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Chapter

# To Teach or Not to Teach in the Early Years: What Does this Mean in Early Childhood Education

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## Abstract

Pedagogy in the early years has often been constructed as a choice between child-centered, play-based, or teacher directed learning. Child-centered learning is often characterized as "following the child's interests." This chapter examines this under-theorized notion by re-visiting constructivist theory, re-examining the differences between constructivism and critical social constructionism and in the process explores many underpinning beliefs about knowledge in early years pedagogy. Examples of critical social constructionist pedagogy, drawn from some of the "big ideas" in the Social Sciences are provided in an attempt to blur the boundaries between the binaries that have dogged educational reform in the early years for decades.

**Keywords:** early childhood, social justice, pedagogy, social constructionism, social science, play

## 1. Introduction

In many countries, the importance of the early years (birth-8) is now recognized and this has often led to greater investment in early childhood education and care (ECEC) [1]. Alongside this investment, policy makers have increased their accountability expectations of early childhood programs, often in terms of more measurable learning outcomes. This increased accountability has created particular tensions for educators working with very young children in the birth-5 years (often referred to as the pre-compulsory years, i.e., the years prior to the compulsory school age). These tensions are related to views about what constitutes learning in the early years and what it means to "know." This chapter explores how a deeper engagement with philosophical ideas about knowledge might inform practice in the early years and enable early childhood educators to articulate their practice more effectively.

Discussions and debates about how children learn and what it means to "know" are informed by ideas and beliefs about knowledge. For example, the early childhood years have often seen a shift of pedagogical focus from what a child *wants* to know in the pre-compulsory years to what a child *needs* to know in the early years of school. Educators in the pre-compulsory years (birth-5) have claimed to "follow the child's interests" as the basis for their curriculum planning and their pedagogy

(ways of teaching and learning). However, in the compulsory years, a shift toward what the child "needs" to know in order to function in society becomes dominant and is often focused on literacy and numeracy competencies. Both these perspectives include "knowing" as an important feature of learning. Therefore, this chapter focuses the discussion on knowing and knowledge (epistemology) as important and often un-examined dimension of early childhood learning and teaching.

This chapter examines the possibility that early learners may be supported more effectively if early childhood educators better understand the epistemology that underpins their practice. Therefore, the first sections of the chapter revisit the differences between constructivism, social constructionism, and critical constructionist theories as a way of exploring what it means to "know." This deeper theoretical work may also contribute to a "shared pedagogical frame" for early childhood educators working across the birth-8 years. The second half of the chapter focuses on what this means for practice. Utilizing one of the "big ideas" from the Social Sciences, some examples of how understandings of social and critical constructionist theory can inform transformative teaching and learning in the early years.

## 2. The dimensions of a shared pedagogical frame

In its broadest sense, pedagogy relates to an interactive process where the educator enhances and sustains learning. The different dimensions that make up a pedagogical frame include beliefs about knowledge and the learning process that in turn construct the relationship between learners, teachers, and contexts. These aspects of pedagogy have been described as the processes through which children achieve the outcomes proposed and how educators should support them [2]. Researchers [3] have expanded understandings of pedagogy to include the dynamic of the pedagogue-child relation (care, empathy, acknowledgement, etc.); the pedagogue-content relation; the child's relation to other children and the pedagogue's relation to a group of children. Although each aspect of a pedagogical frame is interrelated and therefore difficult to separate, this chapter focuses on beliefs about knowledge (the pedagogue-content relation) for I contend that these underpin the relationship between learner, educator, and context.

Although not often acknowledged in many discussions of early childhood practice, beliefs about what constitutes knowledge and how it is produced underpin early childhood pedagogy. As Gergen ([4] p. 17) contends "Beliefs about knowledge inform, justify and sustain our practices of education." Many discussions of the differences between the child-centered, play-based pedagogy in the birth-5 years and a "teacher directed" and "subject driven" approach in the early years of school are underpinned by beliefs about knowledge. However, constructing pedagogy as a choice between a child-centered or a teacher centered, subject driven approach does not reflect the nuanced approaches to pedagogy that are evident across the birth-8 years. In their study of early childhood pedagogy Siraj-Blatchford et al. [5] conclude that we should be moving away from such a polarized description of teaching and learning. This "moving away" requires sustained intellectual work. This chapter explores the possibility that the ambiguity that characterizes debates about early childhood pedagogy is related to lack of understanding regarding the epistemological basis of our teaching and learning. This chapter addresses this ambiguity and explores how constructivist perspectives have been challenged by critical social constructionist ideas. The next section of the chapter therefore briefly revisits contemporary research into constructivism.

## 3. What does it mean to "know" and what counts as knowledge?

Early childhood education has traditionally been informed by a "constructivist" view of knowledge in which each individual (child) is engaged in a process of "building up" knowledge as they encounter the experiential world. From a constructivist perspective, learning involves a "personal construction of meaning" [6]. This constructivist view of knowledge contrasts with an objectivist epistemological perspective where knowledge is seen to be "discovered" (often by others) and then can therefore be transmitted "ready-made" to the learner ([6] p. 332). This contrast has been the basis of educational debate for decades and has often been described as an epistemological impasse that has created polarized positions regarding what constitutes teaching and learning.

Some theorists have attempted to find a way through this impasse. For example, Elder Vlass [7] argues that while "radical" social constructionists argue that *all* knowledge is socially "constructed," realists and moderate constructionist theorists would agree that there are some aspects of the world that are the way they are independently of how we think about them. Similarly, moderate realist theorists would agree that there are aspects of the world that are best knowable through social processes involving interpretation. We will now explore more deeply the basis of these ideas and their implications for teaching and learning in early childhood.

Cognitive constructivism, the explanatory framework developed by Piaget [8] focused on how individual learners adapt and refine knowledge based on individual experience. Piaget's depiction of the developing child as a "lone, inventive young scientist, struggling to make independent sense of the surrounding world…" ([9] p. 9) has dominated early childhood pedagogy for many years. A cognitive constructivist approach to young children's learning focuses on the workings of individual mental processes. Most early childhood educators working with children aged between birth-5 would argue that they work from a constructivist paradigm with children actively involved in constructing their own knowledge. While many early childhood educators working in the early years of school would also argue that they are working from a constructivist perspective, these educators are often working in school systems which have an objectivist epistemology as their "default" position where knowledge is seen to be "transferred" from the minds of teachers to the minds of learners [10].

While many theorists continue to take a constructivist approach and maintain an interest in the internal working of the individual mind, social constructionist theories have emphasized the social processes involved in learning. Within a social constructionist frame, we move our gaze from individual characteristics as explanations for learning, to a focus on the social unit of activity and regard individual higher cognitive processing as derived from that [11]. Vygotsky [12] claimed that "…all higher (mental) functions originate as actual relations between human individuals." An emphasis on the social dimensions of learning has contributed new ideas about the relationship between educators, early learners and knowledge. For example, a cognitive constructivist frame views learning as primarily individual but in a social constructionist paradigm, the centrality of interpersonal relationships (often with a more competent "other") is fundamental when considering how early learners make meaning of their worlds.

### 3.1 From constructivist to social and critical constructionist perspectives

The difference between the constructivist and social constructionist paradigms relate to their differing emphasis on either the mental processes of the *individual*

*mind* as constructing knowledge from within (constructivist) or an emphasis on the mind and knowledge as formed by *social practices* (social constructionist). Ernest ([13] p. 484) uses metaphors to make some distinctions between constructivist and social constructionist positions. He appropriates the idea of "persons in conversation" to describe constructivism. Here the emphasis is on the individual mind as personal, separate, and idiosyncratic, and the construction of reality occurs and then maybe is "adapted" in conversation with others. This can be compared with a social constructionist perspective where the construction of knowledge is likened to individuals as "actors in a drama." The child is not constructed as separate from the social milieu, but is part of it, an active social participant. Here, the social is prioritized over the individual and "to be knowledgeable is to occupy a given position at a given time within an ongoing relationship." Social constructionist perspectives have been challenged and extended by Critical Constructionists who argue that the process of constructing meaning is "inseparable from our culture and the *power relations* embedded in our culture" [14]. A critical perspective is concerned with examining the power relationships in the social world and exploring how the cultural scripts being enacted in any dramas position children: some with more power than others.

This chapter presents the possibility that a deeper understanding of these different perspectives regarding knowledge (how it originates and is communicated) enables early childhood educators to make more equitable, inclusive curriculum and pedagogic decisions. Working within a critical social constructionist paradigm means that the child's social circumstances are no longer seen as "background," but rather, as the basis of learning. The next sections of the chapter examine how a critical social constructionist perspective opens up the possibility of new "ways of being" for young children and the adult educators with whom they are interacting.

## 4. Opening up new ways of teaching and learning: Social Science in the early years?

In this section of the chapter we use some of the "big ideas" drawn from the Social Sciences to explore the question of whether a better understanding of our beliefs about knowledge can contribute to a pedagogy that honors what children "want" to know and also connects with what they will "need" to know in order to function in society. The subsequent discussion presents the possibility that the "big ideas" that drive investigation and inquiry in Social Science are at the heart of young children's learning and that a critical social constructionist perspective offers the potential to support children's interests in a collaborative process of making meaning of their social and physical worlds.

The Social Sciences are concerned with society and the many relationships among individuals within any given society. The concepts guiding inquiry in the Social Sciences connect with the commonly espoused principles of early childhood education for understanding and sustaining relationships is fundamental to pedagogy in the early years. Teaching and learning in the early childhood years has been described as "Social pedagogy" and is primarily concerned with "learning to live together" (Bennett [2] p.12). The focus of this chapter is how intentional teaching, informed by a critical social constructionist epistemology, might play a part in "learning to live together."

### 4.1 Exploring some of the big ideas involved in "learning to live together"

The subsequent sections of the chapter draw examples from one of the Social Science disciplines: the concepts of place and space (Geography) to explore

teaching and learning in the early years from a critical social constructionist perspective. The proposition explored here is that pedagogy informed by a critical social constructionist stance and a better understanding of the concepts and methods of inquiry offered in the Social Sciences may support early childhood educators to sustain, enhance and extend young children's learning about "living together" that might contribute to a more socially just world. We propose that the big ideas of "place" and "space" might inform a more socially just pedagogy than a cognitive constructivist approach. This is because the concepts of "place and space" provide the stimulus for exploring the *diversity* of the life-worlds that children bring to a learning event in more equitable ways than those pedagogies of the past where notions of a "universal" childhood formed the basis of inquiry and learning. In summary, we argue that the diversity in children's experiences of place and space offers the opportunity to explore differences and similarities as ways of broadening children's understanding of their worlds.

Understanding "place" is something that the child "wants to know." This interest is evident (for example) in the sandpit or block corner where young children are intensely involved in negotiating boundaries and borders, establishing possession, sharing and claiming space. So, is it possible (and beneficial) to connect the child's "wanting" to know with broader educational purposes and outcomes? We argue that these "sandpit" situations offer the opportunity to extend and enhance young children's understanding of wider society. Understanding place and space has been identified as something children "need to know" in many curricula. For example, in the Australian curriculum (ACARA) [15] the "concepts of place and space" include the understanding that "the ways people organize and manage the spaces in the places we live…can be designed and redesigned to achieve particular purposes." It seems that knowing who "owns" spaces and which space is appropriate for a particular activity is important for participation in the social worlds of the home, classroom and beyond.

### 4.2 Intentional teaching in the early childhood years

In a general sense, the word "intentional" co-located with the word "teaching" implies that there is a sense of *purpose* behind the early childhood educator's pedagogical decisions. The synonyms for the word "intentional" add further clarity as to what might be involved in intentional teaching. These synonyms include: considered, designed, mediated, planned, premeditated and proposed. These verbs are familiar to early childhood educators. Quality early childhood programs have a clear sense of direction and purpose where educators are able to articulate the broad learning outcomes that guide their practice: they are purposeful. For example, many early childhood curricula provide evidence that children's understandings of the relationships between the times, places, people and events in their world are intended learning outcomes.

A considered approach to any intentional teaching and learning demands attending to *why* early childhood educators might engage with children's interest in "place": what is the purpose behind sustaining and extending children's thinking about this concept? If a primary educational aim or purpose of early childhood education is to "learn to live together" in ways that are inclusive and socially just, the first question early childhood educators must address is: What concepts might contribute to a more socially just world through children's exploration of "place"? What are some of the understandings of place that are important in contemporary times? These questions require careful consideration for the responses will guide the educator's conversations, interactions, choice of materials and intentional teaching.

Returning to the theoretical concepts introduced in earlier sections of the chapter helps clarify how a critical social constructionist perspective can offer some useful ways of seeing the learning that is occurring as children are playing out their understanding of place. Firstly, the child, from the moment of birth would be considered to be an *active participant* in the world: they are "actors in a drama." The child is not preparing to play a part but *is* playing a part and making meaning of the world. A social script informs each child's experience in so many ways with cultural tools (such as language), symbols, customs, food and common uses of space. From a critical social constructionist perspective, what is important here is that the adults interacting with the child see their role (and the roles of other children) as co-constructing this meaning together.

### 4.3 Exploring the social and physical world in contemporary times

The concepts of place and space are some of the most common stimuli for young children's play. Children bring to their play their own unique understandings and experience of "place" as they take up roles, re-construct situations and events in their play. For example, in one very disadvantaged setting, the educators took the decision to construct a Police Station play area. The result was that some children assumed a position of power and leadership in the play that had not previously been observed. These children enacted processes (such as being called by a number, prioritized, segregated, and questioned) that demonstrated their experience of this particular "place." This example illustrates how an early childhood educator's understanding of the importance of "place" informs the provision of diverse "places" within early childhood classrooms that contribute to, and support, children's cultural identities and learning. Another example is where the provision of a "publishing" corner in the early years classroom provides opportunity for children to assume the identity of illustrator, writer and author that might not otherwise be possible.

In order to better understand how children utilize their life-world experiences in play, contemporary early childhood research has moved away from a developmental perspective with its emphasis on the child as individual to the child as a social participant. This participation is crucial to children's construction of knowledge. The child's knowledge and understanding can be understood from a "Funds of Knowledge" (FoK) [16] perspective, foregrounding the social origins of knowledge as a result of participation in particular cultural and social circumstances. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss a FoK approach to teaching and learning in depth, but it is relevant to acknowledge that in recent times, a FoK approach recognizes children's learning in terms of both the "sources" and "areas" of knowledge as not only household and community experiences but also popular culture, media and classroom participation.

Alongside a recognition of the knowledge children have developed within their social worlds, the concept of "working theories" [17] to describe children's "evolving ideas and understandings" is also useful and consistent with a critical social constructionist epistemology. Utilizing working theories as a way of explaining children's knowledge construction contributes to a more inclusive pedagogy for it highlights not only the cultural "situatedness" of the child's understandings but also "how different access to funds of knowledge may offer insights into matters of inclusion, exclusion and status within children's play" ([18] p. 297). As illustrated in the Police Station example above, the type of knowledge and experience of "place" that children bring to their play may contribute to their status and power but also can lead to exclusion and powerlessness [19]. Take a moment to consider what a

First Nations child, the child experiencing homelessness or the child of a refugee family might contribute a discussion about "place."

One of the principles underpinning a socially just education is that if curriculum and pedagogy enables the most disadvantaged children in the group to participate equally, this benefits the whole group. If the experiences, conversations and resources used in the inquiry about "place" include the experience of the homeless and refugee children, this not only values those children's experiences, it broadens and extends the whole group understanding of place. Intentional teaching techniques such as shared book reading, situates children's own experience of place alongside those of other children: those found in stories, media and popular culture. In this process, the group's knowledge about place is broadened and extended. However, the educator's skill in facilitating and mediating the exchange and sharing of these life-world experiences becomes crucial.

### 4.4 Intentional teaching as "inviting children into a conversation"

As previously noted, intentional teaching in the early years often means continuing the ideas and interests that children are exploring through play. However, there are many unexplored issues associated with the assumption that, in a group of young children, it is possible to follow *all* of the children's ideas and interests, *all* of the time. Educators continually make considered decisions about *which* of children's multiple, sometimes very transitory, ideas and interests will be pursued further, and whether to involve a larger group of children into this pursuit. I had the privilege of discussing these questions in a personal conversation with Carla Rinaldi in 2012. Carla suggested that the process involves considering whether one child's interest is relevant to the larger group and if so, engaging children in an extended inquiry can be seen as "inviting children into a conversation." This idea of "inviting" children into a shared inquiry or conversation resonated with my research into early childhood pedagogy within a critical social constructionist paradigm.

An epistemological perspective that views knowledge as constructed rather than as "truth" enables the teacher to work alongside the child (or children) in the process of co-constructing knowledge. Viewing teaching and learning as a co-construction of meaning reduces the divide between "teacher led" or "child centered" perceptions of teaching and learning in the early years. No longer is the adult positioned as only ever "responding" to the needs or interests of the early learner: the adult is now in a reciprocal relationship, also contributing ideas and ways of knowing and supporting other children to participate in the conversation. Co-construction is described as a process where two (I would argue and sometimes more) people interact and "each participant listens to the other's ideas, contributes from their own, and together they develop their unique shared meaning" ([20] p. 37). The child's voice is heard and valued and all participants make links between experiences, across time and distance. Thus, co-construction re-positions both the early learner and the teacher. The educator is learning alongside the child/children. Returning to our example of "place," in Australia, as the indigenous child contributes ideas about connection to the land, perhaps supported by a visiting indigenous elder, the educator, along with the children in the group is deepening their knowledge of "place."

Viewing learning as "co-construction" is premised on the belief that both the child and the educator (or another child/children) with whom they are interacting see a "context, a situation, or a phenomenon, which is 'objectively' the same in qualitatively different ways …and if we become aware of others' ways of seeing, then we have a certain degree of collective consciousness" ([21] p. 190). Here, we see a shift

from a cognitive constructivist perspective focused on the individual child's construction of meaning to a critical social constructionist paradigm concerned with the pair or group's understanding of a phenomena, experience or concept.

By interacting with others (both adults and children), children will be exposed to a much wider range of "ways of seeing" (in this case, place) than is available when working or playing alone. The child finding their own way into a "landscape of ideas," concepts, terms and facts shared by others, is learning [21]. However, in this solitary process, their own perspectives limit individuals. By learning how others see and experience place, a child will be broadening their ideas of the multiple ways that "place" can be seen and "meaning is enriched in the process."

In this process of co-constructing meaning, adults actively participate as "intentional mediators" [22] and this concept of "teaching as mediation" opens up new possibilities for thinking about teachers' work with early learners across the birth-8 years. This approach does not assume the dominance of one knowledge over another but different knowledges are not "valued as more or less true...but are put side by side and treated equally important as different ways of understanding" ([23] p. 285).

As becomes evident, within this framework the role of the pedagogue is significant, the teacher has important work to do working alongside the learner/s, mediating between the known and the unknown. The teacher, is not only a "mediator of knowledge" but a "critical mediator of knowledge" whose role involves making the "culture, worldview and social arrangements and everyday practices of their society more accessible" ([22] p. 349).

### 4.5 Teaching as mediating: extending pedagogic repertoires

Mediation involves many different pedagogical decisions. As previously discussed, the educator's consideration of whether a child's idea is pursued at an individual, small group, or whole group level is an intentional decision. Designing learning experiences for individual children, a small group or the whole group requires sophisticated and purposeful planning. One of the benefits of planning whole group experiences is that the "shared" experience ameliorates some of the inequities of individual children's opportunities. For example, as part of the group conversation about "place," a carefully planned excursion to a particular "place" (e.g., an Art gallery) offers all children to participate equally in a conversation about what makes this place special, what happens there, and the people who are involved, etc. The excursion forms the basis of a more equal conversation than sole reliance on children's previous opportunities. Again, the diversity of life-worlds can be brought into the conversation to extend children's understanding of place. For example an indigenous perspective regarding how, although many galleries now include indigenous artworks, in times past, indigenous artists displayed their art in culturally significant, natural places would be important.

The language used in the educators' questions, resources, responses and comments is critically important from a critical social constructionist perspective. Using accurate words such as "space, artists, artworks, light, hanging" in context invites children to think about particular space (in this case the Art gallery) in new ways. Literature, storytelling, and multi-media resources are useful to enhance "shared" understandings about place. Asking the children why they think people have created art galleries stimulates thinking about how "places and spaces" are designed by people for particular activities: one of the core principles of understanding the social and physical world.

A common mediating strategy utilized by early childhood educators is illustrated by the Police Station example described previously. Educators often "orchestrate" the environment by introducing props and organizing space related to particular social activities (shops, hospitals, homes, etc.). Working within a critical social constructionist paradigm includes considering the environment as mediating strategy. In a socially just pedagogy, the environments being provided must include aspects of diverse children's experience. For example, in an Australian context, in the sandpit, are the tools and toys from a solely western repertoire (Tonka trucks, cranes, plastic containers) or do the props include examples from indigenous ways of knowing such as bark, native plants, and perhaps some tools that could be used for re-constructing animal tracks.

Photographs and videos can be the stimulus for enhancing and extending children's learning about "place." For example, based on a Photostory [24] methodology, children could be asked to take a photo of their favorite place, both in the classroom and in their wider worlds. For very young children, families or carers could be asked to capture the places where their babies or toddlers are happiest and share these with the educators. These photos could be the basis of whole group discussions about whether there are common features of these places. What makes the space special: the people or activities there, plants, animals, materials, quietness? These ideas could be used to make changes in the way the center is organized. The photos could be sorted, re-arranged, published and shared in many ways, utilizing multiple technologies such as slide shows, e-books and photo-books with captions.

Video recording children at play in the sandpit, particularly if there is a dispute about territory, ownership and use of space could be the basis for beginning significant conversations about "place." Using the words "boundaries" and "borders" introduces important ideas regarding how "ownership" is established, who makes the decisions related to whether and how space is shared, not only in the sandpit, but also in the wider world.

Lastly, experiences in the Arts provide the opportunity for children to co-construct meaning as they explore, express and communicate aspects of their social and physical worlds in unique ways. For example, drawing, then sculpting the people who live in the "place" called home is a valuable opportunity for children to explore the concept of "place" over an extended time using different materials to represent and express their ideas and understandings of the places, people and events in their worlds.

## 5. Conclusion

This chapter has presented the possibility that revisiting our beliefs about knowledge from a critical social constructionist perspective offers early childhood educators the potential to make more socially just pedagogical decisions. Using examples drawn from the Social Sciences regarding the concept of "place and space" we have examined the potential of intentional teaching for sustaining, enhancing and extending young children's learning.

The chapter has explored how a metaphor of the child as participating in a "drama" as they find their way into a landscape of ideas, utilizing the cultural tools (such as language) that are made available in their life-worlds, offers the teacher a position as a critical mediator in the process of learning. The teacher is an important

player in the drama: making connections, supporting children's working theories, initiating and sustaining "big" ideas over time.

A critical social constructionist epistemology opens up new ways of thinking about teaching and learning in the early years that moves beyond a choice between either a child-centered or teacher-directed approach. Pedagogy informed by an understanding of critical social constructionism pays attention to the knowledge that children bring and extends this knowledge in ways that contribute to a more socially just world.

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