Early Childhood Education as an Evolving 'Community of Practice' or as Lived 'Social Reproduction': researching the 'taken-for-granted'

MARILYN FLEER
Monash University, Frankston, Australia

ABSTRACT Early childhood education within many English-speaking countries has evolved routines, practices, rituals, artefacts, symbols, conventions, stories and histories. In effect, practices have become traditions that have been named and reified, evolving a specialist discourse. What has become valued within the profession of early childhood education is essentially a Western view of childhood. Documents abound with statements on what is constituted as 'good' practice or 'quality' practice or even 'best' practice. But for whom is this practice best? This article examines early childhood education from a 'communities of practice' perspective, drawing upon the work of Goncu, Rogoff and Wenger to shed light on the levels of agency inherent in the profession.

Introduction

… we must become reflective with regard to our own discourses of learning and to their effects on the ways we design for learning. (Wenger, 1998, p. 9)

Early childhood education has developed a specialised discourse to allow individuals within the profession to communicate effectively about all matters associated with the design and implementation of learning programs for children from birth to eight years. Yet have we locked ourselves into a self-perpetuating set of values and practices that make it difficult to move thinking forward? Have we positioned ourselves so strongly within the rhetoric of the profession that it is difficult to introduce new ideas, or indeed, think of 'other ways of doing things'?

Our profession, with its own codes of practice, its own discourse and its own theoretical perspectives, has built itself into an institution that has taken on a life of its own. Anecdotal evidence suggests that our specialised field will

only allow newcomers in when they have mastered the language and have understood the codes of practice. From time to time our profession has been criticised for being 'misunderstood' or for being 'precious' or for grounding itself in practices (e.g. 'play-based programs') that mean very little to anyone outside of the profession. Indeed, it is difficult for anyone to communicate effectively within the profession without the appropriate knowledge of the discourse. Those who do not master the language of the practice are positioned as 'not being early childhood'.

It is timely that we critically examine our own profession and question what we have inherited from our forebears, the histories that we re-enact with each generation of early childhood teachers, and deconstruct the 'taken-for-granted' practices that plague our field. The institution of early childhood education is in need of close examination.

> *For the structure of human exchanges, there are precise foundations to be*
> *discovered in the* institutions *we establish between ourselves and others;*
> *institutions which implicate us in one another's activity in such a way that, what*
> *we have done together in the past,* commits *us to going on in a certain way in the*
> *future. ... The members of an institution need not necessarily have been its*
> *originators; they may be second, third, fourth, etc. generation members having*
> *'inherited' the institutions from their forebears. And this is an important point,*
> *for although there may be an intentional structure to institutional activities,*
> *practitioners of institutional forms need have no awareness at all of the reasons for*
> *its structure – for them, it is just 'the-way-things-are-done'. The reasons for the*
> *institution having one form rather than another are buried in its* **history.**
> *(Shotter, cited in Rogoff, 1990, p. 45)*

The history we have inherited includes structures such as learning centres or areas within a pre-school (e.g. block corner), beliefs such as child-centredness, pedagogical practices such as play-based programs, adult–child interactional patterns such as holding infants to face the adult for maximum communication, and using active questioning with five year-olds to find out what they know. However, are these taken-for-granted views and beliefs about best practices in early childhood education relevant to all children from all cultures (see Rogoff, 1990, 1998; Chavajay & Rogoff, 1999; Dahlberg et al, 1999; Goncu, 1999; Mosier & Rogoff, 2000; Mejia-Arauz, 2001)? Although there are many areas that could be analysed, only four taken-for-granted assumptions are considered in this article. They are:

- how is the child situated – inside of or external to the adult world?
- the orientation of children to learning;
- individual and social orientation;
- conversations as 'add-ons' or as part of the adult world.

How is the Child Situated: inside of or external to the adult world?

Many English-speaking countries take great pride in the richness of their communities through their multicultural populations. Child-centredness, so highly valued in Western countries and in early childhood education, can have many different meanings. In Western communities children are placed central to curriculum – their interests, their needs, and their perspectives are privileged in program planning. This child-centred view is foregrounded in most introductory early childhood textbooks (e.g. Arthur et al, 1996) and in Australian curriculum documents (e.g. Department of Education and Children's Services, 1996; Queensland School Curriculum Council, 1998: Australian Captital Territory Education and Community Services, 2001).

Yet consider the following, as noted by Rogoff (1990):

At home, young children in an age-segregated community such as the U.S. middle class seldom have much chance to participate in the functioning of the household, and may be segregated from human company by the provision of separate bedrooms, security objects, and attractive toys. Middle-class infants are in the usual situation (speaking in worldwide terms) of being entirely alone for as much as 10 hours of a 21-hour day, managing as best they can to handle their hunger or thirst with a bottle and their need for comforting with a pacifier or blanky or teddy, and working, as Margaret Mead put it, to establish their independence in the transitions to sleep and waking in the night and at naptime. (p. 124)

Rogoff (1990) argues that in Western communities, infants are not seen as central to everyday life. They are positioned as 'other' to the day-to-day life of families by being put into segregated spaces, and are given toys and materials that do not relate to real-world activities. In creating child-centred programs in our centres, we have further removed children from the day-to-day world and placed them in an artificial world – one geared to their needs, where they are central, but separated from the real world. We have created an artificial world – with child-sized furniture and home equipment, materials such as thick paint brushes, blocks and puzzles, and an outdoor area with carefully designed climbing equipment for safety. These isolationalist practices are common in most 'Western' communities and fit within the child-rearing practices found in 'Western' families for orienting children to their world (see Rogoff, 1990; Goncu, 1999). This perspective contrasts strongly with what takes place in some other cultures:

In societies in which children are integrated in adult activities, the children are ensured a role in the action, at least as close observers. Children are present at most events of interest in the community, from work to recreation to church. … As infants, they are often carried wherever their mother or older siblings go, and as young children they may do errands and roam the town in their free time, watching whatever is going on. (Rogoff, 1990, p. 124)

In these communities children are situated within the family and community as central beings. They are a part of all the activities of the community. They

witness what takes place, they interact with community experiences and they are included within the day-to-day of the 'adult world'. This approach to situating children within the adult world does reveal the inadequacies of a Western view of child-centredness. The child is already embedded within the community. These communities do not have the need to artificially centre the child to give importance to their role in the community – as many from the 'West' must do, since they already situate the child outside of the community. 'Child embeddedness' is a richer and more sophisticated concept than the term 'child-centredness'.

By considering whether or not children are embedded within their community, I examine more broadly the concept of child-centredness. In drawing upon sociocultural theory, I go beyond examining the child as an individual to consider the child as part of the cultural and community context (see Rogoff, 1998, for personal plane of analysis, interpersonal plane of analysis, and a community plane of analysis).

In recent research undertaken by Fleer & Williams-Kennedy (2002), the embeddedness of the child within the community was also highlighted as central to some Indigenous families within Australia.

We all grew up looking after each other. We like learning around our cultures (Vicky). (Unpublished data)

My 17 year old son rang and asked to look after his sister's new baby; come and help care for the baby; he actually asked could he come up; men, including boys, have a lot to do with babies, they are not afraid to carry newborns, they want to play with them; you don't see it as much in Western ways (Laura). (p. 50)

That is why everyone is responsible for children, including males, not just the grandmothers and the aunties, but the males as well; except of course for traditional ways, such as men's business and women's business (Najwa). (p. 50)

Some things we just live – and don't realise it is different from other cultures (Sharon). (p. 50)

The embeddedness of children within many Indigenous cultures within Australia also highlights the shared responsibility for children across the community. Learning is a shared responsibility located within real community contexts featuring real situations. Children are a part of the adult world – spaces and places are not created, but, rather, learning is viewed as embedded in everyday activity.

In multicultural Australia, disrupting the creation of spaces and places for learning, such as early childhood settings, is not possible or indeed necessary. What is important is the reconsideration of the way we have organised the spaces and the way we have created traditional areas such as the block corner, the home corner or the outdoor area. Much recognition for new ways of thinking about our early childhood centres has taken place in recent years as a result of perspectives gained from Reggio Emilia (Edwards et al, 1998; Giudici

et al, 2001). Within this different cultural orientation to learning, there are three important differences. Firstly, the boundary of the learning environment extends well on into the community – indeed, the centres were created with a community orientation in mind; secondly, the spaces within the centres do not follow the traditional early childhood environment; and thirdly, the equipment and materials available to children are real, representing what is available in the adult world. Our Freobel inspired kindergartens have served a useful purpose for many generations of children. It is timely that other ways of thinking about and planning for children's learning are needed – ways that feature the diversity of cultures that represent Australia.

The Orientation of Children to Learning

One day when my eight-year-old daughter was watching some girls her age play a game in the house where we were staying, she turned to the [Inuk] mother who spoke English and said:

Anna: How do I play this game? Tell me what to do. What are the rules?
Inuk Mother: (gently) Watch them and you'll see how it goes.
Anna: I don't know how to learn by watching, can't you tell me?
Inuk Mother: You'll be able to know by watching.
(Crago, cited in Mejia-Arauz et al, 2001, p. 5)

Early childhood education is grounded in a belief that 'doing' is very important. Contributions from Piaget, Montessori, Froebel and others have instilled within our discourse the notion that learning occurs through the manipulation of concrete materials. We organise environments so children can choose materials and actively learn through blocks, construction kits, puzzles, and dress-ups with miniature home equipment. In centre-based care, we find the adult's role involves a significant amount of talking to children as they handle these materials. However, there is one interactional pattern that takes on less importance, and that is the modelling by adults and the corresponding observation by children. For example, in a recent study by Fleer & Richardson (2003), an analysis of 12 months of documentation collected by early childhood teachers indicated that staff recorded child behaviours in isolation from adults. No teacher modelling was recorded and only a limited amount of non-verbal interaction featured in the documentation. The traditional early childhood practice of observing children had privileged an individual orientation and did not include what adults were doing or saying.

However, as the teachers framed their observations from a sociocultural perpsective (following professional development), they noted an increase in observations featuring adult modelling, extensive interactions between staff and children, and deliberate planning for working within the children's zone of proximal development. The reframing of staff perspectives in taking observations of children allowed more non-verbal communication to feature.

Learning within an observational context was no longer silenced as teachers were looking for and recording from a broader sociocultural pespective.

In many cultures adults and children learn by observation. In Rogoff's (1990) meta-analysis of the cross-cultural literature in this area, she stated:

> *the method of learning to use the foot loom in a weaving factory in Guatemala is for the learner (an adult) to sit beside a skilled weaver for some weeks, simply observing, asking no questions, and receiving no explanations. The learner may fetch a spool of thread from time to time for the weaver, but does not begin to weave until after weeks of observation, the learner feels competent to begin. At that point, the apprentice has become a skilled weaver simply by watching and by attending to whatever demonstration the experienced weaver has provided.*
> *(p. 129)*

For some Indigenous Australian children, learning by observation without verbal explanation is also very important. For instance, in the following excerpt Dujwandayngu discusses her role and other family members' role in an important Indigenous dance known as the 'crow dance'.

> *That's the crow dance; the children recognise the beat to the song – music is sometimes like a role model, I just get up and dance; and they hear the music; they identify the songs and the music with the dance (Dujwandayngu). (Fleer & Williams-Kennedy, 2002, p. 35)*

> *Auntie was showing the kids what to do (Dujwandayngu). (Fleer & Williams-Kennedy, 2002, p. 35)*

> *There wouldn't be a lot of talking, but rather a lot of doing. It is interesting how in school we do a lot of talking about it and less of the doing (Denise).*
> *(unpublished data)*

In their research, Fleer & Williams-Kennedy (2002) found that learning through observation was an important learning tool for the Indigenous families who participated in the study. The families had videotaped observational learning and discussed their documented video-recording as evidence of its importance, noting that 'doing' was more important than 'telling'.

Rogoff (1990) suggests that 'Westerners' view observation without explanation as a passive activity:

> *Mainstream middle-class researchers, who rely less on observation, tend to think of it as passive. However, it is clear that children and skilled adult observers are very active in attending to what they watch. In the guided participation of children in cultures that stress children's responsibility for learning, children may have the opportunity to observe and participate when ready in the skills of the community and may develop impressive skills in observation, with less explicit child-centred interaction to integrate the children into the activities of society.*
> *(p. 129)*

Since children are embedded within the community, they have numerous opportunities to observe real-world activities that are important in that community. As observers of ongoing and frequent community activities, they have plenty of time to watch. They have many opportunities to participate in aspects of community activity, and they have many family and community members on hand to support their efforts. The full performance of the community activity and the repetition of these performances provides time and space for children to observe and develop observational skills (Collier, 1988; Briggs, 1991; Lipka, 1991; Stairs, 1991; Chavajay & Rogoff, 1999; Fleer & Williams-Kennedy, 2002). In this way it is possible to see how observation is not necessarily a passive and therefore less useful approach to learning for young children. For some children, learning by observation is very important in their culture. To foreground active exploration through activity and adult narration would mean some children's modes of learning are not catered for in early childhood education – in effect they are silenced:

> *Understanding variations in cultural patterns for learning through observation*
> *may be particularly important in improving the ability of schools to serve children*
> *whose family and community backgrounds emphasise observational learning.*
> *(Mejia-Arauz & Rogoff, 2001, p. 10)*

At present there is a disjunction between children and communities who value observation as a vehicle for learning, and the beliefs and practices in early childhood education in many Western communities. In multicultural Australia, privileging activity and narration in our early childhood settings should be rethought and more diverse ways of learning should be acknowledge and incorporated. We need to move from a 'one approach to learning model', to a 'many approaches to learning model' in early childhood education.

Individual and Social Orientation

In the literature, autonomy (independence, personal agency, free will) and responsibility (cooperation with a small group, interdependence) are often treated as conflicting or even opposite (Mosier & Rogoff, 2000):

> *ethnographic research suggests that in some communities, the goal is autonomous*
> *responsibility, in which individuals choose by their own will to cooperate with*
> *others – a different concept than the polarity of freedom from others or obedience*
> *to authority. Rather than autonomy and cooperation being in opposition,*
> *autonomy with personal responsibility for decision making can be compatible with*
> *values of interdepenence and cooperation among group members (Lamphere, 1977;*
> *Oerter, Oerter, Agostiani, Kim & Wibowo, 1996; Paradise, 1994; White &*
> *LeVine, 1986; Yau & Smetana, 1996) (p. 3)*

Early childhood education has always been geared to focusing on the individual child. We observe the child, we document what we observe (gather data), we analyse that data and then we make inferences which inform our

planning for particular individuals. We have prided ourselves in concentrating upon the individual (Arthur et al, 1996). Yet, not all communities value this focus (Rogoff, 1990). For instance:

> Marquesan (South Pacific) mothers actively arrange infants' social interactions with others; if babies appear to get self-absorbed, mothers interrupt and urge attention to the broader social environment. (Rogoff, 1990, p. 133)

and:

> in Japan, autonomy and cooperation are compatible qualities that both fall under the definition of the term, 'sunao'. (Mosier & Rogoff, 2000, p. 4)

Fleer & Williams-Kennedy (2002) note in their research that some Indigenous communities from Australia value a social orientation and find the individual focus in schools and centres to be very difficult for their children. For example:

- sharing knowledge is not cheating;
- sacrificing praise from the teacher for their friend;
- catching up to where they are;
- working on your own means your failures are highlighted.

Sharing knowledge is not cheating:

> I shared knowledge when I was at school and the teachers used to think that when I used to help my cousin in the classroom that I was cheating. The teacher used to think we were all cheating, just because we were all helping each other, but really that's a the cultural thing – if you know the answer then you really need to share it; and it works in opposition to competition because the aim is for you to share what you have got and not to keep it to yourself; see if you look at competition it is an individualistic thing, you are really competing against other individuals; with sharing, you are sharing with everybody, it is a different way of doing things (Laura). (Fleer & Williams-Kennedy, 2002, p. 31)

As represented in 'Western' education, an individualistic approach that encourages children to become independent workers actively works against the culture of some children. As such, thought needs to be given to fostering interdependence among children.

Sacrificing praise from the teacher for their friend:

> In school, children didn't want to feel too different and didn't want to not fit in; they are so sensitive to another child's needs; they look like they are sacrificing praise from the teacher for their friend; our kids are so unselfish in that way (Sharon). (Fleer & Williams-Kennedy, 2002, p. 31)

'Group membership' is more highly valued than being 'an individual' for some Indigenous communities in Australia. It is part of the basic fabric of early childhood education to work with individual children's sense of self and praise their efforts in this process. Yet for some children, this works against the

importance they place on being a group member. Excelling above other group members and having this highlighted by the teacher is culturally inappropriate for some cultures in Australia.

Catching up to where they are:

> *The children need a quiet time to let the other child catch up to where they are. Gail (child in school) worried about the other kids; but didn't let anyone else know that; she was beyond where they were; the teacher talked about how Gail helped other kids (Laura). (Fleer & Williams-Kennedy, 2002, p. 31)*

Working on your own means your failures are highlighted:

> *If you put a child on their own, you focus on them; give them the attention; then they succeed or fail; if they fail on their own you highlight that failure (Gloria). (Fleer & Williams-Kennedy, 2002, p. 28)*

These perspectives challenge our basic assumption that we should focus on the individual. Many of our interactional patterns in early childhood are tied up with observing the individual and moving thinking and development forward (Arthur et al, 1996). Yet for some children this effort is misguided. Our focus for these children should be how we can build upon the interdependence and social obligation that has been developed so thoughtfully in these communities. For example:

> *In everyday activities, (Marquesan) babies are usually held facing outward and encouraged to interact with and attend to others (especially slightly older siblings) instead of interacting with their mothers. (Rogoff, 1990, p. 133)*

The child-rearing practices of Marquesan families contrast with those espoused within many Western communities. Most child development books and curriculum documentation directed to carers who are working with infants in many English-speaking countries promote the view that babies should be held facing the adult who is holding them. This would be deemed as very important and an appropriate practice for communicating effectively and responding appropriately to infants (e.g. Fleer & Linke, 2002). Yet this approach to adult–infant interaction is based upon a belief that an individual orientation is important (Rogoff, 1990), whilst for Marquesan families being oriented toward the group is more important.

The importance of community and family in some Indigenous cultures in Australia is also important. For instance, Fleer & Williams-Kennedy (2002) noted in their research that when family and community participants viewed the video data gathered by each family, notions of interdependence emerged:

> *I was thinking ... 'that is someone's mum ...'. We say it all the time, when we talk about someone, we talk about their relationship to someone else. We don't speak the name, but rather the relationship (Denise). (Fleer & Williams-Kennedy, 2002, p. 20)*

They use their skin names too. Not just your name – English name, but where you from? If it is a black fella we ask you, and you talk about where you are from – rather than using the English name. You make a connection straight off. We may say 'We know all your mob' (Sharon). (Fleer & Williams-Kennedy, 2002, p. 20)

Family relationship is not immediately obvious, but all of them [shows with arm movement] are related. Sometimes we don't know the kid's name, but we all know the family – that's so and so, you don't need the name, but you need the connection. But as a teacher you need the name for the role! (Denise). (Fleer & Williams-Kennedy, 2002, p. 20)

These statements are more easily understood when consideration is given to the fact that in some Indigenous communities, babies, toddlers and young children sit on an adult's knee or in their arms in the outdoor environment for long periods of time watching all the community and family members walk by and be told about their relationship to each one.

There is a growing body of literature that is beginning to question whether 'Western' early childhood assumptions should be viewed as universal (Dahlberg et al, 1999). In deconstructing assumptions in early childhood education, how do we reconstruct in ways that reflect the diversity of multicultural Australia? How can we change our orientation from an individualistic perspective to a more socially focused view? Changing early childhood discourse so that it is more inclusive of other world-views is an important beginning point. For instance, talking about planning for individuals should also be accompanied by planning for interdependence. We could begin by reappraising written material such as: central curriculum, state-based curriculum, national accreditation documentation, early childhood textbooks for graduate and undergraduate students, licensing requirements and legislation documentation, teacher handbooks, centre and department websites, teacher education course material, centre policy statements, professional associations documents – these are but a few of the commonly available materials that all privilege an individual orientation in Australia today. In order to change public documentation to be more inclusive in its language, many conversations are needed. These conversations provide the beginning point for examining issues of diversity at a fundamental rather than a superficial level.

Conversations as 'Add-ons' or as Part of the Real World?

If we go back to earlier arguments about how many Western families isolate their infants by placing them into their own bedroom, in their own cot and provide them with pacifiers, we can see that it is necessary to organise 'conversational opportunities' during wakeful periods. If we now also consider how the child is generally not part of the adult world – but, rather, a child's world with toys and friends is created, we can see how as children grow older

further 'conversational opportunities' must also be created. Rogoff (1990) has suggested that:

> *In cultures that adapt situations to children (as in middle-class U.S. families), caregivers simplify their talk, negotiate meaning with children, cooperate with them in building propositions, and respond to their verbal and nonverbal initiations. (p. 123)*

As part of creating these conversational opportunities, particular conversational genres are produced. One of the distinctive features of these interactional patterns is the use of questioning. These conversational patterns tend to be mirrored in many early childhood centres and schools. For instance, many early childhood teachers (see Fleer & Williams-Kennedy, 2002):

- ask questions about things to which they already know the answers;
- ask questions to find out what you know;
- ask questions to keep the conversation going;
- ask questions as a social greeting (e.g. how are you?);
- ask questions when they really don't want an answer (rhetorical questions);
- use questioning as a link between ideas and activities in the classroom or centre;
- use questioning as a control technique;
- use a variety of question types – (e.g. why, when, how, who); and
- expect children to ask questions and to know how to do this.

The last point reflects a belief that all children learn these conversational patterns in their home or community prior to beginning early childhood education. However, conversational patterns do not necessarily evolve in this way for all children (Goncu, 1999). As Rogoff (1990) stated:

> *In cultures that adapt children to the normal situations of the society (as in Kaluli New Guinea and Samoan families), caregivers model unsimplified utterances for children to repeat to a third party, direct them to notice others, and build interaction around circumstances to which the caregivers wish the children to respond. (p. 123)*

In Australia, some Indigenous people have challenged the use of questioning as part of the conversational genre valued in early childhood education. For instance:

> *My grandmother she believes you don't ask questions, you should just watch and listen. In some communities you only watch and listen. In some communities it is bad manners to ask too many questions. I was always taught by my grandmother that you don't ask questions, you watch and you learn; you don't question things; copying rather than asking questions (Laura). (Fleer & Williams-Kennedy, 2002, p. 57)*

The privileging of a question-based pattern of interaction in early childhood centres and schools has meant that some children are faced with the task of

not just learning the content, but also the codes for participating effectively in the learning practices to have access to the content. Vicky explains:

> *When I was at school, I didn't learn the things I wanted to learn because I was too afraid to ask the questions or didn't know the questions to ask. I never learnt the things I wanted to know; if I was worried about spelling or reading or something like that, I never asked or questioned as a child; so I want Gregory [five year old son] to be able to learn things by asking questions (Vicky). (Fleer & Williams-Kennedy, 2002, p. 57)*

Hill et al (1998), in citing Delpit (1988), demonstrate the importance of not only making these schooling processes explicit, but actively teaching them:

> *good intentions about diversity are not enough. Being nice, warm and friendly can lead to a lack of challenging standards and a lowering of expectations. Teachers have the responsibility to teach the codes needed to participate fully in mainstream life. Delpit (1988) states that all students must be taught the codes needed to participate fully in mainstream life, not by being forced to do mundane pointless exercises but in meaningful endeavours. They need access to teachers' expert knowledge of the conventions of the written code which are just that, conventions which have developed originally in an arbitrary way to record meaning. While acknowledging the expert knowledge of the teacher, the expert knowledge of the learner must be acknowledged as well. (pp. 29-30)*

Consequently, it needs to be acknowledged that the question-and-answer genre evident in many Western early childhood education communities is being privileged. It is one of the taken-for-granted practices in Australian centres – yet not all children have prior experiences of this genre in their community or family. Acknowledging and making explicit this type of interactional pattern is important in an Australian multicultural community. We can no longer assume that the taken-for-granted practice of asking questions should be privileged. Being aware of the particular interactional style normally exhibited by the teacher is the first step to realising inclusivity. The second step is to think beyond one interactional style and begin to develop a range of ways of interacting – a diversity of ways that reflect the diversity of the children. Privileging one way of interacting in effect silences other ways of interacting.

Maintaining the Status Quo or
Moving Early Childhood Education Forward?

In many English-speaking countries, early childhood education has developed routines, practices, rituals, artefacts, symbols, conventions, stories and histories. Many of our taken-for-granted practices have become traditions. Wenger (1998) used the term 'reified' to explain how these traditional practices become named, and a specialist and truncated discourse emerges. Yet

what has become valued within the profession of early childhood education is essentially a 'Western' view of childhood. We have assumed that:

- notions of high quality 'Western' interactional patterns between adults and infants are universal (that is, we all hold our babies to maximise adult–child interaction) (Rogoff, 1990);
- the best way to learn is through activity and not sitting and watching – since watching is considered a passive activity (Rogoff, 1998);
- question-asking by children and teachers is an important technique for learning for children (Mejia-Arauz et al, 2001).

We have created educational outcomes for early childhood education based on what has historically been perceived as needed for 'Western' children, such as child-centredness, to compensate for the fact that infants and children are not embedded within community practices. We have created conversational opportunities and patterns of interaction, such as the use of questioning, to compensate for children's disembeddedness. We have channelled our efforts and discourse into an individualistic framework at the expense of interdependence, thus disenfranchising some children and positioning them as failures when they do not succeed on their own. Our early childhood 'community of practice' that we have inherited from our forebears requires some reanalysis.

Ironically, we can use the notion of 'communities of practice' as a vehicle for this process of reanalysis since it is also a useful analytical tool.

> *For many of us, the concept of learning immediately conjures up images of classrooms, training sessions, teachers, textbooks, homework, and exercises. Yet in our experience, learning is an integral part of our everyday lives. It is part of our participation in our communities and organisations.* The problem is not that we do not know this, but rather that we do not have very systematic ways of talking about this familiar experience. *(Wenger, 1998, p. 8; emphasis added)*

Communities of practice as a theoretical tool help illuminate how the 'taken-for-grantedness' of early childhood education takes place:

> *What is taken for granted fades into the background – but the tacit is no more individual and natural than what we make explicit to each other. Common sense is only commonsensical because it is sense held in common. Communities of practice are the prime context in which we work out common sense through mutual engagement. (Wenger, 1998, p. 47)*

Meaning in communities of practice is possible only when ideas are jointly understood and enacted within a particular community. Meaning does not reside in an individual or even in printed matter, but, rather, meaning exists through a dynamic process of living in the world. Early childhood curriculum cannot exist unless a community gives it meaning and brings it into existence. Wenger (1998) states that abstract ideas must become reified if they are to exist

and if they are to be useful tools in a community. For instance, he states that we take an abstract idea such as 'democracy' and we concretise it by using the symbol of the Statue of Liberty holding a set of scales. When something is reified we are able to perceive its existence. For example, child-centredness has been reified in early childhood education. In this process, child-centredness develops an independent existence. It takes on the status of an object. We use the reified idea as a tool that changes our experiences of the world.

Wenger (1998) warns that often the reification process results in slogans – such as 'Children learn through play' – which simplify complex understandings and hide broader meanings. As such, these terms become embedded within our community of practice, transcending time and cultures, forming part of our histories. For example, in thinking about children learning through play, what sort of play are we talking about and what sort of learning do we think happens? Have the reified ideas inherent in early childhood education reduced our profession to a community of practice built upon many slogans and with little capacity to reinvent itself? Have our reified and very precious ideals masked their culture-specific beginnings? Can we think differently about early childhood education and critically examine existing reified cultural tools?

In order to move forward, we need to look back and analyse what we have inherited. We also need to reify new cultural tools, such as child embeddedness, and give these terms meaning so that we can think differently and change our 'community of practice'. When we do this, we see that we no longer reproduce ourselves in the next generation of teachers, but, rather, we speak openly about the cultural tools we are using and model the analysis required to ensure that those tools are still appropriate for the next generation of children attending our early childhood centres. In this sense we move beyond social reproduction.

In this process, we need to give a voice to cultures other than those from 'Western' communities. Their voice will help our profession find, for those from the 'West', 'new' terms and concepts. With these new cultural tools we can think differently and begin to see other ways that early childhood can be enacted, begin to acknowledge the diversity of approaches to learning that children and their families bring with them to our centres, and demonstrate movement beyond an ethnocentric perspective on early childhood education. We can move beyond social reproduction to communities of practice that reflect everyone's practices.

> *Children's personal and family histories of participation in different forms of learning need to be recognised and understood in order to build on the children's familiar ways of learning. Teachers, and other adults whose aim is to foster children's learning can help children learn new ways of learning and also strengthen familiar traditional ways, by recognising and adapting school practices to cultural variations in the traditional modes of learning. (Mejia-Araz & Rogoff, 2001, p. 20)*

Correspondence

Marilyn Fleer, Faculty of Education, Monash University,
Peninsula Campus, McMahons Road, Frankston, Victoria 3199,
Australia (marilyn.fleer@education.monash.edu.au).

References

Arthur, L., Beecher, B., Dockett, S., Farmer, S. & Death, E. (1996) *Programming and Planning in Early Childhood Settings*, 2nd edn. Sydney: Harcourt Brace.

Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Department of Education and Community Services (2001) Contours of Learning. Discussion Paper. A Guide for Children's Learning in the Early Years. Canberra: ACT Department of Education and Community Services.

Briggs, J.L. (1991) Expecting the Unexpected: Canadian Inuit training for an experimental lifestyle, *Ethos*, 19, pp. 259-287.

Chavajay, P. & Rogoff, B. (1999) Cultural Variation in Management of Attention by Children and their Caregivers, *Developmental Psychology*, 35, pp. 1079-1090.

Collier, J., Jr (1988) Survival at Rough Rock: a historical overview of Rough Rock Demonstration School, *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 19, pp. 253-269.

Dahlberg, G., Moss, P. & Pence, A. (1999) *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: postmodern perspectives*. London: Falmer Press.

Department of Education and Children's Services (1996) *Foundation Areas of Learning. Curriculum Frameworks for Early Childhood Settings*. Adelaide: Department of Education and Children's Services.

Edwards, C., Gandini, L. & Forman, G. (1998) *The Hundred Languages of Children. The Regio Emilia Approach – advanced reflections*, 2nd edn. London: Ablex.

Fleer, M. & Linke, P. (2002) *Babies: good beginnings last forever.* Research in Practice Series, 6(2), 2nd edn. Canberra: Australian Early Childhood Association.

Fleer, M. & Richardson, C. (2003) Collective Mediated Assessment: moving towards a sociocultural approach to assessing children's learning, *Journal of Australian Research in Early Childhood Education*, 10, pp. 41-55.

Fleer, M. & Williams-Kennedy, D. (2002) *Building Bridges: researching literacy development for young Indigenous children.* Canberra: Australian Early Childhood Association.

Giudici, C., Rinaldi, C. & Krechevsky, M. (2001) *Making Learning Visible: children as individual and group learners*. Reggio Emilia: Reggio Children Sri.

Goncu, A. (Ed.) (1999) *Children's Engagement in the World: sociocultural perspectives.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hill, S., Comber, B., Louden, B., Rivalland, J. & Reid, J. (1998) *100 Children Go to School. Connections and Disconnections in Literacy Development in the Year Prior to School and the First Year of School*, vols 1-3. Canberra: Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

Lamphere, L. (1977) *To Run after Them: cultural and social bases of cooperation in a Navajo community.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Lipka, J. (1991) Toward a Culturally Based Pedagogy: a case study of one Yup'ik Eskimo teacher, *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 22, pp. 203-223.

Mejia-Arauz, R., Rogoff, B. & Paradise, R. (2001) Cultural Variation in Children's Observation during Demonstration, unpublished paper.

Mosier, C.E. & Rogoff, B. (2000) Privileged Treatment of Toddlers: cultural aspects of autonomy and responsibility, unpublished paper.

Oerter, R., Oerter, R., Agostiani, H., Kim, H-O. & Wibowo, S. (1996) The Concept of Human Nature in East Asia: etic and emic characteristics, *Culture and Psychology*, 2, pp. 9-51.

Paradise, R. (1994) Interactional Style and Nonverbal Meaning: Mazahua children learning how to be separate-but-together, *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 26, pp. 156-172.

Queensland School Curriculum Council (1998) Preschool Curriculum Guidelines. Brisbane: Queensland Government.

Rogoff, B. (1990) *Apprenticeship in Thinking: cognitive development in social context.* New York: Random House.

Rogoff, B. (1998) Cognition as a Collaborative Process, in W. Damon (Chief Editor), D. Kuhn & R.S. Siegler (volume eds) *Cognition, Perceptions and Language*, 5th edn, *Handbook of Child Psychology*, pp. 679-744. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Stairs, A. (1991) Learning Processes and Teaching Roles in Native Education: cultural base and cultural brokerage, *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 47, pp. 280-294.

Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice: learning, meaning and identity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

White, M.L. & LeVine, R.A. (1986) What is an Ii Ko (good child)? in H. Stevenson, H. Azuma & K. Hakuta (Eds) *Child Development and Education in Japan*, pp. 56-62. New York: W.H. Freeman & Co.

Yau, J. & Smetana, J.G. (1996) Adolescent–Parent Conflict among Chinese Adolescents in Hong Kong, *Child Development*, 67, pp. 1262-1275.