Young Children's Views of their World

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This collaborative research project is being undertaken by Dr Gillian Potter and Professor Freda Briggs of the de Lissa Institute of Early Childhood and Family Studies, University of South Australia.

The study focuses on how children perceive and understand their experiences of life in Australia, New Zealand, UK, USA and Singapore at the beginning of the 21st century. It is based on the belief that children have competency and a unique perspective.

The aims of this project are to explore 6 - 7 year olds' perceptions of social, cultural and moral issues relevant to their world, to examine the influence of mass media and technology on their thinking and to assist early childhood educators in their understanding of children's thinking in a rapidly changing and increasingly diverse world. This should facilitate the planning and implementation of responsive curriculum.

There have been many studies of children around the world. In Australia - Ochiltree & Amato (1985), Amato (1987): in England Newson & Newson (1968, 1978), Segloe, Pringle &Wedge (1972) and in the United Stares, Bronfenbrenner (1970). In New Zealand, Ritchie and Ritchie (1970, 1978) surveyed child rearing practices and there have also been two longitudinal studies of children's development' (Fergusson et al 1989; Silva, 1990).

Most studies, however, have emphasised an external view of children's knowledge, thoughts and competency as opposed to listening to children talk about how they perceive the world. Children have been constructed as vulnerable, in need of protection and lacking competence with their lives which are directed by adult determination and interest (Mayall, 1994; Morrow & Richards, 1996). Oakley (1994) and Qvortrup (1990) argue that children, as a group, have been invisible and excluded by the social sciences just as women were two decades ago.

Moreover, there has been growing criticism of the pervasive dominance of psychological models of child development and children's voicelessness (Mayall, 1994; Prout & James, 1990). Sociologists and educators are beginning to recognise the importance of understanding how children construct aspects of their experiences within home and school contexts. Indeed, there is growing interest in how children construct themselves and their position in their world.

Scandinavian countries have a strong belief in the importance of children's viewpoints and understandings. Deliberate efforts have been made to include these in research. This arose from the realisation that recent social and economic changes affected children as well as parents. As a result, research into how children understood and experienced their world was undertaken. (Dahlberg, 1990, 1991; Doverborg & Pramling, 1993; Qvortrup, 1990; Solberg, 1990).

Our study is part of an international movement toward giving a priority to the meanings which children construct about their experiences in the context of their everyday lives,

This qualitative research project is taking an interpretive approach to investigating by interview, young children's perceptions of their world. A semi-structured interview schedule has been devised to use with a group of 500, 6 - 7 year old children across five cultures. An effort has been made to reflect gender balance, sociocultural diversity, independent/state schools, urban/ near rural children and Aboriginal/Maori children in the sample. All interviews are being audio taped and transcribed. Interviews are being conducted by the two researchers on a 1:1 basis with young children in a familiar setting. The interview schedule is used to encourage children to express their opinions relating to the roles and responsibilities of families and family members, culture, issues relating to social justice, safety, school, mass media, popular culture and religion.

Discourse analysis will facilitate the description of children's experiences in the domains mentioned above. SPSS software will be used to help identify similarities and differences between children's experiences according to gender, cultural group, sociocultural factors and parents' education and employment.

The particular age group has been selected because children of this age are becoming increasingly articulate. They are aware of mass media and technology and have been at school long enough to have opinions about school and social justice issues. They are relatively relaxed with strangers in an interview situation in their school setting.

The study will provide valuable and up to date insight into children's thinking about childhood at a time when there have been vast changes in the family, childcare, education, environment, economy and society. Such insight will be invaluable to early childhood educators professionals and policy makers.

Findings of the research will be published so they can be used by students in teacher education programs at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

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