

Children's working theories about identity, language and culture

O faugamanatu a fanau e sa'ili ai o latou fa'asinomaga, gagana ma aganu'u.

A collaborative TLRI project between Keryn Davis and Ruta McKenzie (CORE Education), and teacher researchers from North Beach Community Preschool and Mapusaga A'oga Amata.

Project start date: January, 2015 Project Finish date: December, 2016

About this project

This was a two-year project that focused on young children's working theories about identity, language and culture, how early childhood teachers can nurture and encourage this learning, and how this in turn impacts on children's participation in early childhood education (ECE) communities. The project explored ways teachers can support diversity, and participation, through pedagogy and programme design that is highly responsive to all learners. This is especially desirable for the potential influence on the practice and understandings of those working with young Pasifika learners; an area where there has been very little research undertaken in Aotearoa New Zealand to date.

What we did

The project was based in two diverse ECE centres in Christchurch: Mapusaga A'oga Amata (Samoan Immersion), and North Beach Community Preschool (English-medium). We worked together using an action research approach which involved cyclic drilling down to explore children's working theories about identity, language and culture in increasingly greater depth. This process included:

1. Collecting examples of children's expressions of working theories about identity, language and culture as they were noticed in the day-to-day life of the centres, and analysing these together;
2. Working in pairs and groups to plan, undertake, and analyse small inquiries (mini-projects) around a range of constructs based on emerging findings; and,
3. Tracking and analysing the working theories and participation of eight case study children (four in each centre), for 18-months.

The analysis process involved exploring multiple cultural viewpoints to make meaning of children's theories. This analysis helped shift what teachers were noticing about what children are making sense of, and how. In turn, this process also contributed to shifts in how teachers responded to children.

What we found out

The story of how each case study child's working theories impacted on their learning and participation over time, was unique, so too were their teachers' interpretations and responses. As teachers became more attuned to children's theories they listened more deeply and this contributed to them better understanding child's ideas and thinking.

Four broad overlapping types or categories of children's theories about identity, language, and culture emerged from the data:

- Making sense of cultural values and practices
- Making sense of connections
- Making sense of their cultural selves
- Making sense of others

Implications for practice

- Working theories about the social world help mediate (or hinder), engagement in learning and learning with others. It is therefore necessary for those working with young children to ensure they intentionally seek to notice, make meaning, and respond to the expressions of children's working theories.
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- Practitioners committed to this process will seek contributions from multiple diverse perspectives, and be inclusive of the voices and knowledges all families bring about their child particularly in terms of their cultural expertise.
- Ensuring there are opportunities for children to share their ideas and understandings are critical. It is likely that practitioners will need to develop new habits of practice and create more frequent, richer opportunities for children to share and contribute perspectives.
- Designing specific learning experiences that create opportunities for children to be positioned as experts in relation to their interests and funds of knowledge from home are particularly important in supporting and nurturing children's working theories about identity, language, and culture.
- When teachers make a conscious decision to tune into and look for examples of children's working theories about identity, language, and culture in action this direct act can kick-start a journey to ward becoming more culturally intelligent, and as a result more culturally responsive teachers. These direct actions from teachers, will in turn, contribute to the growing cultural intelligence of the children they work with.

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