and values shape an individual’s behaviour but also that the individual continually re-moulds the cultural values and traditions. Hence, emergent work from a socio-cultural perspective frequently focuses on context. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of ‘Community of Practice’, for example, explores the social and cultural customs and ways of operating within a community in their explorations of learning. Similarly, Rogoff’s (1989; 1990) concept of guided participation focuses on the nature of tacit learning in informal learning contexts. Similarly, Edwards (2004: 88) explored the context of ‘practice’ in early childhood education, indicating that “cultural context is incorporated into interactions and their outcomes”. Viewing pedagogy as an evolving culture which is passed-down as new children and practitioners enter and contribute to the setting and which is re-moulded, perhaps on a daily basis, provides a real opportunity to ‘plan for endless possibilities’ (Gripton, 2017).

This understanding of pedagogy as a culturally dynamic endeavour is strengthened further as we continue to explore advances in technologies. The hyper-pace at which technologies emerge in society and in education negates the need to always view practitioners as ‘educators’ solely responsible for transmitting, sharing, directing and encouraging knowledge generation in proximal and distal ways. For example, we see how readily parents and practitioners embrace young children’s innate capacity to tinker and learn how to use new devices, unhindered by anxiety, self-consciousness or adult-centric notions of being a luddite. Instead, these young citizens are taking a leadership role in not only learning the mechanics of the device but also to teach the older generation how to use these devices (see Arnott et. al. 2019). A dynamic shift in the pedagogic culture has become apparent, where learning together is unencumbered by intergenerationally perceived knowledge status. Power dynamics, while always present, in some cases have qualitatively shifted.

The transformation of the culture is not only shaped by the child, however. The adult’s role also becomes central to the process of establishing a strong Pedagogic Culture which is not rigid but is alive with possibilities and idiosyncrasies to support the

individual child. We know that in high quality early childhood education the practitioner must understand and listen to children. They must develop a relationship with children whereby they know the child's home culture and previous experiences and perspective. Drawing on this concept and not limiting our exploration to the child's role in navigating a complex social system but rather looking at the wider or holistic system as a whole, you can see that both adults and children lead the evolution of the setting and pedagogy which guides experience.

The Pedagogic Culture

Building on those underlying principles of the structure of pedagogy and the cultural exploration presented thus far, I present a conceptualisation of the Pedagogic Culture as a means of articulating the complexity inherent in early childhood provision. By Pedagogic Culture, I mean an explicit conceptualisation, recognition and application of the holistic ecological elements that frame the practice of supporting learning in early childhood. In many cases, this represents intangible, or structural, social and relational characteristics which underpin children's experiences; perhaps rooted in the invisible pedagogy. It represents processes that become habit - processes that also evolve and change as children and practitioners reproduce the context; processes that underpin a cultural entity which is early childhood pedagogy. That is to say that, it is the dynamic interlinking of these holistic playroom elements that is likely to shape, and be shaped, by children's social play and by practitioner planning and leadership. Working from this lens, we must understand how the interlinking elements of a particular context shape how children experience the environment and their play in unique ways.

The notion of Pedagogic Culture is offered as a conduit to begin synthesising and reflecting upon the multiplicity of factors which contribute a particular way of supporting children's learning in early childhood education and to understand what leadership may look like. It draws from the very essence of play that Samuelsson and Carlsson, (2008 page 627), drawing on Sawyer (1997), suggest is about 'improvisations where there is no manuscript, but the script is created on the spot in the interplay between children'. Just as play is not bounded and is limitless, the notion of Pedagogic Culture offers a valuable responsive and reflective frame to understand early childhood education' The main contribution is in the understanding that no two pedagogic cultures can ever be the same. They may mimic or resemble characteristics of another setting or another pedagogical approach (as can be seen with the overlapping pedagogies presented in the previous section) but the way that the child and staff experience their context is idiosyncratic and context specific. For play, this realisation offers interesting interpretations of what this means for practice and for framing children's learning experiences.

It is argued that play is 'transference of culture' (Jonson, et al 2005 cited in Samuelsson and Carlsson, 2008 page 627), and I would argue that the Pedagogic Culture are the spaces in between play and learning, representing the evolution of that culture where play manifests. To understand this perspective, it is important to view play as something which is also dynamic. Play is not a discrete activity but rather the projection, development and cognitive/metacognitive demonstration of children's appropriation of their particular cultural context. In this sense play is more than simply the resources with which the child engages or the child's spontaneous activity. Play is unique to each context, to each child and to each practitioner, because it is the

synergistic output of a specific Pedagogic Culture. As part of a Pedagogic Culture, play is the culmination of carefully considered framing. It is this conceptual understanding of early childhood education as something greater and broader than 'play-based pedagogy' that is required. We need to see children's play as an endeavour which evolves alongside society, thinking and cultures. We also need to see pedagogy as multi-faceted and continually evolving and growing to demonstrate our need to always strive for better. Leadership in this lens rests on harnessing the unique and cultural qualities of play to support children to extend their explorations across time and space.

Conclusions

The theoretical considerations of pedagogy presented in this chapter suggest that pedagogical leadership must focus on the range of contexts or 'social worlds'. Thus, context is more than just the people and the things in the setting but includes historical and cultural influences on activities. It involves a relativist interpretation of multiple realities dependent upon the 'social, economic, cultural and historic nature of the group under consideration' (Tudge et al., 2009: 118). Activities and experiences will therefore vary, and as leaders of dynamic pedagogies, practitioners can draw on the ever changing nature of culture to justify their practice, which may look different to the norm. Understanding children's experiences as a continually evolving and vibrant evolution of individually crafted moments underpins this chapter. Newly gained knowledge, familiarity and relationships, help reimagine possibilities, feeding into a newly unique Pedagogic Culture.

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