

Tell us about it: Children's expressive narratives about Head Start

by

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Abstract

The present study aims to examine children's experiences in childcare programs that serve at-risk populations in the city of Ottawa. To achieve this goal, we engaged children in art-based activities and conversations about their own experiences at childcare. Twelve childcare centres agreed to participate in this study: ten municipally funded Head Start programs and two not-for-profit programs. This study employed art-based methods to involve children in semi-structured discussions about childcare. Interviews were accompanied by artistic activities. Through thematic analysis, we found that children shared stories of important experiences, their daily lives, and activities they enjoy most. Children highlighted play and friends as some of the most important experiences. Additionally, themes of nature, animals, physical activity, reading and writing were commonly discussed. This study demonstrated that children are capable of identifying experiences in their lives that are important to them.

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Introduction

Research focusing on early childhood education and development frequently relies on educator and parent perspectives in understanding child wellbeing and experiences. Despite the abundance of research on parent and educator perspectives, there is need for more research that includes the child's input and point of view to inform a complete picture of children's lives.

There are many barriers that face researchers who wish to include young children's perspectives in research, so appropriate methodologies must be implemented to facilitate this process. In spite of these challenges and barriers, developmental researchers have an obligation to provide children with the opportunity to participate and contribute to research in meaningful ways. These obligations are outlined in Articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). Article 12 states that children who are able to form their own views have a right to express them freely in all matters affecting the child and they will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. Article 13 states a child has the right to freedom of expression, including the freedom to seek, receive and provide information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of barriers, orally, in writing or in print, or in any other media they choose.

By using age appropriate participatory methods this study aimed to gain a better understanding of the perspectives of preschool children's experiences in early childhood education settings. In order to gain these perspectives we employed art-based activities to engage children in describing their daily experiences, important events, and most enjoyable activities in their childcare setting. The children who participated in this study

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come from childcare centres located in the city of Ottawa. Childcare centres selected to participate in this study were Head Start programs that primarily serve families and children who qualify for subsidized spaces, as such, many of the children come from backgrounds or communities that are subject to multiple risk factors.

Therefore, we encountered children who have language difficulties or other barriers to their communication, which is why an arts-based approach that facilitates verbal and non-verbal communication was so important to gaining insights into the perspectives of this group of children. More specifically, we employed the use of arts-based approaches to facilitate meaningful conversations with the children. The literature has shown that children are able to use various art media to assist in their communication. For example, through dramatic play, drawing or 3-dimensional art, children have been found to be able to communicate their stories in a comfortable and natural interaction (Ahn & Filipenko 2006). Not only art-based activities have been found to support communication, but also to provide children and researchers an opportunity to discuss past events through the present moment, rather than children recalling abstract events (Kellman, 1995).

The effectiveness of children using art to illustrate or 'act' their experience, accompanied by a narrative describing their art, was demonstrated in Kragh-Muller & Isbell's 2011 study. This strategy was used with children aged 3-6, allowing them to share their perspectives of everyday life in childcare.

In the present study, conversations with children were recorded and thematically analysed to determine common themes between children, and across childcare centres. This type of research has also been shown to be effective in a preschool setting when

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children describe their experiences in the beginning and end of the school year (Einarsdottir, Dockett & Perry, 2009) indicating that this method is age appropriate for our population of interest.

In what follows, I will address the importance of including children and the challenges researchers may face by including children. In addition, the topics of children's vulnerability, competence, and the risks and benefits of including them as active participants in research will also be explored. To provide examples of research in which these barriers were overcome, studies in the literature that have been effective in including children as active participants will be reviewed.

Importance of including children in research

Under the UNCRC that was ratified by Canada in 1991, we have a legal obligation, to fulfill our duty to provide children opportunities to participate in matters that are important to them. An adult centered perspective diminishes the importance of children and disregards their ability to identify experiences that are valuable to them, inhibiting them from impacting their own lives. Recognition for the importance of children's perspectives has become more common in research in recent years. Viewing children as active participants, shaping their environments and interactions, is an important part in this development (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). Despite this emerging trend, there is still need for more studies examining children's perceptions and understanding of their experiences from their own point of view.

A majority of studies examine children and their environment through data collected from parents or teachers – or from observation, expecting little to no input or

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participation on behalf of the child. Most studies do not rely on data collected *with* children's participation and contribution. Not only does this leave us with an incomplete picture of the lives of children, but researchers end up examining children's lives from an outsider's perspective. This is inadequate to ensure we have a complete understanding of the viewpoint of the child and leaves us with half a story, without perspectives from both sides of the "looking glass". By having children as active participants in research we are provided with a wider range of perspectives in our data and a better idea of their reality and lived experience.

Challenges of Including Children in Research

The critics of children's participation have proposed a number of arguments supporting the view that the inclusion of children in research is often not possible especially when children are very young.

Indeed, there are several potential challenges and barriers that researchers face when conducting research with children. First, children are frequently seen as *vulnerable* and in need of protection. As a result there is a tendency to exclude children as a cautionary strategy. Second, there are many debates surrounding whether children have enough *competence* to consent to research and the role that parents/caregivers play and how this may complicate their participation. Third, it is frequently argued that the *benefits/risks balance* whereby having children participate in some types research does not always justify the risks they are exposed to.

Children's vulnerability

The first argument regarding child participation is centered on children as vulnerable and in need of protection. Protectionist strategies of this type seek to keep

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children safe, but may at the same time lead to their exclusion from research and perpetuate stereotypical views of the children as wholly inferior and helpless. Some have argued that this protectionist approach can lead to harm by systematically depriving marginalized groups from the benefits of research and opportunities to share their experiences (Swauger, 2009).

Children's competence

Although it is true that children are a vulnerable population due to their reliance on adults, the characterization of children based on their dependence may lead to unintended violations of the respect of the person and the principles of justice, which are two of the core principles of ethical research (Swauger, 2009). Reframing our perceptions of children as competent and capable individuals is a first step towards research practices that are more aligned with the ethical standards of respect of the person and the principle of justice.

Negative assumptions around children's capabilities can be challenged by providing children the opportunity to replace these assumptions with their own perspectives of self and their social environment (Bray, Liebenberg & Zinck, 2014). While we can reason that children and adults have different levels of ability, researchers can design studies that use methodological devices that are better suited for children's capabilities and that promote active participation of children, making the research experience more meaningful to participants.

Furthermore, researchers have debated whether children are capable of truly providing informed consent. With the introduction of the Nuremberg code in 1947, children were characterized as being too immature to provide consent for participation in

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research (Alderson, 2004). On the other hand, Powell, Fitzgerald, Taylor & Graham (2012) argue that in certain contexts, even young children or children with learning difficulties are capable of making informed decisions in regards to participation if they are provided adequate information in an appropriate medium. What we quickly discover in the debate surrounding consent is that context plays a large role in how we seek children's consent and whether caregivers have the authority to make these decisions independently of the child.

The role of caregivers in making decisions about their children's participation in research, researcher should always do their best to respect the child's ability to make decisions for themselves. By not offering children a reasonable opportunity to take part in the informed consent process researchers continue to reinforce the stereotype of children as helpless and incompetent (Gallagher, Haywood, Jones & Milne, 2010). Although parents, caregivers and researchers have an important role in ensuring the safety of children from exposure to potential harms, they also run the risk of using this power to exclude children, intentionally or unintentionally (Masson, 2004) from important research activities. Instead, giving children a fair opportunity to choose, breaks down the power dynamic between children and adults, supporting the children's ability to make choices freely.

The use of assent, instead of informed consent, with young children has also been criticized. Assent is defined as an "informal agreement" to participate and it is often used in lieu of formal consent when there is an assumption that the participant is unable to fully understand the process of research required to make informed consent.

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A report by Bray et al. (2014) discusses criticisms that assent may be used by researchers as a form of agreement in situations where children do not have the legal authority to consent for themselves. More cynically, it has been suggested that this practice allows researchers to pressure a child into participating because of their inability to verbally or actively refuse to participate (Alderson & Morrow, 2011).

In addition, it has been argued that it is not ethically sound to use assent independently of consent practices with caregivers. As Cocks (2006) states, assent is insufficient to ensure ethical integrity, but with the support of caregiver consent can be an important tool. By asking children for assent before they participate, children are provided with the agency they require to express their willingness to participate or not in research. If children are not aware they can choose, they may persist in participating without the realization they can stop.

Balancing risks and benefits

The third main argument surrounding child participation is whether exposing children to risks in research is justifiable by the benefits research may provide. Rather than approaching child participation and protection from opposing fronts, these two can help to define the parameters necessary to ensure children are able to safely participate in research (Graham, Powell, Taylor, Anderson & Fitzgerald 2013).

Part of this ethical debate is based on the biomedical model, which was created to examine the ethics of participants exposed to very tangible benefits and serious risks, for example an experimental surgery (Bray, et al. 2014). However, as Morrow & Boyden (2013) discuss, depending on contextual factors, children may be more vulnerable to abuse than adults when they participate in research. It is for this reason that we must take

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particular care in our design of research projects to reduce the risk to children participating.

The risks to participants in social science or humanities research are often far less significant compared to those implicated in medical research. These risks are sometimes indistinguishable from those that participants may experience in daily life (SSHRC, 2010, p. 23-24). At the same time, as the nature of childhood is transient, it is also difficult to justify the findings of research conducted with a child to be beneficial to that individual child. It is for this reason that immediate benefits must be ingrained in the study in order to truly benefit a participating child. For example, participating in research can provide children with a joyful experience, education, and feelings of empowerment from the knowledge that their perspectives are being taken into account (Bray, et al. 2014). Of course the risk of being harmed is heightened when research topics are of a sensitive nature. In this case it is important that researchers are not only well trained, but also have strategies to identify and mitigate any re-traumatization or distress caused by their participation in research (Bray, et al. 2014).

Based on the evidence presented so far, it is clear that any child should be able to participate in research given that appropriate methodologies and considerations are made to ensure their wellbeing. As with any research, it is necessary that proper planning and ethical considerations be taken into account in order to conduct research with justice, respect, and the wellbeing of participants in mind. Having children participate in research simply requires different considerations to be taken into account, but can still be accomplished with proper planning.

Psychological literature and children's participation

Examples of active participation of children in psychological research are not abundant. There are several reasons that researchers have proposed for not involving children as active participants in research.

In studies where children are interviewed researchers have questioned the ability of children not to be influenced by the interviewer to the point of invalidating the findings. For example, Melinder & Korkman (2010) used a 2x2 factorial design to assess the interviewing strategies of clinicians and police. In clinician interviews, props were used to facilitate the conversation between the adult and the children, whereas in police interviews, only verbal conversation took place. Although the researchers found that prop-assisted interviews can yield improved accuracy for children with low intelligence scores, they found them to have a distracting effect on children with higher levels of intelligence when compared to verbal-only interviews. Another key finding was that repeated interviews using props, not only resulted in a higher number of misleading questions, but that children would become more likely to reproduce errors in recall after repeated interviews. This study indicates that interviews with props help to facilitate communication with young children who score lower on intelligence.

Other studies using qualitative methods provide some examples of effective research involving children. Chang & Cress (2009) examined the use of arts/images as discussion points in order to enhance 3-4 year old children's communicative abilities. The purpose of this study was to demonstrate how parents could facilitate the continuation of conversations with children in order to scaffold and facilitate language development. Conversations with children were initiated by parents with the question "Could you

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please tell me about your drawing?" and the conversation revolved around whatever illustration the child was completing. This study highlights the importance of engaging in conversation with young children, rather than unidirectional or disjointed conversations with children. Parents were coached to "engage" children with the intention of carrying on a conversation before data collection began. Parents were provided many examples of questions they might ask to continue the conversation if it was not unfolding naturally. The conversations about the artwork were coded based on the types of conversational tools used (informational questions, representational functions, heuristic functions). The authors suggested that by engaging children in conversation with the intention of discussion, children and parents would experience better connections and help scaffold children's speech patterns. This study also speaks to the benefits that children gain from simply being engaged with an adult who is interested in what they have to say.

Another example of a study that highlights children's ability to actively participate in research is provided by Longobardi, Quaglia & Lotti (2015). Longobardi disputed that children's scribbles are a type of precursor to "actual" drawing and that they have particular meanings to the children. In this study, the author examined the "scribbles" of children aged 0-3 years in Italian nurseries and found that scribble styles (circular/jagged) are associated with different experiences they are trying to draw (bad/good). For example, some children would draw a negative experience such as "a bad dog" or "hitting my head" using jagged lines. On the other hand children would trace circular shapes to express positive experiences, like "my mother" and "playing with stickers". If children below the age of 3 have meaning to their drawings, then certainly older children can describe the meaning behind their drawings as well.

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Children's drawings are important for expression. However, drawings can also be conversation starters, and adult researchers can engage children in discussing their drawings to better interpret what children wish to express. For example, Coates & Coates (2006) discuss the importance of joining drawing and utterances together when interpreting what children are trying to communicate. Through this study they hoped to define the relationship between drawing and narrative with young children in addition to examining the implications of this relationship for conceptual and creative development. For children aged 3-5 in childcare, they found that drawing could help enrich storytelling, and can also reveal complex conceptual differences in what they are trying to express. One particular example was that of a child who wished to draw a rowing boat rather than a pirate ship and worked with her peer to create boats, sharks, waves and many other features in the drawing. Transcripts of the discussions between children and researchers and children showed that the combination of artwork and discussion were an important part in the development and expression of ideas and content.

Additionally, we find that when we incorporate children's active participation to research, we can discover novel insights into their world provided by the children. In a study by Einarsdottir (2014), she sought to examine how children perceive the roles of preschool teachers in their childcare environment. Children aged 5-6 years old engaged in a photo activity where they were given disposable cameras, and were instructed that they could take pictures of what they liked, what they did during the day, what they did not like, and what the adults did in preschool. These photos were used as discussion pieces in an interview with the children, even when the educators were not present in the photographs, the researchers asked the children what the educators were doing at the

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time. The researchers found that children often did not give much thought to what educators were doing throughout the day. When children were probed about the educator actions throughout the day, children described them in a superficial way, for example: "They are just watching over us."

Children are not only able to participate in meaningful ways through qualitative methods, but young children are also able to complete a number of quantitative assessments that require their active participation. Children are able to contribute to the field of research in a number of ways, and these following studies showcase those contributions and the effort researchers made to facilitate their participation. In the following examples we can see child participation contributing to the field of language, social and cognitive development.

Language development is just one important topic of research in child development, and the participation of children is very beneficial to this field as demonstrated in the following studies.

In a study by Roberts & Kaiser (2012), the parent-implemented "enhanced milieu teaching" (EMT) intervention was examined. This study aimed to examine the language development of Language Impaired (LI) children from 2-3.5 years of age. Although this study used many observational and parent report scales, it also included measures that required children's active participation. This study chose to use the Bayley-III test in particular as it uses more testing items for children than most standardized language assessments. This study not only demonstrates children's ability to participate in assessment batteries, but it shows the benefit of having multiple sources for data collection. Through parental and child participation in a number of assessments,

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researchers and children were able to collectively contribute to the development and advancement of an effective intervention supporting children with LI.

Ryder, Leinonen & Schulz (2008) examined children with specific language impairment (SLI) using 3 assessments designed for child-based measurements of language development. The goal of this study was to examine children's use of context in responding to questions using pragmatic language. Participants in this study were 27 children with SLI and 72 children without SLI ranging in age from 6 to 11. There were three different styles of tasks used in this study: a picture task, verbal only task, and a story task. The picture task involved children identifying a "correct" picture based on verbal cues provided by the experimenter. The Verbal only task involved children choosing a card with a two-sentence scenario, which was read to them. They were then asked a question regarding this scenario and required to respond verbally. The final task involved reading a short picture-story (designed for children aged 3-5) to the children with the researcher and questions were asked throughout the story to assess level of reading comprehension. Scoring was based on mean correct responses to each of these tasks, and it was determined children with SLI did in fact perform worse on tasks involving verbal communication based on the pragmatic complexity of the task when compared to their non-SLI peers. This study provides an excellent example of assessment tools that can be used cooperatively with young children to provide quantitative data from child participation.

In another study Qi, Kaiser & Milan (2006) examined children's behaviour using a combination of child language testing procedures and adult behavioural observations. Children aged 3-4 years old in a Headstart classroom were assessed using the Caregiver-

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Teacher Report Form (CTRF/2-5; Achenbach, 1997) accompanied by language scores obtained from children through the Preschool Language Scale-3 (PLS-3; Zimmerman, Steiner, & Pond, 1992). With the use of these assessments, the researchers were able to examine the correlations between children of high and low language abilities and their behaviour problems. They determined that children with lower language abilities were more likely to experience behavioural problems than their high-language peers.

A similar study by Ross & Weinberg (2006) sought to examine a potential relationship between language delays and behaviour and socialization problems. Children aged 1.5-3 years of age participated in this study and were assessed based on language using the PLS-3 (PLS-3; Zimmerman, Steiner, & Pond, 1992) and behaviour using the Bayley Scales of Infant Development (Bayley, 1993). To complement the teacher administered Bayley scale, the Vineland Adaptive Behaviour scales (VABS) (Sparrow, Balla & Cicchetti, 1984), a semi-structured interview was used with parents. This study determined that children with overall language delay scored lower on social scales than their peers with only expressive language delays. In addition, they determined that children with overall language delay demonstrated problems with socialization in comparison to their peers who have either expressive language delay or receptive language delay.

Cognitive assessments are frequently a challenging topic area for child participation based on the "internal" nature of the examination. Below are two interesting examples of cognitive research that involved children in two very different ways.

In Porter's (2009) study children between the ages of 3 and 5 were able to participate in order to explore how children's social-cognitive play types are influenced

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by both relational and individual variables. In this study children were able to provide physiological data through the use of EKG's while they sat still and while engaging in a puzzle activity. Measures of relational factors and temperament were collected through a mixture of parental reports and observations in lab conditions. By challenging the children with difficult puzzles, researchers were able to determine the physiological response of children to mildly stressful situations. In addition this study examined how children reacted to stressful social situations (for example: stranger giving a gift, or wearing a scary mask). Additionally, children were observed interacting with same-sex unfamiliar peers during a group play session. Although the authors of the study were unable to demonstrate a predictive relationship between social-cognitive play types and individual variables (physiological and temperament), they demonstrated that there are correlations between these variables. In addition, this study highlights a number of ways that children can participate and contribute to knowledge generation through their participation in a wide variety of research activities from EKG's to strange social situations.

In another example of research involving children, Loxton, Mostert & Moffat (2006) approached quantitative analysis from a very unique perspective of drawing analysis with 4-6 year old children. The objective of this study was to examine if there are positive correlations between the Goodenough-Harris Drawing Test (GHD) (Harris, 1963), teachers ratings of these drawings, and their perceptions of children's intellectual maturity. Children were asked to draw a man, woman and a self-portrait. These drawings were then scored based on standardized scores by researchers. The pictures were then given to teachers who would blindly score each child's drawing on a Likert style scale

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where they would score their estimates of the child's intellectual maturity and age based on the drawing in front of them. The researchers found significant weak correlations between teacher's perceptions of children's intelligence and performance on the GHD test.

Studies examining children's experiences are becoming more frequent, and investigate how children discuss different types of experiences. Through an exploration of these studies, we can see the potential contributions that children are able to make to our understanding of their lives.

For example, it has been demonstrated that children from 4 years of age, are mature enough to speak about themselves when the discussion is meaningful to them (Roth, Dadds, & McAloon, 2004). In this particular example, the researchers developed a child self-report method using a stuffed bear as a talking piece to discuss their own feelings and emotions. Interestingly, the researchers found low levels of consensus between child self-report scores and adult rating scores, and high levels of consensus between parent and teacher scores. This highlights the importance of using child-centered methods when assessing children and their environment.

Furthermore, Almqvist & Almqvist (2015) found that children, aged 4-6 years old, were able to distinguish between activities they found fun, and those they found boring. Almqvist also aimed to examine feelings of empowerment experienced by young children. To accomplish this goal, the researcher gave the children the opportunity to express themselves through photo-elicitation interviews, which gave children the opportunity to take photos and use them as conversation pieces. Children were asked to take photos of activities or events in their childcare that they felt were fun or boring. Then

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the children choose some of their photos to describe to the researcher, explaining why they photographed them how they felt when they photographed them. They found that children experienced feelings of empowerment from their participation in decisions and planning, and the study as a whole. This demonstrates the personal benefits children experience from contributing to research in meaningful ways.

Finally, in Messina & Zavattini's (2014) study children aged 6-7 demonstrated their ability to differentiate between experiences that caused feelings of well-being and distress. Using observational methods, a child interview and parental reports, the researchers determined how children with differing attachment styles recalled memories of wellbeing and distress. Interestingly, the authors found that children with secure attachment were able to recall more positive and negative events than children with insecure attachment styles.

In a study examining how children identify different events in their life Ellingsen, Thorsen & Størksen, (2014) involved the children in the development of cue cards that would assist with their descriptions. Through the use of visual cue cards 5-year-old children were able to differentiate between events "most like" and "most unlike" their everyday experiences. These cue cards were most helpful for children with limited verbal communication. Additionally, the researchers found children's perspectives to be key in the development of their card methodology, as they provided key insights into the development of child friendly tools.

Narrative inquiry is another method used to involve children in research. Through this method, we can provide children with a dynamic and interactive means of communication, which is necessary to explore children's lived stories (Clandinin &

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Conelly, 2000). Ahn & Filipenko's (2006) study sought to gain an in depth understanding of 6 children's experiences in childcare. Through the use of narrative inquiry the researcher explored children's personal experiences. In their early childcare centre, the children were videotaped and audiotaped over a period of 3-months where 30 narratives were collected with the children. These 30 narrative sessions took place during a free-play time where the child was able to freely select an activity they wished to engage in, from building, artistic or dramatic play among others. The authors found that children explore their self through narratives, exploring topics of the self, the self in relation to others and exploring ideas of abstract, philosophical and moral questions.

This study demonstrated that children will share the experiences they feel are most important to them when they are given the opportunity to do so. This has been demonstrated also in Kragh-Muller & Isbell's study (2011), in which children from Denmark and the United States shared their experiences of childcare. Children between 4-5 years of age were asked to illustrate their favourite and least favourite aspects of a day in childcare, and accompanied their drawings with a narrative. This study identified many common themes held between the two participating nationalities, including outdoor play, and the importance of having friends to play with.

Summary

Despite uncertainty regarding research involving children and their ability to share their perspectives in some specific areas of psychological research, what has been presented so far indicates that active participation in research by young children can lead to important advances in knowledge creation.

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Almqvist & Almqvist (2015) captures a key concept on research involving children and their perspectives, stating that, "Listening to children's own opinions and sometimes following their lead [...] demands courage and trust in children's own competence."

The present study assumes children are capable, rather than helpless, and therefore aims at gaining a better understanding of the child's experience in childcare. Through the use of various arts-based methods and conversations with children we aim at understanding what experiences children feel are most important in their childcare setting. This information will be used to inform best practices for childcare programs that appeal to children.

Based on the review presented above, and our assumption of children as competent and capable participants, we expect that:

- 1) Children will be able to express their views provided they are offered the opportunity to do so through arts-based approaches.
- 2) Children will offer their accounts consistent with their level of language abilities. In other words, we expect that older children will offer richer and more detailed accounts than younger children.

Methods

To achieve our goal we used a qualitative approach. Qualitative methodologies were chosen for this study as we sought to understand the experiences of young children, while giving them the opportunity to voice themselves and impact their own lives in meaningful ways.

This study used an emergent approach. This means that the methodologies that were identified have evolved as I spent more time with the children and educators at the Head Start centres. From visits across the Head Start centres, it was found that many children would benefit from activities that would facilitate verbal discussion, which led to the development of art-based activities to facilitate short interviews.

At the same time, we employed a participatory action approach as we sought to engage staff at all levels of seniority to use their skillsets and context specific knowledge to guide the development of our methodologies and strategies. This played a part in empowering the people involved in the participating programs, providing them a voice and opportunity to influence research that impacts them and their practice.

Participants

Participants in this study are preschool age children attending childcare centres in the Ottawa region. Children's age ranged from 2 and-a-half years to 5 years. Thirteen childcare centres agreed to participate in the study. The participating childcare centres serve primarily high-risk populations where the majority of children are subject to multiple risk factors. More specifically, we selected the ten Head Start centres in Ottawa that are municipally funded. These centres are connected through the Ottawa Carleton

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Head Start Association for Preschools (OCHAP). The OCHAP network is composed of program directors and educators that facilitate collaboration between these ten centres, supporting their programming and professional development. In addition, we have secured the participation of two centres with the Andrew Fleck Child Care Services that serve a similar population of children and families.

We recruited a total of 116 children, distributed among the centres, which represents roughly a third of the children attending these centres. Every child was given an opportunity to take part in any of the activities that we provide to the centre as part of the research, regardless of their involvement in the research.

Recruitment

The research was approved by the individual boards of the participating childcare centres as well as the Carleton University Research Ethics Board. Prior to data collection, educators assisted with the dissemination of consent forms and a letter prepared by the researchers specifically for parents explaining the project in simple terms. Parents were informed that if they would have liked their child to participate in the activities they had to return the signed consent form to the childcare centre. Contact information for the associated centre and research team were provided if they wished to ask any questions. Although we were working with a population at risk, the activities we planned did not add additional risk to the children. The conversations and activities that were planned for data collection were the type of normal activities that the children engaged in during a regular day at childcare. Therefore the research project was perceived as 'low-risk' by both parents and educators.

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The specific activities proposed to the children were discussed and chosen with the assistance of the educators from each centre.

At the time of data collection children were asked for their assent (see Appendix D). It was made clear to the children that they were able to stop participating at any time. The researcher also observed the child closely for signs of discomfort or disinterest, which were interpreted as changes in willingness to participate.

Procedures

Prior to data collection, the researchers met with staff from each centre to share the objectives of the research and discuss the research process. The research took place over two phases: 1) Priming and 2) data collection.

Phase I – Observational Phase

The observation phase served to develop an understanding of the contextual factors for each centre participating in the project. In this phase, the researcher engaged in observations of the daily functioning of the childcare centres. In order to maintain a relaxed environment and establish comfortable interactions with the children, the researcher played a supporting role in the daily functioning of the program by assisting and facilitating in the programming in the weeks preceding data collection. The children were not required to engage in any interactions or activities during this phase, beyond what they would normally do when guests are visiting the centre and interactions with children remained informal. This phase also familiarized the children with the researcher, which helped to create a comfortable interaction between the researcher and the children during the activity phase of the study. This phase lasted 13 weeks.

Phase II – Priming

In order to ensure our study was conducted in a way that was appropriate for the context and the abilities of the child participants, a priming phase was introduced. The priming strategy we sought to implement was to have educators introduce the idea that visitors would be attending childcare to ask questions about favourite activities and 'things' they do or use at childcare. The priming was designed to facilitate discussion with the children and reduce the need for free recall. A discussion of how we would conduct this priming phase took place when we sought feedback from staff during a scheduled meeting. At the meeting we listened to the educators' and staff input and incorporated their suggestions into our plan. During our meeting with educators and staff we discussed the logistics of the activities and processes for data collection, including decisions on which activities to use, the number of researchers supporting the activity and data collection.

Details of each activity and how to carry it out were described in one-page sheets (Appendix H) so that educators had a clear picture of the different activities. The descriptions included the purpose of the activity, step-by-step instructions, a list of materials needed for that particular activity, and instructions on how to data would be collected and recorded. Through a discussion with the various centers, we were able to agree upon priming strategies at each centre that would help the children familiarize themselves with the activities and questions they would be taking part in for the study. During the priming phase, the early childhood educators introduced the topics of children's "favourite activities" and "favourite things", through their regular circle time.

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This helped to prime children's memories so they could recall activities and things that they found enjoyable within the program when researchers came to visit the programs.

The educators explained that the researchers wanted to find out what a day at childcare is like, and the children could use art to show them.

Phase III – Data collection

The interviews and data collection was performed by researchers and trained volunteers. Teams of 2-4 people, made up of volunteers and at least one researcher would visit each centre, depending on the number of children at each centre, allowing for more volunteers to assist if necessary. Volunteers were trained to obtain and record the children's assent prior to data collection (Appendix D). In addition, trained volunteers engaged in data collection, also administering the interview questions and record responses.

Arts-based activities accompanied our interviews/conversations with children to facilitate discussion around the research questions. The planned activities were the same or similar to those the children would experience on a day-to-day basis within the childcare environment, such as talking, drawing, playing, or other similar activities.

A digital voice recorder was used to record the interviews to allow for thematic analysis at a later time. For some activities, a photograph of the child's art creation was taken with a tablet device or smart phone.

These are some examples of activities that educators and children choose from:

- 1) Sand Tray Activity: Trays, "Moon"/"Kinetic" sand, collection of small toys and figurines, Tablet (for pictures).

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- 2) Drawing Books: Variety of coloring pens, pencils and crayons, drawing booklets for each child, tablet (for Pictures)
- 3) Dramatic Play Activity: Variety of props/outfits for different role play, for example: Lunch time: utensils, toy food, pots/pans, apron; Classroom Time: art board, chairs, teachers outfit, pointer stick, glasses; Quiet time: Blankets, pillows, books
- 4) Scrapbook Activity: Disposable camera or Tablet for image capture, Empty Scrapbook, Glue, Markers/Crayons/Pencil Crayons, Stickers

We provided all the materials needed to conduct the activities.

With the children in our sample coming from many different communities in the Ottawa area, we expected diversity among participants, but also between centres. To ensure the activities selected would be most successful, we discussed with educators which activities would be best for data collection, for each individual centre, based on children's familiarity and current programming.

When data collection began, the researchers set up the activities upon arrival at the childcare centres. Children were invited to engage in a group activity table with the researchers or educators. In this step the researcher asked general questions about the children's likes and preferences, and their day in childcare, this conversation followed the interests identified by the children. These activities served to capture children's interest and focus their conversations in the present moment in addition to providing a warm up period before data collection.

The researchers would then proceed with the assent process with each individual child before beginning data collection. A researcher, volunteer or educator familiar with

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and instructed on the appropriate procedures, provided the child with a brief summary of why we are doing the activities and what we hope to learn from him/her. First we explained that we wanted to learn about a day at their childcare, and that the children's art activities could be about "a day in childcare". Following this we explained to the children that we wanted them to tell us about their art and tell us what they created. It should be stated that if a child did not assent, the researcher would continue to interact with the child in a friendly way until he/she decided to move on to another activity.

At this point, children who provided assent, were invited to continue the activity at another table to reduce distractions. Children were asked if they would like to participate in any of the other activities with the researcher, like drawing, crafts or other artistic media. We had the opportunity to inquire as to what they chose to create and why.

The conversations with children helped us understand what experiences they found most important and helped us to understand how they view the childcare environment. Children were asked about their favourite activities, places to play, and friends they play with, and had the opportunity to illustrate their stories through an arts-based medium. Consistent with qualitative methods questions were open ended and discussions focused on topics identified by the child. The questions asked were short and used easy to understand language appropriate for children of this age. Similar questions have been used in studies seeking child perspectives within similar age ranges (Kragh-Muller & Isbell, 2011, Einarsdottir, 2014, Formosinho & Araújo, 2004). The initial questions are listed below, probes were used throughout the discussions.

1. Is it ok if I ask you some questions about daycare/childcare/school?

(Consent/Assent)

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2. (Explain recorder) Is it ok if I record you so I can hear you later?
3. What do you like to do at school?
4. What is your favourite thing at school?
5. What do you like to do when you are outside?
6. What do you like to do when you are inside?
7. Is there anything you don't like to do?

Conversations with the children's were recorded and drawings or crafts were photographed to accompany our data analysis.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Analytical approach

Children had the opportunity to share the experiences that are most important to them through conversation with the researchers. I used the Nvivo software to conduct thematic analysis to interpret the data (i.e., the recorded conversations).

Conversations revolved around questions about the participants' day in childcare, and what their favourite activities were in that setting. The children's responses to our guiding questions were coded with the goal to identify common themes.

All children whose parents had consented to be part of the research were given the opportunity to participate in the project, despite theoretical saturation being reached early in the process of data collection. Responses were quite similar to those from discussions with participants at the earlier stages of the project.

This study was designed to gather data through children's participation. However, it was also designed to promote children's participation in research. For this reason I did not stop data collection when saturation was reached but continued engaging with children until I had interacted with all the participants who were willing to take part in the research.

The perspectives of children in this project have been interpreted through a phenomenological lens. This means that we placed the emphasis on subjective expression rather than observing an "objective" reality (Jackson & Verberg, 2007). To this effect, we believe that each child has a unique view of their environment and lived experience and this is what we explored through our interactions with them.

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Elements of narrative approach were also employed in our study as we sought to understand children's lives within the context of childcare. Our narrative approach will not be seeking an in-depth understanding of the child's life as a whole, but they will focus on gathering stories that describe their childcare experience with a developmentally appropriate level of detail.

Frequently in the literature, researchers rely on the assumption that those of higher social status have the best perspective on a childcare setting. Through this study we involved managers, educators and support staff, at the Head Start childcare centres. This developed better methods to engage young children who often do not have an opportunity to share their voice.

This study is part of a larger project that has involved extensive observations where I had the opportunity to visit each childcare centre for 2-3 days over 13 weeks. In addition, I conducted interviews with the educators from each participating centre to learn about their experiences working in a Head Start program. The centre observations and interviews with staff provided me with understanding and insight into the daily lives of children and staff in the Head Start centres. The emergent approach of this project has also maintained credibility, as we have relied on feedback and guidance from staff and management. Regular progress reports to staff and managers have acted as member checks to ensure our methodologies and research strategies reflect the reality of the context.

Data analysis

Following each session, recordings were automatically assigned an identification code (Ex. SR081XY) for anonymity and confidentiality purposes. All recordings were organized using Nvivo (Nvivo, 2015), a program designed to facilitate qualitative data analysis of rich data sources such as recordings, video, or pictures. Nvivo was used to review all recordings and prepare them for coding.

Given the nature of our interview procedures, a warm up period was necessary with many children. Some of these recordings did not result in any relevant data being collected. Recordings that did not contain data were removed from the data set.

In Nvivo, data was coded using “nodes” which are the instances where responses occur within the audio recordings. Responses from children were usually short phrases or one-word responses, as such the responses themselves did not require interpretation. Node labels were based on single word or short phrases that best represented what child had said. For example: a recording may have 3 nodes labeled “books”, “cars”, and “friends”. Another recording may also contain a node labeled “books”, in which case that node was also to be coded under the same label. Nvivo grouped these labels together into a frequency list.

General data nodes were established based on similar responses and frequencies. For example: “climber” or “climb” on the play structure would be classified as the same node label.

A final revision of the recordings was performed examining the specific times when children spoke about their interests within each recording. These times were entered as “time windows” which encompassed the entirety of each utterance in regards

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to a node. The purpose of the time ranges was to further organize our recordings. We entered time windows because of the relative length of the recordings compared to the brief length of discussions about data: many recordings had only one or two brief discussions regarding child interests – yet the recording may have been 15 minutes long.

Nvivo was also used to group node frequencies into a visual list. The emergent approach to data analysis allowed themes common across children to emerge from the data. Two trained researchers (my thesis supervisor and myself) grouped nodes into themes through a consensus process. Through discussion, the major themes of Play, Friends, Indoor & Outdoor, and “Does not like”, were identified based on the frequency of related nodes that arose during analysis. Subthemes were identified based on similar nodes within each major theme. The theme of “Does not like” arose from answers to a different question than the other themes, the response rate for this question was too low to determine meaningful subthemes.

Results

The major themes identified are discussed below, all names presented are pseudonyms:

1. Play – Mentioned by 60 participants (52% of participants)

Play is defined as engaging in activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than explicit instructional activities. The activities described by children were unstructured in nature and were child led. Many children brought up the idea of “play” as a general activity they “liked”, without a specific example in mind. The majority of children specified play activities that they enjoyed, the types of activities varied widely, although some subthemes were identified. Some examples of the subthemes are: play with toys, play through art, gross motor play, play in nature, and dramatic play.

Interviewer: What do you like to do at school?

Lily: “I like to play here”



Figure 1. A young child playing at the water table on a sunny day.

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1.1. Artistic Play – Mentioned by 36 Participants (31% of participants)

Many children identified types of artistic activities as their “favourite” things in preschool. This prominently included: painting, drawing and coloring for example – using a variety of media (crayons, pens, chalk, paint). These are very common activities in the preschool environment, as they will frequently be available to the children throughout the day at communal tables. During free play this type of activity was generally performed individually by the children, but on occasion teachers would prepare a group-drawing activity in which multiple children could participate. Drawing and play-dough were both activities we invited children to participate in during our interviews.

Interviewer: What do you like to do at school?

Naomi: “Color”

Interviewer: What do you like to draw?

Naomi: “I like to draw mountains”



Figure 2. Bruce is pictured here drawing during an interview with one of the researchers.

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1.1.1 Pretend play – Mentioned by 7 Participants (6% of participants)

This particular type of play also came to the forefront as some children described different types of role-play or imaginative play they enjoyed at school. Not all programs had access to dress-up materials, but taking on the role of a favourite character or superhero was a common play activity among the children. Children took advantage of materials around the classroom or yard to take on a persona (a wheel and seat to be the bus driver). Some examples were dress-up, feeding dolls and being superman.

Interviewer: What do you like to play?

Theo: “Play rocket-ships”

Interviewer: What else do you like to do?

Theo: “I always fly in the sky!”



Figure 3. Children are playing with the kinetic sand, figurines and toys. On occasion, children showed more interest in the figurines than the mouldable sand.

2. Friends – 19 instances (16% of participants)

Friends were a common topic brought up by children. Friends were often identified independently as a “favourite thing” at childcare. More commonly, children identified friends as someone they engaged in play activities with. We found 3 subthemes relating to friends: “celebrations & parties”, “home life” and “meal time”. For example: “I play with Tony” or “I like to color with Avery”.

In addition, for those children who participated in the photography activity, friends were a common focus of their photos. The descriptions that accompanied these photos seemed to explain the photography activity as a social activity, where friends participated.

Interviewer: What do you like best about childcare?

Derek: “play with friends” --- “I like to play with James”



Figure 4. Two friends engaging in a drawing activity together with the researchers.

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3. **Indoor and Outdoor play** – Mentioned by 34 participants (29% of participants)

When discussing likes with children, we would ask them where they liked to play the most. In Ontario, childcare programs children spend at least 2 hours a day playing outside, so children spend a significant portion of their day in an outdoor environment. Many play areas and activities were unique to either inside or outside play. So when asked where they liked to play, children often responded “outdoors” or “on the play structure”. Some children would volunteer activities they enjoyed doing in their favourite play area (outside/inside). We identified 3 subthemes that relate to indoor and outdoor play: “gross motor”, “nature & animals”, “reading & “writing.

Interviewer: What do you like about school?

Jasmine: “I like to play... I like to play outside”

Interviewer: What do you like about playing?

Jasmine: “Being on the slide”

Interviewer: What else do you like?

Jasmine: “The teeter totter”.



Figure 5. Photos of the indoor and outdoor environment at one childcare centre. *(Left)*

A photo of the greeting room leading to the classrooms – breakfast is served here.

(Right) A photo of the outside playground – a cycling path is a highlight of this yard.

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3.1. Gross Motor – Mentioned by 22 participants (19% of participants)

The children we interviewed frequently brought up physical activities that they enjoyed taking part in which revealed a subtheme of “gross motor activities”.

These activities would often be in the outdoor environment, the playground or using outdoor play structures such as swings, slides or bikes. The activities children identified were usually during their outdoor free-play time, and would not be organized by adults. Some activities named were jumping, dancing, and running.

Interviewer: What else do you like to do?

Mason: “Play outside with the cars”

Interviewer: What else?

Mason: “Play [on] the climber”

Interviewer: What else do you like?

David: “The big trampoline”

Interviewer: And what else?

David: “Slide”



Figure 6. Three friends competing to show off their acrobatic skills to the researchers.

3.2. Nature & Animals – Mentioned by 12 participants (10% of participants)

A common topic that children brought up was nature and animals. Children discussed items that take place in the natural environment like rocks, sand, and water. In addition, animals were a common topic in the childcare environment (pictures and toys) and children frequently pointed out some of their favourite animals. Some favourites of nature and animals were horses, flowers and trees. In addition to natural elements (e.g., sand, water), children also talked about natural places (e.g., the park).

Interviewer: What do you like to do at school?

Bill: “I like to draw a bumblebee”

Interviewer: What do you like at school?

Asha: “I like to go to the park”

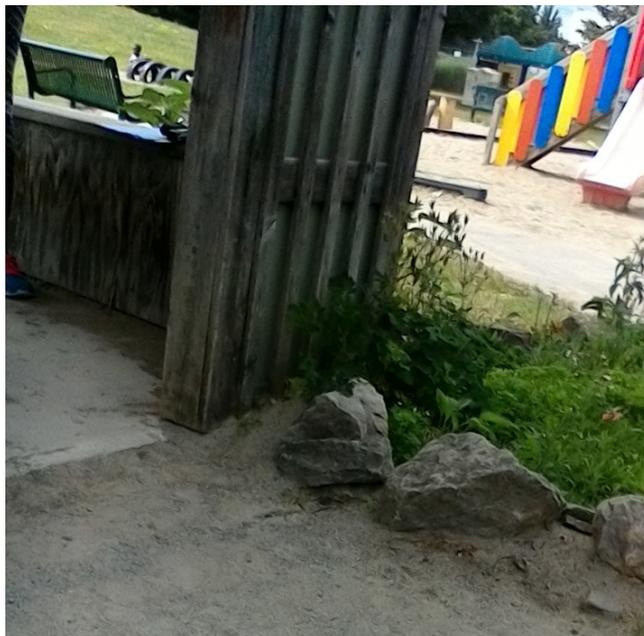


Figure 7. A photo taken of the flower bed in the yard of the childcare.

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3.3. Reading & Writing – Mentioned by 8 participants (7% of participants)

Children's interest in books, writing and stories was also identified as a theme within the childcares. Quiet time and circle time are both opportunities for children to read and listen to stories common across all programs. Although not part of our interview process, children frequently asked the researchers to read books with them. Children spoke about how they liked books, and they liked story time. Some children also described how they enjoyed writing letters.

Interviewer: What do you like about school?

Taylor: "Books"

Interviewer: What about the books?

Taylor: "I like the caterpillar book"

Interviewer: Is there anything else you like?

Taylor: "The big bad wolf"



Figure 8. Photo taken by a child of the reading corner, one of their favourite places to be in childcare.

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4. Does not like – 9 Participants responded (8% of participants)

This theme was in response to our question “what don't you like at school?”.

Although we asked this question of most children, only some shared their dislikes.

Many children named something and then stated that they liked that. Interestingly, many children who were asked this question responded “nothing”, and when prompted by the interviewer the child insisted there was nothing they didn't like.

Some examples of dislikes were: Fighting, teeter-totter, going home.

Interviewer: Is there anything you don't like about school?

Robin: “Doing nothing”

Interviewer: Is there anything else you don't like?

Robin: “I don't like when I fall down”



Figure 9. We asked this child to show us a face for something she “doesn't like”. She is demonstrating her “oh no” face here.

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5. **Celebration & Parties** – Mentioned by 3 participants (2.5% of participants)

Another subtheme that emerged was parties and celebrations, classrooms and activities in childcare are frequently themed to reflect seasonal and holiday events.

These activities were described in relation to their family or peers.

For example, children discussed Canada day fireworks, birthdays and Christmas.

Maggie: “These are fireworks”

Interviewer: Where did you see fireworks?

Maggie: “I see Canada fireworks!”

Interviewer: What is your favourite part of daycare ¹

Anush: “Having a party”



Figure 10. A young boy creating a “Father’s day mug”. The classroom was completing Father’s day artwork to take home to their parents on the week of Father’s day.

¹ Sometimes children identified their childcare as a “daycare”

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6. Food & Eating – Mentioned by 4 participants (3% of participants)

Children often shared “eat or eating” when asked about their favourite things. Further questions would yield specific favourites and sometimes discussions of the meals they had that day. Within these childcare centres, all meals are communal so children eat the same food together with their peers and educators.

Some examples children provided were cookies, sandwiches and ice cream. The children did not share many additional details in regards to their food preferences.

Interviewer: What do you like at school?

Sophia: “Lunch”

Interviewer: What do you like to eat?

Sophia: “Grapes”

Interviewer: Something else you like to eat?

Sophia: “Strawberries”

Interviewer: What else do you like to do at school?

Ralph: “I like to eat”

Interviewer: What do you like to eat?

Ralph: “Sandwiches and cookies”

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7. **Home Life** – Mentioned by 6 participants (5% of participants)

Home life was also a theme that emerged through our discussions with children. Even when asking them about school, children often made reference to their lives and family outside the school environment. Children talked about who drops them off at school, what their parents do during the day, toys at home, or that they are looking forward to going home.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

Alex: “Mommy is going to English [school]”

8. **Clothing & Outfits** – Mentioned by 4 participants (3% of participants)

This theme was made up of discussions from children telling their favourite pieces of clothing, for example glasses, coats and shoes. Some children were very excited to show visitors their new and favourite articles of clothing.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you want to tell me about school?

Avery: “I like to play with my watch”

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9. **Miscellaneous** – Mentioned by 17 participants (15% of participants)

Some items children described as their favourites were unique and could not be placed in any other theme so they were categorized as miscellaneous.

Interviewer: What else do you like to do?

Jackie: “Tricks”

Interviewer: You like tricks?

Jackie: “Yes”



Figure 11. A young girl who likes to go on “adventures” showing us her artwork.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to gain a better understanding of the children's experiences in childcare and which experiences are important to them. Through our analysis of the discussions with children, we learned that some topics, friends and play, emerged very naturally in conversation with children. Through probing follow-up questions we also identified aspects of the indoor and outdoor environment that children liked, including: gross motor activities, read & writing, as well as animals & nature.

The topics of "play" and "friends" came to the forefront of our interviews as children stated their favourite aspects of childcare were playing and interacting with friends. This was expected since as children enter into childcare their social circle expands drastically with many new children in a new environment (Coplan & Arbeau 2009). It is also around age 4 that children begin to verbally express relationships as friendships, and identify peers as friends (Hartup, 1992). As a result, children are engaging with play partners and establishing friendships in their early years that provide opportunities for interaction in new ways. Not only this, but the complexity of preschoolers play increases as they engage with their friends in more complex forms of play (Howes, Droege, & Matheson, 1994).

Our findings suggest that play is an important aspect of a child's experience in childcare. Frost, Wortham & Reifel (2012) found that children described play as something that is not planned and is flexible allowing choice, creativity and the use of imagination. This view of play is consistent with our findings. For example, in response to our questions, children discussed play in both general terms "I like to play", and with specific examples, "I like to play with blocks" showing that they understand play as a

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broad area of engagement, or as something they do when they freely engage in an activity. This is a reflection of other findings by Einarsdottir (2005), where 5 and 6 year old children identify play in general terms as an important part of their playschool environment.

At the childcare centres we visited, while there was effort put into planning the daily activities, children were afforded a great deal of freedom and choice in choosing the activities they would like to engage in during some periods of the day. More specifically, children described play that primarily fit into three categories: playing with objects, sociodramatic play, and social play.

Play with objects was the most commonly described kind of play identified by children in our interviews. This type of play can take place individually or as a part of a social interaction and allows children to learn how objects function (Rubin et al., 1978). Play with objects can also take the form of functional or dramatic play, realistic or imaginative, and internalized or externalized play. Unfortunately, our research methods have not provided us with insight into the children's internal play processes as to whether they acting out internal schemes or events using the objects available to them, so we are not able to discuss this implications of this facet of object oriented play. However, we can examine whether the objects children played with were used in functional or dramatic ways. Functional object use describes the use of an object in order to develop motor skills or cognitive abilities, for example sorting blocks by color. Dramatic object use, on the other hand, involves assigning imaginary properties to the object at hand to be used in story-based play (Morgenthaler, S.K. 2015).

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Examples of functional object use were common in our discussions with children who talked about playing with blocks, magnets or puzzles for example. Dramatic object use was not described by the children as much with the exception of one child who described using a blanket as a cape while he played "superman".

Within the realistic/imaginative play dichotomy, objects are either designed with characteristics for imaginative play or children assign new characteristics to an object. For example, child sized kitchenettes are intended to simulate real objects. Alternatively, children can assign imaginative properties to real objects, for example, imaginary seatbelts on chairs as they pretend to drive a bus. Initially, as children grow older, they tend to rely less on realistic properties of items and begin to assign more imaginative properties to these objects (Fenson, 1986). Children in our study most frequently described the use of objects for their "intended" purposes, such as cars or baby dolls to play out racing and caring for a baby. Although infrequently, children discussed the use of an object with additional properties, for example chairs lined up to simulate bus seating, while some children described the use of imaginary seatbelts.

Whatever playstyle children choose, providing children the ability to engage freely in new materials seemed to increase their overall engagement compared to adult directed activities (Justice & Pullen, 2003).

The complexity of play increases as children begin to engage their peers in play interactions. Peer relations are defined as broad interactions or experiences children have with children of similar age (Rubin, Bukowski & Bowker, 2015). Sociodramatic play is one type of interactive play that occurs when peers engage in dramatic play together. It is comprised of dramatic play elements, like the use of objects as dramatic tools, role-

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playing characters or make-belief situations, in combination with social elements, like interaction between multiple play partners and the use of verbal communication regarding the play event among these play partners (Nourot, 2015). Children in our study did name sociodramatic play activities that had been observed by the researchers in the childcare setting. For example, children identified “driving the bus” as a favorite activity at one centre in which children would take turns as passengers or the bus driver playing the role of children and adults on the bus. More frequently, children engaged in simpler dramatic play, which consisted of taking on simple role-play, caring for a toy baby, dressing up and pretending to be a dragon, or taking on the role of a favorite hero.

Social play is also a type of play identified by children during our interviews and is commonly seen in the childcare environment. In the literature, social play is described as any kind of play that takes place through peer interactions (Coplan, Ooi, Kirkpatrick & Rubin 2015). For example at one childcare, a group of peers worked together to construct a tower of blocks and cylinders, and took turns collecting and placing materials on their creation. Similar to sociodramatic play, social play assists in the children's social development (Göncü & Gaskins, 2011). For example, between the ages of 3-5, children's play-styles typically begin to transition from solitary bases of play to more social bases of play (Parten, 1932). The development of their pretend play abilities at this stage in their life is a significant developmental accomplishment (Coplan & Arbeau, 2009).

While children are engaging in interactive play, it is important to know how they perceive the peers they interact with. Are these peers simply play partners, or is there deeper meaning and a development of a relationship behind their interactions? The literature defines friendship as a particular kind of relationship between two peers and is

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defined by three particular characteristics: both members of the dyad recognize the relationship, the relationship is based on mutual affection, and finally, the dyad engages in the relationship voluntarily (Rubin, Bukowski & Bowker, 2015). Howes (2009) reveals that children are able to differentiate between "friends" and "non-friends" during the preschool years, which is reflected in our own study, where children would frequently identify their friends by name. Children in our study also expanded by telling us the favorite activities they engaged in with these friends. This has also been reflected by Einarsdottir's (2005) study in which children described interactions with friends as one of their favourite things in childcare.

But how do children identify their friends from their other peers? For children aged 4-8, children primarily identify friends as peers who share play preferences with (Bukowski & Hoza, 1989). Other studies examining the children's expectations of friendship at age 6 include sharing common activities or interests, being in regular proximity, and being supportive and affectionate. (Bigelow & LaGaipa, 1980) Also, childhood friendships are typically formed between children that are similar in age, sex, and race (Hartup, 1992). This attraction to form friendships with similar peers has been explained as homophily by Byrne (1971). Based on this, we can see that children's expectations of friendship are fairly simple, and that when children are engaging in activities with their peers, they likely perceive them as friends. However, other studies, though, have demonstrated that children's friendships are relatively stable at this age, with 66% of children maintaining their identification of "friends" over 6 months (Gershman & Hayes 1983). This would indicate that friend selection is purposeful and children select their friends based on having similar characteristics and interests.

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However, it has been suggested by Smith & Schneider (2000) that ethnocentricity in children's friendships may be less pronounced in culturally diverse communities.

Interestingly, children in our study did not discuss the educators during the interviews despite educators' continuous presence in the classroom environment. These findings are in line with the literature, as demonstrated in Einarsdottir's (2014) article, where children did not remember educator activities in great detail, despite they were asked directly about them. This may relate to how the educators interact with children in the early childhood education context, where they typically take on the role of 'moderators' of learning and social interactions rather than directing the children in such activities. In this context, children may perceive teachers as observers, only interceding when they need assistance resolving a conflict or emotional distress.

As a follow up to our questions about likes, we asked children further questions about their likes in the inside and outside environments. Children in these programs spend their time in childcare divided between the indoor and outdoor environments. Questions about inside and outside environments yielded additional themes, which reflected children's favorite activities indoors and outdoors. The three themes identified by these questions were grouped into gross motor, nature & animals, and reading & writing. The breadth of gross motor activities discussed by the children was quite surprising as the individual interests of each child varied. Through our discussions, 22 children shared 14 different gross motor activities that they preferred in the childcare environment. It is not surprising that this topic came up as children in these childcare centres are expected to get at least 2 hours of outside play time each day. Simply having access to playground equipment, like bikes and play structures, has been shown to

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increase physical activity engagement among preschoolers (Ridgers, Fairclough & Stratton, 2010). Similar organic engagement has been seen when children have access to reading & writing materials, where children engaging in books, even when they have limited understanding, is associated with development of vocabulary and phonological awareness (Johnson, Martin, Brooks-Gunn & Petrill, 2008). Children identified this type of engagement when discussing favourite places in childcare, where they enjoyed spending time in a reading corner engaging with books. Interestingly, writing typically is not a common activity organized by educators in classrooms for this age group, yet some children choose to paint letters and numbers using the media available. The discussion of another contextual factor in the childcare environment was the presence of items related to nature & animals. Children in our sample identified a number of natural elements like rocks, flowers, trees, as well as favorite animals like horses and hippos. It has been shown in the literature that exposure to natural objects improves sensory awareness and has an overall restorative effect (Louv, 2005; Bradley, 2015). Many centres bring a great deal of natural materials, for example honeycombs, tree branches or leaves, into the classroom environments and activities. Like reading, gross motor and natural materials are all available to children in these programs, and without facilitation, they are choosing to engage with them when they are afforded the opportunity.

Reflections and Limitations

As this study followed an emergent approach, many challenges and limitations arose during the process of the study. Despite these limitations, the emergent approach allowed us to adapt and modify our methodologies to meet the present needs of the

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project. One such challenge was in response to our question “what don't you like about school” where children were frequently unsure in their responses. For example, children would understand the question, and assumed we were asking what else they liked.

Children would often choose an activity, and when the interviewer attempted to confirm with the child's response “you don't like drawing?”, for example, they would reiterate “I like drawing”.

In the present study, nine children identified things they did not like, for example, sleeping at school, fighting, or the dark. We received the response “nothing” from 5 children, in response to this question. Children would confirm their response when probed about their answers. The mixed responses, and confusion we encountered when asking this question may have been a result of the inability to understand the change in questions from likes to dislikes. In order to avoid this confusion, the transition from likes to dislikes might have needed to be more explicit, with a break and explanation by the interviewer. This could help the children understand that a change in question topic is occurring so they are able to respond more accurately.

In our initial approach, we also aimed to use artistic activities as a facilitating tool for collecting data when children illustrated their favorite things at school. As we engaged children in discussions while engaging in an art activity our expectation was that children would use the pieces of artwork to reflect the topics of their interviews. In reality, children would frequently illustrate something unrelated to their favorite things at school. Although the artwork did not help provide us with data related to our questions, it did help facilitate the question process. Artwork was helpful in establishing a dialogue between the child and the researcher at the beginning of our interview. In addition,

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children seemed to enjoy the interview process and were more engaged in discussion when the researchers showed interest in what the children were illustrating. Discussing the artwork with the children between questions seemed to provide a give and take exchange of information between the children and the researchers. This is in line with findings by Chang & Cress (2009), that using drawings helped to focus discussions. Although the creation of artwork seemed to help many children, some children seemed fixated on the content of their artistic creations and did not engage in conversations related to their likes and dislikes in school. Unfortunately, the artwork created by the children in our study did not provide us with insight into our research questions, but it did serve as a means to capture children's attention for our discussions, in an activity they are comfortable and familiar with.

Another limitation of this study is that we were unable to examine the children's responses based on age groups. Ages were not collected from all childcare centres and left a significant number of children without identified ages. As a result we were unable to run analyses to determine if age was a factor in children's responses, both in topics and response rates.

An additional limitation of this study is related to the consistency in which data was collected. Being a field study involving several centres and children, a team of volunteers was trained to help with data collection. However, despite every volunteer having the same protocol and instructions for how to interact with the children for data collection, some inconsistencies in interview procedures did occur. Volunteers and researchers were using an adaptive approach to data collection so that each child was approached as a unique individual, some needing more support in their communication

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than others. Some conversations were more interactive, and as a result directed questions were used which may have led child responses, rather than having them self-identify. Another inconsistency was from occasional interruptions by other children in the childcare environment, for example a nearby child overhearing and responding to the researcher questions which may have influenced the participants own responses. It is possible these inconsistencies may have had an impact on individual responses. Furthermore, our questions “what do you like to do when you are outside” and “What do you like to do when you are inside” were not asked of all children. Since these questions followed the initial question, some children terminated the interview before we were able to ask these questions.

Conclusion

In the present study, we sought to gain an understanding of children's experiences from their own perspectives. We engaged children in activity based discussions around their likes and dislikes in the childcare environment and were rewarded with their insights. We found that children are able to effectively share their perspectives through child-centered interviews. By engaging children in conversation they highlighted experiences of peer engagement and play as some of the most important experiences in childcare. These perspectives have reflected many observations in the literature, and also shed light on children's own perspectives. Children also identified the environmental factors that were present and important to them, which coincide with the pedagogical application of childcare programming. From this, children have demonstrated that they freely engage with materials and peers in their environment that they find appealing, without the need for adult direction.

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Not only did children's perspectives provide us with unique insights about their world, but they also helped us to construct a new knowledge base to support the development of childcare policy and pedagogy in Canada.

Appendices

Appendix A – Organizational Consent Form



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Consent for Organization

What is the purpose of this study: We are seeking to observe the functioning of the child care centres to gain a better understanding of each individual centre, including the similarities and distinctive characteristics of each.

In addition, we will be discussing the children's favorite learning experiences at their childcare centre. Through our discussions, the children will identify the experiences that are most important to them and we will engage in a drawing activity to illustrate their narratives. Through these discussions we will be better able to identify activities or events that children are most receptive to.

What will participation involve: Participation will involve access to the 10 Head Start Centres for the purpose of conducting the 3-stage research project.

What risks and benefits are associated with participating: There are no risks or discomforts associated with taking part in this study. All participants are free to withdraw or refuse to participate at any time.

Is this confidential? Any information employees of your organization give will remain strictly confidential and will only be seen by myself Alan Hay and Stefania Maggi. The information will be used for research purposes and the generation of a report for the OCHAP network.

What if I have more questions? If you have further questions about the procedure and purpose of this study or your involvement in the study, you can email:

1. Alan Hay (AlanHay@cmail.carleton.ca) or
2. Dr. Stefania Maggi, (stefania.maggi@gmail.com), Associate Professor at Carleton University Institute of Interdisciplinary Studies/ Child Studies Program and Department of Psychology (613) 520-2600 ext. 8393.
3. Or, you may contact the office of the Chair of the Research Ethics Board, Carleton University (613) 520-2600 ext. 3591.

If you would like to give us permission to conduct a study with your organization, please sign below.

Name of participating organization: (Please print): _____

Date: _____

Signature of Program Administrator: _____

Appendix B – Parental Consent form



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Parent Consent for pictures or videos of children

As part of our research project, we may be taking pictures or videos of your child in their childcare environment.

All pictures or videos may be used in printed materials, our project website, or in conference presentations for an undetermined period of time.

I understand that the pictures or videos of my child may be used for printed materials, shown at conferences or put on websites with public access.

I understand that my child can still participate in the study even if I do not give permission to be photographed/video recorded.

I understand that by showing the face of my child his/her anonymity may be compromised.

- Yes, I give permission for my child to be audiotaped.
- Yes, I give permission for my child to be videotaped.
- Yes, I give permission for my child to be photographed.

Your child's Name: _____

Parent/Guardian Name (print): _____

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____

Date: _____

If in the future, you wish that the pictures of your child be removed from the website or the printed materials, please email:

1. Alan Hay (AlanHay@cmail.carleton.ca) or...
2. Dr. Stefania Maggi at, stefania_maggi@carleton.ca or call 613-520-2600 extension 8393.

Appendix C – Parent Letter



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Parent letter

Date (Date letters are to be sent home)

Dear parent/guardian,

We are conducting a study in your childcare centre and are very excited to speak with your child about their experiences at the centre.

Why do we want to do this project?

We want to hear what children have to say about childcare from their point of view and what they feel is the best or most memorable part of the childcare experience. The findings of this study will provide valuable information to educators about program development and teaching plans.

What is the purpose of the project?

Your childcare provider has asked us to help them understand what make their program unique and what aspect of the programs can be improved. Part of understanding how your program can best help children is to know what kind of experiences children have at the centre.

What is my child asked to do?

Children will draw and engage in conversations with the researchers. They will be asked about the things they like about the centre, and to draw pictures about their favourite activities or things they have done during their time at the centre.

Confidentiality

1. When we talk with your child and ask them to draw we may call them by their first name. Sometimes children like to sign their art, so their name may appear on the drawings. Once we go back to our office, we will transcribe the audio recording of our conversation with your child and at that point we will use a pseudonym instead of your child's real name. Also, we will mask the name of your child from his/her drawings before we study them further.
2. When we show the drawings from your child as an example of our findings, his/her name will not be visible. Also, when we play the recordings of our conversation with your child, his/her name will be masked.
3. No one except from the researchers will know the name, gender, date of birth or address of your child.
4. All drawings from your child and recordings of your child's voice will be stored on a password protected computer. Only the researchers will have access to this computer.
5. Any document we create that reports the results from this project will not identify your child by name and/or date of birth in any way.

Are there any risks to you or your child?

There are no risks involved with this study. You can choose not to have your child participate in the study and your decision will have no impact at all on the care you receive at your childcare centre.

What are the benefits to you or your child?

This research may help us better understand if there is something that can be done to make your child's experience at the centre the most productive and positive possible. Your child will have the opportunity to express his/her feelings and tell us about what he/she enjoys the most about going to childcare and the activities he/she finds most memorable. This will help us understand what is most important to children attending childcare and what we can do to best support them in their early learning experiences.

Who do I contact if I have questions or concerns about this study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, you may contact one of the following people:

1. The Teacher at your Head Start Centre (insert name and contact information);
2. Alan Hay (AlanHay@cmail.carleton.ca),
3. Dr. Stefania Maggi, Associate Professor at Carleton University Institute of Interdisciplinary Studies/ Child Studies Program and Department of Psychology (613) 520-2600 ext. 8393.
4. The office of the Chair of the Research Ethics Board, Carleton University (905)521-2100 ext. 42013.

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Thank you.

Sincerely,

Alan Hay (Alan Hay's Signature) Stefania Maggi (Stefania Maggi's Signature)

Principal Investigators: Alan Hay, Masters Psychology Student at Carleton University
- Department of Psychology

Dr. Stefania Maggi, Associate Professor at Carleton University - Institute of
Interdisciplinary Studies/ Child Studies Program and Department of Psychology

Appendix D – Warm-up Protocol and Assent



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Warm-Up Protocol and Assent Script

1. Before meeting with each of the children individually the researchers will be participating in activities in the classroom and providing the children with an opportunity to get to know them.

The researcher will interact with the children through play, reading, and conversations.

2. It will be explained to every child, in clear and simple language, what we hope to do with them. To transition to the one-on-one research activities with the children, explain in advance what we hope to do with them.

“Let’s play/read for a few more minutes to get to know each other a little better. I would like to know about the things you like here at (Name of childcare centre). You can also ask me all the questions about me that you like!”

Is it ok if we talk about this? (assent)

In the ‘warm up’ time you’ll bring up the conversation about favourite places/things to do then ask the child to draw or do a craft about it.

“If you were to pick only one favourite places/things/etc. which one would you choose?”

then,

“how about we draw/do craft about it, is this something you would like to do?”
(other assent)

3. I think this is a more fluid process where you’ll move between conversation and activity back and forth. I suggest you make sure to always ask if it is ok to change pace or activity as you go along. After a few minutes of play, we can begin the assent process with the child by asking if they would like to participate in the activity.

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"Would you like to begin the activity?"

If the child says "yes" then this would imply assent for this age group (3-5)

If the child says "no" then we may spend more time playing/reading together and ask again later.

If the child does not want to participate, than their wishes will be respected.

If the child wishes to stop at any point they will be free to do so, either expressed through waning interest or verbally saying so.

With respect to Audio recording,

"This is a recorder/phone and I am going to put it right here while we talk. What this thing does is to save what we say so that I can listen to it later. Look...(show the kids how it works by recording something - it also helps you to test if it works).

Is that ok? If you don't like it we can put it away."

If the child says "yes" then this would imply assent for this age group (3-5)

If the child says "no" then we will proceed without audio recordings.

Appendix E – Researcher Profiles



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Hi! My name is Stefania University in Child been collaborating with the past 8 years. I am some time at your child's about the Head Start children and families.



Maggi. I teach at Carleton Studies and Psychology. I have childcare centres in Ottawa for excited that I will be spending centre! I can't wait to learn more Program and how it benefits

Hello, my name is Alan Hay. I am a student at Carleton University where I am completing my Master's Degree in Psychology. I have been working with Stefania Maggi in the Ottawa community for 2 years with local community centres. I am very excited to spend time visiting your child's centre and learning more about the activities they enjoy and the way they learn.



Appendix F – Guiding Question for Discussions

Children

Objective of our discussion is to answer the overarching question:

– What experiences are most meaningful to children when they are in the early learning centres?

Does the literature address this question? NOT really...why is it important that we answer this question from the point of view of the child. Because it promotes their right to participate in something important in their lives. Because to know how to improve program for kids we cannot ignore their lived experiences.

In working with these young children we hope to engage in conversation about topics of favourite places, activities, friends, games, field trips, to understand their experiences in preschool. Our discussions will be adapted to each child, but we hope to find out about their likes and dislikes, their favourites, and their wishes (if you could change XXX what would you do?) The children will have the opportunity to draw about their responses and then talk about and describe them to me.

Some example questions could be...

Show me where you like to spend time most?

When you are here, what do you like to do most?

Draw and tell me about your favorite trips/events. Have you gone anywhere outside with your teachers that is not your playground? Where did you go?

What did you do? What did you like about that day?

What is your favourite game with friends? What games do you like to do with your friends? Why?

What do you enjoy most about preschool?

Appendix G – Childcare Centres

Data collection will take place at 12 different Child Care centres across Ottawa listed

below:

Nanny Goat Hill Nursery 755 Somerset Street, West Ottawa, Ontario K1R 6R1

Queensway Preschool 429 Parkdale Avenue K1Y 1H3

Children's Aid Society Head Start Nursery School 1602 Telesat Court, Gloucester, Ontario, K1B 1B3

Cornerstone Children's Centre 2330 Don Reid Drive, Suite 102, Ottawa, Ontario, K1H 1E1

Hawthorne Meadows Nursery School 2244 Russell Road, Ottawa, Ontario, K1G 1B3

Heatherington Nursery School 2330 Don Reid Drive, Suite 102, Ottawa, Ontario, K1H 1E1

Annavale Nursery School 250 Anna Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario, K1Z 7V6

Esther By Day Care 1550 Caldwell Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario, K1Z 8M7

Foster Farm Child Care Centre 1065 Ramsey Crescent, Ottawa, Ontario, K2B 7Z9

Pinecrest Queensway Head Start Nursery School 2860 Ahearn Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario, K2B 6Z9

George Street Andrew Fleck Child Care Services Centre, 195 George Street, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 5W6

Overbrook Andrew Fleck Child Care Services Centre, 557 Queen Mary Street, Ottawa, Ontario, K1K 1V9

Ottawa Inuit Children's Centre Inuit Head Start, 230 McArthur Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario, K1L 6P5

Appendix H – Sand Tray Activity

Sand Tray Activity

Purpose of Activity

In this activity, children will be asked to create a “sand world”, using kinetic sand and various toys or figurines. Sand play is used by many therapists working with children, as it is a creative and age-appropriate way for children to express their thoughts and feelings. The goal of this activity is to use sand play as a way for the children to express how they feel and how they view their experiences in childcare. The children will be playing with kinetic sand and using toys or figurines as a way to recreate their daily experiences at the childcare, allowing them to express their feelings. When the child is finished creating their sand world, they will be asked to describe to the researcher what kind of sand world they have created and why.

Step-by-Step Guide for Activity

Educators are asked to facilitate this activity with the children by having a small group of 4-5 children sit at a table together. Each child will be given a plastic tray with kinetic sand, and there will be a collection of toys and figurines on the table. The educator will have the children “free play” with the kinetic sand and figurines in order for them to get settled into the group and activity. Once the children are settled, the educator will explain to the children that the purpose of this activity is to have them create a “sand world” about their daily experiences at childcare. The educator will explain to the children that they can create their very own sand world by using the toys and figurines on the table and placing them in the sand. As a way to motivate child participation in this activity, the educator will tell the children to create their sand worlds as if they will be shown to children from other childcare centres (sand worlds will not actually be shown to other children). Once the children start creating their sand world, the educator and researcher will take note of the figurines that each child decides to place in the sand for later discussion.

Data Collection and Storage

When the children are finished their sand world, the researcher will ask each child's permission to take a photo of their sand world and if they would like to describe their sand world to the researcher. If given permission, the researcher will then record each child separately explaining the description of their sand world, asking questions or using prompts such as “tell me about the sand world you have created to show other children”, “why are these two characters beside each other?” and “which two characters are your favourite?” The photos and voice recordings will be stored on a tablet that will be provided by the researchers, and each child will have their own folder on the tablet. The tablets used for this activity will be stored in a locked office, and only accessible to the researchers.

Materials

- Trays/ plastic containers for the sand
- Moon sand for each tray
- A collection of small toys and figurines (provided by the researchers and centres)
- Tablet (provided by the researchers)

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