

Practitioners' Views on Learning Using Children's Peer Interactions Amongst Under Three Year Old Children in Selangor, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Research on children's peer interactions shows many benefits for children's development especially in developing children's social competence. Drawing on a case study data from a study that investigated peer interactions among under-three year old children in three Malaysian childcare centers, this paper provides a picture of how the children's peer interactions was understood by largely untrained practitioners at the start of the project, and how the complexity of children's lived experiences remained hidden to the practitioners until they took part in the video-stimulated recall (VSR) interviews based on children's peer interactions, and focus group discussions. The latter provided practitioners with an opportunity to deepen their thinking about children's peer interactions and to begin to see them as linked with learning. In particular, the practitioners perceived that (i) play; (ii) familiarity; and (iii) having friends constituted important learning for children during peer interactions at their early childcare centres. This has implications for understanding the roles of early childhood education practitioners to children's peer interactions as well as how practitioners can help support children's learning to make a social difference.

KEYWORDS: *Children's Peer Interactions, Practitioners, Early Childhood Education Centre, Video-Stimulated Recall Interviews, Focus group Discussions*

INTRODUCTION

The reality of increased participation in childcare services by under three year olds means that infants' and toddlers' experiences are no longer influenced solely by their immediate family members (White, 2014) but also by practitioners and peers in early childhood education (ECE) centres. According to Katz (2004), early childhood education centres can provide children with valuable opportunities for regular interactions with peers because infants attend childcare centres regularly in small groups of same-aged peers. Being at the childcare centres is an opportunity for children to exercise their social competence, of which peer interaction is a part. Many researchers have argued that peer interactions have a significant influence on the children's learning and development (Corsaro, 2003; Bukowski, Buhrmester & Underwood, 2011) and this suggests that

studies of children's peer interactions can contribute to the adults' understanding of the best conditions to support children's learning (Musatti, Mayer, Pettenati & Picchio, 2017). This in turn can enlighten adults on planning educational practices in ECE centres. The views practitioners hold about young children in their care can guide the practitioners not only to enable children's experiences but also to constrain them (Salamon & Harrison, 2015; Salamon, Sumsion, Press, & Harrison, 2016). Yet, as Harkness and Super (1997), Hurd and Gettinger (2011), Davis and Degotardi (2015) and more recently, Mussati et al. (2017), have argued, there is still a lack of research on practitioners' perceptions, knowledge and children's experiences with peers in ECE contexts. As children spend a great amount of time at ECE centres, it is important that the practitioners are aware of the peer interaction that is going on between the children, how to support and encourage it, and to be conscious of the connection peer interactions have to social competence (Rose-Krasnor, 1997; Davis & Degotardi, 2015; Degotardi & Pearson, 2009; Williams, Mastergeorge, & Ontai, 2010).

The importance of peer interactions among children in ECE centers

Children as young as two months old show interest in other children (Carta, Greenwood, Luze, Cline, & Kuntz, 2004), yet for many years, researchers considered infants and toddlers under three year olds as unable to establish interactions with peers (Rossetti- Ferreira, de Moraes, de Oliveira, Campos-de-Carvalho, & Amorim, 2011). However, a number of studies on children's peer interactions have indeed shown that children younger than three year olds do become involved in quite complex interactions (Brownell, 1990; Goin, 2006; Howes, 1988; Howes & Matheson, 1992; Whaley & Rubenstein, 1994; Wittmer, 2012). For example, a study conducted by Aureli and Colecchia (1996) with forty 3-year-olds looked at play behaviour among children who attended childcare compared with children who did not attend childcare. The children were each observed for twenty consecutive minutes during free play for four weeks and both cognitive and social aspects of play were considered. The study revealed that children who went to childcare interacted in a more complex and advanced manner than children who did not go to childcare with the childcare-participant children showing a higher level of symbolic play with longer interactions between peers. Higher level of symbolic play here refers to children carrying out a specific activity, utilizing means to accomplish an activity and completing of an activity through successive steps.

Some researchers claimed that early peer interactions have a unique and important role in children's social and emotional development (Dunn, 2004; Hinde, 1979; Hartup, 1996). Others have specifically linked peer interactions at a young age to children's developing social competence (Aureli & Colecchia, 1996; Elicker, Ruprecht, & Anderson, 2014; Kemple, David, & Hysmith, 1997; Williams, Ontai, & Mastergeorge, 2010), and specifically to cognitive development and language and literacy development (Williford, Whittaker, Vitiello, & Downer, 2013).

Practitioners' perceptions of children's peer interactions

According to Kemple et al. (1997); Salamon and Harrison (2015) and Williams, Mastergeorge, et al. (2010) practitioners often have their own perceptions about how

young children should interact with each other and these are often reflected in how they respond to children's behaviour at their ECE centres. Practitioners' perceptions thus impact children's engagement with peers. The limited literature on practitioners' perceptions of children's peer interactions is particularly evident for children aged under three years. While a number of studies have looked at practitioners' perceptions or beliefs of teacher-child interactions at their ECE centres (e.g., Granger, 2017; Hartz, Williford & Koomen, 2017; Degotardi, 2010; Berthelsen & Brownlee, 2007; Mill & Romano-White, 1999; Berk, 1985), their perceptions of children's interactions with other children have not been investigated.

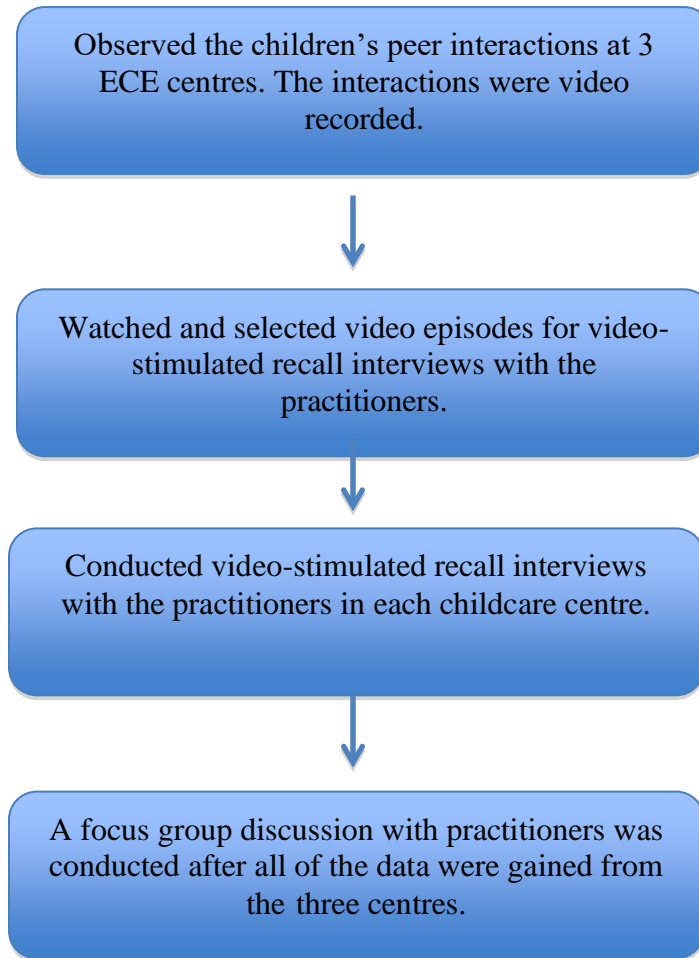
Most literature of the children's peer interactions is from the point of view of researchers who studied children during set-up situations. For example, Hay, Nash and Pedersen (1983) collected video footage of pairs of infants within a playroom and found that the twenty-four infants reacted to the presence of peers by touching them and their toys. In most cases, the peers reciprocated to the touch and the interactions were seen to be harmonious. The researchers argued that at 6-month-old, infants are able to influence each other's behaviours. Similarly, a more recent study by Engdahl (2011) focused on how toddlers (17-24-month-old) initiate play, interact and communicate with their peers during free play in a Swedish preschool and showed that the toddlers used multiple strategies to attract the interest of their peers such as showing toys, using verbal and non-verbal cues to invite play, imitation and negotiations during play, to name a few. The researcher also found that not all practitioners at ECE centres are knowledgeable about young children's interaction competencies. Again, this emphasises the importance of the practitioners' knowledge and the fact that studies that looked at the practitioners' perceptions on children's peer interactions are few in number.

A study that throws light on this focus, even if only indirectly, is that by Degotardi and Davis (2008). This study investigated early childhood practitioners' interpretations of infants' behaviour. Twenty-four practitioners were interviewed and asked to interpret video episodes of selected infants behaviour during play. Findings from the research revealed that the practitioners used a broad range of interpretive statements in describing the infants' behaviours so that while in most cases the responses contained references to non-psychological attributes such as, 'He is sucking his finger' or 'He is kissing teddy', other responses contained descriptions of psychological activities, affective, and motivational inferences, as well as some cognitive references of the children's behaviour. The study suggests that a more careful observation of the children's behaviour could lead the practitioners into giving more in-depth interpretation of the children's behaviour. This could also mean that the practitioners need to be knowledgeable about what is going on during children's peer interactions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employed a multiple interpretive case-study design. A total of 15 children were observed and the interactions amongst the children were video recorded during free play at three ECE centres in Selangor, Malaysia. All of the children were below the age of three at the start of the study. Video-recorded observations of each child's peer interactions were made at the childcare centres during two different sessions: 45 minutes of video recording in the morning and another 45 minutes of video recording

in the afternoon on two separate days. Video episodes from the video recordings were then selected and were shown to the practitioners to explain what they understood about what was happening with the children. This was done during the video-stimulated recall (VSR) interviews with the practitioners at their respected ECE centres during their free time. After that, a focus group discussion was done at a venue with all of the practitioners who participated in the study. The data collection procedure is illustrated in a flow chart below:



The analysis in this article is underpinned by Super and Harkness' (1986) concept of the 'Developmental Niche'. The 'Developmental Niche' by Super and Harkness (1986) is a theoretical framework that attempts to explain child development in terms of three sub-systems that work together with other features of a given culture to mediate the child's experience. The developmental niche has three components, which are: (1) the physical and social settings in which the child lives; (2) the customs of childcare and child rearing; and 3) the psychology of the caretakers. My study draws on the third component of the developmental niche: the psychology of the caretakers, and uses this as a way of explaining how the practitioners within the children's childcare setting mediated the children's experience. According to Super and Harkness (1986), caregiving and childrearing are underpinned by the caregivers' psychology or the caregivers'

understandings of their role, including their educational practices. This suggests that the practitioners' understandings give effect on the opportunities that they provide for children to interact with peers because practitioners use understandings to guide children's peer interactions. By considering the practitioners' perceptions and responses of children's peer interactions within their setting through the lens of Super and Harkness's concept of the developmental niche, it becomes possible to see that the practitioners' perceptions and responses can have an effect on children's peer interactions.

FINDINGS

The process of being involved in the study, and the opportunity to discuss peer interactions among under-three year olds during VSR interviews and focus group discussion with other practitioners, had opened the practitioners' eyes to the many learning that were happening for the children during peer interactions. I discuss the learning that the practitioners mentioned under three key themes: (1) learning outcomes of play; (2) learning outcomes of familiarity; and (3) learning outcome of having friends.

Learning outcomes of play

The practitioners in this study recognised that when children play together, they develop a number of social skills, including sharing resources such as toys and materials with peers. They believed that sharing is a learning task that children achieve as a result of being at the centre for a period of time. Amy, a practitioner, commented on this:

The positive outcome of playing together is that they can share their things with others. When Anna was a new child at the centre, she didn't know how to share. She likes pink you see. So when there were pink things around she said they were hers and she would not let anyone touch the things. I keep telling her that we have to share things here. After a while of being here, I can see that she can share, even pink things. She knows they are not hers but they are for everyone to use... Two days ago, Anna shared a toy with Willy without fighting. They shared a pink teapot.

Apart from learning to share toys as an outcome of play, the practitioners valued play as a way for children to communicate with each other. During a VSR interview with the practitioners at one of the ECE centre, the practitioners discussed how children listened to each other and imitated their peers' words as they communicated. For example, Rozita (practitioner) explained that:

It's very normal for the children to imitate each other. Like in this video of the children here, they are imitating each other. I think imitating one another is how they interact too, a kind of communication. They imitate their friends' words. I think it's because they have limited vocabulary, so they imitate what others say. It's their way of learning the language too. When they are together, they have a chance to learn and practise language.

In addition to sharing resources and communicating with peers, the practitioners also indicated that the children learn about others' feelings when they play, and develop empathy and understanding about others' needs too. A practitioner, Khalila, commented on this:

These children play together all the time. Sometimes we don't even know what they are playing but they look very involved with each other, that means they understand each other as they play their games, laughing, screaming and running around. They look happy so that means everything is well. Even though we don't understand what they are doing or playing, as long as they understand each other, that is fine. They are happy, adults are happy too.

All things considered, in reference to Super and Harkness' (1986) notion of the psychology of the caregiver as a key influencer of a child's developmental niche, it would seem that the perception that play is beneficial for children was an important component of the practitioners' psychology and this was evident in the way the practitioners focused on the benefits of play and discussed how play can lead children to learn about sharing, and about communicating and understanding each other.

Learning outcomes of familiarity

In addition to play, the practitioners also perceived familiarity to be an important part of peer interactions. Aureli and Colecchia (1996) similarly noted that children who go to childcare centres regularly have the opportunity to become familiar with their peers as they interact with the same people. This can therefore have a positive effect on the children's development particularly in making connections, gaining confidence, and friendships – an insight that the practitioners in the study commented on at various times in VSR interviews and focus group discussions.

Making connections with peers was perceived to develop due to familiarity with peers. During a VSR interview that was focusing on two children at an ECE centre, the practitioners reflected at length on the video excerpts and commented on how familiarity makes the children happier as they were able to connect to each other's experience. A practitioner called Fifi commented:

That's another one of their favourite game (referring to two children on the video). They like to put that box on their head because it's like putting on a helmet. Roy and Willy ride motorbikes to come here. Their fathers ride motorbikes to bring and fetch the children. So when they play with the box over their heads, it's like wearing helmets and riding a motorbike

Amy, another practitioner at the centre added to Fifi's comments:

Yes, the children were pretending to play motorbikes. That's probably because they are used to riding motorbikes. If it were another child, maybe that other child would make the container as a hat and not a helmet.

Gaining confidence was also mentioned as a learning outcome of familiarity with peers.

According to Kochanska and Radke-Yarrow (1992), children who regularly socialize in playgroups and explore new environments grow to be more confident of themselves when they are toddlers, making those actions among infants an important developmental task. During the VSR interviews and focus group discussion, some practitioners expressed a similar view and emphasized that children who attended childcare centres become more confident in themselves when they are familiar with the people around them and with the setting. Practitioner Rozita said that:

This is like their second home, because they come here every day and spend a lot of time here. They meet the same friends. So they grow confident of themselves and are not shy with their friends anymore. When they first came here, some of them were very shy, scared and didn't mingle with others. Now they are better.

The practitioners further perceived familiarity to be connected to developing friendship among the children. According to Howes and Philipsen (1992) and Hay, Payne and Chadwick (2004), during the second year of life, children start to have a particular preference for a peer and this could develop and blossom into a friendship throughout the preschool years. This was evident when practitioner Khalila commented during a VSR interview:

Some of the children have been here for more than a year. They came when they were babies and they have grown up together with their friends. So they know each other. They even have best friends. Like Jasmin's best friend is Suzy. When Jasmin comes in the morning she will look for Suzy and when she sees Suzy, she goes to her and gives Suzy a hug.

The comments by the practitioners in this section summed up how they perceived children's interactions with familiar peers as strengthening connections between them, building their confidence and developing friendships with one another, which all have a connection to building up the children's social competence (Rose-Krasnor, 1997). In this study, it was clear that the practitioners recognized the social competence benefits that accrued to very young children from interactions with familiar peers. Looked at through the construct of Super and Harkness' (1986) developmental niche, and the idea that the psychology of the caregiver influences child outcomes, these findings suggest that practitioners are likely to further enhance their sensitivity to the complex interactions that under-three year olds engage in, if they had the opportunity to observe and reflect in depth on children's peer interactions on a more regular basis.

Learning outcomes of having friends

In addition to commenting on the learning outcomes of familiarity, during the VSR interviews and focus group discussions the practitioners contributed a number of statements that showed the significance they put on having friends at an early age and the importance they attached to young children attending childcare centres. Particular benefits from having friends emphasized by the practitioners were: (i) the development of empathy: and (ii) preparation for school.

According to Rose-Krasnor (1997), empathy is one of the specific abilities that

has been identified in the skills approach to social competence and Canning (2011) has argued that even as young as two years, children can show signs of empathy with peers who demonstrate that they are hurt (see also Svetlova, Nichols & Brownell, 2010). In this study, most of the practitioners offered examples of children in their centres giving comfort to their peers. Some examples are shown below:

The children are concerned about each other. There are times when their friend is sick, they will give more attention to that friend like stroking the friend and when a friend is absent, they will ask where is he/she and why is he/she is not here. Then when I say he/she is sick, they say things like, '*Kesian dia*' (poor him/her). So we can see that they have empathy towards their friends... I think they learn from us adults because we demonstrated empathy towards the children. So the children imitate us. (Rozita)

Lily was trying to comfort Helmi when he cried (referring to video). They comfort each other all the time because they are friends. When one cries, a peer will come and ask what happened and then they will hug and stroke the peer's head or back. In this video, Lily is seen to hug Helmi when he is crying. Maybe Lily wanted to make Helmi happy again. (Husna)

While developing empathy among peers is seen as beneficial to children's friendship development, the practitioners in this study also believed that when children make friends at childcare centres, they tend to develop social competence which can help them be ready for school later on in their lives. Most of the practitioners in this study linked attending childcare centres and having friends at an early age to social competence later on in school. Practitioner Jamilah commented on this subject:

In my opinion, exposing children to socializing with friends at an early age is actually good. Because when they have to go to school later, they will be prepared. If they are not prepared, they might be scared and even cried when they go to school because they are scared of the strangers. And they might probably have problem socializing and adapting to school.

In regards to above, the practitioners' viewed children's friendship to be beneficial in developing empathy towards peers and to prepare the children for school when the time comes. The practitioners also linked having empathy and preparation for school with social competence. Being good at social competence does not happen by itself but it needs guidance and interactions with other people (Rose-Krasnor, 1997). Thus, how practitioners perceived peer interactions is important as it can affect the way they support children's peer interactions at their respective childcare centres (Davis & Degotardi, 2015; Super & Harkness, 1986).

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this research is about the practitioners' views of learning via children's peer interactions at respective childcare centres as they were revealed during

VSR interviews and focus group discussions. By framing this research with Super and Harkness's (1986) concept of developmental niche, and specifically the notion of the psychology of the caretakers, the practitioners' views and understanding of children's peer interactions were explored. This notion assumes that the way practitioners perceive and understand children's peer interactions can affect the opportunities they provide for the children. Three themes were identified in the data collected through VSR interviews and focus group discussions. The practitioners saw the learning outcomes of play, of familiarity, and of having friends as important for children's peer interactions. They further elaborated that as the children interacted daily with peers at the childcare centres, they were able to share resources, communicate with peers, understand others' intentions, needs and emotions, make connections, gain confidence, develop friendship, develop empathy and be ready for school. Rose-Krasnor (1997) suggested that the children's developing cognitive, emotional, motor and communication skills facilitate the growth of the social abilities displayed by the under three years old children in this study and are important for children's learning because they can help children's drive to competence. It takes careful observation and thoughtful reflection on the practitioners' part to identify these learning abilities in children.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICES IN ECE CENTRES

This study brings into focus that training in early childhood education is important for those people who want to work with children, be it centre preschool, a childcare centre, or a nursery. Throughout the study, it was clear that while the practitioners showed some understanding of children's peer interactions, their initial views about peer interactions were quite limited and did not show a full awareness of what was going on in the children's peer interactions. Nevertheless, the practitioners' understandings broadened considerably when they were given a chance to comment on the videos of the children's peer interactions during the VSR interviews. Moreover, the focus group discussions with the other practitioners deepened the practitioners' thoughts on children's peer interactions at the respective childcare centres. This shows that the practitioners benefitted from the opportunity to reflect with colleagues on the children's interactions during the VSR discussions and this helped them realize what truly goes on during children's peer interactions at a childcare centre. The way that VSR supported practitioners' learning implies that video can be a potentially powerful tool in professional development for teachers.

Some of the practitioners mentioned that this study opened up their eyes and thoughts to different ways of looking at the children's peer interactions. For example, practitioner Elina said in the focus group interview:

When you asked me to think about the children's peer interactions, it made me see things that I never saw before. Like I never thought these children are capable of doing this and that but when I see their videos and thought deeper, I can see that there is so much learning potential in them.

Elina's comment suggested that she recognized that being reflective of her own

thinking could open up perspectives that she had never thought of before. According to Jenkins and Hewitt (2010), a teacher's job is not just planning the daily curriculum but also to be reflective. Thus, one clear implication from my study is that practitioners should be given opportunities to reflect on their practices as this can expand their thinking about teaching and learning and about how to support children's learning and development (Hill, Stremmel & Fu, 2005). According to Kane (2008), it is necessary for researchers to continue collecting practitioners' views on the matter of teaching so that the practitioners can remain motivated in their profession.

Therefore, a key implication from this study is that it is important that practitioners are knowledgeable about children's peer interactions and about the impact they have on children's learning, leading to the conclusion that training in ECE prior to, or while working in a childcare centre, is needed. While the children gained a lot of knowledge by interacting with their peers daily at their childcare centres, it was clear that the practitioners a potentially very powerful position to support the children's interactions. This study shows that practitioners are more likely to do so if they understand what is going on for the children. In turn this means that the practitioners need to be alert to what is going on for the children, to have the time to devote to observing children in a meaningful way, and also have the knowledge to interpret what is going on in the observed interactions. Sometimes the children need advice or explanations from the practitioners and if the practitioners are not trained to understand the children's cues, they are not able to give the right response to the children. In addition, the practitioners have the opportunity to give encouragement to the children in a way that supports their social competence development and the use of agency in their everyday life so that they can be effective in their interactions with others. This knowledge of how to give support, encouragement and responding positively to children's conflicts, cannot be left to chance but requires specialised trainings particularly for those working with very young children under the age of three.

Areas for future research

Much research has been conducted on children's peer interactions but not many peer interaction studies have focused on children who are under three years old. The need for further research in this area is still at infancy stage. In the Malaysian context, future research is needed to look at the children's peer interactions across a greater number of childcare centres all over Malaysia, not just in Selangor. It is important to understand what goes on during the children's peer interactions in other parts in Malaysia too because once we understand what children do during peer interactions, then practitioners are better equipped to give children the support they need to build children's social competence.

A study could also be undertaken to investigate qualified (as opposed to untrained) practitioners' views of children's peer interactions and find out how they support or encourage children's peer interactions at their childcare centres. The practitioners in the study were mainly practitioners who had no ECE qualifications or trainings and thus their perceptions may differ from those of practitioners who are

qualified in ECE. The findings can give insights on the type of training needed for childcare centres' practitioners prior to their career.

In addition to this, this study looked at children's peer interactions and linked them to social competence development. Future research can look at other areas of children's development such as cognitive development or moral development and link it to children's peer interactions. This may allow the learning of children's peer interactions in Malaysia to be captured and linked with children's development in the Malaysian ECE context.

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