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**How do young children learn about solidarity? Beliefs of student teachers in early childhood education about children's social participation**

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**Abstract**

This chapter presents an analysis of student teachers' beliefs about how children learn to be members of the classroom community and how they view their role as teachers to support such learning. Interviews took place with 34 student teachers who were enrolled in a vocational education program through which they gained a qualification to teach in early childhood programs. The conduct of this research involved the presentation of a scenario about a dilemma of practice in which a child's behavior disrupts the routine for the group. While a number of participants in their responses emphasized the authority of the teacher in ensuring child behavioral compliance in the situation, there was also strong consideration of the need for the child to recognize his role as a member of the group. Most participants acknowledged their duty of care for supervision of all the children as a key response to the teaching dilemma, however many participants also identified ways in which they might meet the child's needs while taking account their supervisory responsibilities. It is concluded that the beliefs these student teachers held about children's participation would be likely to support children's learning about solidarity in their early childhood classrooms.

## Introduction

In Australia and other Western countries, a major goal for children in early education is to learn to be independent. This individualistic orientation of education is accomplished through supporting children to develop competence and confidence in their individual abilities and to take personal pride in their achievements. However, this focus on independence can be balanced with a focus on learning for interdependence. Within the European tradition of sociological thinking, interdependence aligns with ideas about solidarity as an educational goal (Durkheim, 1925; cited in Hargraeves, 1980). Solidarity refers to the integration of individuals within institutions and society. It is about the social relations that bind people together. Teaching about solidarity in education systems is a moral endeavor through which children learn values about relating to others and participation within social groups (Ainley, 2006).

Learning for solidarity is at the heart of the social and moral outcomes of education. Solidarity is about learning to live together within societal institutions as well as an appreciation of the importance of mutual understanding and respect for others (Hargraeves, 1980). Since the Delors Report (1996), a report commissioned by UNESCO, there has been increased emphasis on the affective and social outcomes of schooling. The Delors Report identified “learning to live together” (p. 20) as one of the four pillars of education with its attendant values of tolerance, fairness, and empathy. Kennedy and Mellor (2006) also noted that the social objectives of education should include building social cohesion, a sense of inclusion, and respect for diversity. A focus on valuing independence should be balanced with goals about learning to understand one’s connections with others and societal institutions (Ainley, 2006).

The importance of building solidarity and participation in classrooms will affect how relationships between children and between teachers and children are constructed. In early education settings, teachers have the opportunity to promote a caring and inclusive community (Wisneski & Goldstein, 2004). Children enter early education programs with a relational morality based on the desire to develop connections with others (McCadden, 1998). However, McCadden also identified that an organizational morality can prevail in early education classrooms in which there is a focus on adherence to rules and compliance with the social norms of the classroom. McCadden concluded that both a relational and an organizational morality are needed in order

that children learn about their responsibilities. While teachers may support development of the social relationships in the classroom, they also need to communicate important values about being a member and contributor in the classroom community.

Teachers also have an important role as a model and a facilitator so that children learn about taking responsibility for their own learning. Buzzelli (1995, 1996) noted that dialogues between teachers and children reveal how power is shared in classrooms. The manner in which power is shared by teachers with children conveys important values to children about respect for others and of acceptance. Buzzelli (1996) explored how the concepts of mastery, voice, authority, and positionality in how teachers construct their relationships with children and share power, drawing on ideas proposed by Maher and Tetreault (1994). These are important lenses through which moral and social beliefs and values are expressed by teachers and communicated to children in early childhood settings.

Using a common practice scenario, this study explores the meanings and structures of student teachers' beliefs about children's participation in the community of the classroom; how children's concerns and issues are taken into account; and how teacher authority is conveyed. Verification is also sought about the value of using scenarios to provide insight into the nature of beliefs about teaching in complex situations and the daily dilemmas faced in the classroom.

## **Methodology**

### **Background to the research**

The participants in this research were students enrolled in a vocational program to obtain a qualification to work in child care and other early childhood settings. The data reported in this paper comes from a larger project that focused on the development of students' personal epistemology for practice in early childhood classrooms, as the students progressed through their vocational education course of two years. This vocational education course is delivered through the national competency-based training framework mandated for vocational educational programs in Australia (Australian Department of Education Science and Training, 2006). The course focuses on core teaching competencies such as planning care routines; establishing and implementing plans for developing responsible behavior; and documenting, interpreting and using information about children to inform curriculum planning. These mandated core

competences and their associated standards do not necessarily address how to manage the complexities of teaching young children in group settings. Staff in many training organizations who deliver the vocational programs strive to enhance students' learning in ways that promote reflective and critical thinking about practice. However, a competency-based training model does not address the subjectivities and multiple perspectives through which the daily dilemmas of practice can be understood by teachers of young children.

## **Participants**

The data for this chapter were drawn from interview transcripts from 34 students. There were 4 male students within this group. The age of the participants ranged from 17 to 47 years. Fifty percent of the students were aged less than 20 years; 88% had completed high school; while 30% spoke a language other than English at home. Thirty-five percent had some experience in work settings with children (e.g., in child care programs or outside school hours care programs) before beginning their vocational education course to attain a formal educational qualification.

## **Practice scenario**

In their second year of training, students were asked to respond to a scenario-based interview to investigate their beliefs about how children learn to be members of the classroom community and how they view their role as teachers to support such learning. The common practice scenario was based on an observed situation in an early childhood center (E. Johansson, personal communication, January 12, 2007):

*You are the group leader for a class of toddlers in a day care center. There are 12 children in the group. It is outdoor play time and all of the children, including your teaching assistant, except you and David have gone outside. You have put some sunscreen on David and told him to get his hat. He suddenly says, "Don't want to go out!" David repeats in a really loud and angry way, "Don't want to go outside?" You say to him, "What's the matter David?" He throws his hat down and then starts to take his sandals off. You know that you are needed outside to supervise the other children in their play because your colleague is out there by herself. On the other hand, you have David in front of you and you can intuitively feel that something is really bothering him.*

Such scenarios enable a multi-layered situation to be explored about how respondents construct meaning about teaching practice (Dockett & Tegel, 1995, 1996; Sudzina, 1997). The students were given time to read the scenario and were informed that there was no right or wrong answers. They responded to the following questions:

- From your point of view, what is this situation about?
- What would you do in such a situation?
- What would be most important to you in deciding what to do?
- What would you like David to learn from the situation?

## Data analysis

The meaning and structure of the overall responses to this situation were considered in the analyses. Marton and Booth (1997) proposed that in order to understand an individual's expressed understandings about a phenomenon one must both assign meaning (*referential dimension*) and identify how the different meanings are related (*structural dimension*). We drew on aspects of Marton and Booth's phenomenographic approach to data analysis by exploring the meanings expressed in the responses to the questions and how these ideas were structurally integrated across responses to the questions. Previous work by the authors has utilized this approach in qualitative analyses of teachers' beliefs about practice (Berthelsen & Brownlee, 2007).

**Referential dimensions:** Important elements of meaning were sought in regard to the following themes: expressions of solidarity evident in acknowledging the classroom group and David's role in the group; the extent to which David, as an individual, was given a voice by the teacher to express his concerns; and the nature of teacher positionality and authority in the situation. Themes were identified with a progression from identifying patterns and summarizing these patterns to a level of interpretation. In this interpretation, there was an attempt to identify the broader meanings and implications in the data (Boyatzis, 1998).

**Structural dimension:** Students' overall responses to the questions can be considered along a continuum of integration and complexity of ideas. A judgment of *low complexity* in belief structure was made when the statements from a participant were based on simple, unelaborated

premises related to a focus on one perspective, that of the adult. A judgment of *medium complexity* of belief structure was made when statements showed an awareness of multiple perspectives (the child and the teacher) and also had some elaboration in the meanings expressed. Finally, a judgment of *high complexity* was made when ideas were integrated, elaborated and formulated as a personally constructed position about the scenario and the actions required. These responses not only showed an awareness of multiple perspectives (the teacher, the child, the group) but the responses were integrated through a theme of solidarity and participation.

## Findings

The dilemma in the scenario reflected a tension between children's needs and the student teachers' responsibilities to follow regulations on supervision. Supervision is a very important caregiving strategy and high levels of skills are required by staff in early childhood settings to ensure the health and safety of all children and, at the same time, to support children's learning and development. Any early childhood service must comply with state licensing regulations for the adult-to-child ratios and make sure children are supervised at all times.

Of interest in the analyses were the justifications and elaborations provided about the elements of the scenario; and, in particular, the responses to the question about what David should learn from this situation. This question conveyed the most salient information for the focus of this paper on the valuing of group solidarity. The importance of David's learning to be a member of the child care group was conveyed in many of the responses.

### Referential dimensions

#### *The teachers' responsibilities and duty of care*

As expected by the nature of the scenario, many responses focused on the teacher's responsibilities for "duty of care" to meet the supervision regulations. David's compliance was viewed by participants as important to the safety of the whole group. This was the uppermost concern for 22 of the participants.

For Lynne, this situation is about her responsibilities to the regulations.

*... The situation is about the ratio of children because there's one staff [member] out there who can't be all alone with all the children. ... The situation is all about*

*the ratio. ... Yeah, make him sit outside, not inside, because you need to be outside with the others; so bring him outside of the classroom and make him sit down and not to play around. ... He or she has to be [able to be seen] because of the safety of the child. (Lynne)*

While Martine articulated her responsibilities for the other children, she also had to convey this to David so that he understood why he had to go outside.

*I'd just want him to understand that there are other children at the centre and that, of course, I want to be sure he's okay but there's still other children outside that need me as well - so just to try and help him to understand that. It's not just him. ... There are other children who might need me outside and they could be getting hurt or falling over and stuff and I need to help them as well. (Martine)*

These responses exemplify the clear focus that many student teachers had on the safety of the whole group as opposed to a focus on individual needs. The importance of maintaining a focus on the whole group also indicated the emphasis on teacher authority and child compliance.

### ***Teacher authority and position***

Many responses made clear that the teacher was the authority in the situation and that children's compliance was important. Twelve of the participants indicated that David needed to learn to do as he was told and manage his feelings and actions.

Melody emphasized David's responsibilities to the group in terms of the value of fairness but she indicated that the authority rested with her to teach "acceptable" behavior.

*... I would have to ask some of the kids to go inside, but that's really unfair for the other children. ... It has to be that it's fair for all the children. ... [He needs to learn] that his behavior is not acceptable. He can't just throw his hat on the ground. (Melody)*

Anita's response considered David's role within the group but also that he had to learn better ways to participate in the activities of the group.

*Just because he doesn't want to go outside ... if he was the only child there it would be different but you've got to help look after 11 other children. He's not the only child there. ... He just can't throw his stuff down and have a tantrum and that*



*he's going to get whatever he wants. ... He can learn that there are better ways to express his feelings and emotions. (Anita)*

These notions of compliance mean that the participants valued the importance of a child learning to participate effectively in group activities. It seems, however, that this participation is based more on needing to ensure safety regulations than a desire to form a cohesive group ethos in the centre. This is also evident in the next theme related to being a member of a group.

### ***Being a member of a group and solidarity***

Twenty participants expressed beliefs that it was important for David to learn to follow the routine of the group activities. This was commonly expressed in statements such as: "David must learn to be a part of the group". These expressions implied that individual needs were subordinate to the needs of the group, as illustrated by the following quote from Narelle.

*... He has to learn to be with the other children and maybe if he plays with other children, he will forget, he will learn. Maybe it will make him learn that everybody is there. He just has to be like everybody else. (Narelle)*

The importance of group solidarity was expressed when it was emphasized that David had responsibilities as a member of the group. David needed to learn to be accommodating and balance his personal needs with those of the rest of the group, as expressed by Renae in the following extract.

*... I don't know if prioritizing is the right word, but like what matters more. I don't want him to think that he's less important than the other children but I think I'd like him to know that the other children's safety comes above him just sitting in a room and having a little emotional crisis ... Like just wanting him to understand reasons as to why other things can come above him. (Renae)*

While Janelle also took this position, her response was couched more empathically as a value of solidarity that emphasized that individual needs may not always be able to be met when one is a member of a group.

*... Just because he doesn't want to go outside, everyone else wants to be outside. So sometimes you just have to compromise. Probably [he has] to think of others. Everyone has to do it in everyday life. You might not want to do something but you*

*have to.* (Janelle)

These statements conveyed beliefs that “give and take” was required in order to be a member of a group.

### ***Meeting individual needs***

Fewer responses referred to exploring David’s individual concerns and how they could be accommodated. Twelve participants expressed concerns that it was important to give David a voice and to make an effort to find out the nature of David’s concerns and provide him with support to deal with his frustrations.

Alison believed that it was necessary for David to learn better ways to manage his feelings. She also expressed her support for David through the mutuality evident in the use of “we” in her response.

*... To express his feelings without getting really upset and angry and that he could express it to me so that we could solve, you know resolve it.* (Alison)

Like Alison, Catherine conveyed respect and support for David and expressed her belief that it was important for the carers to be attuned to children’s feelings and be responsive.

*... That he is safe and his opinions are valued, and if he doesn’t want to go outside and he is scared of something, the carer knows; and that the carer is able to pick up on it - so that his feelings are being met and his opinions are being met, as well, and [he is] listened to.* (Catherine)

This emphasis on responsivity was also evident in Rachel’s response:

*... If there’s something wrong he can tell me. Maybe something you can’t see, you have to ask him ... It’s okay. Don’t be scared. You can tell me what’s going on. Don’t be afraid. ... So I guess, in that sort of situation, I have to be alert and kind of look for what may be hidden there. Something’s wrong. I’d probably just tell him that.* (Rachel)

These statements conveyed beliefs that attention to the needs of the individual was important. Across the responses there was an emphasis on what David had to learn in terms of the self-regulation of his emotions and also about learning to use language to express his needs.

## Structural dimension

Judgments of *low complexity* were made for 21 participants whose responses had minimal justification and maintained a single focus on how to deal with the situation. This focus could be adult-centered in terms of an emphasis on teacher authority and the responsibilities of the teacher for supervision or child-centered on attending to David's concerns.

For example, Sasha emphasized her authority as the teacher in providing David with specific directions for his behavior.

*... He doesn't have to throw his things around. Ask him that if he doesn't want to go outside, then he just has to say he doesn't want to go outside, instead of throwing his hat and taking off his shoes. (Sasha)*

Ruth also expressed her views quite simply with a focus on David learning to express his feelings in words.

*To express what he's feeling inside. To be able to tell us what's on his mind so we can deal with what his problem is. (Ruth)*

A *medium level of complexity* in the structure of responses was assigned to 10 of the participants. These respondents recognized complexity in the dilemma and the need to consider the situation from more than one perspective that included adult-centered and child-centered viewpoints.

For example, Karen saw her supervision responsibilities as significant but also took David's concerns very seriously.

*... You've got to get outside and supervise the other children with the other carer because the ratios aren't going to be met outside. If something happens, people are liable for that. But you've got David who doesn't want to go outside and you've got to be sympathetic and understanding of that. ... You try and find other means of figuring out the situation to solve it so you can help him and help supervise the other children. ... You have to really think about everyone. ... So I would definitely have to get someone else first and then concentrate on David at the same time because you can't just ignore David either. [He needs to learn] ... That it's okay if he doesn't want to play. He can do something else. He can sit under a tree and*

*read a book. Maybe he can take something from inside to outside that he likes.*

(Karen)

Similarly, Sarah expressed concern for David and his individual needs but also emphasized her responsibilities to the group.

*... Well, what we normally do when they're upset, we just pick them up and we'll take them outside with us anyway, even though they're crying and stuff because we've got to get out there, we've got to watch because [there are] 11 other kids or 12 other kids; however many there were, are needing our attention as well; and not just one. ... [He needs to learn] ... Well, one, that he can't get his own way – it doesn't matter how big a tantrum you throw. We can't always be there to say, "Okay, we'll calm you down now, we'll forget about the rest of the children." But yes, just to let him know that when everyone else goes outside then it's time to go outside. (Sarah)*

Judgments of **high complexity** were made for three of the participants. These were more elaborated and multi-dimensional perspectives because these participants looked at the situation from a variety of perspectives. They reflected on their options to meet both David's concerns and their responsibilities. For participants judged as having high complexity in their responses examples are given from Maxine and Susan.

Maxine took account of the supervision issues as a strong concern. This would be most important to her decisions on what to do. However, she also was concerned for David's wellbeing and her support for him. She tried to take the teaching assistant's perspective in making her decisions about what she should do. She considered the need for solidarity and, in this, looks to David's future. She believed that he needed to learn to consider the needs of others in his actions and make compromises in order to be successful in the future.

*[What I would do] I wouldn't leave my assistant out their alone because it is a legal requirement; although you can be absent for ten minutes, it is safer to have you out there. She can't watch everything: "That child is going to fall and that child is going to fall, and which one do I go to?" ... I need to be there. It is not fair. It's not fair on her, and it's not fair on the child and the other children as well. Being a toddler room there would only be a few other children, but still toddlers*

*can be a lot to handle and can be very “gung ho” if they want to do that. “I’m not going to fall from up there, I’ll climb up there.” If I was that assistant, what would I want my group leader to do? I put myself in their shoes.*

*[He needs to learn] ... I want David to learn that he can definitely tell me things, like he doesn’t want to go outside. Learn to express his feelings but that he can’t always have things a 100% his own way. You have to make compromises in everything, in schooling, in relationships, friendships, in everything. You have to make compromises for things to work. It is one of the things of life, you can’t always be: “I’m doing this and I’m not going to budge.” ... I want David to learn that we do care for him and we do want to help him, but there are other children and ... you can’t take up a 100% of someone’s time, there are appropriate times for that.*

Susan’s responses were quite child-centered in trying to see things from David’s point of view as well as while recognizing her responsibilities for the other children. She also acknowledged the importance of solidarity within the group.

*[What I would do]... Something has upset him. Something has triggered off this behavior that has happened outside. ... He might have had a fight with one of the other children so he has associated that with being outside. ... I don’t think he is just being selfish. He wouldn’t behave like that just to be selfish. Something has triggered the situation off. ... Something has obviously triggered him to behave in such a way, and he is only a toddler too. So he is starting to understand cause and effect, that sort of thing. I don’t think it is attention seeking. ... Maybe it’s hot, maybe it’s the concrete or sandpit, you just don’t know, so I think you need to find out, try and find out what it is. ... I would probably try to calm him down and try and find out what is the matter, depending on his abilities. I wouldn’t force him out there either. ... Well I suppose you could take him out but try and pick him up and comfort him and make him secure at the same time because you have to be out there with the group, trying to watch all the other children and just sit with him for a little while and comfort him and talk to him and try and find out what the issue is.*

*[He needs to learn] That he is secure and that he is important and that his needs*

*matter. Like if he is having this tantrum, we're not just going to leave him there and ignore him and that because there is something upsetting him we want to find out what it is. ... He is important. He is important to the community, the centre community and the group, and that we care about him. (Susan)*

Susan and Maxine used multiple perspectives to analyze the situation. They hypothesized and speculated about alternative reasons for David's behavior but they also were clear about what he needed to learn. While there were many perspectives considered, the notion of solidarity was a theme about participation in the classroom group, as well as the need to support David's individual needs.

## **Discussion**

This chapter has explored the meaning and structure of beliefs that student teachers held about a common practice scenario in an early childhood classroom. The analyses examined student teachers' beliefs about how children learn about solidarity and participation in the classroom. When students begin their studies to obtain a qualification to work in early education settings, they often begin with a simple motivation that they want to work with young children. However, as a result of their professional training, it is expected that they will appreciate their role in more complex ways. For optimum performance in a complex professional role, students need to learn to deal with ill-defined problems to which simple responses cannot be prescriptively applied (Biggs, 1996). Through their educational experiences, student teachers need to learn to make informed judgments based on the evaluation of alternative courses of action. The analyses of responses to the teaching dilemma presented in this paper provided insight into how these student teachers would make important decisions in their practice.

As appropriate to the situation, many participants saw that their primary consideration was to supervise all children in the group as required by regulations. Many of the participants had adult-centered viewpoints, focusing on the authority of teacher to ensure the focus child in the scenario complied with the directions given by the teacher. There was an expectation that the child depicted in the scenario needed to "fall into line" with the acceptable norms for behavior in the classroom. However, there was also a strong focus that the child should learn about his role as a member of the group. Many of the participants discussed the ways in which they could

potentially meet the child's needs and these ideas emphasized that using language was a key to the self-regulation of behavior. While a focus on individual child development is evident in the vocational education program in which these students participate, the responses to the scenario also indicated that they held expectations that even young children can understand their role within their community of young peers – a first step in learning for solidarity. However, much of the focus on group participation given by the participants was more about meeting the regulations as an organizational issue rather than as a higher moral principle about the importance of social relationships with others.

Learning about solidarity is founded in our group experiences. From an early age, children's experiences in child care and preschools provide opportunities for participation in group life. As Durkheim (1925, cited in Hargreaves, 1980) noted, while there is interdependency between the social and individual spheres of life, there are also potential conflicts. Collective experiences can give children a range of social skills and the capacities to "get along" with others while some collective experiences will threaten the rights of the individual. Additionally, it is only through our collective experiences that we learn self-respect, since feelings of self-worth are the result of feedback received by others in social settings. Even in early education, children can come to appreciate that their personal interests must sometimes be subordinated to the interests of group.

This study has two implications for teacher education and professional development. The first implication is that professional courses need to provide understandings of the complexity of the teaching role and opportunities to examine the sort of dilemmas that may arise in daily practice. The use of a scenario as presented in this chapter provided insight into the variety of views that may be held about a single situation. Scenarios can be a vehicle for discussion and reflection by teachers and student teachers. There is value in using scenarios to understand the daily dilemmas faced in the classroom. While there will never be one single and right answer in responding to these dilemmas, opportunities to analyze and reflect on possible actions build capacities to deal with the ill-defined problems in teaching practice. It is important that students learn to recognize that there may be multiple perspectives to consider for any situation and that effective decision-making requires evaluation of alternative courses of actions; as well as recognizing that there are multiple important decisions to be made in the everyday routine in a classroom with little time available to reflect on courses of action.

The second implication is about learning for solidarity in early childhood classrooms and exploring the ways in which teachers' values are conveyed to children about social participation in the classroom community. "Learning to live together" (Delors, 1996) as one of the four pillars of education with its values of tolerance and fairness are the foundations of social cohesion and inclusion. These moral meanings are embedded implicitly in teachers' daily practices without a lot of recognition that children are learning social values from teachers' actions and reactions. In the case of solidarity, children can learn values in early childhood programs about how responsible participation is important in the community of the classroom. These are values that they will carry with them into their future experiences within classroom groups through their education as well as in group experiences in the wider community.

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How children learn - Early childhood development - Children and language acquisition. Learning through play - The importance of play - Creating the right environment for play - Developing language through play. How to talk to young children - Encouraging emotional development - Developing language through interactions. Learning: English and everything - Developing the whole child - Learning English in context - Guiding the learning experience.Â I want to thank the British Council for giving me the opportunity to learn about how children learn English in early childhood. I learned about how children learn, about learning through play, about how to talk to young children and about watching children learn.