

## Digital storytelling: Capturing children's participation in preschool activities

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Children should be active participants in the environments in which they engage. However in the prior to school setting, it is not necessarily clear to educators how children understand their role and place within that community. Lave and Wenger's (2005) situated learning theory provides a useful frame to consider this developing sense of membership and the connections children make between home and their prior to school centre. In the spirit of belonging, being and becoming (COAG, 2009), a cohort of 27 children (aged 4-5 years) transitioning to the first year of formal schooling were invited to create a digital story representing their active participation in their centre. Analysis of the ways the children expressed this sense of belonging revealed sound understandings about what it is to be part of the community, the responsibilities this entails and the implications for early years educators.

### Introduction

In Australian prior to school settings, the *Early Years Learning Framework* (COAG, 2009) has formalised the early childhood education reform agenda to achieve consistent and high quality education for children in these foundation years. Underpinning the framework is the vision that young children are active participants in their own learning and that their lives are characterised by belonging, being and becoming (COAG, 2009; Theobald, Danby & Ailwood, 2011). That is, that a child feels that they belong to their family, their culture and their communities. Further, that they are allowed simply to participate in these communities and be children in the present. And finally, that the development of these valuable early relationships and interactions equip them to continue along the path of becoming fully active and participating members of settings beyond their immediate domains (COAG, 2009). The being, belonging and becoming frame resonates with Lave and Wenger's (2005) theory of situated learning. That is, children in prior to school settings begin as peripheral participants as they learn about what it means to be there. Their experience over time leads to a sense of belonging as their understanding of the unique social practices affords full participation within that community. Further, the focus on becoming allows them to engage as peripheral participants of future communities as they imagine themselves in a range of settings such as primary school and the workforce.

Central to developing children's perceptions of being, belonging and becoming is their ability to engage with established events and practices within prior to school educational settings (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Heath, 1983; Lave & Wenger, 2005). That is, they must broaden their existing understanding about the ways they meet the demands and expectations for interactions and relationships established within their home and cultural domains. And further, new understandings must be developed for the more formalised

prior to school educational setting (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). However, it is well established in the literature that this adaptation is not straightforward for all children.

Heath's (1983) foundational ethnographic research observed that a child's success making the transition from home to education systems relies on the ways their home literacies are valued by that system. For some, Heath (1983) observed, the move is easy. Barton and Hamilton (2000) concurred, explaining that a close match between the domains of home and school allows "leakages and movement between them" because of the similarities in cultures, in knowledge, and in the expectations for engagement (p. 11). For other children, however, their knowledge, understandings and cultural practices are either not valued or not even considered within the setting, potentially creating confusion about the ways they can belong. These findings are supported more recently in the work of Compton-Lily (2006), McNaughton (2001) and Comber and colleagues (2001; 2004; 2013). Further, Heath (1983) observed that the practices some children bring, while perhaps well aligned with those of the educational setting, were not previously bound in their homes by school related constraints such as time, sequence, location (such as indoors/outdoors) and teacher preference/direction, potentially problematising success in this setting. Greater similarities between the domains affords early successful engagement in the new setting, but for those where the difference is great, the devaluing of existing practices can challenge one's very identity and sense of belonging (Baynham, 1995; Street, 1995; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Compton-Lily, 2006; Rogers & Elias, 2012). An early understanding about "the way we do things around here" (Schuck, et al., 2012, p. 39) is clearly key to supporting children's identity development and ability to participate within not only the communities of prior to school settings, but also in educational domains more generally.

Indeed, Danby and Farrell (2004) argued that children are "competent interpreters of their everyday worlds" (p. 35), that they not only understand the "rules" for successful engagement through play within a community, but they are also capable of creating their own. That is, they understand the "ways to get things done" (Bruner, 1983, p. 45). This argument is supported by Lave and Wenger's (2005) legitimate peripheral participation theory as children first enter the setting and become full participants as they develop knowledge and competence. It is this understanding of the demands and expectations within the community that appears to allow children not only to participate, but to make powerful contributions (Danby, 2009). But how do children understand their prior to school community? How do they talk about themselves as members of it? And how can this knowledge be captured? These questions underpinned the design of this research project.

Insight into the ways children understand themselves as members of their prior to school setting can provide evidence from which educators could monitor learning and design experiences that afford genuine contributions both within the immediate community and beyond (Brooker, 2005; Nimmo, 2008; Prout, 2002; Theobald, Danby & Ailwood, 2011; Yelland & Kilderry, 2005). It is through the connections children have, both physical and interpersonally, that they construct their understanding of language (Falchi, Axelrod & Genishi, 2014). One way to gain such insights into the ways children experience their

prior to school setting is by supporting them to create digital stories and to examine these stories as reflections of their membership in that community.

Digital storytelling can be interpreted in different ways, depending on the context. It most commonly refers to the creation of a multimodal, digital text that combines photos and voice (and sometimes moving images, sound effects, music or text) using computer video-editing software (ACMI, 2005; Meadows, 2003). Digital stories differ from other broadcast media, in that they utilise multiple modes of meaning to create works that are usually only between two and four minutes long (ACMI, 2005; Meadows, 2003). The short narratives created are most often highly personal; they act as avenues for self-expression, allowing people to represent their thoughts, memories, opinions or ideas (Hartley, 2008; Meadows, 2003).

Artefacts such as digital stories are powerful representations of children's lives within communities (Pahl & Rowsell, 2011) and provide example of creative (yet relatively simple) uses of technology (Flewitt, Messer & Kucirkova, 2014). Digital recordings of regular events within an environment can help us understand "children's meaning making processes" (Haggerty, 2011, p. 385). We take the understanding that creating an artefact provides children the opportunity to offer "valuable insights and perspectives on ... their lives" (Prout, 2002, p. 75) as they capture their current understanding and point to opportunities for the development of new ones. Dockett and Perry (2007) argued that children "know a lot about themselves, how they learn, and how they respond in certain situations... and are eager to be involved in meaningful communication" (p. 14). Digital stories can provide a space for all perspectives to be captured and shared.

Digital stories are a powerful means of self-expression. They allow their creators not only to express themselves but also their understanding of the world. Opportunities for children to use technology for text creation purposes empower them as learners (Verenikina & Kervin, 2011; Kervin, 2016). Di Blas, Paolini and Sabiescu (2012) contended that the benefits of digital storytelling include improved communication abilities and children's ability to organise and structure content. Specifically, digital stories provide opportunities for children to be creators of text, to be authors, to share what they have to say about their learning, their interests and the ways they engage within their communities (Mantei & Kervin, 2011).

This paper reports on data collected in our *This Is Me!* (TIM) project (Mantei & Kervin, 2010). While we have previously presented case studies of individual children (Kervin & Mantei, 2011) and discussed digital storytelling as a methodology (Kervin & Mantei, 2015), this paper looks across data collected in one site as we examine the children's digital stories to understand the insights children offer into the way they participate in their preschool environment.

## **Approach and methodology**

This project stems from the premise that the opportunity to create digital stories provides children with a process that enables them to operate within their own context as they visually capture activities of importance and orally annotate these to share their own experiences, while presenting these in an order of relevance to the individual.

A team of three researchers visited a community based preschool centre to work with children making the transition to Kindergarten (the first year of formal schooling in New South Wales). The researchers had conducted other studies at this site and were known to the educators and children. After receiving ethical permission from our university and the centre management, informed consent for this project was obtained from the centre director, the centre staff and each parent/guardian for children starting Kindergarten the following year. The research team was located within the centre during its operating hours for one week during the last week of the month of November. The centre was open on weekdays from 7 am to 6 pm, and the research team was present from 8:30 am to 2 pm. During this time 27 children (15 boys and 12 girls) aged from 4-5 years created digital stories. We acknowledge that these participants may not be representative of the entire population of children who are transitioning into their first year of formal school. It is our intention to see our participants and this research design as a pilot as we consider how children engage with digital storytelling.

The research team adapted Meadows' (2003, 2011) digital story structure so that children could engage with the creation process. Meadows' work, mostly with adults in the United Kingdom, invited the creation of digital stories using 10 photographs in a selected sequence and a 250 word script, which was narrated over the photographs into a cohesive account of whatever topic the adult had chosen. In the TIM project, the children were invited to create a digital story in response to the question, "What do you like to do in your centre?" The children directed, reviewed and sequenced 10 photographs in response to the focus question. However, rather than attempting to draft and edit a 250 word script, these very young children were instead invited to annotate each photograph directly into the story.

In the setting, each child was invited to participate in the process, consent was provided for all children to be included and all children engaged readily with the experience. The preschool educators, parents and future Kindergarten teacher were identified to the children as the audience for their stories. An educator at the centre, with whom the children were very familiar, created an initial digital story. This story was deconstructed with each child as they started to work with the researchers. The educator's digital story was an important artefact in the process, not only as a demonstration of the product they were to create, but more importantly it promoted digital storytelling as an activity that a member of their community valued and wanted to share.

Each child created an individual digital story with a researcher as they:

- Photographed 10 events and/or activities they identified they enjoyed at the centre.
- Individually talked with a researcher about each photograph, explaining why they took it, what happens in that location and any special memories. This conversation was recorded.
- Worked with the researchers to edit the images and audio into a multimedia presentation.

This process has been elaborated elsewhere (Kervin & Mantei, 2015). It is interesting to note though that while each child was invited to take their own photographs, the children mostly wanted to stage a photograph with themselves in it, which was then captured by a researcher. A researcher worked with each child to order the photographs for the digital story and assisted them with using software to record their annotation, attach the recording to an image and export it as a *QuickTime* movie. Each digital story was shared with the children and centre staff and families. Data gathered comprised field notes recording the process of creation, audio recordings of conversations and the digital stories as a finished product and its parts (that is, 10 images and transcripts of the annotations recorded). For the purposes of our paper, we refer to the children using pseudonyms.

Figure 1 provides an example from one child's digital story. It is the final child-selected image with accompanying annotation. It provides an example of a posed image and its accompanying annotation, which describes the play that occurs at the activity with connection to life experience.



Hi. I like to drive the bus. And I, and I will, um/ I like to, um/ sometimes, when, when Daddy's trying to park, I drive, um, and I really park!

Figure 1: Image 3 of Zara's story

## Analysis

Each of the 27 digital stories comprised 10 images and an average of 199 words for analysis. While it was the researchers' initial intention for the children to capture their own photographs, overwhelmingly they expressed a strong preference for a researcher to take the photograph so they (the child) could be featured in the image. As such, the location of the image was noted, but not analysed in depth. Instead, the researchers turned their attention to the transcripts accompanying the images. This enabled the researchers to examine the ways the children expressed their engagement within their setting in response to a selected image. The data were analysed within a situated learning frame (Lave & Wenger, 2005) as the children articulated their "ways of belonging" (p. 35) in this community. In particular, we were interested in how these children became involved in

their community, their understanding of the practices within this setting, the activities they identified and how they described their engagement with these.

Analysis of the transcripts revealed categories that provided insight into the ways the child participants understood their place in the prior to school community. That is, their stories revealed their understanding of the opportunities for participation available to them and the responsibility that comes with those opportunities. Transcriptions were kept in their entirety as all words, utterances and pauses were recorded.

Of the 27 stories, the following categories were identified:

- 13 of 27 stories featured indoor activities. These included: dress ups, block building, jigsaw puzzles, reading and writing.
- 21 of 27 stories featured outdoor activities. Over half of these (12 of 21) featured interactions with the soccer ball in the playground. Other outdoor activities included riding bikes, the frog pond and various playground adventure equipment.
- 15 of 27 stories made reference to the 'rules' or explicit behaviours expected for successful participation in the activities described.

It is the children's sharing of advice or wisdom about the appropriate ways to participate within this prior to school setting that is the focus of this paper. The 'ways to participate' are broadly categorised in two groups: those within the centre and those and beyond.

- Within the centre, analysis of the transcripts revealed a range of strategies for participation: choice, physical participation, specific skills, social considerations, and safety.
- Beyond the centre, transcript analysis revealed the place of technology in each setting, family pastimes, and family practices.

Findings from the data in each category are now discussed.

### **Practices within the centre**

#### *Choice*

The children demonstrated their freedom of movement within the centre environment. This freedom was extended to specific activities but also their movement across the internal and external spaces in the centre.

The children were invited to participate in the digital story experience, in line with the centre philosophy for all activities available to the children. At the beginning of the digital story process, a head-shot of each child was taken as the introduction to their story. Jack (scene 1) stated, "Hi, my name is Jack. This is me, having a photo. So, if you wanna have a photo/if you're doing this, you can...do it if you want to!" This example from Jack demonstrates the choice and control felt over interactions in the environment.

Some children reached beyond the resources available in the centre on the day they created their digital stories. For example Jaida (scene 5) enthused, “I love playing with the hairdressers. And, um/and I/and they’re packed away. And I love playing with it, but it’s packed away.” Similarly Jack (scene 2) explained, “... I’m standing on the bike trikes and w/when, um/there’s no bikes out, but, they are in the shed for/and they’re gonna come out in a hour.” Lucy (scene 10), while making connections to a piece of equipment she also had at home, stated, “... I got a trampoline at home and there’s a trampoline at school but sometimes they bring it out and sometimes they don’t [sigh].”

#### *Awareness of physical participation strategies*

Many of the children described exactly how they interacted with an activity giving insight into specific physical participation strategies. When annotating an image of himself in a tunnel, Liam (scene 4) explained, “You can climb over the tunnel, through it/go through the tunnel. You can go across the tunnel with no hands!” He demonstrated a sense of awareness of action and also identified the opportunity to explore new possibilities available from the activity. Adam (scene 8) did the same, while not necessarily demonstrating the same levels of language proficiency, “... I’m do/I’m rolling upside down in this pipe thingy. Stop!” (see Figure 2). While he also had a sense of the movement, he didn’t necessarily have the same repertoire of movement or possibility. However, he did demonstrate a definite sense of task completion. The need for completion of the activity within his annotations was repeated. In another annotation (scene 7) he stated, “This is me balancing across the handrails of a bridge. Stop!”



Figure 2: Adam, Scene 8

#### *Specific skills associated with practices*

Specific skills associated with activities were identified. For example, Will (scene 5) observed, “I like chalkboards, I like to write my name, and do/draw everything, and I can write everything/and also can draw and, and colour in and do everything”. In this example, while writing tools were available, there were no formal writing lessons provided for the children. However as Will demonstrates there was an awareness of writing as an important activity available within the centre.

*Social nature of participation*

The children appeared to have a strong sense of the importance of friendship. Will (scene 2) identified that sometimes he wanted to "...go away and find a friend", Jai (scene 1) said, "...I like being friends with people". Some were able to identify friendship strategies to support this process. For example, Lucy (scene 3) emphasised the need to "...share with my friends". Conor (scene 4) talked about "I can pick people up" when riding the "taxi" bike. Lucy declared "...I make friends ..." (see Figure 3) and Jack (scene 7) explained "...if you wanna play, you can...um, you can play with me, if you want to." Jaida described, "I love playing with my friends on there, but some people do go on there. But it/it's OK if they go on. But it's fine if they go on!" (scene 9).



Figure 3: Conor on the 'taxi' bike, Scene 4

Participating in a range of activities with friends was a prominent feature in many annotations. Conor (scene 4) explained, "I like going on the taxi bike, cos I can pick people up..." and Jaida (scene 8) shared, "I love doing stuff on the slide. And people go down at the same time. And I love playing with my friends on there. And they push me down. But it/it/I love doing that." For some children, having someone to play with at the activity was more important than the activity itself. Will (scene 2) said, "...I like block corner, when I have a friend. And...when I'm alone, I don't like it. So I just wanna go away and find a friend." For other children, having friends was important, but so too was the flexibility of movement within the prior-to-school environment. Lucy (scene 3) explains "...well, I can play on the bikes. And sometimes I can share with my friends. And sometimes some of my friends get off."

While the majority of the images captured one child engaging with an area or activity within the centre environment, some children did reveal their understanding that this was bigger than them alone. For example Lucy (scene 6) annotated an image of herself standing beside the creek, "Um we like to go and dip our feet in the water when it's hot and when it's cold we don't and that's all" (see Figure 4). The notion of company when in the setting, expressed as "we" was captured across a number of the transcripts.





Figure 4: Lucy at the creek, Scene 6

Two children made reference to gender as they annotated images. Lili (scene 9) talked about an image of her at the hairdressing station in the inside environment. She spoke about her interactions with peers during her time here and described “Umn, well some/sometimes my friends come over and play with me, and sometimes the boys be the/and I be the girls, and sometimes the boy bes the boy. And sometimes I can play with Jaida and Saffron.” Lucy appears to have ideas of what it means to be a boy and a girl and while she identified that boys visited the area, she was specific with the female friends she played with. Felicity (scene 4) annotated an image where she is using an older laptop computer in the undercover veranda area external to the classroom. She explained the computer was “... just the pretend one, but someone boys pulled all the keys off it, because/I don’t know why they did it, but they just did it for fun.”

Some children spoke of specific activities with a real sense of awareness of what was happening around them. For example, Felicity (scene 8) observed “... This is me on the slide. And there’s a little boy down the bottom, and he’s from the early learning room. And I’m sliding down because, um, I wanted just to side down and, um, have some fun!”. This centre environment included children from 6 weeks of age to the cohort included in this research. The awareness the older children showed towards the younger children was evident also in their movement around the outdoor spaces (which were shared by all children).

#### *Rules about safety and procedures*

Some children demonstrated awareness of specific rules that accompanied activities within the centre. Some were associated with the actual equipment as Jack (scene 5) explained, “If you want to dig, you have to take/leave the truck in the dirt pit, so you don’t even for/get to take it away. So ... if you wanna/you can’t take it away.” Other children identified rules that were peer focused. For example, Jaryd (scene 4) describes sign-writing that follows building and the expected peer behaviours during this process: “I like playing with the blocks and I put my sign up. And they knocked it down/and then, um...I was/and then they didn’t know I putted a ‘no touching’ sign on.” Jack (scene 6) annotated an image of himself standing next to a block tower saying “... I’m standing next to the blocks, while Stefan and Adam were building. But, I’m sorry Adam and Stefan.” There

appeared awareness of the peer-negotiated rules surrounding building activities and the expected practices that followed the creation of a sign.

Five children described specific safety issues as they discussed their images. Zara described an incident involving one of the educators (Matt) with the pet yabbie in the classroom: “Matt fed the yabbie and he was trying to, like, he was on this, and he was trying to [nip] his finger. There’s some rules about the yabbie. And you’re not allowed to bang on [their] tank...because, because the yabbie might climb out the tank, and then get out, and then nip ya!” In this example Zara talks about an incident and the specific ‘rules’ she has learned.

Some children appeared aware of consequences that could arise from their actions. For example, Lucy spoke about an activity that she enjoyed doing and the safety implications of this: “... I like hammering and making sure that I don’t um hurt my fingers ...”

The children identified specific locations in the playground and the associated rules and behaviours. When talking about the frog pond (scene 4) Jack said, “...if you want to look at the frog pond, be very careful, so you don’t even frighten...frogs. But there gonna/there’s even lily pads in there, so you don’t even be mean to the frogs!” (see Figure 5). When talking about the creek that runs through the top section of the playground Jack said “... you have to leave the creek alone, so you don’t splash your friends. So..if you want to play, be very careful.” (scene 6) Layla also identified safety considerations for another part of the playground that contained some large rocks. She said, “... I like sitting on the rocks. If you stand on them, it’s not very good. All the teachers say, if you stand on them, you will fall off.” Jack demonstrated that while he knew the possible dangers, he was still prepared to take some risks. On his fifth image he shared, “I was climbing up the tree, whi/while the teacher wasn’t looking”.



Figure 5: Jack taking care near the frogs, Scene 4

## Connections to practices beyond the centre

### *Technology*

In many cases the described activities had strong connections between similar experiences in the home and community. Six children captured themselves playing on the computers (a desktop that was functioning and a lap top that no longer worked). Two children identified associated rules and practices for this equipment. For example Will (scene 9) described "... I like playing stuff, cos I like/I like computers cos you can do lots of things/games, and you can put on videos/everything." While there were some games available on the desktop computer, there weren't any videos, suggesting Will was aware of the potential of the activity beyond the preschool environment.

### *Family pastimes*

Some children made connections between the centre and home activities. For example, Jack captured an image of himself making paper aeroplanes and later recorded, "This is me when I was making aeroplanes. So, if you want to make aeroplanes, follow the instructions." (scene 9). During interactions as this image was captured he talked enthusiastically about how he and his father liked to make paper aeroplanes and how he'd been given a book with a range of patterns that could be followed (the 'instructions').

### *Family practices*

Two children connected with family activities through their interactions with centre activities. Through their annotations they identified the associated practices attached to these. Zara's annotation of her ninth image described how she was cooking in the photograph and explained "... sometimes my mum lets me help her make doughnut mans." Lucy used images 4 (her completing a drawing) and 9 (sitting with a group of her peers) to talk about activities that had happened in her family. She used image 4 to talk about how, "My daddy um cut the trees down and there's poison on the trees and I had to...and now they both have poison on them." Image 9 captured the story of a family holiday and the rules associated with some of the activities: "Um ... I went on a holiday to Currumbin and we watched the dolphins do backflips and we saw sharks and stingrays and I getted to pat the stingrays...but not their tails." (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Lucy, Scene 9

A further point of interest in this scene is the connection the child has made to home family practices whilst in the setting of storytelling.

## **Discussion**

In this research, the children were invited to create a digital story to represent the ways they engage in their prior to school setting. The findings support Danby and Farrell's (2004) observation that young children are indeed competent in interpreting and understanding their settings. The children in our research demonstrated clear understandings about the boundaries, expectations and ways of being in their community. Through their extended experience within the setting they had come to know the 'rules' of participation (Lave & Wenger, 2005) in terms of maintaining their personal safety, in respecting the safety and rights of others and their environment. Examples of this include ensuring physical safety by avoiding the yabbies' nip, considering the wellbeing of peers by refraining from splashing them, and respecting the immediate environment by moving carefully near the frogs. As active participants in their community (Theobald, Danby & Ailwood, 2011) the children appeared empowered to make choices about their own activity and to consider the ways their choices impacted their environment, peers and others.

The opportunity to create digital stories made space for children to share what they know about themselves, how they learn and how they perceive themselves within a community (Dockett & Perry, 2007). The process of constructing digital stories provided the children with opportunity to capture images of their choice, annotate them with information important to them and hold their viewers' attention for a sustained time. While the stories were digital in nature, they were not resource heavy with respect to technology. The stories were created with one device that took photos and enabled these to be sequenced and orally annotated. The children were observed in this research to be confident in the selection and annotation of the images. An understanding of the purpose of the task was evident as they designed their story to inform others about their centre. Further, a sense of their audience was clear as they explained not only what an activity was, but also made recommendations about some ways to be successful in the task.

Digital stories offer opportunities for educators to make powerful pedagogical insights into children's learning. The child-selected images and associated annotations can reveal something of the way a child views him or herself as a member of a setting and of the events, practices and artefacts s/he holds as important for this membership. The selected activities can demonstrate preferred activities, for example, indoor/outdoor tasks, print based/screen based texts, which teachers can use as springboards to engage children in new learning. The selections the child makes gives insight into how they view their preschool context; where it is they like to be, what is important to them and why this is the case. Further, the stories can inform educators about a child's development of oral language structures and vocabulary growth, again, offering starting points for the development of new knowledge. Through careful observation of digital stories, educators

can reflect on the design of their learning experiences and the learning environment as they plan for future learning.

The findings from our research identify some priorities for future research. Capturing digital stories from children from a range of contexts will provide insight into the different experiences offered in preschool contexts and the ways that children interact with these. There is also need to consider further the potential audiences for these stories and if (how) this might change the way the child expresses their story. We believe they have the potential to be examined by educators as a professional development tool to inform practice. The insights the children offer could provide feedback on the experiences offered, while also providing direction for future planning in early childhood contexts.

## Conclusion

Digital stories create opportunities for educators to observe the connections children are making between activities on offer and the ways they conceptualise their learning spaces. Through modest demands upon technology resources and expertise, the children's digital stories provided opportunity to examine their personal preferences within the centre. The choices of images and annotations the children created provided insight into their perspectives of rules, routines and home experiences within the preschool setting. Such insight can alert educators to areas of both well-matched and mismatched understandings of and expectations about the activities, potentially supporting children's transitions (Heath, 1983). Such insight offers early years educators important opportunities to support children in making transitions to new communities such as Kindergarten. They can support children to develop an understanding of the ways to draw information, skills and values from one community to the next and to apply them flexibly. Early years educators can support their learners ultimately to make decisions about who they want to be within the communities to which they belong.

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**Please cite as:** Kervin, L. & Mantei, J. (2016). Digital storytelling: Capturing children's participation in preschool activities. *Issues in Educational Research*, 26(2), 225-240.  
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