RESEARCH NOTE

Listening to Teachers Listening to Children: One Child’s Story

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Abstract

This paper presents some initial findings from an ongoing study in junior primary classrooms in Victoria, Australia. It is grounded in sociocultural theory and in particular the work of Barbara Rogoff. Rogoff’s (1998) three planes of analysis (the personal, the interpersonal and the cultural/community) was adopted as the tool for analysing the pedagogical decision making processes of two novice teachers working within the current Victorian Early Years of Schooling context. These teachers, provoked by the evolving education and research project in Reggio Emilia, Italy, intend to work in ways that recognise and value the potential and competencies of young children at a time when the education system imposes a prescribed curriculum and narrowly defined learning outcomes measured increasingly by standardised, state wide testing. How these teachers resolve the tensions between their philosophical positions and the imperatives of the system is told through the experiences of one child.

Introduction

After all we have said about children, we have to discuss more fully the role children assume in construction of self and knowledge and the help they get in these matters from adults. It is obvious that between learning and teaching we honour the first. It is not that we ostracise teaching but we declare “Stand aside for a while and leave room for learning, observe carefully what children can do and then, if you have understood well, perhaps teaching will be different from before”. (Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 82)

To stand aside for a while, to leave room for learning, to observe carefully what children can do are difficult ideas in the current education climate where instrumentalist government policies and directives mandate a curriculum, define narrow learning outcomes, prescribe levels of achievement and measure children’s learning increasingly through state-wide, standardised testing. As Jungck and Marshall (1992) explain, “knowledge is clearly and carefully defined, prescribed
and measured as a commodity or product. The intention is to have students successfully achieve predetermined ends” (cited by Corrie, 1999, p. 33).

The impression is also that “every matter can be reduced to value free technical inputs and measurable outputs” (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence 1999, p. 41). In returning to these theories and practices of previous decades, simplistic notions of literacy and literacy acquisition are privileged, teaching is reduced to a technical level and fixed or rigid age norms and expectations of achievement misrepresent the nature of children’s learning and possibilities for that learning.

Loris Malaguzzi, theorist and founding director of Reggio Children claims that to continue to push prepackaged knowledge in some sequential order indicates an intolerable indifference to children and that “teachers must enter into the time frame of the children, whose interests emerge only in the course of activity or negotiations arising from that activity” (Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 73).

The Sociocultural Perspective

Rogoff (1998) argues that to understand learning we need to study individuals as they participate in ongoing and varied sociocultural activities. From a sociocultural perspective (see for example, Cole & Wertsch 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1998; Wertsch, 1991) children are the products of their social and cultural world and they in turn influence that world.

However, personal, social and cultural processes are not independent entities and therefore individuals cannot be taken outside of the activity to have their development analysed. According to Rogoff (1995), applying different lenses to and analysing the personal, interpersonal and community planes of activities or contexts of interests, provides an effective means of examining the relationships and interactions as well as the cultural context and artefacts.

The personal plane of analysis highlights the individual child, while the interpersonal plane of analysis features the interactions between the individual and others within the particular social setting. The third, or community plane of analysis, concentrates on the cultural or institutional context. As one plane is examined within the activity the others are observed in the background (Rogoff 1998). These three planes of analysis are used to examine the pedagogical decision making of two novice teachers, working in a government school in a highly diverse, but low, socio-economic community in Melbourne, Australia.

Sharing the Journey

Over the course of a school year I was participant observer in this Year 1 and 2 multi-age class. The teachers, provoked by the education and research project evolving over more than forty years in Reggio Emilia, Italy, questioned the certainties associated with an outcomes-based curriculum and prescribed standards of achievement. These teachers were intuitively conscious of the limitations of traditional approaches and the potential of such practices to distort
and misrepresent children's learning. They understood that children take an active role in the construction and acquisition of knowledge and they recognized the right of each child to be a protagonist in their own learning. These teachers appreciated the importance of participation and social relationships in the learning process, a feature of Rogoff's (1995) interpersonal plane of activity mentioned previously. However, in their first year of teaching they were unsure about ways of organizing their programme and managing the classroom environment to reflect such beliefs.

Supported by a visionary school leadership team they gave thought to ways of working that valued the knowledge and skills children construct independently of, and prior to, schooling. They wanted to allow time for the thinking and action of the children to develop but were professionally aware of the expectations of others and sometimes themselves, to move the children forward in ways promoted by the state education system. This is an example of what considerations can occur through the contextual or community plane of analysis.

**A Provocation**

Viewed through the personal lens, evidence of inappropriate, and to some degree, practices harmful to the children's view of themselves as capable learners, emerged early in the year. These identified risks encouraged the teachers to continue to search for better ways to engage the children in active and sustained learning.

A particular provocation for deep reflection about learning and teaching was provided by Child Z, a boy in Grade 1 who when asked “What was the best thing you did at school last year?” responded: “The best thing I did at school was to be naughty”. As Malaguzzi (1998) noted “the conditions and goals of the one who teaches are not identical to the conditions and goals of the one who learns” (p.83).

**A Further Provocation**

While Teacher S and Teacher L continued to question many aspects of the previous year's teacher-directed, skills-based approach to literacy I observed their own programming and practice still reflected a strong inclination towards the traditional view of literacy as print-based reading and writing developed through more instructional methods.

A child's drawing on a screwed up piece of paper left on the floor provided the catalyst for real change and renewed their determination to look to the children as sources of inspiration. Teacher S and Teacher L could not ignore this child's cry for help and understanding when they examined the graphic detail on the page depicting the message “I can't do school!” (See Figure 1)
Child Z's feelings about his learning and his ability to operate in the cultural context of the classroom were very revealing and deeply disturbing. Teacher S and Teacher L were moved to apply the different lenses in order to understand this child's learning from within the ongoing events of the classroom and to draw on and make use of the particular tools and artefacts relevant to that particular context.

When learners are viewed as active participants in shared endeavours, a decontextualised way of interpreting progress becomes fundamentally flawed. Teacher S and Teacher L reflected deeply on their practice as they sought to understand the children's learning in terms of their relationships with others and participation in social activity (Lave & Wenger 1991).

In seeking to move from an essentially individualistic model towards a participatory one, these teachers considered ways to provide more opportunities for collaborative experiences and to create new possibilities for interactions with materials, peers and adults. As a “pedagogy of relationships” (Rinaldi 1998) evolved in the classroom, Child Z developed a strong friendship with another boy and they began to engage in play situations. His sense of belonging and self confidence to participate was enhanced as he developed new understandings and skills.
Pedagogical Decision-making with an Interpersonal Lens: Making the Difference

With the increasing realisation that their emphasis on providing “the literacy programme” detracted from optimal time with children, Teacher S and Teacher L devoted less time to teacher-directed activities and instead encouraged learning through the range of symbolic languages, including drawing, painting, music and work with clay, in individual and group initiated experiences and interactions. These opportunities to use a range of materials, to investigate and to engage in problem solving tasks opened up new possibilities for learning.

As they entered into different relationships with the children they were able to let go of beliefs about what they should do at school and began to teach more through interpreting the on-going processes of learning. They were better able to appreciate how children learn to be literate through engaging in purposeful, connected activity. In this way they gave recognition to literacy as a social, cultural and political practice (Cee 1996).

Child Z grew into “school literacy” when Teacher L and Teacher S “stopped doing school literacy”. He began to include text in his drawing, to write about subjects that interested him and to refer to different texts to find information.

As the teachers observed the deepening engagement in the learning process their resolve to recognise the legitimate rights of children increased. Their appreciation that children have to be taken seriously and be believed in, grew. They became more confident to trust the abilities of the children and to make their own programming decisions in the light of this knowledge. Gradually confidence developed as they became more able to trust theoretical principles extracted from their work with the children.

Towards a Community of Learners

As a more democratic programme evolved, the social relationships in the classroom developed in a more natural way around the children’s ideas and interests to enhance this learning community in which both adults and children are active and involved in shared sociocultural activities (Rogoff, 1998). I observed more sustained encounters where children engaged in self-initiated and group learning opportunities. Child Z began to enter more into social relationships with other children. Teacher S and Teacher L engaged with the children to listen, to question, and to set up provocations for learning.

It took considerable determination, courage and passion to work towards finding new ways to sustain each child’s spontaneous curiosity and to promote collaborative processes and respectful relationships. But we did learn, in Malaguzzi’s (1998) terms, to “stand aside” to leave room for learning, and it was the children who showed us the way forward.
References


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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