CHAPTER TEN

Positioning Children to Cope with Change

Cecily Knight

Abstract

This paper examines the changing nature of society and its impact upon children in families as they negotiate change. It investigates some of the multiplicity of issues surrounding helping children manage change in the 21st century.

Introduction

This paper engages with the idea that social change which generates changes in the lives of adults, impacts on the life-experiences of their children. Early childhood educators are increasingly aware of the challenges in responding to the changing nature of childhood and how best to help children cope with the changes.

In writing this paper, I have drawn on my experiences of working with children who have experienced change, loss and grief. I have facilitated an Australian program, Seasons for Growth (Graham,1996) and am a certified companion and trainer for the program. Seasons for Growth is an intervention program designed to provide support for these children. My experiences lead me to pose these questions. Is it possible that the strategies used in the program provide

a framework for coping with all change? What impact do sociological changes have on children and childhood?

This paper will examine briefly the changing nature of society and how this relates to sociological discourse on childhood. It will examine the impact of changes in family situations on children, the benefits of intervention strategies in helping children cope with change and the possible implications for all children.

Society in the 21st Century

The past 25-30 years have seen the emergence of a new world. Changes in information technology, globalisation and social structures are evident. (Giddens, 1998) Postcolonial, feminist, and sociological theory challenge dominant discourses in post-industrial Australia (Luke, 2000). Smith (2000) discusses the changes in relation to teacher education programs and notes that social change means that the context within which education is conducted is also changed. In discussing the impact of new technologies, Smith (2000:8) states that *it provides a new kind of life space for young people.* Smith further outlines some of the challenges and principles for new approaches to teacher education. The implications for early childhood educators warrant closer investigation of Smith's innovative ideas, Although discussion pertaining to the changing society of the new millennium and the pace of change has become something of a cliché, it remains factual and children are caught up in the stresses that often result from change.

Personal identity, changes in family, gender relations and cultural identity take on new significance in the network society. In a time of unprecedented change, the challenge for early childhood educators is to investigate the effect on children in adapting to new societal demands. Early

childhood educators need to question existing premises and situations for children and ensure that the needs of children are given priority in the new society. As part of effective strategies, early childhood educators need to form strategic alliances with other professionals and organisations that work for the good of children.

In adapting to new technologies and changes in society, many social practices challenge traditional concepts of 'family'. It is not surprising that revisions of discourse about family are emerging in Western industrialised nations. The permeable nature of family structure has become obvious. Multiple perspectives on family have replaced the patriarchal family. A definition of family has plural possibilities and implications for images of family (Bowes & Hayes, 1999). It appears that the family is the site of many of the clashes between old and new paradigms. The pace of change in existing social structures and conventions that affects adults threatens the notions of the family unit as it was previously known. The liberal view of the changing family suggests that the family is not in decline, but rather changing (Gilding, 1999). Parallel to the fast changing societies has developed increased concern for children and knowledge about them. This has resulted in international movements for the protection of children.

The Changing Lives of Children

As families become more diverse, children as family members face many dilemmas relating to their change situation. The effects of change on children can be quite devastating if they are not given the necessary support (Raveis, Siegel & Karus, 1999). Research seems to have documented the effects of change on children as a result of death or divorce (Osterweis , Solomon, & Green, 1984; Siegel, Karus & Raveis,1996), but there is still a need for

research into the many other types of change that occur today for children (Howe, 1999). Some of the changes that children can face include: the death of a parent, grandparent or significant other; divorce of parents; children/parents living with life-threatening illnesses or drug abuse; the relocation of families; loss of employment for a parent or significant other.

There are many books and manuals on the market outlining approaches for helping children adjust to their changed family circumstances and cope with the associated stresses. A common theme in the literature is the acknowledgement that children across the developmental span do not experience change in the same way. Their level of cognitive, social and emotional and linguistic functioning affects their understanding of the change and their ability to cope with the particular change, so that two five year olds coping with family dissolution through divorce, will experience and cope with their situation in very different ways.

Another significant factor is that the original loss and change can trigger other significant life changes for the child. For example, the loss of a parent may result in the loss of economic security for the family, geographic displacement, changes in household routines or the introduction of new adults into a child's life (Raveis et al, 1999).

As families struggle to manage the changing society, immediate family changes have a direct impact on the lives of children. This raises questions regarding the position of children in Australian society.

Social Construction of Childhood

The social construction of childhood is linked to the images of children and childhood that a society projects. The meanings attributed to the social construction of

childhood are given popular expression through these dominant images, ideas and values. Images of childhood can influence the role of children in a particular society. The dominant images of childhood result in hegemonic assumptions that accept and perpetuate acceptable roles for children. These assumptions position children and childhood as homogenous, adult-directed and weak.

Howe (1999) and Rhodes (2000) discuss the relationship between childhood and societal changes. They maintain that childhood can mean different things and be shaped differently in different cultures and at different moments in history. This challenges the traditional notion that childhood is a fundamental human experience that is universal for all children regardless of culture (Kincheloe, 1997).

Canella (1997) asserts that the assumptions of society position children in particular ways. For example, children are placed in a distinct group that adults consider are in need of their protection, guidance and control. The notion of children as weak shifts power strongly to the adult and results in a dichotomous relationship. According to Canella (1997:43) this *privileges adult knowledge as what the child will eventually learn and places children in a position to be controlled.* Woodrow (1998) affirms this notion in her work on the image of the child as innocent. Silin (1995:107) also raises questions regarding society's positioning of children and suggests that *children possess moral integrity, a power and a vision that has become submerged by adults.*

Canella (1997) believes that child-centred pedagogy perpetuates the dominant ideology of the universal child. This has implications for early childhood educators who are seeking to give children autonomy in managing change, both in childhood and beyond, and requires further investigation.

Society's image of childhood is characterised by contradictions. Childhood, it seems, is constituted as a time

of powerlessness but also as a desirable commodity. Currently, there appears to be a paradox surrounding childhood. Woodrow (1999) discusses some of these contradictions. The perspective of the child as embryonic adult is one of the common tenets of current Australian early childhood practice. Woodrow (1999:10) suggests this is problematic because it endorses social conformity and denies children *the opportunity to grow in their own understanding and construction of moral and ethical responsibility.* This would appear to contradict the promotion of internal locus of control for children, where they take responsibility for the consequences of their behaviour.

Research involving the interrogation of images of childhood has particular significance for the positioning of children in responding to and shaping social change.

Helping Children Cope with Change, Loss and Grief

An effective intervention program, in my experience, is Seasons for Growth. Seasons for Growth uses the symbolism of the changing seasons of the year as a framework for exploring issues of change, loss and grief (Graham, 1996).

The program contains age-appropriate activities/ strategies designed to help children cope with a broad range of situations arising from loss and grief as a result of change. The program provides children with a forum for examining how their particular loss situation has impacted on their lives. They are made aware of relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes that may assist them in understanding and coping with their change situation. These include general problem solving skills, skills for increasing internal locus of control, skills for managing fears and anxieties through coping responses. It is a program that empowers children to be in control of their behaviour in responding to change.

Seasons for Growth is not so much a program as a process. It is not counselling or therapy. A child who has completed the program is not considered "cured" of their grief. Children have simply been given the opportunity to explore their grief and presented with coping strategies that they can use. The program recognises the cyclical nature of grief. At any time a person may find they are back in the darkness, the winter of their loss. The difference, however, is that they have a way of knowing that there are choices they can make that will assist them in coping with the change or loss. Increased resilience does not mean the pain of the change, loss or separation is erased but because the child is in control of his/her behaviour, there appears to be less likelihood of serious maladjustment in the long term.

In my experience, the program appears to be successful in helping children manage their immediate change and anecdotal evidence suggests that children use the strategies long after the intervention program is completed. Longitudinal studies to investigate the long-term benefits have not been completed. The success of the program and its growth worldwide, has encouraged me to investigate further the universal implications for children.

Towards Resilience

Lambert (2000) states that the research literature indicates that there are important elements of self-control that relate to younger learners. She suggests that children in the early grades of school have more belief in their own competence than older children in relation to perceptions of their learning ability. Younger learners believe that they themselves can make a difference while older children believe that outside influences play a key role in their learning outcomes. Lambert (2000) also suggests that the younger learners are more intrinsically motivated to learn

than their older counterparts. Surely this would suggest to early childhood educators the importance of developing these skills and attitudes so that children will feel empowered in all aspects of their lives, social as well as educational.

Parallel to the fast changing societies has developed increased concern for children and knowledge about them. This has resulted in international movements for the protection of children. In spite of this, there are still many situations that are less than ideal for children. For example, 34, 000 children still die every day and there is an increase in drug consumption among children (Folster, 1999, Feingold, Quilty & Taras, 2000).

The immediate need for facilitating coping strategies in children is emphasised by other factors such as the alarming suicide rates for children. Range (1996) states that suicide is the fifth leading cause of death in children. I have found limited research on childhood suicide. Range (1996) presents some statistics and points to the urgent need for adequate prevention and intervention strategies. In fact, Range argues for the introduction of school-based suicide prevention training modules.

I would suggest that this information highlights the urgent need for further research in this area. Researchers (Bowes & Hayes, 1999; De Civita, 2000) report that resilience occurs as a result of factors within both the child and the environment. There are many variables in the balance between resilience and vulnerability in children and families. The capacity to cope and the manifestation of competence warrants closer investigation in order to identify those skills and attitudes that are important in dealing with the challenges. These can then be used in addressing particular needs of children and families. Early childhood educators should investigate strategies to

empower children and families to mobilize their own resources and facilitate positive adjustment to change.

Early childhood programs need to reflect the paradigm shift from a deficit-based to competency based approach where all children are encouraged to have the knowledge, skills and attitudes to deal with change. This should enable children to move from dependency on external sources for the solutions to their problems and toward self-reliance in their decision making.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to outline some of the concerns regarding how children respond to social changes. Changes in society at a macro level and changes in family situations impact on the lives of children. Early childhood educators have a responsibility and a moral duty to promote child welfare. Central to the discussion, is the idea that childhood in the 21st century is distinctive because it has to engage with technological, economic and social realities that were unknown to previous generations.

The problematic relationship between childhood and social change is evidenced by the number of problem situations involving children (Osterweis et al, 1984; Range, 1996; Siegel et al, 1996; Raveis et al, 1999). Further research is needed into ways to promote social competence for children, while consistently respecting their dignity. It involves giving children inner strength and external support (De Civita, 2000). It involves reconceptualizing and interrogating the nostalgic imagery of childhood. I will continue to investigate positive approaches that may assist children in negotiating social change, as I believe there is an urgent need to identify components that provide the foundation for effective communication concerning children and change.

In my future research I wish to investigate if it is indeed possible to identify particular strategies or patterns of behaviour that could assist all children to create alternative futures. Is there a way to prepare young children for the resilience that life in the 21st century seems to demand? As early childhood educators, how can we best meet the needs of children and how do we prioritise and position childhood by our actions? I pose these questions for further research.

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