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THE CONSTRUCTION OF 'CHILD' AND 'CHILDHOOD' IN OFFICIAL CHURCH EDUCATIONAL DOCUMENTS PART 2: IMPLICATIONS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD RELIGIOUS EDUCATORS

Abstract:

This paper following on from the paper "How Shall we Know Them? Part 1 - The Construction of 'Child' and 'Childhood' in Official Church Educational Documents" (Grajczonek, 2010), considers the implications that such constructions have for religious educators. It argues that at the heart of these implications are religious educators' own views of 'child' and 'childhood'. It is important that all educators purposefully consider the question, "Who is the child?" for themselves, and then how that sits with the construction of "Who is the child?" in these documents. Within the intricate and complex web that includes the Church documents' image of the child, the contemporary early childhood image of child and the local cultural context of the image of child, religious educators must identify and articulate an image of "Who is the child?" that is aligned with their personal views, the local cultural context views, as well as with early childhood and Church views. Given the ambiguity that exists among these, the task of early childhood institutions and schools articulating their image of child is not without its challenges. However, it is essential that religious educators at the staff level come to shared understandings of the image of the child that is informed by all key elements, as without this articulation, the child will not be at the centre of all teaching and learning in the early childhood religion setting/classroom.

Introduction

Underpinning all decisions regarding young children's learning is the image of the child as strong, competent and capable(Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007; Fraser, 2006; Millikin, 2003). Contemporary early childhood education rejects the image of the child as being weak, deficient and needy. The image of the child held by an early childhood educator directly influences that educator's philosophy of teaching, his/her approach to early childhood education and how he/she understands the construction of childhood. The image of the child and how childhood is constructed are also significant to early childhood religious educators. In a recent publication in the *Journal of Religious Education* (Grajczonek, 2010), the construction of 'child' and 'childhood' in official Church educational documents was interrogated. When compared with contemporary views of 'child' and 'childhood', the findings of this interrogation highlighted a number of ambiguities and challenges for early childhood religious education. This paper seeks to elaborate further on those findings of the previous study, specifically in terms of their implications such findings might have for early childhood religious education and religious educators.

Summary of findings of previous study

Before such implications are articulated, it would be helpful to summarise the key findings from the study. The specific documents analysed in this study included: *Gravissimum Educationis*, Declaration on Christian Education (Vatican Council II, 1965), *The Catholic School* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977), *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988), and finally *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997). Extracts that included the words 'child', 'children', and 'childhood' to which specific characteristics and attributes were assigned were selected and analysed using Systemic Functional Linguistics (Freebody, 2003; Halliday, 1975, 1994) and Membership Categorisation Analysis (Freebody, 2003; ten Have, 2004). The analysis involved an integrated investigative process, which applied Systemic Functional Linguistics to determine how the language functions, and Membership Categorisation Analysis to gain deeper insights

into the nature of childhood as described in the specific and implied category bound activities assigned to children.

The analysis revealed that overall in these documents children are not viewed as active agents either in their own experiences of childhood or as participants in decisions which affect their lives. Explicit in the documents is what is to be done *to* children and *for* children but by whom is not always made clear. On the one hand, it is at times implied to be parents and/or teachers. On the other hand, it is explicitly named as the family, the Church, and the Catholic school as responsible for children's training and actions. Such training is assigned to children's physical, intellectual and moral development. However, *prudent* training is explicitly required for children's sexual development. With this emphasis on children's development, children are constructed as *becoming* rather than *being*, that is, "the significance of the here and now in children's lives" (Australian Government Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations, 2009) is not recognised or acknowledged. The training of children as articulated overall in these documents is to *provide* for, and *protect*, children - two of the 'Ps' in the *United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989), but remains silent on the third 'P' *participation*.

A further finding of the study was that children are constructed as deficient and vulnerable rather than capable and strong (Dahlberg et al., 2007; Malagazzi, 1993), unable to cope with secular culture which is implied to be harmful and pessimistic. This construction is particularly evident in *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997) which places children into a bleak world (para. 15) from which they seem to have no escape save through the Catholic school. This construction more than any other, constructs children as lacking any ability to initiate or enact change themselves.

Children are mostly constructed as the universal child, that is the *one* child representing *all* children, which disregards several key theories regarding early childhood, including sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1967), which advocates the social nature of learning and bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), which emphasises the many contexts children inhabit all of which influence their learning. However, children are acknowledged as unique individuals in *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 22). Children are placed in several cohorts including: vast numbers denied an education; many others denied a Christian education; and finally, in most cases as "children of God". The "children of God" construction is particularly remarkable in that it places children alongside and equal with adults, that is, as a 'competent subject' (Dillen, 2007, p. 41).

Overall then, the contemporary image of the child as competent and capable, whose present being and current experiences are valued contradicts the image of child constructed in these documents. What does this contradiction imply for religious educators in early childhood settings?

Implications for early childhood religious education and religious educators

Consider purposefully the image of the child

At the heart of this discussion regarding the implications of how the 'child', 'children' and 'childhood' are constructed in the documents is this concept of 'image of the child'. The image of the child directly shapes how educators understand childhood, which in turn shapes and maps approaches to teaching and learning. It is therefore crucial that before educators think about curriculum planning, preparation and implementation, that they first consider and articulate what is *their* image of child. Rinaldi (as cited in Hughes, 2007) argues that the following key questions must be seriously considered by all educators:
- Who is the child?
- What is childhood?
- Does childhood simply exist, or do we create it?
- Does each society create its image of childhood and of its child?
- How does a child learn? (p. 50)

Educators' images of children have many reflections (Fraser, 2006) which include first, a personal one informed by our memories and experiences of our own childhood. Then, a more objective image that is constructed by our observations of children is added. The final and strongest reflection is the cultural one, "shaped by the values and beliefs about what childhood should be at the time and place in which we live" (Fraser, 2006, p. 20). Rinaldi (2001) emphasises the significance of cultural influences in shaping values and beliefs about what childhood should be. The contemporary image of child reflects society's more significant valuing of children. It is as if society has re-imaged its views of the child and the construction of childhood, articulated more formally at the international level in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989) as well as at the national level in *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (Australian Government Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations, 2009). Certainly in nations such as Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States of America, and countries of Western Europe, children's place in society is no longer hidden; they are active participants who have the right to articulate themselves about matters that concern them.

It is equally as important for early childhood religious educators to also consider and articulate their image of the child. However, for religious educators in the Catholic sector, in addition to their own personal reflections, and to the objective reflections as well as cultural and societal reflections, exists another reflection to be considered – that of the Church as articulated in its official education documents. Just as educators must know the key informing educational theories regarding the image of child and construction of childhood, early childhood religious educators must be cognisant of the Church's image of child and its construction of childhood. Therefore our discussions regarding the documents' views need to begin with how the image of child as constructed in such documents might inform and shape religious educators' own images of the child. An extended implication of seeking to articulate one's own image of child clearly and succinctly is the importance and necessity for *all* staff then to come to a shared understanding of what the image of child might be for their particular early childhood setting or school. This discussion at the Catholic setting would consider views of children at five levels: (i) first, each staff member would need to share their personal images and this should be done in a respectful way as a diverse range of images would be articulated; (ii) then it would be necessary to attend to the question of "Who is the child in *this setting*, at *this time*?", which considers the specific local cultural context which has to be at the heart of all discussions and decisions; (iii) third, the image of the child as constructed in the Church documents requires exploration; (iv) next, the contemporary view of the child in terms of early childhood education theory must be also taken into account; and finally (v) a clearly articulated image of "Who is the child for us here at St. ....?" is required.

Responding to the question of "Who is the child?" is key for all educators working with young children in Catholic child care and early education centres, as well as early childhood settings in Catholic schools. Once religious educators consider this question both personally and at the institution level, other key implications concerning young children's learning in the religion program can then be attended to.

Consider children created in "the image and likeness of God"

Two key images constructed in the documents were "children of God" and "created in the image and likeness of God". These images deserve probing at a deeper level, as the documents include adults along with children in both constructions. Two different aspects of these constructions have implications for educators. First, in being constructed with adults implies that children are no less than adults and therefore command the same respect and treatment as adults. To do less is to enact 'adultism', which dismisses childhood and requires children to act like adults (Miller-McLemore, 2003, as cited in Dillen, 2007). With this as the central concern and starting point, all other decisions are then made so as to affirm and ensure children's dignity and agency that is generally given to adults as a matter of course. The implication here is that religious educators *invite* children rather than *demand,* for example respect children's decisions when they opt not to pray or respond during shared prayer sessions; seek their genuine input into decisions about when they would like to pray or which aspect of the church they would like to learn more about, or which symbol on the altar they would like to know more about, or which sacred symbols of other religious

traditions about which they would like to know more. Scaffold them in their emerging critiquing skills for example, by asking what were the 'good' or positive aspects of the prayer celebration or class prayer assembly and what were the 'not so good' or weak aspects. Probe more deeply into their responses by asking how they might improve prayer time or the gospel presentation. "I wonder what else we could add to the presentation of that gospel story to make it more alive, or more engaging, or more creative." This enables young children to realise they can evaluate or question and they will come to realise that they are valued as participative agents rather than as passive recipients.

The second aspect of the particular construction "created in the image and likeness of God" which acknowledges the dignity of all children implies their sacredness, uniqueness and individuality. It is this understanding of children as unique individuals and having dignity that must underpin and drive our central *modus operandi*. This is related to the previous discussion but it does require intentional and explicit honouring of children, their questions, responses, ideas and the like. Sometimes in the busyness and rushed nature of the days linked to young children's seemingly endless energy with constant chatter and questions, such chatter and questions can be ignored, dismissed and/or disregarded as idle asides. Young children will soon come to realise that what they have to say, their input, their contribution is neither highly regarded nor important. Their sense of dignity and sacredness can be diminished. The only means we have of attending to the dignity and sacredness of each child is to *listen*, really listen and *hear* what it is they are seeking to express. The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education pays great attention to listening to each child, enacting a pedagogy of listening. The implication arising from this construction of children as being "created in the image and likeness of God" is a pivotal one for religious educators.

A pedagogy of listening requires the educator to listen with "the third ear, to hear implied meanings of children's words" (Forman & Fyfe, 1998, p. 249). Listening as practised within the Reggio Emilia approach is central to the learning relationship between educator and student and if an educator seeks to attend to the individual child's learning he/she must first listen by being open and attentive:

> Listening is a premise of every learning relationship. Of course learning is an individual act, but we also know that learning is taken to a higher plane when there is the possibility to act and reflect on the learning itself. Representing our learning process and being able to share with others becomes indispensible for that reflexiveness which generates knowledge. (Rinaldi, 2006)

For religious educators to enact a pedagogy of listening, an acknowledgement of, and attention to, the dignity, uniqueness, and sacredness of each child is required. A pedagogy of listening (Dahlberg et al., 2007; Rinaldi, 1993) acknowledges young children's speaking rights as well as the right to be listened to, that is, not be interrupted, or pre-empted or even manipulated. Their suggestions need to be legitimised. Overall, early childhood educators do take children's agency seriously and ensure that they do have decision-making rights. However, during the religion class these same rights can be overlooked. An example of this is to respect children's personal decisions when they make the choice not to pray during class prayer times. Comments made by teachers following a prayer time in which a significant number of children elect not to pray, such as, "You've probably forgotten how to pray," (Grajczonek, 2006b, p. 166) imply that these children should have prayed. Such comments do not enact children's agency and voice. To enact a pedagogy of listening would reflect an image of child that would explicitly say, "You, created in the image and likeness of God, have much to offer to this place; your ideas, thoughts, contributions and beliefs are valued, as is our relationship." If the child is to be at the centre of all our curriculum and pedagogical decision-making, we need to first come to *know* the child, and to come to know the child requires *relating* to the child, *speaking* with the child, *listening* to the child. We cannot respond authentically and insightfully if we have not listened. At the same time, it is also equally as important to explicitly demonstrate and model for children their obligations to reciprocate listening to, as well as respecting and honouring others. Several times throughout the documents the child and children are constructed as "child of God" and "children of God". Such images are at the same time both problematic and beneficial. On the one hand, tensions arise from this construction as it suggests that all children in the class are children of God and educators know that given the pluralist nature of student populations in Catholic schools, not all children would 'fit' this image. When religious educators are reflecting upon their image of the child in terms of

their diverse lives and backgrounds, they cannot disregard children's diverse religious contexts. Educators' views of what the child is and ought to be is rooted in culture, society and family values (Fraser, 2006), but family religious traditions must also be taken into consideration. We do not only live in a multi-cultural society, but we also live in a multi-religious society and that society is reflected in education systems, including the Catholic school system. Our image of child must reflect this diversity across all aspects of their learning, including the classroom religion program.

In the first instance then, all educators in Catholic schools need to be aware of the nature of the student populations in their classrooms. If early years educators do not know who are Christian and not Christian, then they run the risk of not acknowledging the Other, or worse, completely disregarding and dismissing the Other, treating all students as belonging to one faith, in this case, Catholicism (Grajczonek, In press). There is much discussion and debate surrounding the issue of students who are not Catholics in Catholic schools (Chambers, Grajczonek, & Ryan, 2006; Donlevy, 2002, 2006) and further clarification of the complexities associated with this issue is certainly required. Notwithstanding that however, one effective starting point for early childhood religious educators would be to acknowledge and embrace diversity giving 'voice' to *all* young students. One way we could enact this is to invite everyone to share their religious beliefs, rites and celebrations, key religious days and the like with other class members. Such discussion can initiate rich interest and engagement.

An example of how to acknowledge the Other was recently shared by an early childhood religious educator who gave 'voice' to a young Hindu boy when he wanted to share the excitement of his family's previous evening's religious festival at home. He had brought the symbol of the particular deity, Ganesha, to school and was able to explain the significance of this symbol with great passion. His knowledge and ability to express that informatively and enthusiastically ignited immediate response and interest in the classroom and the teacher recognised the 'teachable moment'. She then reached for the candle, crucifix and coloured cloth from the prayer table and shared the religious significance of these three symbols for Christians. Suddenly, the young students were engaged in what these symbols meant for Christians (and most were Catholics) and wanted to know all about them, other symbols and their associated celebrations. Following the investigations over the next few weeks, these young children were then able to stand up and share elements of their own religion informatively. The teacher reported that her classroom religion program in that year had been the most successful and effective in terms of students' interest and engagement in, as well as knowledge, understanding and appreciation of, the classroom religion program outcomes.

Emphasise children's 'being'

The documents also place a significant emphasis on children's *development* rather than their *being*. In this construction, children are viewed *universally*, the *one* child representing *all* children who develop through a series of stages including physical, cognitive, social and moral. It is as if children are passive recipients seemingly 'caught' or 'stuck' in a particular stage of development, waiting for the appropriate adult training to proceed to the next stage. These developmental theories had significant influence on children's religious developmental theories (Fowler, 1981). Poststructural theory influenced by the work of Foucault (1972), challenges these theories of structures into which children are placed in order to explain their development, advocating that children should have agency in constructing their own lives. Poststructuralism argues that *the child* in the singular form cannot be representative of *all* children, as each child's experiences of childhood is unique and distinct to a variety of contexts including their social, cultural, political and religious contexts.

Such challenges can also raise dilemmas for early childhood religious educators who on the one hand, call on such theories as Fowler's to assist in their considerations of young children's approaches to their learning in the religion program. For example, they know that it can be difficult for the young child to fully understand and appreciate the metaphorical and religious meanings of the sacred creation myths. They know that if not presented in the appropriate ways, young children in the intuitive projective faith stage

(Fowler, 1981) find it difficult to distinguish between fact and fantasy and therefore can take such stories literally. However, on the other hand, if they hold the image of child as competent and capable, they know that they can find ways of explaining the role of metaphor and how it has assisted all cultures to try to explain their beginnings and relationships with their creator/s. By paying attention to children's *being* at the present time, religious educators can harness their strength and capabilities, listen to their 'voice', to their questions, wonderings and even explanations about such key stories. Religious educators can explore with children the richness of the Australian Indigenous Dreaming stories and how they provide meaning for Aborigines' understandings of the origins of life and world. Young children will be intrigued and engaged in such investigations. The new sociology of childhood (James & James, 2004; Mayall, 2002) focuses on the child as an individual and values each child's *being* and *current* experiences of his/her childhood. This understanding has been captured and embraced in *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (Australian Government Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations, 2009) which emphasises young children's *being*:

> Childhood is a time to be, to seek, and make meaning of the world... *Being* recognises the significance of the here and now in children's lives. It is about the present and them knowing themselves, building and maintaining relationships with others, engaging with life's joys and complexities, and meeting challenges in everyday life. The early childhood years are not solely preparation for the future but also about the present. (p. 7)

Enable and activate children's resilience

The documents, particularly *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997) also construct children as vulnerable. When educators view children as vulnerable they construct them as needy and wanting, rather than as independent and strong. Yet again, we meet this construction of the 'deficit' rather than the 'abundant' child. Educators know the importance and value of young children's resilience. Children cannot be cocooned from life's challenges and it is essential that young children are encouraged and shown how to deal with challenges and frustrations, to explore fresh approaches, to persevere and persist. Eaude (2009) insists that children's search for meaning necessarily involves them trying to make sense of difficult issues such as suffering, pain and loss, and that too often this is the one aspect of children's spirituality that adults avoid perhaps in their overriding desire to protect children. However, it is as important for children to try to make sense of such issues as it is for adults. In his program "Ten Sources *of* Power *and* Perspective" (pp. 171-209) which is a series of steps that offer "ways of empowering that deeply felt impulse that is the innate spirituality of children" (p. 173), Hart (2003) suggests that educators assist children to master themselves, to take that deep breath and work through the initial frustration or discomfort, to persist rather than to give up.

Many instances can occur during any one day in which children become upset and feel powerless, and during such times teachers could support and scaffold children to problem-solve, to respond and to initiate a positive outcome, rather than react. Children's literature is filled with individual children who take agency, who are resilient and who do take the initiative to achieve positive outcomes, rather than react in negative ways. A very negative image of children's circumstances was conveyed for those children constructed as the "new poor" in this document (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997, para. 15). Educators could respond to this construction in a variety of ways. First, ensure that the class/group takes initiative and agency during any whole school activity that focuses on providing aid for children in such circumstances. Let them be part of the decision-making processes regarding what can be done and how to do it. Discuss with children the Church's stance on social teaching and social justice particularly with regards to what the Church means by an 'option for the poor' (Grajczonek, 2006a). During such discussions and school activities, assist children to realise that all of us have the capacity to make a difference in others people's lives, just as we have in our own lives.

Another aspect of this vulnerability is children's seeming inability to cope with the bleak environment of the contemporary world (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997, para. 15). In this particular construction, little sense of hope is generated. However, it is important that educators ensure an optimistic and positive view of the world is promoted. Children cannot come to believe that they or others are victims

of a world that offers no hope or of circumstances that are insurmountable. Indeed the Christian worldview is one of hope. It is essential that children do not become overly anxious about the state of the world, or that they have no ways of enacting change. Young children can be taught the Christian understanding of hope and can be scaffolded to voice what that 'hope' might look like, sound like and feel like in the early years setting or classroom, in the school and in the community. They can be assisted and scaffolded to appreciate that they can enact that hope; they can enact that change. It would also be equally as important to assist children to reflect on any change they enacted, explicitly acknowledging and articulating their efforts and successes.

Conclusion

The construction of the 'child', 'childhood' and 'children' in these official Church educational documents has raised a number of significant implications for all religious educators. Recognising that ambiguity exists in these constructions, impels educators all the more to know in what ways they can respond to ensure young children's participation, to enact both their agency and voice. This paper has considered several implications for religious educators that calls for their own articulation of the image of the child, the consideration of the dignity and sacredness of each child who is created "in the image and likeness of God", the emphasis of children's *being*, and the enabling and activating of children's resilience. These implications are only examples and are by no means definitive. They are offered as ways to open discussion and as springboards for further discussion and implementation into the early childhood religion program as well as into the religious life of all early childhood settings and classrooms. It is also important that discussion goes beyond the classroom to the wider school or centre setting. At staff meetings, school/centre committees meetings, professional development sessions, and the like, religious educators can be advocates for children's voices and participatory rights not only in their own classrooms but also in the wider setting outside of the school/institutional contexts.

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