

Twenty first century children and curriculum: a cultural-historical perspective

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The life experiences of children in the twenty-first century differ greatly from those of previous generations. This paper draws on ideas from cultural historical theory to consider how the cultural and social experiences of young children are working to shape their development in particular ways. The paper reflects on the extent to which this understanding can be used as a basis for thinking about curriculum from a temporal perspective as a means of increasing the relevance of the early childhood curriculum to young children and their families.

I had never actually given a great deal of thought to the temporal relevance of curriculum until we had children of our own. In the years prior to having children I taught in early years settings and began teaching and researching early childhood education at Monash University. During this period I did not particularly think about time as an aspect of curriculum. Time in terms of the present in which I was teaching; time in terms of the past which defined many of the teaching practices I was using, time in terms of the future to which the children were heading; and finally time in terms of the relationship between the children's play, learning and development. If anything, I focussed on time in terms of 'stages of development', opting to plan learning experiences that were supposedly aimed at supporting the development I could 'see' and drawing on the use of traditional materials and activities such as play dough, home corner and building blocks.

Later, when I was able to begin researching with the City of Casey early childhood teachers, I began to understand time as related to the cultural historical argument. Here I understood this as suggesting that development was derived from the social and cultural practices of a community which were generated within the context of their collective history. I think I understood this in an abstract sense as I was able to understand the argument that the conceptual and language based tools of the community developed over time (and formed the basis of activity for the newborn), in that children would learn through their participation in these historically derived tools. I am not so sure that I was as alert to time-in-the-present, and the way that these same tools were being re-used and re-developed in the very process of their social and historical construction. Thus, my interpretation of cultural historical theory was probably a little static as I tended to focus on how the tools had developed, and that these tools would be acquired by children, however I was not as aware of their use as tools for understanding, constructing and responding to the present in ways which worked to shape the future.

At about the same time our first child was due the early stages of our work in the City of Casey were drawing to a close. In this round of research we had focussed on learning more about cultural-historical theory and the ways in which this could be used to inform teaching practice so that we could move beyond the more traditional models allowed by developmentalism and constructivism. The teachers had been highly engaged and committed to the project and developed some thoughtful responses and ways of working in practice with cultural historical theory. Their understandings of the social dimensions of learning certainly deepened, and they became more focussed on observing children's learning in terms of the social interactions occurring between children and staff in relation to particular tools and activities. As we engaged with the idea that children's learning was central to their cultural experiences we came up against the role of play both in their daily lives, but also as a pedagogical tool in early years education. If we were to accept the cultural-historical argument that children's development is a function of their social and cultural experience, did this mean we also had to accept aspects of their play worlds that did not necessarily fit with our

conceptions of ‘appropriate’ play and the pedagogical use of play in early childhood education? The discussion began to focus on the ‘need’ for children to access traditional early childhood play activities due to the ‘constraints’ they experienced in their daily lives, for example through living in houses with smaller yards, not being able to ‘roam free’ because of perceived safety issues; or through engaging with digital or corporate toys instead of more traditional experiences. Having begun to think about development in cultural terms, the teachers necessarily began to engage with the idea that their positions on play were also necessarily cultural, and in doing so, identified the culture of ‘early childhood play’ and children’s current ‘play worlds’ in relation to the future world the children themselves were going to need to occupy. For example, the following exchange highlights how these three time-dimensions began to intersect giving rise to questions about whose play it actually was that they valued, and for what reasons play was being utilised in the early childhood curriculum:

Educator 1: *You can’t let your kid go riding up and down the street because it is not safe. They might get run over. So the opportunities that we had, or have grown up with, in a lot ways, children simply don’t have any more in their home environments. I think the basic things of being able to play in a garden space and get stuff out and play with things are important. We can help provide that environment for children when they may not get it at home simply because it is not there*

Educator 2: *Are we reliving our childhood? Maybe a childhood that we had, that we feel that the children are missing out on today?*

Educator 3: *What about the world that they are going to grow into? (From Edwards, 2009, p. 66).*

An interesting debate ensued in which the teachers explored how they responded to the play objects and experiences children encountered in their homes and families. This discussion touched on the corporatisation of childhood and childhood artefacts as a significant aspect of the way childhood is experienced by today’s children. This aspect of the conversation focussed on the ways in which the teachers related to the cultural play experiences of the children they worked with in the context of their classrooms. Some teachers believed that incorporating corporatized play into the curriculum had value, whilst another believed that early years education should provide opportunities for play that drew on more natural experiences:

I had some children bring in some Spiderman toys a couple of years ago and once upon a time I would have said ‘put it in your bag’. I was in a very different space then and so by this time I was able to say ‘Ok, great, so you like Spiderman, how does he move?’ and started this whole conversation and by the end of the term they had made Spiderman masks, they had made him clay, they had painted him, they had done every single possible thing you could think of, or not think of, because they came up with amazing ideas about Spiderman. It was really eye opening to me to see how limited I had been and when we just opened the door and allowed things to occur, what could happen (from, Edwards, 2009, p. 67).

I am selective at what I greet warmly, creatures and things I believe have potential for learning, but McDonalds toys I believe there are other things they could be doing and there are lots of things they could learn about. It is about what you value as play and learning (from, Edwards, 2009, p. 68).

During this period of pedagogical and theoretical reflection my husband and I began to prepare for the birth of our first child. Two things strike me as particularly significant about this period, and as having prompted me to think more broadly about the concept of time as it is related to a cultural historical perspective on development. The first was the implementation of a welfare proposal in which the Australian government would give to parents a lump sum of \$5,000 upon the birth of

their child, independent of their level of taxable income. The second was our increasing engagement with our new our local community to which we had recently moved upon the purchase of our first home. We lived within the City of Casey in an area broadly characterised as representing the worst of aspirational living in which the central social, cultural, economic and recreational activity was enacted and derived from the local shopping centre – Fountain Gate. The name is perhaps unfortunate, as there are not really any fountains in the area, nor any gates. However, it has become synonymous with all that is represented by massive shopping centres accessible primarily by car and focussing mainly on the act of consumption as a means of social participation. The area, the shopping centre and the lifestyles of the people living there were somewhat lovingly, and yet biting, characterised by the sitcom ‘Kath and Kim’ which went on to have great appeal with Australian audiences. Thus, whilst I was participating in conversations with the local teachers about the role of play in learning, my husband and I were visiting Fountain Gate to purchase the necessary equipment for the forthcoming baby with the promise of a \$5,000 bonus to come.

Until this point neither of us had been particularly interested in shopping, and we were not really interested in brand name clothing, furniture, cars or accessories. We had pretty much avoided Fountain Gate as much as possible, using it only to do our banking and grocery shopping. When we first ventured out to shop for the baby we were confronted by an amazing range of options. Options including where to shop, what to buy and how to buy it, including the advice to ‘buy now and pay later with your baby bonus’. However, the options did not stop here as we could also choose from a remarkable range of products, each with different logos and character associations, all suggesting particular things about our parenting beliefs and social status, and all of them carrying associated price tags. This was just the basic equipment, a pram, a nappy bag, a cot and a change table. To come were the clothes and toys. In retrospect it is perhaps surprising that the sheer range and corporatized nature of the clothing and toys took me surprise. I had just spent the last ten years of my life working in early childhood education, and yet, really I was surprisingly ignorant of the toys, clothing and artefacts that many of the children and families within the community in which I worked regularly used and purchased. We did our best to buy what we thought necessary and attempted to avoid clothes and toys which we considered overly commercial. This significantly reduced our ‘options’ as there was surprisingly little left over that remained unbranded.

Thus we entered parenthood and I continued teaching at the university, reading about cultural historical theory and working with the City of Casey teachers. As first time parents completely and utterly besotted with our child we endeavoured to provide a home environment that was largely free of commercial product, commercial television and commercial technology use. I had seen young children at Fountain Gate dressed from head to toe in Thomas the Tank Engine or Dora the Explorer clothes carrying matching backpacks. At playgroup many of them also had the drink bottles, lunch boxes and even snacks to match. I began to wonder at this level of consumption, how it was made possible and how it was interfacing with the children’s learning, play and development. At home we continued to maintain our stance against commercialized products and asked friends and family to try and avoid gift giving that included characterised toys or other commercial products. It helped that we limited our son’s access to commercial television and internet sites, and in many cases he simply did not know the names of many of the available products. Some people asked us if we thought we were being ‘fair’ to our child and suggested he would be socially disadvantaged at pre-school and school without knowledge of the toys, products and television shows the other children would have. I thought about the debate between the Casey teachers and whether or not I was in fact choosing to value a particular type of play, and experience and childhood over others.

The arrival of our second child just two years after the first rapidly changed many of our practices. Gone was the time for lots of stories, songs and play in the sandpit. Our previous ban on DVD’s and television was slowly lifted when my sister-in-law lent us a pile of Thomas the Tank Engine

DVD's, and said 'the only way to breastfeed the baby when you are on your own at home with a toddler is to put on one of these'. To start with it was only going to be Thomas the Tank Engine, but soon it was also Postman Pat, and then Fireman Sam, and shortly after this ABC TV became more frequent, and even the baby was watching. We used the DVDs to keep the children quiet whilst packing lunches, organising clothes and washing dishes. Soon they both began to recognise logos in the shops and were asking for toys and products with Thomas, Pat and Sam on them. Whilst we managed to largely resist this, the interface between the television programs and the internet was not as easy. One day I showed both of them the Thomas the Tank Engine website as an alternative to watching yet another DVD. I had supposed and hoped that the website might be more interactive, and in a way it was as we did seem to talk to each other more and engaged in the activities provided even though the website was hosted by HIT entertainment. The children asked for the internet as often as they asked for DVDs, and YouTube was soon a firm favourite. Amongst their preferred activity was viewing YouTube footage posted by other children that featured mini Thomas the Tank episodes showcasing the toy train collections of children from across the globe.

It was about this time that I read the paper by Davydov (1982) outlining many of the central tenets of Vygotsky's cultural historical theory. Of these the one that confronted me the most was this:

"First according to Vygotsky's cultural historical theory, the development of human personality takes place during its upbringing and teaching, and has a specifically historical character, content, and form, and therefore in different historical eras, we see different types of individual psychological development" (Davydov, 1982, p. 15).

It was the notion of different historical eras giving rise to different types of individual psychological development that made me re-think my position on time in relation to the early childhood curriculum. Here we were in an unprecedented time of consumerism, commercialisation, technology and electronic media watching videos on YouTube recorded by children on the other side of the world playing with their Thomas the Tank engine train sets. In the same day we might have watched a Thomas the Tank engine DVD, read a Thomas the Tank engine book and refused to buy a Thomas the Tank t-shirt at Fountain Gate. The interface between the technology, the product, the play and the learning was increasingly blurred. Were the children learning about trains through their play, or were they learning to want Thomas products? Did accessing a community of Thomas the Tank engine fans on YouTube help them see how to engage with the toys in a creative way, or was it just more entertainment? I couldn't really see what type of development this particular era was working to create. In the meantime, I was teaching pre-service teachers at the University about cultural historical theory in the rather static terms I described earlier – as a theory outlining the cultural nature of development and the acquisition of conceptual tools. Yet what were the conceptual tools of this generation, of these 21st century children?

When I thought about how I understood curriculum and looked at what I saw in many early childhood settings I wondered where Thomas the Tank Engine and YouTube were to be found. It was not just Thomas the Tank Engine and YouTube, it could have been any character and any technology – DVDs, digital cameras, online advergames were actually surprisingly absent amongst the many traditionally valued activities and experiences. Following the advice of my colleague Mindy Blaise to read outside of the early childhood literature, I decided to read the research derived from the field of marketing. On doing so I was greatly surprised to find that for several years this field of endeavour had already developed a 'new' theory of development which described the stages and process involved in becoming a consumer from birth through to adulthood (John, 1999). Given the traditional reliance the field of early childhood education has had on theories of development as an informant to practice I wondered about the lack of awareness this research seemed to have within the sector. I thought back again and again to the City of Casey teachers and their discussions around whether or not the cultural play worlds of today's children had a role to play in their classrooms.

The part of me that had parented against consumerism aligned with the traditional, and the part of me that was increasingly seduced by the interface between the digital media, the technology and the consumer-orientated toys thought 'yes, perhaps'. The 'yes, perhaps' was my dawning realisation of the temporal component of cultural historical theory, and therefore its application to curriculum. Time exists in relation to the past, the present and the future. The conceptual tools of these children's worlds are the language and language systems of the past, but also the knowledge systems associated with being and becoming a consumer of products and a user of digital media and technology. This present development will be carried with, and by, these children into a future in which they will create the present that works to define their own children.

A few weeks ago I was at the local park in Oxford with the children. I noticed a group of older girls, probably about ten years old. They were playing a game in which they all had to spin around as fast as they possibly could until they were so dizzy that they fell over. The last one left standing would be the winner. As I watched the girls negotiate the rules of this game it became clear that two of them were assigned a special role, in that they would use their phones to record the game as it unfolded. When the spinning commenced the 'recorder girls' weaved in and about their tumbling friends taking close up shots of their faces, and then moved back out of the action to record the entire scenario. As soon the game ended the girls all gathered around the phones to watch the replay and analysed each tumbling moment and facial reaction. They then played the game again and again, recording each new episode as they went. When the game finally ended there was much discussion about what would happen with the digital data. It was concluded that they weren't allowed to 'post' or 'send' the data anywhere or to anyone as it would be too embarrassing if it became public. The punishment should anyone 'post' or 'send' was to be social exclusion because 'we won't talk to you if you do'. These are 21st century children integrating 21st century technologies and rules into a game I suspect has been played for many years and perhaps will continue to be played. I remember playing this same game (without the phones), I have seen children in early learning centres and at birthday parties play this game, and I suspect this game will be played into the future. The girls used their digital technology in a way which expanded the possibilities for each cycle of the game to be relived and shared as a group. They also used the technology with a sense of responsibility to the ethics of the situation. Their development and learning was changed by the new tool because they could analyse the immediate past, but also because they needed to deal with a very modern problem – that of digital data protection. There were quite clear rules here for the use of the technology in relation to their play in way which made me think again about Davydov's suggestion that "in different historical eras, we see different types of individual psychological development" (Davydov, 1982, p. 15).

In line with this thinking I have begun to lessen my resistance to the children's access to digital media and their use of technologies. In part this came about when we first travelled to Oxford for sabbatical and found ourselves in a two-bedroom second-floor flat heading into winter. Having been accustomed to a four-bedroom house in Australia with a backyard, trampoline and bikes the children initially, and quite literally, bounced off the walls of the flat. We found ourselves constantly telling them to be quiet as we were bothering the neighbours who lived below, above and next door to us. We tried to keep them quiet by playing their DVDs, but they were bored with watching the same shows over and over again. Then we found Cbeebies. Like our earlier capitulation into the DVD's Cbeebies was meant to be a moderate and controlled experience. Perhaps they might watch it for half an hour before the oldest went to school, and then maybe they might watch it for another half an hour after school. Within two weeks they had firm favourites and our conversation was becoming littered with references to Chugginton, Nina and the Neurons, In the Night Garden, Waybuloo, NumberJacks and Charlie and Lola. One morning our eldest son assigned me a role from NumberJacks (I was to be number 3) and I found myself jumping from the couch into the lounge area in search of any objects containing any semblance of 'threeness'. On yet another occasion we watched as our toddler 'flew' around the room as the characters from

Waybuloo danced to their theme song. Inevitably we found our way to the Cbeebies website where we interfaced ourselves in the online Night Garden using webcam and travelled down Lola's throat to catch and count the germs that were causing her cold. A few days later at Blackwell's we found ourselves debating which book to buy; a Charlie and Lola activity book; or a copy of the 'Tiger who came to tea'? The children were 'playing' digital media in a number of ways, and for once I did not necessarily see this as something that needed sanctioning; rather I saw it as an act of interpretation in response to their use of a culturally determined tool.

Geertz's (1973) description of a culture as a 'web', with 'man suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun' (p.5) is a way of thinking about the experiences of today's young children that I find helpful. This is because for 21st century children there is no separation between consumer products, digital media, television viewing and their online participation. Each of these elements forms part of the cultural and social web which children navigate on a daily basis as participants in our 21st century world. As the cultural-historical argument suggests, their development, learning and play is therefore informed and shaped by this navigation in ways that we have not previously encountered. What does it mean to watch NumberJacks on television before you act it out in your lounge room and go online to play it digitally? What does it mean to put yourself in The Night Garden using a webcam so that you stand alongside Upsy Daisy on your computer screen, but then you see her for sale a few days later in the shops? What is it like to be ten years old and negotiating the ethics of digital data management with your friends in the local park?

These questions have forced me to think of the temporal dimensions of curriculum when I reflect on the discussions we had about the role of play in early years education in the City of Casey. Conceptual and language based tools change over time within the social and cultural context, therefore what and how young children are learning must also be changing. If I am to accept my own thinking about the time dimensions of early childhood curriculum, this means I must necessarily engage with my perspective on the time dimensions of children's play. Twenty-first century 'web-play' characterised by the interface between digital media, consumerism and the convergence of physical and digital play will not go away because I don't want my children to buy into mindless consumerism, or even because I might think there are better types of play for children to experience in early learning settings. In fact, the play is likely to grow more developed and more sophisticated and to contribute to increasingly changing developmental outcomes such as the capacity to negotiate the social-digital needs of the girls in the park. What I wonder now is the extent to which we can engage this play as educators to work with it as a form of learning for social, cultural and even content purposes, but also outside of it as a form of critical awareness about how the world operates and the implications of our actions? By this I mean the learning that might be derived from physically and digitally playing NumberJacks; but also thinking about why we might feel we need to purchase all the Charlie and Lola merchandise, and where this need came from, and where our money goes when we do buy it, and finally, what actually happens to these toys when we are tired of playing with them? Perhaps play-based curriculum in early childhood education was never really as simple as I once thought, as children from every generation have had to negotiate a particular web of meaning. However, for me the most recent lesson has been that it is perhaps not fair to separate my understanding of play and development from the very time in which it is occurring for the children whom I might care for, teach or perhaps research with. To do otherwise suggests the type of separation between life and education I used to rail against as a teenager. Vygotsky (1997) describes it as such:

Ultimately only life educates, and the deeper that life, the real world, burrows into the school, the more dynamic and the more robust will be the educational process. That the school has been locked away and walled in as if by a tall fence from life itself has been its greatest failing. Education is just as meaningless outside the real world as is a fire without oxygen, or as is breathing in a vacuum. The teacher's educational work, therefore, must inevitably be

connected with his creative, social and life work. Only he who exerts a creative role in real life can aspire to a creative role in pedagogics. It is just for this reason, that in the future the educator will also be an active participant in society” (p. 345-346).

Whilst I never previously thought about time in relation to curriculum, now I think that perhaps the curriculum should be a branch of time itself. This is because time is intimately connected to society, and so thinking about curriculum as a branch of time means growing towards the future in a way which is responsive to the conceptual tools of the past and the present. Working in this way means that the skills and knowledge necessary for future participation in society don't need to be guessed at; cultural historical theory shows us that they will already be there in an emergent form right when they are needed. The branch sits within society's zone of proximal development so that we can work with children and their social worlds in ways which help us *to create and interpret the future* rather than thinking about how the curriculum needs to prepare children for the future. In this way I increase my chances of being an active participant in society, both within that experienced by young children, but also within that to which I chose to participate as someone intimately concerned with the relationship between the educative and the social.

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