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17\textsuperscript{th} EECERA Conference
Exploring Vygotsky’s ideas:
Crossing Borders
Language experiences

Preverbal children in Australian childcare centres
Introduction 1

• This research focused on infants in Australian childcare centres in order to examine everyday experiences as a means of describing the culture of the childcare centre in terms of values and beliefs about infants in Australian society.

• The choice to use language and communication as a window onto the child’s experience grew out of the influence of Vygotsky and his theories on the role language, as communication, in development.
The research

• Aims
  – To examine the Australian childcare context as a developmental niche and discuss implications for future design of group education and care settings

• The methodology
  – Epistemological approach – phenomenology
  – Theoretical perspective – socio/cultural view of human development and relationships and the context identified as a development niche
  – Methodology – An interpretist model emphasising the importance of language, history, culture and context in development
  – Method – recording of daily experience by concentrating on naturalistic, uncontrolled data with an emphasis on interpreting communicative intent
The method

• Data
  – Infants from 6 months – 24 months observed. It is within the interactive social and physical organisation of human activity in the first two years that children develop a sense of self, sense of others, formal language and culture. Observations were naturalistic consisting of 20 minutes uninterrupted video recording every two weeks
  – Video recordings were transcribed and coded as communicative language acts

• Findings
  – Focussed on the two centres as a developmental niche.

• Discussion
  – JAS and relationships
Contents

• The developmental niche
• Language as a communicative act
• Language, culture and cognition in infancy
• The data – naturalistic observations
• The Australian childcare centre as a developmental niche
• Conclusions
The developmental niche

• Super and Harkness (1972, 1986)
  – A system consisting of:
    – The physical and social settings within which children live
    – The culturally regulated customs of childcare
    – Caregiver’s theories about children
The developmental niche

• Valsiner (1987)

Zone of proximal development

Zone of free movement

Zone of promoted activity

The role of the more competent member of the culture helps distinguish the zones.
Communicative Acts

Language and Culture

Act
Action
Context
Communicative acts

• Joint attention
  – The process in which mental activity is communicated between participants. A “meeting of minds” which is the basis for communication and cultural learning about the outside world (Bruner, 1995).
  – Intentional, goal oriented activity
    • Three indices used to describe communicative action
      – Gaze alteration
      – Repair of failed messages
        » If the addressee does not respond in the intended manner, infants frequently augment the intensity of the communicative behaviour or substitute a new gesture for the first, as if to clarify the message (Bretherton et al, 1981:55). This is an indication of intersubjectivity
      – Ritualisation of previously instrumental gestures
Children and culture

• Cole (1996) said that in a sense children are “cultural objects” themselves.
  
  – *The changing means by which they appropriate the cultural toolkit of their society in the process of becoming adult members is central to the process of ontogenetic change (p. 181).*
A cultural approach to ontology
(Cole, 1996)
Joint attention

- Joint Attention is the process of sharing one’s experience of observing an object or event, by following gaze or pointing gestures. It is critical for social development, language acquisition, cognitive development.
Joint attention

Beginning of theory of mind
Example of meaning within JAS

- Natasha
Joint attention - Natasha

- Context: Natasha has a new baby at home. She was given a new doll to look after when her Mother and sibling came home from hospital. She has brought her doll to childcare. The children are singing together.
- Action: Peter, when shown the doll hits it.
- Act: Natasha first shows approval of Peter’s action and then shows disapproval by gathering the doll in her arms in a nurturing movement.
Natasha 2
Repair of missed messages

• In the first year infants will use gestural messages and in order to make themselves heard these will include repetitions, additional information, combinations and substitute messages.
Communicative acts

• Sam
Repair of missed message - Sam

- Context: The children are having lunch sitting on a picnic rug. Sam wants another sandwich.
- Communicative acts: Eye gaze, directly at adults, following sandwiches and looking back at a particular adult. Pointing and grasping gestures, vocalised “more” twice and sat back mumbling and expressing displeasure. After 23 identifiable acts she achieved her sandwich.
Communicative acts

- Chris
**Attempted repair of missed message - Chris**

- **Context:** Morning tea, Chris enjoys his drink and then drops his cup on the ground. It is picked up.

- **Communicative acts:** Chris is still thirsty and asks for more drink. He points at another child’s drink, vocalises, uses facial expressions. He communicates he wants something but not what. Without an empty cup to wave he cannot make himself understood. He does not get a drink.
Chris 1
Chris 2
The Australian childcare centre as a developmental niche

- The physical and social settings of everyday life
  - Routines dominated the day in the centres observed. Often routines took place in permanently designated spaces and the zone of free movement was very small. Many rules were constraining and the zone of promoted activity involved many rules about hygiene and safety.
The Australian childcare centre as a developmental niche

- The customs of childcare
  - These include beliefs about infants and the form these beliefs take in such social and cultural settings as training courses and industry (childcare) standards.
  - Therefore regulations, government policies and quality assurance systems dictate practices, use of the environment and relationships that prevail in centres.
The Australian childcare centre as a developmental niche

- The psychology of the caregivers
  - The observations about repair of missed messages could be construed as adults of the culture not expecting preverbal children to have high levels of communicative competence. This social view of infatns needs to be explored if infant competence is to be part of the social image of children within our institutions.
Implications

• Children were studied as part of a particular context – therefore observing their experiences is a way of examining the context
  – Is childcare designed by adults to meet the best interests of adults? Which adults?
  – Do caregivers need to learn to listen to the communicative acts of preverbal children if children are to have agency in the institution of childcare?
References