Responding to the fears of early childhood: an investigation of perception and practice in emotion education

Reesa Sheryl Sorin

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RESPONDING TO THE FEARS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD-
AN INVESTIGATION OF PERCEPTION AND PRACTICE IN
EMOTION EDUCATION

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

From

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

By

Reesa Sheryl Malca Sorin

BA, Grad Dip Ed, BFA, MEd, MA (Hons)

Faculty of Education

2001
DECLARATION

I, Reesa S.M. Sorin, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Reesa S.M. Sorin

21 February 2001
And he went back to meet the fox.

"Goodbye," he said.

"Goodbye," said the fox. "And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."

"What is essential is invisible to the eye," the little prince repeated, so that he would be sure to remember.

This thesis is dedicated to Ben, for his patience, love and tolerance, and with the hope that some day he, too, will achieve his important goals.
Thank You

To Wilma Vialle, my supervisor, for her patience and help throughout this process and for discovering my learning style and encouraging it.

To my son, Ben, the inspiration for all my work, for giving up quality time so that mum could do her research, for listening and putting up with me during those very emotional times and for making me smile and showing me what feeling really means.

To my mother, Gertie Sorin and my sister, Shelley Sorin for encouraging me and supporting me, even from a distance, and for selflessly putting my research needs before my family commitments.

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To my dog, Sparky, who stayed by my side from early morning to late night as I gave up walks on the beach to work on this research.
Abstract

The focus of this study was to investigate basic emotions, in particular the emotion of fear, as they are reported to be experienced by preschool children and how fear is responded to by parents and caregivers. To accomplish this, it looked firstly at whether eight basic emotions are reported as present in the preschool child. It then focused on fear: which fears are reported as experienced by preschool children and how they are displayed. Parents were surveyed as to how they respond to their child's fears and all participants were asked to report how caregivers in the early childhood settings respond to children's fears. Participants were asked to comment on the effectiveness of caregivers' current practices in responding to fear, and to suggest further approaches that could be taken in responding to children's fears.

The study is qualitative in design, using a constructivist framework to examine fear and adults' responses to fear by collecting individual constructions from preschool children, their parents, their caregivers and the researcher. This was undertaken using a variety of tools, including: Parents' Surveys, Caregivers' Surveys and Focal Group Interviews; observations by the researcher; and a reflective journal kept by the researcher. Data were collected over a six-month period from four early childhood settings available to children aged three to five in the area: a long day care centre, an independent preschool; a preschool attached to a school; and a multifunctional Aboriginal children's Total participants included forty-five children aged between three and five years old, forty-six parents and twenty-one caregivers.
The eight basic emotions surveyed were reported as present in preschool children, however reports of fears varied greatly between parents, caregivers and the children themselves. Caregivers reported the least awareness of fears in children. This may be accounted for by the limited time and context that caregivers have with children. However, if caregivers' jobs are to prepare children for learning and for life, they need to be aware of all aspects of child development and of how they can help each child to reach her/his potential.

A variety of methods were reported by both parents and caregivers to respond to children's fears. However, not all of these methods proved effective; some even seemed to invalidate the emotion of fear in young children. For example, denying fear or modelling non-fearful behaviour may give children unrealistic messages about the emotion.

A discrepancy between parents' reports of their own responses to fear and of caregivers' responses was noted, even though many parents reported similarities in parental and caregivers' approaches. Parents reported that they responded to children's fears in both verbal and physical ways. Yet parents expected caregivers to respond to children's fears by talking to them; few mentioned physical responses such as giving the child a cuddle. This may be due to the current social context where child protection is focused on by the mass media.

While caregivers were often reported to be “extensions” of parents in their
responses to fear, some caregivers reported implementing teaching and planning strategies in addressing fear. Many participants reported that caregivers' responses to children's fears could be more effective, and some offered suggestions for further responding to children's fears.

Most participants seemed to view fear as “negative” and in need of eradication. The literature, however, suggests that it is important to understand all emotions and to be able to express them in ways that are both individually and socially acceptable. This means a shift in social/pedagogical thinking to a more “emotion-based” curriculum, supportive of emotion understanding and expression.
RESPONDING TO THE FEARS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD —
AN INVESTIGATION OF PERCEPTION AND PRACTICE IN
EMOTION EDUCATION

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