



'THEY ARE MY FRIENDS!' FINDINGS FROM AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY ON YOUNG CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF NURSERY PLAY AND LEARNING

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Abstract:

Young children's nursery play has been the focus of attention for years now focusing on the relationship between play and learning as well as the role of play in children's overall development. In previous years most 'play studies' were concentrated on observing, recording, and analysing young children's play from the adult's perspective. However, recent studies aim to give young children voice and ownership on their play and learning experiences. In this respect, this paper is based on a small-scale ethnographic study and seeks to address the need for young children's voices to be heard with regard to their nursery play experiences. A variety of audiovisual research methods (video camera, tape recorder, and still photographs) were employed for the collection and analysis of the data. The thematic analysis of the data suggests that young children's play dialogues and comments on their nursery play can provide practitioners and other significant adults with rich and valuable insights into their views on play and learning within the early years' settings. The themes that emerged included children's experiences of play in terms of ownership, negotiation, learning, and preferences among others. In this respect, it is highlighted that young children's voices added to the perspectives of their significant adults can help us form a complete picture of nursery play and learning with implications for the implementation of the early childhood curriculum.

Keywords: play, learning, children's voices, ethnography, early years

1. Introduction

"The word 'play' conjures up images of laughter, enjoyment, indulgence and sharing"
(Sayeed and Guerin, 2000, p. 1).

However significant the importance of play in early years and the plethora of research concerning the adults' role in it, there still remains a significant gap in relevant

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research regarding the view of young children on nursery play. For instance, what is rare in the literature is the actual voice of the young 'players' themselves and how they view and experience play and learning in a nursery setting. Limited studies do exist that attempt to include young children's perspectives; some of them do so from an ethnographic approach. Studies by Corsaro (1981, 1993), King (1979), MacNaughton (2000), Nutbrown (1999), Paley (1993), Sawyer (1997) are some of the few that are placing young children's perspectives in the centre of attention.

Similarly, in recent years researchers have tried to include young children in their research as participants rather than objects providing the base for several publications on early childhood research ethics and methodology (Aubrey et al., 2000; Christensen and James, 2000; Greig and Taylor, 1999; MacNaughton et al., 2001).

Thus, this paper wishes to add to the growing early childhood education research literature by stressing the importance of the need for young children to be heard. In doing so, it presents evidence that young children are capable of becoming research participants and informants provided that the researcher has thoroughly and carefully considered the importance of sufficient time and appropriate use of research methods based on those young children's age, needs, and understanding. Their views could obviously provide additional knowledge about their nursery play experiences along with the views of their significant adults with significant implications for implementing the early childhood curriculum. Although no generalizations could be claimed because of the small-scale nature of this study, the present findings will provide us with valuable insights regarding young children's perceptions and experiences of nursery play.

This study is based on the pilot of a longitudinal ethnographic research study on nursery play. Thus, issues related to methodology were the central focus and will be addressed in this paper. The research questions that emerged were the following:

- Which ways of recording could capture the young children's play experiences and still maintain their natural environment?
- How can the discussions and interviews be structured to elicit the information needed?
- How can young children's perspectives on play be included?

2. Literature Review

Young children's play has been the focus of researchers from various disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, and education. Most play studies have taken place either at home or in an educational setting, (for instance Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978; Smith, 1994), and have been highly influential on how play is valued and viewed for young children's overall development and learning. Equally, the role of the significant adults, such as parents/carers and early educators, in children's early years of play has been previously studied in great depth; see for example Brock, Dodds, Jarvis & Olusoga (2009), Fleer, (2018), Bennett et al. (1997), Bruner (1980), Dunn and Wooding (1977), Smilansky (1968) amongst others.

The centrality of play in early childhood education was stressed by the HMI report on the education of children under 5 (DES, 1989), which outlined the importance of designing a broad and balanced curriculum in which play featured strongly. During the 1990's the place of play was somewhat marginalized according to Nutbrown (1998), but in the 2000 Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage, play is described as *"a key way in which young children learn with enjoyment and challenge"* and the role of the adult is crucial in providing effective support and a secure environment for children (DfEE / QCA, 2000; pp. 25-26). As Wood (2014) presents it is important to plan a curriculum that is focused on what children need are interested in and learn from in order to ensure that agency, self-regulation, and control are provided to them.

According to the literature, play is generally regarded as a pleasurable activity; an activity that is 'fun' and 'fanciful' (Saracho, 1991). Thus, some scholars (for instance, O'Connor, 1991) view play as the 'opposite of work' due to its pleasurable characteristics, while others (Isaacs, 1933) believe that it is the 'child's work'. Play and work are sometimes presented as a set of bipolar constructs with a great degree of overlapping within the curriculum (Bennett et al., 1997). On the contrary, Manning and Sharp (1977) had stated with regard to the work and play distinction/relationship:

"There is no division between play and work in the infant mind: whatever he is doing, he is learning. His so-called playing is in fact working; he concentrates all his faculties on the one activity in which he is whole-heartedly engaged. It is this concentration that 'teaching - play' can exploit" (p.12).

At the same time, Wood (2014) argues that although play is an important and fundamental activity, it is children's use of play that enables them to learn providing evidence that peer cultures and relationships are crucially important to enhance learning and development as young children recreate their interests and insights through play. To support the centrality of play in young children's learning, (Fleer, 1998, p.6) highlights that *"learning enriches the play of the children in the imaginary situation, at the same time as affording meaningful and joyful learning of concepts as detailed in early childhood curricula"*.

3. Material and Methods

In an endeavor to incorporate young children's views in the existing 'play literature' a small-scale ethnographic study, took place at an inner-city nursery in the North of England; methods were to be tried out and elaborated for on the longitudinal study that followed. Ethnographic research according to Blatchford-Siraj (2010) derives from the anthropological and cross-cultural study in an attempt to present some aspects of the experiences of a group of people aiming to provide an overall view of the experiences and values of the participants of the study.

According to Mukherji & Albon (2011, p.46), listening to young children is an “*emerging principle that underpins research*” as this is explicitly mentioned in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), articles 12 and 13:

“Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child...the child shall have the right to the freedom of expression; the right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice.” (UNCRC articles 12 and 13, quoted in Moss et al., 2005:2).

Having negotiated access to the nursery, and explained the purposes of the research to the participants, parents/carers were asked for their informed consent. In addition, children were enabled to choose whether they wanted to participate or not in the research as well. The research was explained to them in a simple and straightforward way. All the names of the participants and the setting were altered to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

In terms of the present study involving young children in decision-making about whether to take part in a research study can be viewed as a useful experience giving them a sense of control and ownership. David (1992) and Evans and Fuller (1998) demonstrate how young children can prove quite powerful agents because they will move away, where possible, if they do not wish to participate. These views were seriously taken into account to ensure young children’s needs were addressed and respected.

3.1 The participants: The ‘players’

In total, 32 children (18 girls and 14 boys) aged between 3 and 4:6 years participated in the study. These came from various socio-economic and racial backgrounds, with the majority coming from working and middle-class families; two of the children had English as a second language. During the initial phase of the pilot, all young children in the setting were told that the researcher was in their nursery school because she was interested in their play. On several occasions she played with them without keeping notes, getting to know them, which was considered a respectful way to behave in their company.

In addition, 4 mothers and 2 nursery teachers were interviewed. As it is usually the case in early childhood research, the adult participants are mainly females. However, for the purposes of this paper, a focus will only be given to the voices of the children.

3.2 Methods

The methods employed to collect information varied from mainly participant and non-participant observations, field notes, and video recordings of play incidents to still photographs and group discussions with children. In total, 7 group discussions took

place, approximately 10-15 minutes in duration each, throughout a 2-week-period of time. Thus, from the total time of 2 hours of unedited video footage, almost 1.5 hours was shown back to the children within these group discussions. Group discussions were open-ended with the aim of enabling young children to express their opinions. These discussions were also tape-recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. Identification of main key themes and common responses was the focus of the analysis that followed.

With regard to the video footage, two questions were addressed prior to the group discussions: where and who.

Where? The discussions took place at the nursery during 'outside time'. Those children who wanted to come and have a look 'what's on the TV' were welcome – in small groups of 4 or 5 children; a number that was reduced to 3 for practical reasons.

Who? The main purpose was to talk to those children who were on the tapes, but other children could come as well. Some of them asked if 'Bob the Builder' or 'Thunderbirds' were on the tape; others talked about the movies they have at home. When it was actually time for them to see that they were starring in the film at first amazement, and then laughter and giggles filled the room.

Video footage and photographs were useful stimuli for conversations and enabled children to recall their play events. Audio visual technology is now widely employed in ethnographic studies (Pink, 2001), so given the children's young age a video camera, a tape recorder, and a camera for still pictures, along with the field notes were used to depict young children's free play at the nursery. The following factors allowed the success of the discussions with the children:

- The clips with the play incidents were short (5-10 minutes);
- There were no more than 3 children at the discussion at the time;
- Children discussed the video clips which featured themselves;
- Children were asked to focus on what was actually happening on the tape and to 'talk about it'.

With reference to the second point mentioned above, MacNaughton et al. (2001) also referred to the importance of having few children of this age in a group because early childhood researchers "*aware of little children's natural egocentricity, may find the process impractical in a 'group' larger than two or three*" (p.165). Perhaps it is due to this 'egocentricity' that the children were particularly interested in video clips that they were 'starring' on. Also, it might be because of young children's need to be constantly stimulated that the clips had to be short but were essential to initiate the conversation with them. Finally, as far as the discussions based on the still pictures are concerned, all children were used to having photo albums in the book corner and probably at home, that they could look at any time. So, they easily engaged in conversation about pictures of themselves playing with other children.

Different research methods enabled the researcher to elicit information according to individual children's needs. For example, when it came to writing up field notes on

site proved difficult because the latter seemed to be distracted. As the researcher wrote in her field notes:

".... as Tim was playing with the flexi straws, he explained to me that he was making a garden, with trees, flowers and a patio. He asked me to make a garden as well and he started asking me, which are: the patio, the trees and the flowers. Then he said that the trees were falling down because some men came and cut them down, at his house. I found the story very interesting and I thought I could write it down. But Tim started asking me what I was writing and why and stopped playing; instead, he was looking at my notebook. I realized I had been the cause for Tim stopping playing and I decided not to write anything down again in front of the children. What else could I do? And how could I best capture their dialogues?" (Field notes)

So, the decision was made for most of the field notes to be written up during breaks and after the end of each session.

A tape recorder proved very successful in recording the fine details of children's play dialogues. At this point, no effort is made to discard the usefulness of note-taking within the classroom. What is acknowledged though is the difference between each research project and the dilemmas that the researcher faces in an attempt to come up with the most appropriate solution to recording the events as close to reality as possible. And in this case, keeping notes while children were playing, was perceived as a drawback rather than an advantage. An example of the information collected by the tape recorder was of the dialogue below. This conversation took place between several children, both girls and boys at the sand tray where many different sizes of boxes, spoons, and scoops were available to them.

- *'This looks like sand, isn't it?'*

John: *"I am making a bowl of porridge. Ghedi put the cement in the tray. It's not good for eat it. It's for making walls. It's dangerous."*

Sue: *"More cement."*

Chris: *"More cement."*

Teacher: *"Oh! No, it's overflowing. It's so full."*

Paul: *"Maybe we have to take some out."*

Aziza: *"You want it."*

Paul: *"Cement is coming for you Aziza."*

Paul: *"Can I have the bowl? Put it back Ghedi. I'll catch it."*

Sue: *"I'll put some more."*

Chris: *"I'm putting pepper in here. Would you like to help me? Now we need some powder, no, flour."*

Cathy: *"I just put some flour in."*

Sue: *"We've already got flour."*

Chris: *"I just put some sugar."*

Cathy: *"You have to pour it very carefully."*

Aziza: *"You want cement?"*

Sue: *"No, we are making some washing powder."*

Cathy: *"I got the most. This is different cement it looks like yellow."*

Chris: *"Yellow and pink too."*

Sue: *"No more spreading, only sprinkling. We're covering the bits off. Take all that sand away first. Put it up. Put some in mine. Put some in yours."*

Chris: *"This looks like sand, isn't it?"*

Cathy: *"It is sand!"*

(Tape recorder data)

There is a sense of movement in this vivid dialogue, a rapid circular movement as the sand becomes porridge, cement, washing powder, flour, and pepper back into the sand. Children creatively transformed sand into other substances of similar texture, while at the same time they are negotiating and positioning themselves amongst other children. Assumptions that play is a 'condition for' learning Fromberg (1995) could easily be supported here, and so could the play-learning relationship, that was stressed by Vygotsky (1978) who argued that through play children are motivated to learn, so the learning that occurs in meaningful contexts becomes a spur to further motivation and hence to further learning.

Children's imagination was probably generated by the texture of the substance they were engaged with – the sand. First, they tried to build something with the sand that was soon transformed into cement:

John: *"I am making a bowl of porridge. Ghedi put the cement in the tray. It's not good for eat it. It's for making walls. It's dangerous."*

With John's initiative other children, like Sue and Chris are getting involved in delivering and adding cement to the bowl that John had previously filled up:

Sue: *"More cement."*

Chris: *"More cement."*

But then, without any apparent reason Chris decides to turn cement into pepper and flour, and at the same time she seems to be transferring the whole subject from cement to pepper by involving more girls in the play situation, something that is accepted by the other girls straight away:

Chris: *"I'm putting pepper in here. Would you like to help me? Now we need some powder, no, flour."*

Cathy: *"I just put some flour in."*

Within only a few seconds Sue decides to lead the situation by proposing that:

Sue: *"We've already got flour."*

Setting a first barrier to Chris forcing her to reinvent a new substance of sugar – previously not mentioned by any of the children:

Chris: *"I just put some sugar."*

Cathy: *"You have to pour it very carefully."*

However, Aziza is still talking about cement and thus Sue finds the opportunity to change the substance again into washing powder:

Aziza: *"You want cement?"*

Sue: *"No, we are making some washing powder."*

Constant negotiation and learning are evident in the dialogue again – children use their imagination and constantly talk about a metamorphosis of sand. This is achieved as the girls try to impress each other by giving new properties to sand. They seem oblivious to the fact that it is actually sand that they are playing with until Sue mentions the word sand, which seems to bring the other two girls Chris and Cathy back to reality.

Sue: *"No more spreading, only sprinkling. We're covering the bits off. Take all that sand away first. Put it up. Put some in mine. Put some in yours."*

From this point onwards there is no return despite Chris' question:

Chris: *"This looks like sand, isn't it?"*

Cathy is not definite that this is sand that they are playing with and in fact, there is no reason to believe otherwise, while at the same time she brings the whole conversation to an end:

Cathy: *"It is sand!"*

Another very stimulating dialogue came from video footage of three girls (aged between 4 and 4:5 years old) painting with toothbrushes in the creative area. The activity originally aimed to let the children experience a different medium of painting. However, the fact that children used toothbrushes instead of paintbrushes inspired them to create a rich dialogue about hygiene and how they should clean their teeth after eating sweets and the different flavours of toothpaste. If it wasn't for Cathy would the children have developed the story like they did? Did her comment trigger the creation of this story?

- *"We are cleaning our teeth because we had chocolate"*

Sue: *"We are painting with toothbrush today"*.

Cathy: *"No, we are cleaning our teeth"*.

Sue: *"I am scrubbing my teeth"*.

Sue: *"Scrub, scrub, scrub"*.

Cathy: *"We are cleaning our teeth because we had chocolate"*.

Sue: *"And sweets and chewing gum. Everything that is bad for us. We have to clean our teeth. My mummy says that the tooth fairy will come when I sleep and she will leave some money at my pillow and when I wake, I will find them"*.

Chris: *"Mine is flavour lemon [yellow paint], this is raspberry ribbon [pink paint], that's lime [green paint], and that's blueberry [blue paint]."*

Cathy: *"Mine is lime"*.

Michele: *"Mine is raspberry"*.

Chris: *"No, raspberry ribbon. My toothpaste is all gone, I am going to buy some more"*.

Sue: *"My mummy let me clean my teeth with a real toothbrush because I do it very properly"*.

(Video data)

When the incident was shown back to the girls, they insisted that they were 'Brushing their teeth' and giggled looking at each other. Only when the researcher asked them if they were really 'brushing their teeth' did they respond that 'They were just pretending!'

Lillard (1998) has pointed out that pretend play involves negotiation between players with differing views, simultaneous representation of objects in two ways (real and pretend), role play requiring acting out others' thoughts and actions, and portrayal of emotions appropriate to varied situations and actors; all actions that suggest that the pretenders have mental representation abilities. The girls in the above dialogue presented all the characteristics of pretend play given by Lillard (ibid.). They showed that they are capable of distinguishing between fiction and reality by stating that they were 'just pretending!'; they were *negotiating* between different views:

Sue: *"We are painting with toothbrush today"*.

Cathy: *"No, we are cleaning our teeth"*.

Girls were transforming and communicating meaning, which is a complex cognitive act. At this point, a reference could be made to play as 'paradox'. Whilst children are aware that play is not real, however, they suspend reality in order to enter into pretend play and share the fruits and benefits of play. Many early childhood educators will have experienced being told by children 'Don't be silly – it's only pretend!' when they have taken a step too far into the realm of the unreal.

Other children were also invited to comment on more video-recorded play incidents. Below a reference is made to children's first reactions to watching the video, high levels of recall regarding previous play activities, and their rationale behind these play activities.

- **First reactions on watching the video**

Younger children's (3.5 years old) first reactions were:

"These are my friends!" [pointing at themselves playing]

or

"This is Charles!"

instead of

"This is me".

For the younger children watching themselves on the TV proved more complex than it seemed. They found it difficult to recognise themselves through the camera. It looked as if they were simultaneously in 2 places: at the room and on the TV. How could they be on the TV since they were sitting outside the screen? An explanation to this reaction could be that perhaps these children had not experienced seeing themselves on home videos.

Older children (4 to 5 years old) recognised themselves immediately:

"That's me. That's not today, that was another day. I am wearing different clothes today",

or

"We didn't have the Lego out today, that was yesterday".

For them, the easiest way to tell whether what was shown did not take place on the same day was by looking out for details such as their clothes, the toys they were playing with on the same day, and so forth. They also expressed their amazement by saying things like:

"That's cool!",

"Can we see it again? It's interesting!"

- **Young children's recall of previous play behaviour**

An element that stands out from young children's group discussions is that most of them seemed to remember the exact details of their play sequences, even if that play incident happened several days before. So, Michele (4.6) said:

"Me, Anne, and the baby are going to be on..."

or

"I am going to put the baby in the basket."

In most cases, children could remember every single detail of what had happened on the day that the video footage was taken, before and after. Children's memory was extremely good, evidence, perhaps, that play is more than 'just fun' but also a serious activity for them. How could play be just fun, since they could recall every single detail of their previous play experiences?

- **Giving a reason for a particular 'play action'**

Children were also able to give their reasoning about why they acted in a specific way during their play. When Sahib (4.2) saw the tape, she explained:

"My ladders keep falling down. That is why I leave."

In the video footage, Sahib is captured playing with the building blocks for quite a while; apparently, she was making some ladders. Nevertheless, she did not stay there for long leaving the construction area to play in the home corner. Linking the video footage to what Sahib has told the researcher, it now made sense why she had left although she was playing there for quite a long time. The stimulus of the video footage enabled Sahib to support her actions with a reason. Unlike how it might have seemed on the footage and if Sahib wasn't asked to comment on the video, one could conclude that perhaps because she is a girl she spent less time with construction toys, as most girls do.

It is usually the case in the literature, that boys to have a greater tendency to use the block area rather than the girls (Gura, 1992). MacNaughton (2000) also refers to the *"block play area as the activity area in which groups of boys are the dominant figures"* (p.113). Although, such incidents were the norm, based on the observations and the video footage – i.e. boys to control the block play area and girls, on the contrary, to lead other areas (e.g. creative, book corner, and home corner area) – Sahib provided us with 'food for thought' as there may as well be other reasons behind the children and in this case girls' actions which we need to take seriously into consideration. Could this mean that practitioners should consider alternative ways of 'looking into' children's play realities? If this is the case, could the use of audiovisual techniques provide them with an insight into young children's reasoning with regard to their play experiences in particular? What would be the effect of such practice on the curriculum implementation? The extracts given above can provide the reader with some insight into their 'play thinking'. So, the reflections of the researcher are now in line.

4. Results and Discussion

This small-scale study made a first attempt to approach young children's play from a different perspective – this of the 'young players' themselves. As it was presented, in the literature young children's play has been studied at length and so has the role of the adults in relation to it. What is limited is the actual voice of the children, this of the main players. In the past, young children had been viewed as unable to participate in research

as informed participants. The main argument had been that they lacked the cognitive skills that would enable them to understand the purposes of the research. Generally, it was considered more appropriate to incorporate the views of proxy raters such as their parents, educators, and older siblings.

However, the methods applied in the study produced a substantial amount of information and proved effective in eliciting young children's play perspectives. Children do things at their own pace and any research with them needs to follow this pace. The element of time is known to every early childhood practitioner, researcher, and scholar (see, for example, Abbott 2001, Nutbrown 1999, Manning and Sharp, 1977). Young children can participate in such research and their views can be heard provided that there is sufficient time and that the methods used are appropriate for their age, needs, and understanding.

Barley and Bath (2014) in this respect suggest that in the ethnographic research process becoming familiar with 'the field' and its inhabitants is both natural and important. They acknowledge that little work has been published on this account as well as the 'familiarization period' and they reflect on the key principles that may be used to enhance ethnographic research practice. Finally, they argue that this period can prove to be an important tool in providing room for young children to express their views. In brief, the level of detail in young children's recall of their nursery play activities was fascinating. Most children provided reasons for their play activities. Those who were shy appeared to be open for discussion while watching themselves on TV, and so were children with English as their second language. There was a sense that young children's nursery play was influenced by the resources available and the curriculum, but it was also influenced by everything that was happening around them. In the majority of the cases, the use of cameras did maintain children's natural environment. However, in some instances, although children seemed not to pay any attention, it inspired some of them to make their own cameras by using building blocks.

This study made clear what Manning and Sharp (1977) had suggested several decades ago. Children gave a non-literal meaning to their activities as they were referring to them and provided no evidence for a distinction between concepts like play and work. According to them, they were 'building blocks', 'ironing the cloths' or 'doing the washing up' a fact that provided more evidence that they did not regard play as fun and less serious than work.

As Abbott and Moylett (1997) denote, children's needs should be recognized and properly met in an environment, which supports and fosters their growing independence (p. 5). This environment, where children will have the freedom to learn and play should be protected and as far as possible remove the inhibiting restriction that arises from fear for children's safety (Nutbrown, 1999). By supporting, promoting, evaluating, and providing a safe environment, children can practice and develop their learning skills through play. Similarly, practitioners ought to look further, if they are to make assumptions about a child's actions, learning, development, and play behavior. Perhaps by using additional means of capturing and analyzing children's nursery life, like the use

of audiovisual equipment, young children's learning and play experiences could be enhanced.

5. Recommendations

Further research will offer some new understanding about young children's play and ways in which we can understand it, drawing on the voices and perspectives of all the participants leading to greater appreciation of David's statement that "*Children are playing to live*" (David, 1996). As Fler (1998) believes new studies in the field of early childhood education as a whole provide insight into the need for an empirical, theoretical, and pedagogical examination of the relationship between play and learning.

6. Conclusion

The findings presented here are a first step into approaching the reality of the play experiences of young children in a nursery setting. It is believed that young children's voices came to add an extra piece to the 'nursery play picture', especially when they provided the researcher with the reasons behind their play behavior. "*The importance of voice in social science research and the justifications for incorporating and interpreting research voices in particular ways*" is also presented by Clough and Nutbrown (2012, p.63) in their book where emphasis is given both to the voice of the researchers in qualitative research as well as the voice of the participants. According to Clough (1998), "*voice does not itself struggle for rights, but is disposed after rights are established: voice is licensed by these rights. It follows from the view that the task for research is largely one of 'turning up the volume' on the depressed and inaudible voice*" (p. 147). Young children's voice is scarcely heard due to the age of the children but if we take into account the needs of our society for Children's Rights to be met then we can be assured that practices that encourage children to be heard will be more commonly followed. Such practices will ensure that the curriculum will be enriched with children's voices and will meet their needs in a more straightforward manner.

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