

Early Education



Volume 66 Spring / Summer 2020

- Teacher Led Innovation Round 3
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- Peer learning in ECE
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- Children, families in prison and ECE practice
- Reflexes and support early learning



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Contributions of articles and photos are welcome from the early childhood community.

Early Education welcomes:

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Children as teachers

How do we support children to be leaders amongst their peers?

Penny Smith

Abstract

Peer interactions are an important part of children's learning and development. Therefore, it is important that teachers support opportunities for children to work collaboratively and to share their knowledge with each other. This paper reports on an aspect of a recent doctoral study that investigated New Zealand early childhood teachers' beliefs and practices related to peer learning. Examples of early childhood teachers promoting and supporting peer learning are presented and discussed. The findings revealed that teachers promoted children's expertise and encouraged them to be leaders amongst their peers, whilst being physically present to support peer play. However, the study identified contradictions between teachers' beliefs and practices regarding intentionally supporting children to learn from each other, and these contradictions are explained. By sharing these findings, I hope to inspire teachers to reflect on how they intentionally create opportunities for children to learn from and to teach each other.

I conducted this study because I wanted to know how teachers were supporting children in New Zealand early childhood centres to learn from their peers. The findings reported here identify strategies teachers used to foster children's peer interactions and moments when children could potentially learn from each other. I also wanted to understand how teachers promoted and supported peer learning within a sociocultural curriculum. The open-ended nature of Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017) means teachers need to interpret their role in a way that supports and respects children's agency while capitalising on teachable moments throughout the day. Working within a curriculum that places the child at the centre can create a tension for teachers as they question the deliberate nature of their role. I was curious to know whether teachers intentionally planned opportunities for children to learn from each other and how they did this in play-based environments. The

notion of a more intentional role for teachers is documented in the revised version of Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) and teachers' beliefs and practices related to intentionally supporting peer learning are shared in this paper. The paper concludes with some thoughts about how teachers can grow their purposeful practice to maximise opportunities for children to collaborate and learn from each other.

What is peer learning?

The term peer learning encompasses the idea of children learning from each other and acquiring knowledge and skills through the process of working together (Topping, 2005). Peers have equal status in the learning relationship as opposed to adults and children. Children have different experiences than adults and multiple perspectives are more likely to emerge when children are playing together rather than when they are on their own (Williams, 2007). Researchers have highlighted the role of peers as engendering a sense of belonging and growing social and emotional competence during collaborative play (Audley-Piotrowski et al., 2015). Social-emotional skills have been identified as vital for wellbeing and learning in early childhood (McLaughlin et al., 2017).

What do we know about how teachers support peer learning?

Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 36) acknowledges the important role teachers have in supporting children to "initiate and maintain relationships with peers". The document states that "it is through interacting with others that children learn to take another's point of view, empathise, ask for help, see themselves as a help to others and discuss or explain their ideas" (p. 36). The Māori concept of tuakana-teina acknowledges that more experienced children have knowledge which they share with those less experienced. "The tuakana-

teina relationship, an integral part of traditional Māori society, provides a model for buddy systems. An older or more expert tuakana (brother, sister or cousin) helps and guides a younger or less experienced teina (originally a younger sibling or cousin of the same gender)" (Pere, 1982, p. 74). Clearly, peers have a crucial role in learning, and we need to understand how we can nurture opportunities for young children to be teachers amongst their peers.

Responsive practice, physical proximity, support for children to enter play and close involvement by teachers in children's collaborative play have been highlighted as important practices in several studies (Kultti, 2015; Mawson, 2011). Mawson (2011) examined children's participation strategies in a New Zealand early childhood education setting, using video to record children's collaborative play, on one morning a week over a period of nine months. The study identified that many children found entering play difficult, particularly if they did not have close friendships and shared experiences with their peers. This finding suggests that teachers need to empower children to enter play by teaching them strategies to integrate themselves into collaborative play. In Mawson's (2011) study, children seldom sought teachers' assistance to enter play, suggesting that exclusion from group play could be far more common than teachers realise.

Hedges et al. (2011) 12-month case study in two New Zealand kindergartens provided evidence of the ways in which children's interests were enacted with their peers, whilst highlighting the spontaneous nature of teacher's involvement. Through observations of children's play, Hedges and colleagues discovered that children's friendships enabled them to extend thinking and interests by drawing on each other's experiences; child-initiated peer tutoring was common in both settings. For older children, friendships provided opportunities to test expectations about sharing, turn-taking, and leadership. Despite this evidence, teachers' engagement with children's interests and experiences did not always occur and many learning and teaching interactions were found to be spontaneous rather than planned. This finding implies the need for teachers to intentionally promote and support peer learning as an aspect of their pedagogical practice.

Williams et al. (2014) interviewed 30 Swedish preschool teachers to explore the role of language in peer learning from the teacher's perspective. Teachers viewed their role as vital in ensuring children gained the language skills needed to engage with their peers. They described their role as

formulating questions to draw attention to children's different ideas and ways of thinking (Williams et al., 2014). However, despite teachers' awareness of their own role in supporting children's language competence, they did not view their role as actively and intentionally constructing situations for collaboration to occur; instead, teachers' responses suggested peer collaboration often happened "by itself in encounters between children" (Williams et al., 2014, p. 236). Teachers expected peer collaboration to occur simply because children were together at preschool.

Intentional teaching involves teachers being deliberate and purposeful in their decisions and actions. Epstein (2014) has identified the need for a balance between child-initiated and teacher directed activities and that rather than being passive, good teachers support children's learning in both types of activities. Providing opportunities for children to plan and reflect, to elaborate on ideas, to wonder and to solve problems are all effective intentional teaching strategies (Epstein, 2014). The studies reviewed above, reveal teachers' reluctance to engage in intentional practices (Hedges, et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2014). These studies suggest being deliberate about supporting peer learning has provided some dilemmas for teachers as they work in environments that promote spontaneous play. After reviewing the existing research, I had questions about how New Zealand early childhood teachers viewed the intentional nature of their role in supporting children to work together.

Methodology

I conducted this study using a mixed methods design comprising of case studies in three early childhood centres in the first phase, followed by a nationwide survey of early childhood teachers in the second phase. In this paper, data from the case studies is reported and discussed. The case studies involved the collection and analysis of data from ten teachers across three early childhood centres. Permission to carry out the study was granted by the Massey University Human Ethics committee.

I conducted semi-structured interviews about teacher's beliefs and practices related to peer learning with teachers in the three early childhood centres. Each teacher was interviewed individually twice as well as observed when working with children. Filmed using an iPod, I observed teachers across all areas of the curriculum. Most of the filming took place when children were freely engaged in play rather than during routine times such as mat times so that data could be gathered about how peer

learning occurs and is supported during naturally occurring play. After the observations were completed, I interviewed the teachers again, and this time I shared excerpts of the filmed observations with them to stimulate recall of their practice. Throughout these interviews, teachers described their teaching strategies and why these were appropriate at the time; including their intentions related to supporting children to work together. Data analysis identified common themes from the interviews and observations. The use of the qualitative research software programme 'NVivo', allowed me to conduct content analysis, resulting in further refining of categories and similar themes to enable triangulation of data sources. The following section contains examples from the data, and these are discussed.

The importance of being physically present

I noticed when filming the teachers that there were many instances where children stood on the periphery, observing play, and possibly wanting to be part of the group. Analyses of the interviews found 18 instances where teachers discussed supporting children on the periphery to enter play. Natasha expressed the importance of teachers intentionally ensuring children had opportunities to join group play. Natasha reflected on how entry into group play and participation is important for peer tutoring.

Before they can do peer tutoring, they've got to learn strategies, like they've got to be able to work alongside and with children before they can sort of become the leader in what is happening ... and some children do it quite naturally and other children need a lot of support. (Natasha, interview 2)

Discussing teachers' knowledge of children during the interview was an important part of understanding teachers' practice. The observations showed that the presence of some children often determined where teachers positioned themselves in the environment. Data analyses revealed 20 instances when teachers went into an area or stayed in an area when a particular child entered or was amongst a group of children. The teachers stated that sometimes children needed extra support if they were to successfully participate in sustained group play. For instance, Ariana had worked consistently with a child who struggled to enter play. She supported this child by being physically close to where he was playing and by promoting positive

behaviours so he could engage in sustained group play. She explained,

the importance of being there supporting him with his positive guidance stuff was the priority and that other children know that he is, he can be a good friend ... I'm more involved with a group of children when Tim is there because I know that has to happen. (Ariana, interview 2)

Previous studies have found the teachers' physical presence has a powerful influence on children's ability to successfully engage in peer play (Petty, 2009; Singer et al., 2014). Teachers in the current study positioned themselves closely to children who needed extra support to communicate and interact positively and constructively with their peers. In the same way, Singer et al. (2014) found that the continuous presence of the teacher played an important role in children's emotional security as teachers were sensitive to the group dynamics which were significant for successful peer play. Teachers in this study intentionally positioned themselves near children who they knew would need their assistance.

Promoting children's expertise

Promoting opportunities for children to share their expertise and leadership was the most common teaching strategy adopted to foster peer learning by teachers and analyses of the observations revealed six instances where this was observed and 45 instances where it was mentioned/discussed in the interviews. In one instance, Daniel (teacher) was working outside with a group of boys who were experimenting with different pieces of rope by tying them to the fort-like structure in the playground. The fort was being used as a steamboat and four-year-old Lachlan was sharing his knowledge of knot tying with Daniel. Lachlan had given the rope to Daniel to hold and was explaining how it needed to be tied. Rather than tying the knot himself, Daniel gave the rope to Aaron whilst encouraging Lachlan to show Aaron how to tie a knot. Daniel commented that he knew this group of boys well and deliberately stepped back in the play, creating an opportunity for Lachlan to share his knowledge. Daniel emphasised the importance of physical modelling between children as he said it allows children with expertise to expose their peers to new thinking and new skills.

Getting him to rather than tell me what he can do show me and in doing that he's exposing particularly Lachlan who came up and had a look, that's

why I said oh how do you tie knots
 Lachlan so its expanding his thinking
 as well so I'm getting Aaron to
 physically show me what he
 interpreted, his interpretation of a knot
 is but I'm also exposing other children
 and hoping that they look at the way
 that he's doing things ... and then
 maybe afterwards let them have a turn
 and they can show me how they do it.
 (Daniel, interview 2)

Encouraging children to share their skills with their peers was a strategy that Heather also used consistently. In the play example, Whitu decided he wanted to construct a building from Mobilo (plastic material that can be fitted together to construct vehicles and buildings). He did not know how to get started and he asked Heather for help. Another child, Martin, was busy building a complex Mobilo structure and Heather saw an opportunity for Martin to share his knowledge with Whitu. Heather explained her intention was to position Martin as an expert in construction.

In this situation it is like tuakana teina as opposed to naturally occurring sort because you know one of Martin's strengths is he's the expert when it comes to mobilo so while he might lack in the conversation area to make friendships ... it gives him something where he knows he's good at it that he can be a leader and he can be the expert and the other children acknowledge and respect him for that rather than oh I don't play with him cause he can't talk. (Heather, interview 2)

Heather deliberately utilised the opportunity that presented itself to promote Martin's expertise and in doing so positioned him in a teaching role alongside his peers. She was particularly intent on maximising this moment as Martin had difficulty expressing himself and rarely talked to his peers.

These findings demonstrate the potential for children to contribute to each other's learning through modelling skills within their peer group. In these examples, Lachlan and Martin were encouraged to teach their peers how to make knots and how to construct with mobilo. Importantly, the teachers viewed these children as having valuable expertise and intentionally created opportunities for that expertise to be shared. These results (specifically evidence of more capable children assisting the performance of their peers) relate to the notion of

'pedagogical relationships with peers' (Hedges, et al., 2011, p. 196). Hedges et al. (2011) have identified the importance of peer interactions for enabling children to contribute to each other's learning and thinking by drawing on each other's knowledge. Similarly, in this study, teachers recognised the role of peers as sharing their expertise to extend each other's learning.

Encouraging leadership amongst the peer group

In addition to creating opportunities for children to share their expertise, teachers sought opportunities for children to take on leadership roles during learning experiences. Paula (T) was an avid gardener who had recently established an area for children to create a vegetable garden. Paula and Anna (another teacher at the same centre) met together to select pairs of children to work together planting vegetables. They had considered which children might take on the role of a peer tutor. They then gathered the four-year-old children together and Paula organised them into pairs for a gardening session, as the following excerpt shows.

Which one of my friends did some gardening yesterday? Would you like to do some more gardening today? (chorus of yes from the children) there are some more plants that we need to plant. Can I have my friend David standing up, and Ellie and my friend Laura can you stand up please? You guys were my absolute masters at planting yesterday...my question to you, is to pick a friend that you would like to help today to do some digging and gardening alongside you, to work together as friends, as pairs, who would you like to choose Ellie? Ka pai, what a great choice. Catherine you can be a leader as well, 'cause you were so keen to garden. (Paula, clip 0587)

The children then went down to the vegetable patch and spent a considerable amount of time before lunch planting vegetables. Paula and Anna had carefully considered who they would choose to lead the planting session and Paula explained her thinking during the interview.

They have shown a lot of interest and they are very um good at planting so I wanted to use their expertise and show their friends, that was the aim hopefully for them to show or support

the other friends and you could hear the language later on that some of them do help, so you need to pack it, you need to dig deeper. (Paula, interview 2)

Paula knew which children had knowledge about gardening as she knew some of these children had helped their parents and siblings or grandparents with planting and were quite skilled. In the planting session that followed, these children were heard telling their peers when to dig down deeper and how to pack the soil down and they also showed the child they were paired with how to put the plants in the ground. The peer learning that took place in this gardening experience illustrates child-led scaffolding (Wood et al., 1976), with the more capable children breaking down the steps involved to successfully complete a task. The children adjusted the level of support they gave during the planting task so that their peer was successful. The gardening experience was a catalyst for peer learning and Paula utilised her knowledge of the children to ensure they were empowered to take on a leadership role amongst their peers.

Promoting leadership roles amongst children has been previously researched in New Zealand early childhood settings (Haworth et al., 2006). In the current study, more capable children (tuakana) were encouraged to take on a support role with younger children (teina) and this resulted in the younger, less experienced children gaining new understandings. In Haworth et al.'s (2006) study, researchers also described seeing the Māori teaching learning principle of tuakana teina in action. These findings demonstrated how teachers stepped back to empower children to share their knowledge and skills with their peers.

Teachers' ideas about being intentional

When I interviewed the teachers initially, they expressed a strong belief in peer learning that was child initiated rather than teacher directed. The teachers stated that peer learning happened naturally and that they did not need to intentionally promote this type of learning (one teacher was the exception). Paula described peer learning occurring spontaneously between children and that her promotion of it is an unconscious practice that just happens. When Heather was asked whether she thought it was important to provide opportunities for children to learn from their peers, she was initially puzzled as to why such a question would be asked. Heather then explained how the

opportunities for peer learning were abundant in the environment in which she teaches. Some of the teachers were reluctant to state that they intentionally promoted peer learning, preferring to say that it is a natural part of the day. Kathy seemed to think aloud when asked whether she deliberately incorporated peer learning into her practice. Her response indicated a possible dilemma for her as to whether she wanted to be intentional in her practice in this area or not.

I think I casually do it. I wouldn't say I deliberately do it cause deliberately would have to imply intent. And as much as I'd like to sit here and say I'm the kind of intentional teacher, I think sometimes things happen on a snap of the moment. (Kathy, interview 1)

Teachers seemed reluctant to state they were deliberately supporting peer learning, instead suggesting that if the environment was right then it would happen naturally. Despite a strongly held belief in the importance of naturally occurring opportunities for peer learning through play, the stimulated recall interviews revealed 47 instances of teachers describing how they intentionally supported peer learning and I have shared several examples in this paper. This finding highlighted contradictions between teacher's beliefs about intentional teaching and their practices. Other research has found similar evidence of such irregularities between teachers' beliefs and their practice (McLachlan-Smith, 1996; Rivalland, 2007). This study has found clear evidence of teachers articulating one set of beliefs and then practising another.

Furthermore, the case studies showed that teachers did not always seem to recognise nor clearly express what their role was in supporting peer learning. Despite this, the filmed observations contained examples of teachers utilising their knowledge of individual children to intentionally support peer interactions. Leggett and Ford's (2013) research has contributed to the debate about the relationship of play-based learning and the role of early childhood teachers as intentional teachers. Their findings demonstrated that teachers struggled to articulate their role in children's learning. Leggett and Ford (2013) argued that a focus on intentional learning and teaching would create a deeper understanding of the teaching learning relationship. The results in the present study indicated that teachers were often engaging in intentional acts to support instances of peer learning, even though at times it was not until they reflected on their teaching practice that they gained this realisation about this aspect of their practice.

Reflecting on your own centre practices

This study has revealed how teachers promoted and encouraged peer learning in early childhood settings. Teachers thoughtfully supported children to join group play, with a particular focus on those children who needed extra help. In addition, teachers recognised opportunities for children to be leaders amongst their peers, and positioned them as experts. I conclude with the following questions that I hope are useful to share amongst your teaching team as you reflect on how you can grow your purposeful practice to maximise opportunities for children to collaborate and learn from each other.

- How do we intentionally create opportunities for children to share different ideas/perspectives within our daily curriculum?
- How do we deliberately capitalise on teachable moments when peers rather than teachers can share their knowledge?
- How do we intentionally create opportunities for children to give each other feedback on their learning?
- Do we or could we pair or group children deliberately?
- How do we deliberately scaffold children's peer interactions to shift them from interacting with peers to learning from each other?
- What skills (for example, self-efficacy or social-emotional competence) might help teachers and/or children create more opportunities for peer learning?

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