



Art in Early Childhood

BETWEEN THE LINES AND BEYOND THE PAGES: THROUGH THE ART OF A CHILD

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ABSTRACT

Comprehension of young children's experiences serve to strengthen their disposition to learning when the focus is less about what is on the lines and pages than what is between the lines and beyond the pages (Ladson-Billings, 1992). This paper suggests that the artwork of children can offer numerous 'zones of possibilities' through which meaningful and interesting connections could be made between home and school.

Drawing upon data collected for my PhD, I examine the artwork of two children, in the first year of school in Bhutan, for zones of possibilities. I will discuss how a deeper awareness of young children's zones of possibilities have the potential to provide important links to children's rich home and community 'funds of knowledge' (Moll, Amanti & Gonzalez, 1992). I will share some examples of how children's artwork can provide links and bridges between home, community and school. Strong links to children's funds of knowledge can foster inclusive and responsive practices that are important elements contributing to the country's philosophy of Gross National Happiness, as well as being good practice for all children.

INTRODUCTION

My research in the homes and the communities of young children in Bhutan, as they transition into school, demonstrated how essential it was for teachers to be cognisant of the home and the community funds of knowledge. Examining funds of knowledge provides teachers with a way of appreciating "the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, Gonzalez, 2001, p. 133). The household culture provides the children and the families with the zone of comfort that Velez-Ibanez and Greenberg (1992) and Moll and Greenberg (1990) describe as an environment of *confianza* where children work, play and live with people whom they trust. In the transition from that zone of comfort to the zone of the school, the children and their families are very likely to experience discontinuities (Ogbu, 1982; Tyler et al., 2008). The school has its own repositories of knowledge, skills and practices that have been accumulated both historically and culturally over the years and in general are followed

diligently without questions. In this paper I would like to suggest that one of the ways that the transition from home to school could be better facilitated is by tapping into young children's funds of knowledge and zones of possibilities through the arts. It is often through young children's representations that we gain a window into their thinking and what is important in their lives.

While this paper draws upon my recent doctoral research to examine some of the norms and practices of a fairly typical primary school in Bhutan, and the system within which it sits, the situations I describe are not unique to Bhutan but can also be observed in many schools around the world. My research examined how these norms and practices could have been different if the teachers and the school system had ways of accessing and understanding the funds of knowledge of the children and their families. Tapping in to local funds of knowledge could support a realignment of available resources as well as informing approaches to teaching and learning. From my observations of children drawing in the context of my research, this paper will suggest that a deeper awareness of the children and their families' funds of knowledge can be accessed through children's drawings and art making. Opportunities for drawing and art making and closer attention to young children's representations of their world enable the interaction patterns, participation structures, curriculum content and classroom practices to more closely match the diverse backgrounds and strengths of young children (Cairney, 2000). While this paper will discuss the zones of possibilities in the context of the norms and practices of the entry class of primary school in Bhutan there are similar possibilities for all children. The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness of the potential for young children's art making, to inform teachers about home and community knowledge, and thus foster more inclusive and responsive practices in the early years.

FOSTERING INCLUSIVE AND RESPONSIVE PRACTICES IN EARLY EDUCATION

The National Education Framework of Bhutan (Royal Education Council, Bhutan 2012, p. 73) defines inclusive as "a process of addressing the diverse needs of all learners by reducing barriers to and within the learning environment". The 'Educating for Gross National Happiness' (Ministry of Education, Bhutan, 2010) document recommends that all schools should practice inclusiveness in all aspects and that the teachers should be culturally sensitive, farsighted and responsive. The term 'inclusive' refers to accommodating the diverse funds of knowledge of all learners and their families in a more responsive and mindful manner. The aim would be to create meaningful dialogue between the families and the school, grounded in the bond between the in-school and the out-of-school funds of knowledge. Only then can teachers be capable of maximizing the children's learning opportunities and creating a sense of belonging that is a result of their home culture being celebrated, included and integrated into the school culture (Gillard & Moore, 2007).

My discussion is focused on two children's drawings drawn from my research data and is grounded in the concept of funds of knowledge. In this context, that means that households have historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills. Support for such knowledge and skills could provide for inclusive, mindful and responsive classroom practices. Van Manen (1991) explains that a technological approach to education assumes that teaching can be accomplished by generalizations and general techniques. However, it is now recognized that education is more meaningful and relevant when it is connected to children's experiences. Alexander (2008) reminds us that

it is children we teach, not subjects. There are many possibilities for creating improved teaching practices in schools. Children's art making provides opportunities for better connections between home and school that could foster more conducive environments for learning. This depends upon creating spaces and opportunities for children to represent things that are meaningful to them and for teachers to be able to see and discuss these representations with those children.

TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE SCHOOL

Observing children during my data collection in schools, I became aware of the fact that "teaching is a complicated interactive practice that begins and ends with seeing the student" (Ayers, 1993, p. 25). Seeing through the eyes of the child made me appreciate where meaningful and interesting connections could have been made between the school curriculum and the children's funds of knowledge. As noted by Ladson-Billings (1992) connections to young children's experiences serve to strengthen their dispositions to learning when the focus is less about what is on the lines and pages than what is between the lines and beyond the pages. Using data from my doctoral research I will now illustrate two such zones of possibilities.

A mathematics lesson

The teacher drew some objects on the green board and then circled them and said, "This is a set of stones", "This is a set of sticks", "This is a set of pencils". ("Sets" was the concept being taught during this lesson). She made the class repeat after her the phrase – "a set of..." several times, after which she distributed blank paper to the class to draw a set of sticks, leaves or stones. The children began to draw and the teacher walked in between the tables to make sure that they were doing what was asked.



Figure 1. Grapes.

Using just a corner of the paper, Bishaka drew a small bunch of grapes (Fig. 1). The teacher came around and asked her what she had drawn. With a slight stutter, she answered in a small voice, "ang... angure" (meaning grapes in her mother tongue). The teacher looked puzzled and repeated Bishaka's words and then repeated her earlier instruction to the class, "Draw sets of stones, sticks, like that, draw, draw" and then moved on to the next table. Bishaka turned towards me with a dismayed look.

Van Manen (1991, p. 7) asserts that children come to school from somewhere else and that teachers need to be aware of "what it is that they bring with them that defines their present understandings, mood, emotional state and readiness to deal with the subject matter and the world of the school". Bishaka's parents are from the southern part of Bhutan where grapes are bountiful. Whenever relatives came to visit, they brought baskets full of grapes, which they were then able to sell in their small shop. Bishaka knew how much her grandmother charged for a kilogram of grapes, where they came from and who brought them. Therefore, her drawing of a small bunch of grapes had a lot of meaning, not only as an item of business in her grandparents' shop but also a reminder of

Bishaka's home village and the relatives who grew them. If the lesson was of 'sets' as meaning 'groups of similar things' as described in the curriculum for Mathematics, then a bunch of grapes could be seen to form a 'set' as the child had assumed. Vygotsky (1987, p. 216) states that, "a child cannot gain conscious awareness of what he does not have". Thus, relating a bunch of grapes to a set is a revelation of her conscious awareness and deep understanding of the concept by linking it to her everyday experience of life. Here is a child moving between school and home and drawing upon her home funds of knowledge to make a more sophisticated understanding of the concept of sets in a school context. Further investigation by the teacher as to why Bishaka had drawn the grapes, could have unveiled a lot about the child and her family, but as this did not happen, it was a zone of possibility that was missed.

The children's funds of knowledge can tell the teacher what they know and are capable of doing (Riojas-Cortez, 2001). When a teacher is not able to connect to such interesting personal information from a child, she is functioning in a 'zone of under-development', which neither helps in meeting the nation's vision to enable every citizen "to achieve their full and innate potential" (PCoB, 1999, p.17) nor does it meet the Gross National Happiness aspiration of "setting high expectations of their students" (MoE, Bhutan, 2010c, p. 40).

An English Lesson

Week 1, activity 4 of the English curriculum had 'free drawing' for the week, as a pre-writing exercise for the new intake children. The teacher distributed the blank sheets of paper and the boxes of crayons to the different tables in the class and instructed the children to draw anything they liked. I already guessed what Sonam would draw as he had drawn the same thing over and over in the drawing book I had given him on our first meeting. He drew a big rectangular box and a smaller one near it, and then diligently filled in some smaller boxes inside the bigger one to represent windows and doors (Fig. 2). Then below some horizontal lines in front of the big house he had drawn was a person going towards something that looked like a bucket. The teacher came around and looked over his shoulder and commented loudly to the whole class, "Good, Sonam has drawn a house" and she moved to the next table.



Figure 2. Angay's house.

The first time I met Sonam and his *Angay* (Grandmother), I gave him a set of crayons and a drawing book and told him he could draw anything he wanted in it. The next time I met him he showed me some of his drawings, several of which were the same as the one he had drawn in the English class. Because I showed so much interest in his drawing, he described his drawing to me. The 'big house' as he calls it in his own language, was not just any house as assumed by the teacher, it was his grandparents' three-storey house and the smaller one near it was his house. The several horizontal lines were steps going down towards the water pipe from which the members of the house fetched water, and the matchstick figure was himself going to fetch water for the chickens, a small chore that he carried out almost every day, and with great interest and responsibility. Without doing this task, his grandma told him, he would not get to eat the eggs.

Having visited the 'big house' several times, I was impressed by the accuracy of the details in his drawing. This drawing was very real for the child; it was not just a pre-writing exercise. I looked at several other children's drawings in the class and wondered what interesting stories lay hidden behind each one of them. I thought they would contain wonderful narratives to share that would bring to light the funds of knowledge that each child had brought into the classroom. The lessons I observed in the classroom offered a number of opportunities for the teacher to delve into the students' funds of knowledge that could have enriched the experiences of both the teacher and the children. However, those opportunities came and went, without the teacher being aware of them.

Vygotsky uses the metaphor of a water molecule, pointing out that the separate elements in a water molecule on their own do not make water, it is their union that gives character to water. He suggests that in a similar way the child and the context combined give a more complete meaning to development and learning (Wink & Putney, 2002). Research has demonstrated that young children's cognition develops best and they succeed academically when congruence exists between what they know and what the school has to offer. Therefore, to make the classrooms more participatory, teaching and learning should be reciprocal between the teacher and the children so that "one learns best when teaching and teaches best while learning" (Tudge & Scrimsher, 2003, p. 212).

Many studies support the idea that the experience gained from home is much richer than the standard formal educational practices the schools can provide. Gonzalez et al. (1993) observed that when children's funds of knowledge did not match those of the school, it generally resulted in lowered academic expectations of those children. The failure to see the rich knowledge, socio-cultural and historical background and value in the experiences of the parents and their children can result in what Sauto-Manning and Swick (2006) and McCarthy (2000) call the "cultural deficit". Such a view of young children would defeat the goal of 'cultural preservation and promotion' that is one of the main aims of Bhutan's 'Educating for Gross National Happiness'.

Researchers assert that the reciprocal practices within kin, friends, neighbours, or teachers establish mutual trust and respect that provides a conducive environment for a child's development and learning. To emulate this, effective two-way communications between home and school has been widely advocated and recommended. This encourage home and school collaborations as a means to develop innovative teaching that draws on the knowledge and the skills found in the children's households which are often illustrated in their drawings, dramatics and stories. The fact is children do have a hundred languages through which they share their world with others (Reggio Emilia, 1998). If teachers were skilled at reading and discussing the representations of young children then they would come to better understand what it was each child was bringing to school that they could build upon. In addition, if representations became part of the dialogue between home and school, perhaps through a sketchbook that was shared between home and school, teachers would gain insights into funds of knowledge that could be supported in school contexts.

Most leading researchers believe in the socio-cultural theory that advocates the optimization of the relationship between the two important settings in a child's life, that is their home and the school they go to. They believe that the two settings cannot be alienated from one another and still hope to produce a meaningful experience for a child.

As the development of a child is influenced by multiple interlocking and nested variables (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), an open communication that encourages a two-way exchange of knowledge between these overlapping set of systems is imperative for the child to develop and learn. In order to empower every child and their parents, there has to be a genuine partnership between the home and the school that will weave the local funds of knowledge into the educational fabric, which would then make visible a plethora of information stored in a child's art work. When the pertinence of such an acquaintance is not understood it gives birth to a school culture in which a "norm of parent-teacher isolation" becomes an accepted way of functioning (Sauto-Manning & Swick, 2006, p. 187) in most cases.

PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

Both nationally and internationally, there is a general movement to recognise the early years' education as a distinct phase in children's learning that should be characterised by a curriculum that focuses on whole-child learning using teaching methods that are appropriate for young children. Hedges (2012) asserts that an early childhood teachers' professional knowledge should include:

...understanding of early childhood philosophy, theories of learning and curriculum and pedagogy applicable to young children. Teachers will also need insightful knowledge about individual children, their families and the communities and cultures of each educational context; and a range of general knowledge to draw on in responding naturally during interactions with children (Hedges, 2012, p.9).

Yet many teachers enter schools without an adequate understanding of this insightful knowledge of their students and their families. Van Manen (1994) rightly comments that for those teachers it will be difficult to know who it is that they are teaching and consequently they will not have the knowledge or the skill to deal with children in any way other than adopting the roles and perspectives that are already a part of the school's culture. Sugarman (2010) claims that educators who perceive homes and communities by their pedagogical characteristics in terms of possessing strengths and resources can shift the power dynamics of an institute by adopting a perennial exchange of knowledge and skills between the different settings.

A teacher must have an in-depth knowledge of the culture, the history and the background of the students being taught so that activities in the class can be woven into the fabric of the daily lives of the learners, with the result that education becomes a meaningful tool for addressing issues of importance and interest to the learners. Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) believe that bringing the students and their families' home funds of knowledge into the classroom, respecting and learning from them, enhances the teacher's role as a dynamic facilitator. In the process, the thinking and knowing that were initially obscure become the ground on which real teaching can be constructed (Ayers, 1993).

The universities and colleges of teacher training need to provide teacher trainees with the experiences and with ways to access the funds of knowledge of the children and their families in the context of their households and communities. These are experiences that cannot be taught in a didactic manner, they have to be experienced by the pre-service teachers so that they can apply them when they become teachers and be better able to

start from the premise that “all students are capable of learning and that they are capable of making a difference in the educational life of their students” (Ryan, 2006, p.11).

The shallow use of reified terms such as ‘child-centred’, often lead to the creation of systems and institutions that separate children from the real world into artificial ones which have little resemblance or usefulness to their real lives. The National Education Framework of Bhutan (REC, Bhutan, 2012a, p. 43) reports that the majority of “Bhutanese students are not able to understand core concepts and apply knowledge to real-life situations” This is because their ‘reading of the words’ and the ‘reading of the world’ do not match. Yet we know that drawing is an activity that assists children with things like problem solving, creative thinking, planning and revising. Concepts such as ‘child-centred and prior knowledge’ that are interpreted in multiple ways seldom succeed in demonstrating that “they are pivotal to the success of children’s learning” (Stephen, 2010, p. 18). When a tool for thinking, like drawing, is not part of everyday experience in school then meeting deadlines may be much more important than the quality of such collaborations. If this is the case a lack of time may become another reason why teachers make no effort to listen to individual child’s interpretations of their drawings.

Wells (2000, p. 5) argues that learning is not dependent on teaching if “teaching is considered as carrying out instructions according to a set of pre-formulated objectives”. Torrance (2008) argues that an assessment should attempt to be ‘assessment for learning’ rather than ‘assessment of learning’. An awareness of the ‘funds of knowledge’ concept can challenge teachers to direct their gaze at the student’s lives rather than at assessment data (Hogg, 2011). Vygotsky proclaims that determining an individual’s mental functioning through a test score is representing the individual in a one-sided fashion. Real learning is a process that takes place in a participatory manner and not solely in an individual mind.

CONCLUSION

The national curricula of Bhutan is not yet easily permeable to a diverse range of children and community pedagogies and knowledge and that “skills and content are prescribed and very particular sets of knowing and doings are recommended”.

Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti (2005) comment that:

What is not evident is how practitioners within the limits of their very real structural constraints can realistically carry out emancipator and liberatory pedagogies when they themselves are victims of disempowerment and their circumstances preclude full professional development (Gonzalez et al., 2005, p. 2).

The main intention of this paper is to portray how very useful and necessary the recognition of the family, children and community funds of knowledge is in regard to an education that is meant to address the wholesome development of a child (ESRCoB, Bhutan, 2008). Providing opportunities for children to represent their lives through the arts opens windows through which the rich possibilities for meaningful teaching and learning appear.

Through my observations of the experiences of the families, children and the teachers in the school context, I saw major gaps between their 'know what' and the 'know how' which Sugarman (2010 p. 839) describes as "what we need to have them do" and what they bring to school "that they can do". When children's funds of knowledge are foregrounded zones of possibilities appear. One way of getting to know more about children's lives outside of school is through the dialogues that take place around their representations. This can challenge teachers' misperceptions and support teachers in finding meaningful ways to maximize children's learning opportunities and experiences with children and their families. The Minister for Education in Bhutan, during the Educating for GNH, 2010 conference said:

We already have the basic materials in our curriculum sufficient to support a Gross National Happiness way of thinking and living. What is required is a creative reorientation of attitude and approach in the way we look at ourselves and perceive our relationship with our field of work (MoE, Bhutan, 2010c, p. 105).

In this paper, I critique the status quo by asserting that, notwithstanding the background or economic status of the children and their families, their rich funds of knowledge should have a legitimate place in our schools. I suggest that children's drawing and art making can provide us with a window into their funds of knowledge. Young children's art making is underutilized by teachers and I suggest that teachers provide more opportunities for children to creatively express the things that are important to them. I argue that it is through an attentive noticing, active listening and meaningful dialogue around young children's representations and artwork that we come to a better understanding of the knowledge, interests and strengths the child brings to school. Art works can provide teachers with the knowledge needed to forge productive links between home, school and community. It is through a deep appreciation of the funds of knowledge children bring to school with them that we are able to provide relevant and meaningful experiences for children.

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Biography

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