Research Note

How Do Young Children Who Are Gifted Play In An Early Childhood Centre Setting?

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Abstract

This paper reports on a thesis study which examined how young children who are gifted play in an early childhood setting. The study adds to an earlier study conducted by the writer and begins to address the dearth of New Zealand research in the early childhood sector concerning gifted education. Two case study children and five teachers from one early childhood centre in the North Island of New Zealand participated in the research. The children were observed and interviewed and their portfolios compiled by the teachers were analysed. The teachers were interviewed. Certain characteristics of giftedness were found to come to the fore during the children’s play and the children had particular play preferences. Specific ways of interacting during play and other playful experiences were noted by the research.

Key Words: Giftedness; play; environments

Introduction

This paper reports on a thesis study designed to investigate the play patterns and behaviours of young children who have been identified by their teachers as gifted and to suggest the curriculum support these children may require during play in an early childhood centre. Three research questions guided the study. These were:

1. What characteristics of giftedness are evident in young children’s play?
2. Do these children demonstrate particular play preferences?
3. What interactions with teachers and other children can be observed during play?

Young children who are gifted possess characteristics that distinguish them from their peers in the areas of cognitive, affective and physical development (McAlpine & Moltzen, 2004). The international literature on gifted education tends to discuss the characteristics of giftedness by separating them into categories such as physical, cognitive and affective subgroups. Such separation of developmental domains, however, is not common practice amongst professionals working with young children in centres in New Zealand. Therefore, in carrying out research in the New Zealand context, Harrison’s (1999) definition of giftedness was drawn upon as it fits with the philosophical basis of early childhood education practice in New Zealand:

A gifted child is one who performs or who has the ability to perform at a level significantly beyond his or her chronologically aged peers and whose unique abilities and characteristics require special provisions and social
emotional support from the family, community and educational context. (p. 20)

Gagne (2004) provides a helpful differentiation between giftedness and talent, arguing that giftedness (which is innate) can be defined as the facility and speed of learning whereas talent is simply age and training related. He notes that giftedness is more easily observed in young children:

High aptitudes or gifts can be observed more easily and directly in young children because environmental influences and systematic learning have exerted their moderating influence in a limited way only. (p. 1)

According to Gross (2004) the play behaviours of young children who are gifted are more sophisticated than children who are not gifted. Their love of rules and changing the rules to supply themselves with their own intellectual stimulation, can cause social frustrations and rejections. Gifted children prefer like-minded playmates, who are cognitively well matched (Harrison, 1999). Advanced play behaviours and interests are apparent in young children who are gifted (Robinson, 1993) and games with rules are often mastered earlier than for other children (Mares, 1991). In other words, play skills and patterns may emerge at more sophisticated levels than what would be the usual expectation for young children. Young children who are gifted need to be exposed to more abstract concepts in comparison to their peers (Clark, 1997) and enjoy play experiences particularly focused around fantasy or pretend play and intellectual board games (Gross, 2004).

The principles of Te Whaariki (Ministry of Education, 1996) reflect a sociocultural approach to learning where there is emphasis on the importance of relationships. Vygotsky (1967) viewed play as a social experience that requires intersubjective understandings between the players and placed high emphasis on children learning from within the influences of their social and cultural life, mediated by more expert others. Wells (2001) considered the role of shared and engaging dialogue between a teacher and a child during play and within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Rogoff (1998, p. 699) this zone “is a way of describing an activity in which someone with greater expertise assists someone else to participate in sociocultural activities in a way that exceeds what they could do otherwise.” She emphasised that it is intersubjectivity that underlies the interactions that occur within the zone of proximal development; interactions which are co-constructed between play partners.

Further to this, intersubjectivity can be viewed as a constantly changing paradigm, as when young children are playing, “continuous knowledge exchange between the children” occurs (Goncu, 1993, p. 101). This notion of an ever-moving and changing continuum was noted by Jordan (2003) who stated, “it is through constructing a joint understanding of the topic of discussion that the teacher and children gather clues to each other’s thinking”, and that “through ever-evolving shared understandings of the topic, the teaching team and the children together co-construct” (p. 4). From these viewpoints, it can be surmised that intersubjectivity provides opportunities for a deeper and more meaningful infusion of mutual understanding and further learning during play.

Method

Case study methodology was used to examine how young children who are gifted play in an early childhood setting. Ethical approval was gained from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee for the study.
Participants were drawn from one early childhood centre in the North Island of New Zealand. This centre was approached because it had procedures to identify children who are gifted and because the centre manager had a strong base of experience in working with young gifted children. Two case study children who had been identified at the centre as cognitively and affectively gifted (MJ a male aged 4 years and 9 months & MC also a male aged 3 years and 3 months at the time of study) and five teachers participated in the study.

Data generation (Graue & Walsh, 1998) took place over a three to four month period; this included interviews with the teachers and the two case study children, observation of the children’s play and analysis of their portfolios. Interview questions were designed based on previously read literature about the characteristics of giftedness and from my earlier study (Murphy, 2004). The qualitative data recorded was substantial and detailed, allowing for careful attention to be given to understanding the play observed. Validity was addressed by carrying out the study in the natural setting of early childhood centre, in the reporting of my findings and concluding statements in the thesis (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Analysis was influenced by my understandings of the experiences (the two children in context) happening at that time.

Results

The results are detailed in full in the thesis (Murphy, 2005). The first research question asked what characteristics of giftedness are evident within the play of the young child. In this study, both children appeared to have advanced language and knowledge, they were perfectionists and highly imaginative, as well as being abstract and conceptual thinkers (time, distance, speed).

When I grow up, I’m going to be a superhero. Spiderman. Spiderman’s not real. Peter is only pretending to be Spiderman. You’d better watch it, because he is only pretend. The human inside him is real, but not the outside of him, that’s pretend. Peter is inside Spiderman, that’s how I know Spiderman’s not real; only pretend. (MJ)

At the start of fieldwork a group of children including MC were asked to paint a flower picture by a teacher. The rest of the children in the painting group painted pictures of flowers but MC painted the whole page white.

Teacher: Where is your flower MC? I can’t see it.

MC: I can see the flour, it’s come out of the bag all over my paper!

MC was innovative in the way he quickly saw relationships between words; a sign of giftedness (Gagne, 2004; Harrison, 1999; Porter, 1999). He could see the other children drawing flowers but his thinking was ‘outside the square’.

MJ often referred to the imagination during play and many recordings were made of him speaking about having pictures in his head. He exhibited a heightened interpersonal awareness and had an advanced sense of humour. I frequently observed rhythmical language during play. On this occasion when humour was evident, MJ’s teacher was trying to facilitate a large group of children at mat time.

MJ: I like Spongebob because he’s made out of sponges. Oh imagine that! Imagine being made out of sponges! (laughing)

SJH (his teacher): OK MJ it’s someone else’s turn now

MJ: soaking soaking joking joking
SJH- OK MJ: It’s x’s turn now
MJ- SJH: You just don’t get it do you? That was so funny!
A love of learning and high curiosity was evident. This was my first experience meeting MC.
MC: What’s your name?
Me: My name is Caterina.
MC: How do you spell it?
Boredom could be experienced (accompanied by frustration as times) especially during pretend play when engaging (usually alone) in complex and detailed play arrangements e.g. kings and queens.
Well you can’t be the mummy if you want to play with me. I’m not playing mummies and daddies cos that’s boring. (MJ)
We play that memory game quite a bit with the cards, where you put the cards down…but he (MJ) wants, it’s too slow. Wants the memory game going at a faster level and speed. It gets boring. He gets bored. (SJH Teacher Interview)
The second research question asked whether children who are gifted demonstrate particular play preferences. Both children seemed to prefer open-ended play, solitary play, pretend play, rules-orientated play and undisrupted play. Open-ended play materials such as balls, hoops, blocks, construction sets, tracks and moving vehicles were most often utilised.
MC would use a very large amount of space to create the most detailed and complex structures. MJ and MC both disliked the disruption to their play caused by noise, interruptions and centre transitions such as breaking to eat together or for mat times.
Today MC was making a rather elaborate block construction. When the teacher called out to wash hands for morning tea, MC sat by his construction and put his arms over it. There were no children near. He looked at me and said, “I don’t want to eat. I want to keep building. Someone’s gonna come and bust it up now.”
MC and MJ often preferred their own company, even when engaging in pretend play, perhaps because as it seemed they had difficulty relating and sharing understandings with other children in the centre. They enjoyed deep use of the imagination, which flourished through play episodes and were evident in conversations
MJ: I love maps. If I could choose any type of map I want, I’d choose a treasure map.
Me: How exciting! I wonder what sorts of things the treasure map would tell us?
MJ: Don’t you know? (tutting) We would be on an adventure for ever and ever and ever and ever and ever, how clever and we’d have to read it backwards to get home which would take for ever and ever, how clever.
In one half hour period, I observed MC talking to himself or an imaginary friend on five occasions. Other occasions occurred where MC has been observed by myself and a teacher, speaking to himself, reading to himself or singing to himself ‘in his own little world’.
MC talks to himself. He mumbles conversation for four minutes. His expression is glazed and smiling. He talks to himself for three minutes more.

People think he’s a social buzzy bee but if you look closely, he’s not [MJ]. He is playing in a group but playing on his own most of the time. He is making his own games and will play alone if the others don’t follow his rules. He’s in his own little imaginary world. He reads to himself, sings to himself and plays by himself. (Teacher Anecdotal)

Both children were keepers of rules and routines during play and in relation to play.

No-one sees what I see. That was wrong. SJH [his teacher] is getting old. She needs new glasses cos she didn’t see him snatching it. The rules are no snatching. (MJ)

On one occasion when children were packing up, MC was directed by the teacher to put all the blocks back tidily on the shelves ready for lunchtime. MC followed her directions. Another child came and tried to help but put the blocks back the wrong way.

MC: Hey! They don’t go that way. The rules are that they have to go long-ways so you can see them.

The third research question asked what interactions occurred during play. The two children interacted mainly with the teachers and rarely went out of sound or sight from a teacher during play. Both children viewed the teachers and myself as ‘pretty girls’; terminology used to perhaps highlight that no difference was seen cognitively despite a difference in ages and life experiences. MJ was highly competitive during interactions with the teachers and with others when interaction did occur with peers. He may have viewed competition as an intellectual pursuit. Evidence of this could not be seen in MC because of his lack of engagement with his peers.

I like games but I only like them if I can be the winner. I’m really good at tumbling monkeys. I always win. I want to win win win, what a spin that’s what I want to do. (MJ)

MC and MJ did not have close relationships with other children, and this may have been due to the frequent incidence of repelling and ignoring peers and of dominating play.

MC: This isn’t about robots. Go away!

Me: So which friends do you like to play with at (centre name)?

MC: Nah. I don’t wanna play with any of them and I don’t want them to touch my tracks or my trains.

MJ reported his frustration as he planned a solitary trip to the moon on a flying carpet out in the playground. In his conversations with me, he openly considered many things such as calculating distance and speed and admitted his belief that other children did not understand his adventures. MJ did have one particular teacher who understood and supported his play.

Me: I could help you if you like?

MJ: (laughing) You’re such a pretty girl. You can’t help me.

Me: Maybe one of the other children could help you?
MJ: Nah. They don’t understand my adventures. I need SJH (his teacher) to help me.

Discussion and Recommendations

Due to the qualitative nature of the study, a small sample size was necessary to complete the study within the required thesis period. The two boys attended the centre at different times and were not of the same age. Girls may have exhibited differing play patterns and behaviours and this could be a further area of research. Play was observed in the early childhood setting only, as the aim of the study was specifically focused. Further research could investigate play patterns and behaviours in the home and in other early childhood education and care settings.

The findings in this study suggest that young children who are gifted are unlikely to engage much in social interaction with their peers (not gifted), but do have a high desire for interaction with adults in their play. This desire could be strengthened if children have access to teachers who can provide a deeper level of cognitive stimulation and are viewed as suitable play partners; as was the case of one teacher in particular at the case study centre.

The study supports the theory that young children who are gifted require additional assistance and should not be left alone to play because they are less ‘needy’ or more cognitively advanced than other children. Young children who are gifted clearly benefit from having teachers who recognise their gifts and respond by enriching their learning and thinking during play and actively contributing to play.

It is possible that the children in this study would have benefited from access to experiences designed for older children and maybe would have responded more positively to socially interacting with their peers in that situation (Harrison 1999). This is important for teachers of older children who are gifted to be aware of and perhaps look at what can be done, such as supporting visits of primary aged children to the early childhood centre and vice versa. For younger gifted children in a mixed-aged early childhood centre setting this may not be an issue, but it would be of concern for any young children in single-age settings. Mixed-age groupings are probably more likely to give young children who are gifted the opportunity to engage in playful experiences with older children, who may provide much-needed cognitive stimulation.

The study could have been improved by gaining access to more case study children at the centre; however, due to the fact that children were nominated by teachers, this would have taken considerable preparation time. The use of teacher observation scales (Allan, 1999) and further input from parents would have enhanced the existing identification processes at the centre and more case study children may have been utilised in the study.

REFERENCES


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