

TELEVIZION

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Television and the "Teletubbies":

A reflection from early childhood service providers in Australia

A pilot study has been undertaken to look at service providers' use of television within early childhood services and to identify rationales used to include this medium as a part of the teaching and learning context. The nature of television or video programmes shown in services has been reviewed as well as the popularity of the "Teletubbies" programmes said to be specifically designed for the younger audience.

Twenty five early childhood services operating in New South Wales, Australia from both the Sydney metropolitan area and geographically adjoining rural areas were involved in the study.

Background

For the past two decades there have been broad debates about children's television viewing behaviours. Various researchers have considered different aspects related to children's viewing of television, questioning whether or not it is a drug (Winn, 1985), researching children's perceptions of reality (Hawkins, 1977; Howard, 1996) through to research questioning if children can distinguish between reality and the images presented to them (Flavell, Flavell, Green & Korfmacher, 1990) to the impact of television on consumer purchasing practices (Fox, 1996; Gunter & McAleer, 1997; Kline, 1993) .

A longitudinal study focusing on infants and television was commissioned by the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA). The study undertaken between 1988 and 1994 tracked the exposure of young children from age four months to 30 months in an attempt to add to the body of knowledge currently held in Australia and internationally (ABA, 1998). Findings of this study have provided a background and conceptual basis identifying criteria for questions asked in this project.

The study

Interviews were conducted on the premises of the child care services during service operation hours. Each interview took on average 15 to 20 minutes to complete depending on the amount of detailed information interviewees provided in their responses.

Initially service providers were asked if television or video programmes were offered to the children attending their services.

As decisions concerning the use of television programmes or videos are often made by the authorised service provider, the criteria used to determine which programmes or videos are able to be viewed by children was a key component of the study. Reasons for providing television or video opportunities were solicited as were reasons for not providing such experiences. As well participants were asked to identify their own views about television or video as a medium of the 20th century and extend their views by identifying both positive and negative attributes.

Participants were asked if parents sought their advice about television viewing for their children and were then asked to explain the nature of advice they would give to parents if asked. They were then asked to report on children's apparent home television viewing preferences. Reports were based on children's self reports and dialogues.

As the television programme "Teletubbies" has received recent media attention, service providers were asked if any "Teletubby" television shows or videos were included in the range of television or video programmes offered to the children attending their services and if services had any "Teletubby" resources used by children or if children attending the service owned "Teletubby" merchandise and brought this to the service. Gender preference about viewing "Teletubbies" was questioned as well as a question about identified changes in children's interests to the programme.

Participants were also asked to comment on the content of the "Teletubbies" programme as a teaching tool for early childhood services.

In concluding the interviews the employment position of the interviewee was asked, their qualifications and the number of years or experience each person brought to their service.

Data analysis and findings

Of the 25 staff interviewed (representing 25 services) 22 services provided care and education for up to 12 hours per day while only three services were classified as preschool catering only for children aged 3 to 5 years on a short day or sessional basis (up to six hours a day).

Initially service providers were asked if television or video programmes were offered to the children attending their services. Nine services (36%) said they provided children with access to television or videos, a further nine services (36%) very occasionally provided children with limited access and the remaining seven services (28%) did not provide children with any access to television or video shows.

Reasons for not providing such opportunities were solicited as were reasons for providing such experiences. Reasons for not providing opportunities included, from 2 services (9.5%) a lack of facilities to be able to watch television or show videos, 2 services (9.5%) perceived television or video viewing as an inappropriate experience for children in a formal care and education context, 3 services (14.3%) commented that children have access to too much television whilst in the home environment.

Reasons for providing access to television and videos was given by 7 services (33.3%) so as to provide children with a different form of education and stimulation, while 2 services (9.5%)

said they used television to view particular educational programmes. For those services which indicated that they only allowed children access to television on rare occasions the reason was due to extenuating circumstances which in most instances were during prolonged inclement weather.

Eighteen services responded to identification of criteria for selecting and screening programmes for children, the 7 services who did not provide television or video viewing did not respond to this question. Comments explaining criteria used to determine which programmes were able to be screened were categorised into the following areas: educational content, music and movement, classified as appropriate for preschool children and service policy.

Five services (27.8%) indicated educational content, 4 services (22.2%) identified individual service policies which had specific detailed criteria and circumstances under which television or videos could be screened for children. 4 services commented that programmes must meet the Australian Broadcasting Authority criteria (CTS 2) P programme for preschool children (Australian Broadcasting Authority, 1995), 3 services (14.3%) said to broaden children's experiences, and finally 2 services (11.1%) said to provide and encourage music and movement activities

The types of programmes screened for children when attending services were identified as being specific programmes related to the content being taught or listed as educational type programmes focusing on concepts. Where children's interest programmes were identified they were scored under titles identified by the interviewees.

Programmes screened which related specifically to the early childhood service programme were identified 13 times. Examples of such programmes were "Kids and Traffic" as well as Maths 'shape' videos and specific nature videos about animals or insects. The category 'educational concepts' encompassed programmes designed to promote children's understanding and experiences. This category was also nominated 13 times by service providers. Specifically named videos screened for children were The Wiggles (9 nominations) identified as an interactive video encouraging movement, dance and singing. This description also corresponds to the ABA (1998) description of interactions with television programmes. Disney videos (5 nominations) and "Teletubbies" (2 nominations) were also identified as having been screened with the reasons for showing these types of videos said to be children's interests. One service provider said they had screened "Teletubbies" once only and would not screen it again due to children's demonstrated lack of interest in the content and inappropriate language model provided by the characters.

Services were asked if parents sought their advice about children's home television viewing. Two service staff said that parents did ask their opinion, 10 said that parents did not ask, while 13 services said, very occasionally, parents would seek advice from staff.

When asked to explain the nature of advice they gave or would give to parents about children's television viewing at home, three participants did not respond to the question (13.6%). Three service staff members (13.6%) said they would actively discourage parents from turning the television on at all, saying that children need to spend more time interacting and talking with others. A further 5 staff members (22.7%) said their advice would be to discourage children's television viewing.

However, a greater number of respondents were more positive about television as a tool for learning with 11 respondents (50%) saying they would encourage parents to provide children

with access to television under specific circumstances. These circumstances were identified as, adults actively monitor children's viewing and preferably sat with the child and shared the viewing of programmes. This joint viewing was to enable parents to be able to discuss ideas and encourage further conversations as well as turn off the television when the content became inappropriate for the child.

Service providers were asked to identify their own views about television and videos as media for teaching and learning. They were invited to extend their comments further by including what they perceived to be both positive and negative attributes.

The three service providers who said they would actively advise parents against providing children with access to television (actively discourage), predictably did not respond to the question related to the most relevant attribute of the medium of television. The remaining comments could all be coded into two categories related to the relevance of information and secondly the visual attributes of the medium. Twenty two (100%) of respondents answered the most relevant attribute was that of information while 13 also added the visual aspect of television as being a relevant attribute. This was rationalised further as participants explained how television allows the viewer to 'see' and 'learn' about things they would not normally encounter in their everyday lives.

Positive aspects of television were coded into the following categories; informative, interactive, relaxing and other. Informative was the most highly identified positive aspect of the medium of television with 21 recorded responses and three omitted. Next was the relaxing qualities of television with 10 responses and third, the interactive nature of television or video which was described as 'being able to be there' this category had 7 responses. The final category, 'other', had 15 responses which included as a positive attribute the ability to "turn it OFF" other comments identified television viewing as entertaining or fun and could be used to assist the development of children's concentration.

Negative aspects were very well defined and were coded into three categories, unrestrained amounts of television viewing or more commonly identified as 'watching too much television' (19 responses), viewing of inappropriate programmes (17 responses) and inappropriate use of television by adults, identified as using television and videos as a baby sitter (7 responses). Service providers when asked to report on children's apparent home television viewing preferences, identified programmes such as Play school (mentioned 8 times), The Wiggles (9 times) Power Rangers (16 times) "Teletubbies" (15 times), High 5 (6 times). Programmes identified as being outside the CS2 P rating and addressing an adult audience when identified by the interviewee were classified for this report as 'adult ' shows. Seven services commented that children watched and talked about adult programmes whilst attending centres.

About "Teletubbies"

As the television programme "Teletubbies" has received recent media attention, mainly negative (Eichler, 1999; Linn & Poussaint, 1999) and it appears many children watch the programme, service providers were asked if any "Teletubby" television shows or videos were included in the range of television or video programmes offered to the children attending their services. As well services were asked if they had any "Teletubby" resources within their centres which are used as components of the programmes presented. Twenty one services did not have any "Teletubby" resources and 4 services did indicate a limited number of resources, these included a video and memory game at one centre, a floor puzzle at another centre, a poster at yet another centre and in the fourth service they had fabric covering a

child's lounge in an infant play room with "Teletubby" characters on it.

Twenty three services said children attending their centres had numerous and various articles of ""Teletubby"" merchandise. The most frequent resource appeared to be the dolls of varying sizes, used as comfort toys during rest or sleep time, then back packs and bags, other identified articles included key rings, hair ornaments, underclothing and socks. Only two service providers said that they were unaware of children having any "Teletubby" merchandise.

"Teletubbies" appeared popular with both girls and boys although according to respondents more girls than boys were interested in the characters. Unsolicited comments which gave reasons given for this were identified as the nature of the merchandise being sold. It was said to be more appealing to girls and girls tended to continue to play with the "Teletubby" dolls for a longer period of time. This also corresponded to the point made by 14 respondents that children's interest waned as children became older and that it was only older girls who still brought "Teletubby" comfort toys and wore "Teletubby" clothing or personal adornments to child care.

Participants were also asked to comment on the content of the "Teletubbies" programme as a teaching tool for early childhood services. Responses were in the main very negative and minimal positive or less than negative comments. There were 16 negative comments, detailing perceived deleterious influences of the programme on children's development, 5 participants said they did not know the programme and could not comment, 2 refrained from commenting and only 2 respondents were positive about the show.

Reasons for the negative comments focused mainly on the language model presented by the characters. Participants in this study identified the "Teletubby" speech as 'poor' and as being 'an inappropriate language model' for young children during their formative language learning years. Inappropriate behaviours were also cited as negative aspects of the programme. The next most criticised aspect of the programme was identified as a lack of stimulation. Thirteen comments detailed the show as slow and pedestrian in nature. Of the two positive comments, one commented on the 'fun' aspect of the show and the cuteness of the characters while the second comment was about the bright colours, this was the extent of positive comments.

Staff experience and qualifications were predominately early childhood with twenty one of the individuals interviewed employed in the position of authorised supervisor, a position of legal responsibility (in New South Wales, Australia) for the daily operation including educational content of the programme provided at each centre. A further two staff members were teachers and three staff members were trained teacher's aids. All staff interviewed had had formal training from either a university, teacher training college or technical training institution. 24 of the 25 participants had studied early childhood development at either a tertiary level (teaching qualifications) or held post secondary training qualifications from technical training institutions. Only one person held other qualifications and she held a tertiary 4 year degree for teaching children aged 5 to 12 years.

The majority of participants had graduated from their relevant course between 2 and 5 years (11 in total), nine had been employed in the early childhood field for a period of 6 to 10 years, only one staff had been teaching between 11 and 15 years and another staff member had been working for 20 years the remaining three participants have worked in excess of 22 years within the profession.

Conclusion

In this preliminary study it appears that many service providers have very definite opinions about television and video programmes both as used in the home and as a tool for children's learning.

Service providers negative attitudes towards television and video shows are well acknowledged in the literature. Children watching too much television was a point raised throughout the interviews. The amount of exposure to television young children experienced was the basis for the ABA research on 'Infants and television' (1998). Results of the study found infants from 4 months of age were exposed to an average of 44 minutes of television each day. By 12 months this had increased to just over one hour per day and by two and a half years the average television exposure time was one hour 24 minutes a day (ABA, 1998).

Exposure times were also reviewed and this is important given the early childhood profession's concern with children watching inappropriate or 'adult' television programmes. The ABA (1998) research indicated that there were two peak viewing periods. The first in the morning 6:00 am to 9:00 am then the evening 6:00 pm to 9:00 pm with children exposed to more television viewing during the evening period. This is important as the ABA Children's Television Standards (ABA, 1995) identify the period during which preschool children's programmes are screened as being between the hours of 8:30 am and 4:30 pm, yet under school aged children are watching outside of these hours and are subsequently exposed to television programmes produced for a more mature audience.

Research on the use of television as a babysitter has been under review for the past 40 years, with initial studies conducted in the 1950s (Gunter and McAleer, 1997). Gunter and McAleer (1997) point out that television is deliberately used by many families to occupy children at times when parents are busy or when parents are not inclined to interact with their children.

Service providers' positive views were carefully expressed or couched in terms of being developmentally relevant and significant to children's education. They commented on specified programmes which they provided for children to supported and promote children's learning and interest in the broader world. Understanding and the positive use of television as an educational tool is also well documented in the literature as quality children's television can enhance children's development by providing gender and ethnic role models, positive role models of co-operation and collaboration. As well social responsibility and moral thinking can be reinforced through content which provides ethical action, and social problem solving (Colanero, 1995).

The "Teletubbies" appear to meet many of the attributes of preschool programmes as identified by the ABA (1998) having music, voices of women and children, distinctive voices and sounds, laughter, applause and sound effects as well as the use of short segment stories. However, this particular programme was not well received nor positively regarded by the early childhood professionals in this study. Whilst videos and television programmes have been used by some services to augment their programmes and provide an avenue for children's interests the number of services providing television or videos on this basis is quite limited.

Although the "Teletubbies" are said to be a landmark in preschool programming (ABC Video, 1997) this view does not appear to be embraced or heralded by early childhood professionals in this preliminary study. Conversely many service providers do view the use of carefully selected television programmes and videos as both an important and significant component of today's education for young children. It would appear that although these service providers are aware that quality children's television can enhance children's

development by providing positive role models as well as other relevant information, they prefer to maintain the human interactive context of socially mediated learning as the first and most important component of teaching young children (Berk & Winsler, 1995).

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