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CHILD CARE SITE OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

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My purpose in this paper is to describe the interaction among 3-5 year old children at two child care centres. The centres become 'windows' through which to observe the children and the child rearing strategies of the adults who direct and carry out the work of the two centres (Lubeck, 1985, 1). The two centres reflect the values of two different cultures which are here described as Koori culture and mainstream* culture.

Culture is 'the whole way of life of a social group' and includes all the conscious and unconscious activities of the people within that social group' (Walker, 1983, 3). Culture includes the behaviour of individuals in that group, the organizational structures, and the values expressed by the group. Values are inferred from behaviour and may or may not be what people say their values are.

I spent most of 1988 observing in the centres and the data quoted in this paper is taken from my report of this research (Sparrow, 1989). I suggest that the differences observed at these centres are not merely the result of idiosyncratic differences in the homes from which these children come to child care. But rather these differences manifest the cultural values of the Koori and mainstream people involved. In other words the socialization of these children as Kooris and mainstream occurs within the environment of these centres as well as in all the other places that these children live.

CHILD CARE

Child care is an influential supplementary child-rearing environment for children involved in full day programs (Burns & Goodnow, 1988, 92). Children spend 8 hours each day in the care of adults who may initially be unknown to them but who soon become significant people in their lives. Children do not chose child care as an experience. This decision is made by parents or others.

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* mainstream refers to standards and inclusive of all

Children may come to child care centres because their parents work outside the home and/or want them to participate in group activities with other children.

Both the length of the child care day and the needs of young children make child care a powerful socializer. The aim of both regulations and training is to ensure that young children are provided with caregivers whose behaviour and values are congruent with community standards. However the questions remain, What community? Whose standards?

THE CENTRES

The two child care centres in this study operate within a N.S.W. regional city. One centre is run by and for Koori people. The other centre provides mainstream child care. The management policies of both centres provide places for both Koori and mainstream children. In practice most of the staff and children at the first centre are Koori, and most of the staff and children at the second centre are mainstream.

The Koori centre in this study opened in 1985 following a 10 year struggle to secure government funding. The centre occupies part of the ground floor of a complex of Koori enterprises including a legal services and lands council offices. The area which the centre uses in this building is small and exemption from state space requirements was granted so that 32 babies, toddlers, and 3-5 year old children could attend the program. The centre employs trained and untrained staff in accordance with state regulations. The director of the centre, a trained early childhood professional, is Koori as are most of her staff.

There are 20 3-5 year old children in the Blue Room at the Centre with a staff of 3 or 4 Koori caregivers. The director's office is adjacent to the Blue Room and from it she can easily be involved in the activities of adults and children at the centre. The director and staff plan a program which aims to develop children's identity as Kooris in order 'to help children avoid resentment about the treatment which they may receive when they go onto school.' The director describes the centre as 'providing a bridge with home' and a preparation for school.

The mainstream centre opened in 1986 under cooperative state and Commonwealth funding arrangements. The centre

occupies a spacious, purpose-built child care facility two kilometres from the first centre. The centre is licensed for 40 babies, toddlers, and 3-5 year olds, and employs trained and untrained staff in accordance with state regulations. The director of this centre, a trained nurse, and most of her staff are members of the mainstream culture.

There are 25 3-5 year old children in the Big End of the Centre with a staff of 3-4 caregivers. The director and staff at the Big End plan a program of activities to accommodate the interests of the older children. The children are often consulted about these plans. The director stresses the needs for a 'homelike' environment and the centre information brochure states that 'all activities and policies are aimed at achieving, first and foremost: happy children and happy parents.'

EXAMPLES AND INTERACTIONS

The examples which follow typify the interactions of children at each centre. While these examples involve only some of the children and adults whom I observed during this study, I assert that their sociolinguistic strategies underline typical and significant cultural differences. I have chosen these particular examples because the contrasts between the children's social strategies are marked. The caregiver's efforts in supporting these interactions are also different. I have included two play episodes and interpretations from each centre. I will then summarize the cultural differences and conclude with some of the implications of this research.

KOORI CENTRE

Cooperative/Competitive Strategies in Construction Play

Sand construction activity
Outdoors/mid-morning/3rd month of study.

5 older boys take the new wheelbarrow to the sand area. With very little verbal interaction the boys begin what appears to be a project of moving quite a lot of sand which had earlier been dumped on the footpath back into

the sand area. The boys fill the wheelbarrow with smaller containers until the sand level exceeds the top of the wheelbarrow. "Right, now filled up!" states N. and steers the sand-laden wheelbarrow to the sand area for emptying. This project continues for 15 minutes and 3 toddlers join the older children. These little children are given manageable tasks which contribute to filling up the wheelbarrow by the older boys. At times various children threaten to high-jack the project by commandeering the wheelbarrow, but N. directs the child by showing him what to do or by handing him a tool to use. No adult is involved in this play.

The sand area at the Koori centre is the site of many cooperative projects. N.'s leadership of the older boys appears to result from his physical competence and a strong 'presence' which relies more on interpersonal relationship rather than with verbal strength. The wheelbarrow at the centre is used cooperatively by many children. It is a keenly-sought toy, and at times caregivers remind children that they must 'take it in turns.' The cross age play of these Koori toddlers and older children occurs whenever the groups are together. The older children expect younger ones to join them, and easily incorporate them in their play. An adult supervises this play from nearby while nursing a baby, supporting the play by providing long periods of interrupted opportunity to sort out social relationships.

POSSESSING AND SHARING

bicycle play

outdoors/late morning/4th month of study

Q. (2.5 years) is outdoors riding the bicycle near the corner of the building, and T. (3 years) is trying to get the bike away from him. T. pulls the bike to 'help' Q. get it off the bricks where it is stuck.

T: "Do you want me to push it for you?"

Q: "No!"

T: "Want me to start it for you?"

Q: "No!"

T: "I can make it go fast. Rhumm, Rhumm" (T. indicates with sounds just how fast he can get it to go.)

"Get off and I'll show you how, O.K.? With this T. tries unsuccessfully to pry Q.'s fingers off the handle bars.

T. "Want me to show you?" T. talks right into Q.'s face to get his attention.

Q: "No." Q. pushes T. away.

T. "I can go up there and back. Want to see me go up there to the sand pit? Want me to show you how to go fast.... when you do monos?" T. touches Q.'s head to get attention.

T: "Can I have a little ride?" T. makes one last try before he yells to the nearest adult, "He already had a ride."

In this episode T. uses his emerging powers of persuasion. He employs a range of persuasive argument to attempt to gain possession of the bike. His communication is supported with gestures and sound effects and he tries to use this communication to get control of the bike. But maintaining the social relationship with Q. is the real issue. And indeed, it is this latter goal which prevails because Q.'s forceful presence rather than talk maintains his possession of the bike. Here T. attempts to persuade, but not confront. This strategy is 'more constructive and supportive of Aboriginal notions of the self.' (Macdonald, 1990).

MAINSTREAM CENTRE

Cooperative/Competitive Strategies in Construction Play

Puppy house construction play
Outdoors/mid-morning-4th month of study

Fran's puppy visits the centre today and I suggest to some of the children that they might build the puppy a house with large Duplo. Instant enthusiasm for the idea by 10 children who begin to take the set of blocks off in three different directions. There are not enough blocks for any group to complete a satisfying house. Some of the children ask me to give them blocks. Raids begin on each house in order to get more blocks, but the relative number of blocks in each house remains about the same until T. suggests, "I'm going to take some of my blocks to this house." (referring to another group's construction).

T/'s idea results in some co-operation among the then two construction groups. More blocks are then added to the larger house and the puppy is placed inside 'to see how he likes it.' The testing of the house by the occupant seems to convince the children that a better design is needed. Each of these modifications is accompanied by talk, some yells, hits, and kicks. No teacher is involved in this activity and I, a visitor to the centre, try to stay out of the play except to prevent injury to children during the block raids and to the puppy from the loving builders.

I suggest this activity because I am interested in how the children will use the Duplo construction blocks in such a project. When so many children join the group I am curious about how they negotiate with one another, and I try not to structure and control the play. Some children insist on my participation. The three groups divide more-or-less on gender lines with one group of girls and two groups of boys. Only the older children are outside at the time of this episode. The activity is highly competitive with each group trying to grab as many blocks as possible and taking them off in three different directions. The play is accompanied by lots of talk about how high, big, strong, and good the various houses are.

POSSESSING AND SHARING

Plastic disk game

Indoors/late morning/5th month of study

C. (4.6), Ca.(4), T.(3), and K.(3) sit together waiting to see which 'game' they will get. When Fran sets the container on the table C. pulls it in front of her and begins to 'organize' the game.

C.: "Now you each get...I'll give K. one...Do you want a yellow one? C. has 8 disks in her hands while the other children have 1 or 2. She now picks up as many as she can manage, "You haven't got one." to T. She begins to chant, "I've got them all...." She has so many that she drops some. "We've got lots, haven't we?" She looks over at T. who has none, "You can only have the reds." The director comes over to the table, shows

the children the picture on the box and leaves it where everyone can see it. All the children examine the picture and they each pick up some disks and make something individually.

T.: "I'm making a mum and sisters."

C.: "I am the sun." emphatically. "This is the sun." She holds her construction up with pride. C. still has the lion's share of the disks and makes another 'sun'.

C. defines the situation with her language and actions. Her talk employs two strategies in this example. She makes existential statements about 'what is,' i.e., 'You haven't got one,' and 'We've got lots, haven't we?' C. also states the 'rules' as she mandates them in this game, 'You can only have the reds.' Both of these strategies function as commands, but are more subtle and acceptable ways of controlling the play.

At this centre there are a few children whose leadership relies on either age, language ability, or style. C.'s forcefulness is a combination of these, and the children are accustomed to C. monopolizing activities. The materials provide a rainy day activity, but are also being used by the adult to teach children to play together as a group and share. The adult's intervention redirects the play, but even when the children gain access to some disks, they work on individual rather than group constructions.

SUMMARY OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

1. Cultural differences include the material environment

Different values on space operate at these centres. The dimensions of the two buildings contrast markedly with one another. The staff at the Koori centre create a social intimacy among those who share their small, renovated space. The staff of the mainstream centre use the spaciousness of this purpose-built facility to organize and separate groups.

The role and value of material items differ as well. Toys are provided at all child care centres. The importance of toys in the play of young children is widely canvassed in early childhood literature (Lay-Dopyera, 1987; Fler, 1989).

This is a quite different socialization process from one in which individual children's needs are seen to be paramount. The caregivers at the mainstream centre support play activities with a number of identical toys so that individual children are not frustrated by having to share. Toys are clearly seen as 'teaching materials' and consciously used by caregivers to guide children's learning, e.g., plastic construction disks, illustrations on toy box. These contrasts have far-reaching implications for the kinds of people being socialized in these two environments.

2. TEACHING/LEARNING

The examples of children's play at the centres highlight some differences between experiential learning and tuition.

Staff at the Koori centre provide an environment where children can learn by observation and personal readiness. This learning is often non-verbal and inductive. The older boys incorporated the toddlers into their play by showing them what to do, rather than explaining the project, e.g., sand construction. Gesture compensates for lack of precision in use of language, e.g., Q. with the bicycle (Halliday, 1983, 160; Purkiss, 1986, 31). Caregivers maintain close proximity to children, but often do not structure their play, accompany it with talk, or solve conflicts for them, e.g., boys with the bicycle.

Staff at the mainstream centre support children's learning by structuring activities and providing teaching materials and suggestions about how to use them, e.g., the director's involvement in the disk game and my involvement with the puppy house. Adults often accompany children's actions with talk. Children also comment on their own play often, e.g., puppy house and disk game. Children appeal to an adult to solve conflicts, e.g., puppy house.

3. GROUP COOPERATIVE/INDIVIDUAL COMPETITIVE

These few examples of children's play raise questions about the different cultural aspirations and values being expressed at these centres. Care must be taken in making generalizations from specifics, but the everyday behaviour of adults and children in these supplementary child-rearing environments asserts that quite different socialization processes are operating.

Is the individual competitive behaviour observed at the mainstream centre the 'standard of behaviour' in our society?

Will teachers these children have in Kindergarten appreciate and extend the group cooperative behaviours observed at the Koori centre?

Are the children at both of these centres growing up in a society which values equally the development of cooperative social relationships and the possession of material items?

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

In separate child care centres Koori people socialize their children in ways congruent with their own aspirations and values. The funding of such centres is a matter of social justice.

Educational Implications

Succeeding in and surviving one's schooling is no doubt a complicated process. Schooling is already underway in child care centres. There is controversy about what 'good' programs for young children should be like, just as there is controversy about primary, secondary, and tertiary schooling (Phillips, 1986; Kelly, 1986). Whose interests prevail in such controversy?

Teachers are frequently cautioned to be sensitive to the needs of culturally different children. Some teachers in Australia have learned how to relate to and teach Koori children effectively (Gray, 1986; Macdonald, 1990). There is a taken-for-granted view by many that by working just a little bit harder and being just a little bit fairer individuals can make the education system cater more equitably for all.

Perhaps more questions must be asked about why mainstream schooling serves Koori people so badly? Would the promotions of Koori cultural rights serve the interests of the powerful in Australia today? The unconscious and uncontested cultural values embedded in mainstream schooling

are powerful reasons for the establishment of separate Koori centres and schools. Indeed the Koori caregivers whom I observed were not socializing their children into the mainstream values of school, but rather trying to help them withstand those values.

Political Implications

This reasearch is about the legitimacy of Koori cultural differences and the right to live out these cultural differences. Funding and accountability issues are major features of the full report of this research. But the issue is not simply one of economic rationalism. Social justice concerns prompted my interest in this research. Mainstream schooling inevitably sorts Kooris out.

Some Koori people challenge the dominant ideology which seeks to incorporate them into mainstream Australia by separating them from their culture. The question remains about whether the government will fund a child socialization program which is not congruent with mainstream culture. The struggle to establish and maintain this Koori centre is a matter of cultural survival.

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