



# Places in the Heart for Growing Identities: Creating Early Childhood Environments that Nurture Children's Identity

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**Abstract:** The overall goal of this research was to highlight the importance of the environment in shaping children's emerging identity and finding new ways to achieve this in an early childhood centre environment. The research question asked "What are the characteristics of an environment that promote the identity of the child?" and an action research methodology (Robert-Holmes, 2011) was applied to the question. This paper briefly describes current literature on the environment as a mediator in shaping children's identities then focuses on key findings from this small-scale research project. The main findings support current literature and theories identifying the sociocultural, physical and pedagogical environments in early childhood as the primary influencers in shaping a child's identity. Of particular interest, as captured through the children's voices, is a preference for solitary play and the strong voice of parents and teachers on the teacher's role in aiding the construction of positive identities through continuing dialogue with children as they relate with others, self and the environment. Implications for practice are also discussed.

**Key words:** environment, fostering children's identities, early childhood education

## **Introduction and Literature Review**

I have always had a passion and strong interest in identity formation. There is a body of literature that emphasises the need for teachers to understand self and their identities as a means to effective teaching (Hansen, 1995; Gibbs, 2006; Giles & Kung, 2010; Glazer, 1994; Kung, 2010; Palmer, 1983, 1998, 2000). However, there is a lack of literature that examines the role of the early childhood centre's environment in shaping children's identities. My primary interest stemmed from a fascination with the uniqueness of the individual and how we are able to recognise and accommodate that in early childhood settings where a variety of environments are being impressed upon the child. To me, this required further more intensive research with a stronger focus in the area of educational

psychology, where the nature of the child is better comprehended in terms of adaptation and socialisation.

The research setting was a private kindergarten with five teachers and thirty-nine children aged between 2 and 5 years of age. The kindergarten is sessional with an emergent-centred curriculum. The participants in the research included children, parents and educators at the kindergarten. While all three groups of participants contributed to the knowledge gained from this research, particular attention was given to the voices of the children.

I entered into the research with the hope of refocusing attention on establishing and maintaining environments that nurture children's places of origin, celebrate their culture, values and belief systems, and support their individuality. What I discovered has brought new understandings to our perception of who or what in the environment helps shape the children's sense of *self*.

### **Literature Findings**

Through a literature search (Brooker, 2006; French, 2007; Kernan, 2010; Gandini & Edwards, as cited in Rinaldi, 2001), I discovered that the identity of children rests in many fields of science. These endeavour to identify and categorise a highly complex set of functions and behaviours that are developed and affected by a host of influences. It is generally agreed that there are four main "sub-territories" of environment that are responsible for the residing identity of the child: the home, educational, sociocultural and physical environments. The last three are all pertinent to the early childhood education centre environment, and will be discussed next.

#### **Physical environment.**

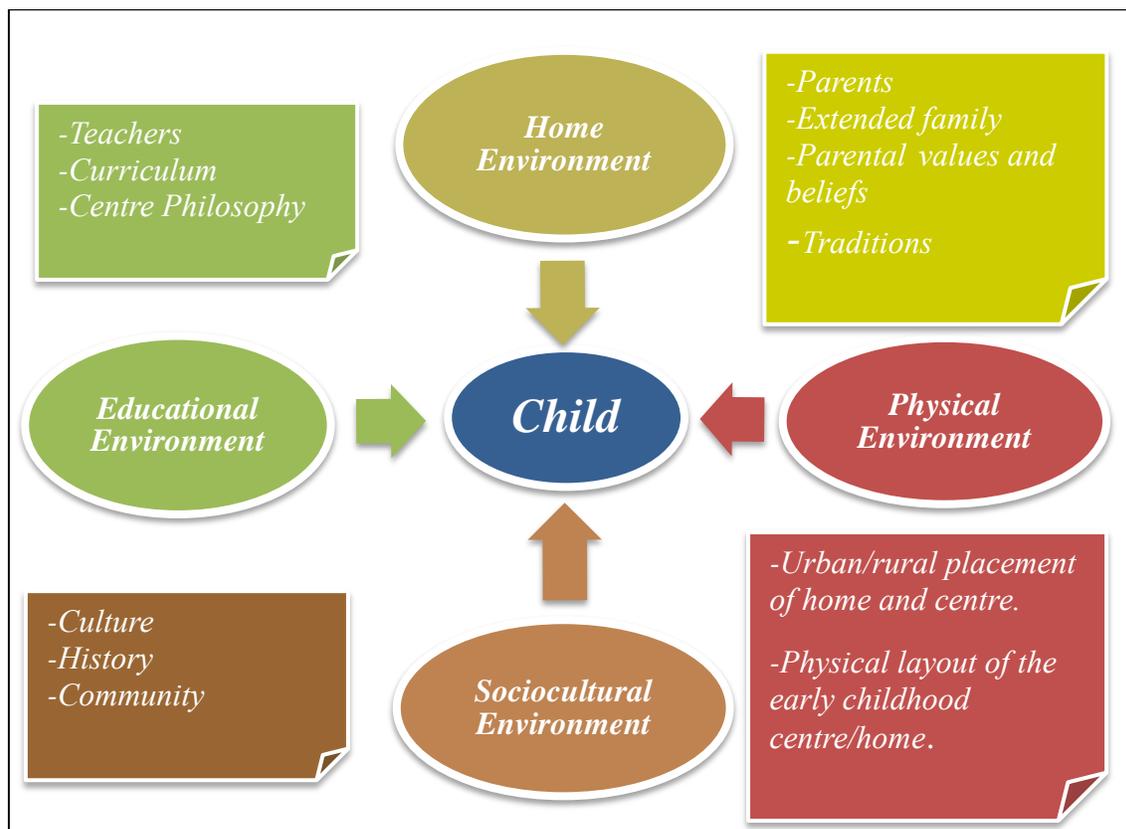
When reading literature about the physicality (structural form, characteristics, shape, space, dimensions) of the environment that shapes children's identities, I discovered the dynamic and responsive relationship that needs to exist between the energies of the child and the physical learning spaces they occupy. Primarily, the physical environment of the early learning centre is a symbiotic site of engagement and interaction. The nature of children is such that they will explore the nature of the environment, and as the child explores the limitations and boundaries of their environment, they modify their responses based on environmental prompting.

The nature of the child explores the nature of the environment, the nature of people it explores limitations and boundaries, and rephrases-or modifies or reinforces itself based on environmental prompting. Kernan (2010) writes briefly about the links between the interactions a child has with a place and how it contributes to their sense of belonging:

Geographical dimensions of children's lives include the intersection of human and physical worlds, and of time and space, spatial variations and, the importance of scale, place knowledge, the distinctiveness of place and the meanings and feelings attached to significant sites of everyday life. ( McKendrick, 2000; Philo, 2000 as cited in Kernan 2010)

This notion was also supported by Malaguzzi (1996) who states, "... We place enormous value on the role of the environment as a motivating and animating force in creating spaces for relations, options, and emotional and cognitive situations that produce a sense of well-being and security" (as cited in French, 2007, p. 18). Penn (2005) also has an understanding that children learn in context and builds upon this idea "of creating spaces for relations" by stating that "children respond to the reality they see around them and what they learn reflects that reality" (as cited in French, 2007, p. 18).

**Figure 1. The Four Main "Sub-Territories" of Environment Responsible for the Residing Identity of the Child**



**Sociocultural environment.**

It is widely known that the formation of children's identity and developing a sense of belonging is strongly linked to the interrelationship between the social, cultural and physical conditions of their lives. Greenman (2005) advocates for caring spaces that nurture warm, reciprocal relationships which, in turn, promote well-being of children. Olds (2000) notes that "the true spirit of places resides not only in their physical parameters, but also in the symbolic meanings that grow up around them as a result of the history, participation, and belonging of the people who use them" (as cited in Kernan, 2010, p. 203). Bronfenbrenner's (1989) ideas are repeated by Olds (2000, as cited in

Kernan, 2010) when he suggests that people grow within multiple contexts, and cites family and culture as important influences to development. Both Bronfenbrenner (1989, as cited in Berk, 2007; and in Santrock, 2009) and Kernan (2010) also highlight the importance of the chronosystem (time) as a mediating factor for growth.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1997, as cited in Brooker, 2006) concur with his concept of “habitus”, where the child in the environment of the family gathers its first set of beliefs, expectations, behaviour and attitudes, endorsing the primary role played by families in identity formation.

In establishing, developing and communicating their identities, children need to be in reach of larger social groups and communities. These legitimise children’s roles as interdependent but contributing members of the systems they are involved with. Gandini and Edwards, supports this citizenry as espoused in the Reggio Emilia philosophy (as cited in Rinaldi, 2001). The child is the central focus, identifying where nature and nurture intersect in the “dance of life”. While the culture of early childhood settings must extend to the wider community of the child (their family and peers), it must also be welcoming to the child as an individual. Curtis and Carter (2003) emphasise the importance of environments in an early childhood centre context that reflect values and help shape identities.

#### **Educational environment.**

Early learning centres are social constructs of power, being impressed upon by the forces of teacher, child, and the external and internal social communities of families, peers and society. The identity of the child, as the central protagonist in their own learning, has a transformative influence on the identity of the environment: Gandini and Edwards suggest that “... the child is a producer of culture, values and rights, competent in learning and competent in communicating with all the hundred languages” (cited in Rinaldi, 2001, p. 51).

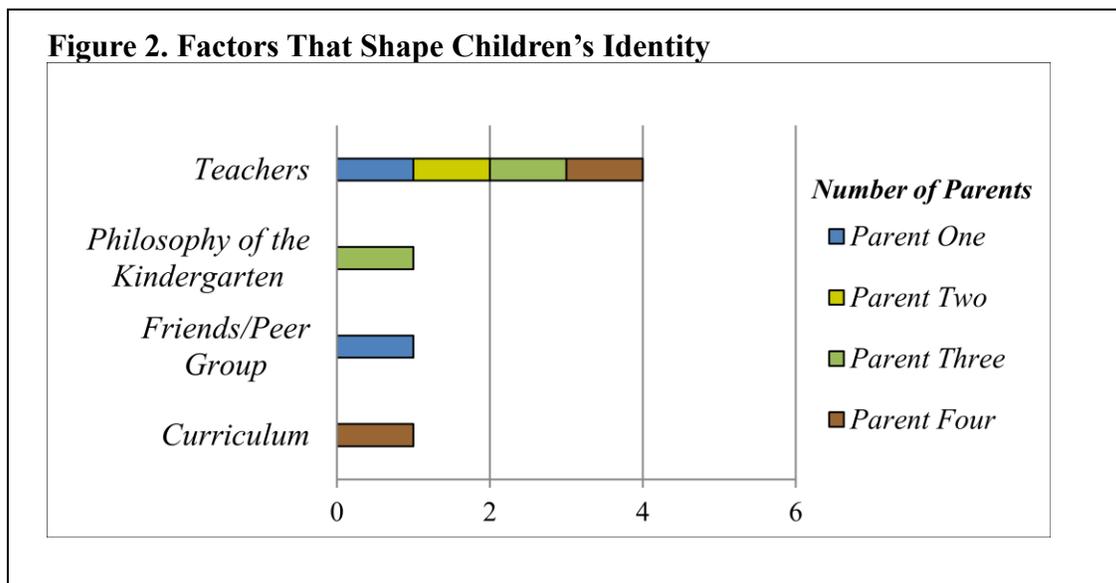
With this understanding of diversity and the receptivity of the child to multifaceted environments (Brooker, 2006, French, 2007, Kernan, 2010; Gandini & Edwards, cited in Rinaldi, 2001), the literature recognises the importance of the pedagogue in empowering the child to challenge the wider-held belief systems in society and also acknowledges the child’s ability to do so. The implication of this for society is increased tolerance of multiformity, which can only validate the unique identity of the developing child.

Brooker (2006) raises the issues of societal bias and prejudices as challenges to early childhood educators in influencing children’s identities, and concurs that the engagement of the pedagogue with the children’s physical environment is vital in precipitating change. Her studies, based on children’s complex familial acquisition of beliefs and roles in societies, found that these were malleable “and that educator’s intentions of reducing bias, and maximising children’s opportunities, may be undermined by their offer of child-initiated activities and freely chosen playmates”. French concurs when she observes that “through participating in everyday activities/ routines and play, children absorb messages from people and the environment regarding their identity and social values” (2007, p. 10).

The common thread throughout the articles was the focus on the child and how pedagogy needs to support the social construct of the child as a subject of life and a contributing member of the social systems they are involved with. Valuing their autonomy and individual differences, educators need to recognise the holistic needs of the child, taking into account their predispositions, their historical and familial narratives, the societies and cultures they live in, and current research in child development that recognises that children’s interests are at the centre of what they know and how they learn. It is the reality of the environments, contexts and settings that children occupy that determines how their identities are shaped and strengthened. Equally, it is the role of the child that fulfils their potentials.

## Findings and Discussion

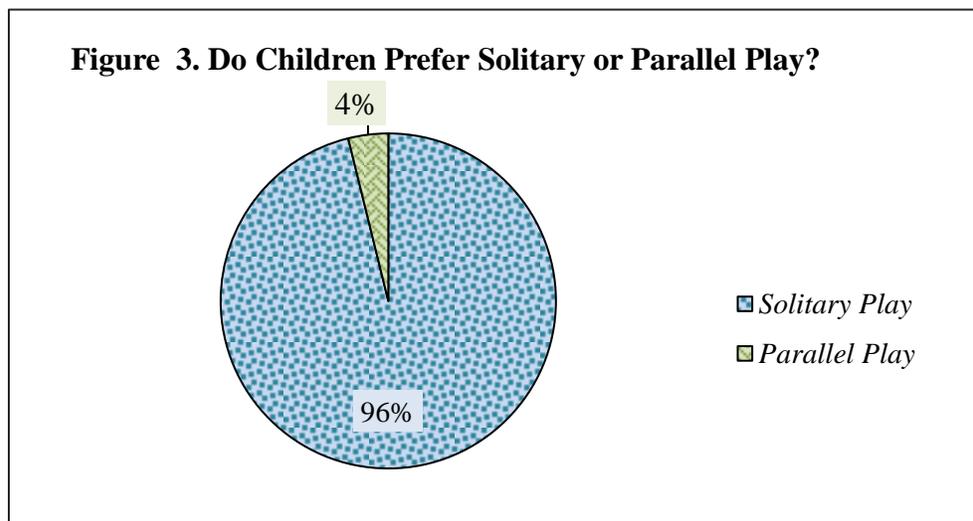
My findings were from data collected from three participant groups: the parents, teachers and children at a private kindergarten. During the first phase of my research, I also collected data from the kindergarten through photography, observations, jottings, questionnaires and focus interviews (Arthur, Beecher, Dockett, Farmer, & Death 2008). Throughout the kindergarten I discovered that the identity of the child was captured by teachers in different ways, including in artwork, writing books, annual class photos, portfolios and on individualised names tags. Three significant findings emerged from the data.



The finding shown in Figure 2 is from data collected from the multi-choice questionnaire given to the parents. The finding supports current literature that states teachers play a crucial role in nurturing children’s identity. Dewey (1996) supported this notion by stating that the adult is “a teacher-researcher, a resource and guide to children, a catalyst to provoke, co-construct, and stimulate children’s thinking...” (as cited in French, 2007, p. 15). Teachers are the catalysts for shaping children’s identities. They are the instigators of dialogue and questions with children, affirming their senses of self and establishing belonging. It is also the teacher’s role to ensure that strong relationships are

established between parents and extended family members. It is this synergy that creates that connectedness with children and acknowledges their uniqueness and personal histories. Educators are translators, mediators and moderators, and ultimately facilitators for the child being able to make sense of their world, because if a child can't establish an identity in a place of belonging they will be lost.

The implications for our teaching practice are that we need to be dynamic and fluid in our responsiveness to the rapid changes in children's states. These vary from child to child and are situational. It would appear that it is our knowledge of the child, and our ability to respond to their needs, that impact on the children's identity. "What teachers do, who they are, how their particular qualities and dispositions harmonise in their teaching, how they think, work and interact with students, have the potential to create life-long effects (Gibbs, 2006, p. 15).

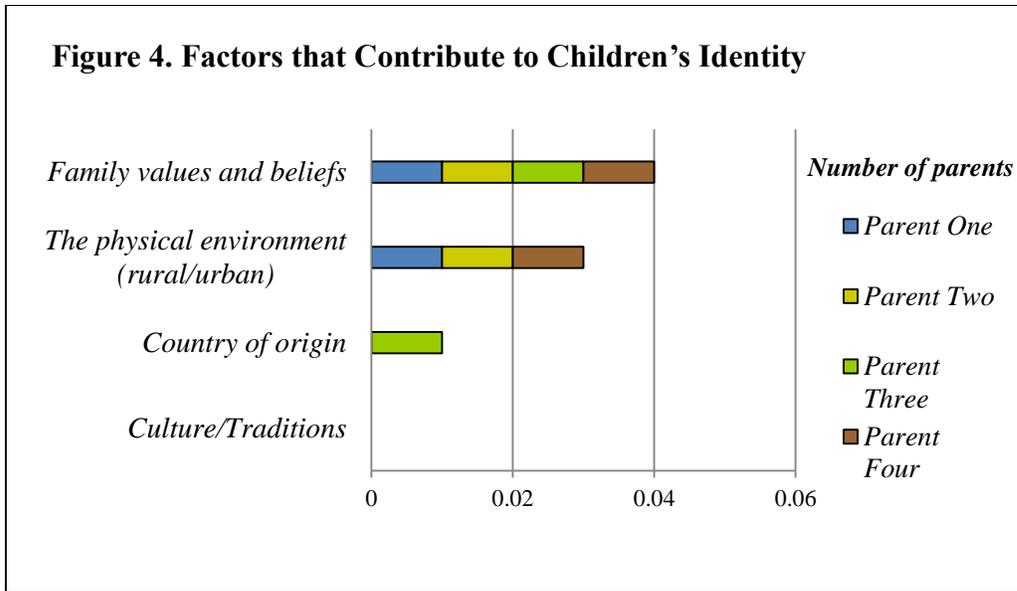


This pie chart, which captured the children's voices when I informally interviewed them, proved to be one of my most significant findings because I feel it contradicts the majority of our early childhood literature and challenges our pedagogies. The finding suggests that perhaps we are crediting the social environment with too much influence on a child's growing awareness of self and self-identity. While peers may assist children with an affirmation of identity (children did identify "a friend or friends" when asked specifically to do so), peers may not play as significant a role in this as we have come to expect.

This finding also helped to answer my research question as it identified children's need for solitude as a key component in developing their identity. It indicates that some children still prefer solitary play or parallel play even when they are older and can achieve cooperative play. "Solitary play has many benefits: some children need to be by themselves to explore their own thoughts and feelings; some need to get away from excess stimulation to focus; and some just like their own company" (Gonzalez-Mena, 2008, p. 102).

The finding has implications for our practice as we seem to put great importance on promoting children's engagement with others in parallel, associative and cooperative play without consulting our children or making enough time to observe how children are collating and interpreting what information they are gathering from their environments. As a result of this finding, we need to ensure that we are creating spaces within our environments that provide sanctuaries for solitude where children can think and engage in internal dialogue, so they can continue to build upon their own understanding of what it means to be an individual. The finding also supports the data shown in Figure 2 which would indicate that it is the teacher's role, rather than that of peers, that is more influential on children's identity.

The third noteworthy finding came from the multi-choice questionnaire given to the parents. The parents who participated in the study were predominantly white middle-class New Zealand/Europeans. For them, culture and traditions were not seen as having a significant impact on their children's identities (see Figure 4). I found this surprising as the literature I read supports strong cultural identifications related to the family construct when it comes to issues of faith, gender and ethnicity: "This first stage in developing an identity – the child's primary *habitus* – reflects aspects of the collective habitus of the family, a set of beliefs, expectations, attitudes and behaviour that have evolved in the course of the family's history and experience and from their social class and other cultural aspects (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, as cited in Brooker, 2006, p. 117). The question has to be asked whether these findings would have been different if I had been working in a multicultural centre with ethnic diversity and where English was often a second language, and where values and beliefs were intrinsically linked to culture and traditions. As Brooker (2006) noted in her studies on ethnicity, there were significant differences between English and Bangladeshi children's experiences of home and school that "were constructed from the complex interactions of gendered and social class beliefs within each family" (p. 119). Similarly, would a Māori language immersion centre produce these same findings? While these questions fall into the domains of sociology, the impact of these findings are relevant to the pedagogical environment and the developing identities of children and society's image of the child. With adults having a significant influence on children's identity then, it becomes critically important for pedagogues to reflect a cultural identity that is compatible with curriculum requirements, the needs of the child and their family, and that also reflects the wider views of society and how we identify ourselves collectively.



## Conclusion

Through the social cultural perspective of children's learning, my research captured the child's voice in identifying the need for solitary play. This was a significant finding as current theories of learning emphasise the importance of environments constructed for social engagement and interactions with others (Berk, 2010; Santrock, 2009). The kindergarten that was the site for this research uses the emergent centred curriculum and has a culture of fostering relationships between parents, educators and children, believing that such relationships have the greatest influence on developing the children's sense of self. My research findings, however, suggest that children prefer spending time in solitary play. Thus, teachers need to also factor in this preference for playing alone and observe how this time with self and the environment helps foster children's identity.

The strong voices of parents and teachers in my findings have implications for good practice regarding the role of the teacher in shaping children's identity. Teachers need to adopt the habit of talking with children, including asking them meaningful questions to hear how they see themselves in relationship to others, with themselves, and with the environment; such questions will aid the children to construct positive identities.

From my readings I observed that there is a lack of literature from New Zealand examining the role of the environment in shaping children's identities in the early childhood education context. Many of the settings described in the literature relate to other countries, cultures and socio-political or socio-economic environments that do not reflect the uniqueness of New Zealand society or New Zealand's early childhood education environments. Relatively speaking we are a young country and from cultural, social and historical perspectives, and in light of present day immigration, we are undergoing constant sociocultural changes which are impacting on how we see and identify ourselves. This provides unique challenges to both to the developing identity of the child, their role in society and the teacher's role in helping children from such diverse cultures develop their identities.

This research has also highlighted the need for educators to take on the role of researcher to uncover how teachers influence how children shape and construct their identities. The complex nature of children's identities requires many educators to, hopefully, emulate the overseas initiatives in early childhood research and contribute to a pool of knowledge that is specific to the New Zealand context. New (1999) echoes this thought when he emphasises that "there is a need for adults to struggle aloud and together ... knowing that their choices create as well as preclude opportunities for children's current learning and future lives" (as cited in French, 2007, p. 8). Just as children shift their focus, we need to be shifting ours.

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