Peer-Reviewed Paper

Shoes and Ships and Sealing Wax – Taking a Sociocultural Approach to Interviewing Young Children

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ABSTRACT: *When conventional interviewing methodology is employed with young children there appears to be a tendency to overlook or avoid the 'talk of many things' in order to focus on the topic of interest to the researcher. The consequence of this is that the researcher may gain an inaccurate picture of children's real understandings, ideas and abilities. If, however, a sociocultural viewpoint is brought to the interview context, then extended conversation (the 'talk of many things'), and the cultural tools that children might use during the interview, can provide a greater insight into their thinking and the activities in which it is embedded. This paper will provide examples from research in which a sociocultural perspective has been applied to the data and data-gathering methods, thus providing greater insights into young children's ideas than conventional methods might reveal.*

PREFACE

> The time has come has come the Walrus said, To talk of many things: Of shoes – and ships – and sealing wax – Of cabbages – and kings – And why the sea is boiling hot – And whether pigs have wings. (Carroll, 1952)

What has this poem to do with early childhood research? No doubt some may think it totally irrelevant, but I include it because it is a favourite of mine from my past (part of what is my own cultural and historical context), and because it may help to illustrate one of the key ideas of this article: What may seem irrelevant on the surface and unrelated to the topic, within a sociocultural perspective can be very important – though this view may not seem clear until later in the article.

INTRODUCTION

Although, in general, research involving young children (and their families) is extensive, much of this has focused on societal issues and developmental trends

(Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996), with most studies having been completed by researchers from disciplines other than education, such as anthropologists, sociologists, sociolinguists and some social psychologists (Hatch, 1995). A majority of these studies, particularly those that centre on child development, are conducted from a Euro-North American (or Minority world) viewpoint that assumes and proclaims certain universal norms and 'truths' about children and childhood (Mayall, 1999; Penn, 1999, 2000; Woodhead, 2000), including childhood in the Majority world.

There is increasingly a need to consider research methods that are more contextually relevant and give a greater participatory role and more rights in the research process to those who are the not only the 'subjects' of the research (even when those subjects are very young children), but also the supposed 'beneficiaries' of the research, that is, children, families, teachers, caregivers and community leaders within diverse communities. This research needs to focus on often over-looked but critically important factors, such as the social relationships and the cultural, historical and political contexts, in which children are developing.

As Wertsch (1995, p. 56) states in promoting a sociocultural research approach in relation to studies of children's mental functioning:

> The goal of sociocultural research is to understand the relationship between human mental functioning, on the one hand, and cultural, historical, and institutional setting, on the other. In a world characterized by rapid political transitions, newly awakened nationalism, and many other forms of potentially positive, but often deadly change, sociocultural research has never been more timely. It represents one of the ways that psychology, anthropology, education, and related disciplines can take a new step in entering into public discourse about today's most compelling issues.

From this perspective it would appear that applying a sociocultural framework to the field of research into early childhood education and development has great potential.

SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

The sociocultural perspective of development derives from the work of Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, who held the view that children are products of their social and cultural worlds, and to "understand them we must comprehend the social, cultural and societal contexts in which they develop" (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 1). Vygotsky believed that because cultures differ in the

activities they emphasise and in the tools they use, all human activity and mental processes lead to knowledge and skills that are essential for success within a particular culture (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 12). The acquisition or development of these skills and knowledge is promoted by adults or other community members who guide children's participation in activities in a 'mutually constituting' or collaborative relationship (Rogoff, 1998, p. 686).

Many children in the Cook Islands, for example, become extremely skilful at the special dance of their own island, participating in dance festivals from early childhood, while many young children in Sweden learn to ice skate as soon as they can walk. In contrast, young children living in Melbourne, Australia, may be unskilled at any of these activities, but depending on where they live, and what is valued in their community, may learn water safety or how to kick an 'Aussie Rules' football from a very early age.

Thus, in studying children we cannot investigate them in a manner that isolates them from their present contexts, nor the social, political and historical factors that have impacted on (and continue to do so) those contexts. In fact, the sociocultural approach is also sometimes referred to as the *social-historical* or *cultural- historical* approach (see, for example, Berk & Winsler, 1995; Wertsch, del Rio & Alvarez, 1995), reflecting that we are as much a product of the customs, events, experiences and beliefs that have *gone before*, as we are a manifestation of present societal ways of life, beliefs and customs. Woodhead (2000, pp. 22-3), in discussing the sociocultural approach from an early childhood perspective, argues that:

> ...[E]very child is born into a sociocultural-historical context. Infants are by nature attuned to engage with the social and cultural environment of activities and meanings.... All environments are culturally constructed, shaped by generations of human activity and creativity and mediated by complex belief systems, including about the 'proper' way for children to develop. The most significant features of any child's environment are the humans with whom they establish close relationships. These individuals (usually family) are themselves cultural beings. They are the product of cultural history and circumstance, which structure their lives and give meaning and direction to the experiences of their offspring, as they introduce them to cultural practices and symbol systems. The way parents care for their children is shaped in part by their cultural beliefs (or ethnotheories) about what is appropriate and desirable, in terms both of goals of child development and the means to achieve these goals.

In the context of this article, therefore, what comes to mind is the question of how consideration of a sociocultural perspective, with its emphasis on social,

cultural, historical and political contexts and relationships, might benefit Minority world early childhood researchers considering interviewing as a method of data collection in research.

PERSPECTIVES ON INTERVIEWING

Although there is certain advice written on the subject of conducting interviews with children (see, for example, Allerton, 1992; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996; Murfin & Butterworth, 1999), few authors pay a great deal of attention to particular issues involved in adopting a sociocultural perspective in the research process. While attention is often given to topics such as the differences between interviewing within quantitative or qualitative studies, structured versus unstructured interviews, open versus closed questions, ways of recording or documenting and transcribing, establishing rapport, ethics, and issues of reliability and validity, rarely is consideration given to how the interview activity could be viewed as a truly collaborative experience that both draws on and reflects the interpersonal relationships and sociocultural practices, artifacts and tools of the contexts in which children develop and learn.

BRINGING A SOCIOCULTURAL APPROACH TO INTERVIEWING

As stated earlier, with guidance and collaboration children become accomplished practitioners in areas of skill and knowledge relevant to particular contexts or communities.

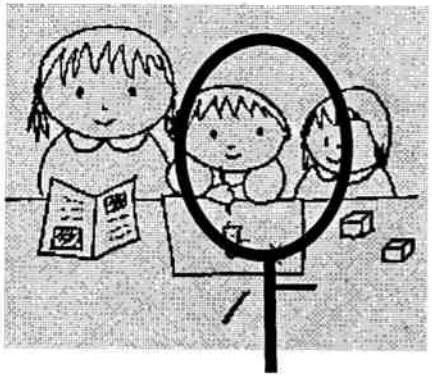
The implication is that research about children or on children (though preferably *with* children) is truly meaningful and worthwhile if it examines the specific context in which children are developing and learning, and draws on and makes use of the particular tools, both mental and physical, and artifacts relevant to that particular context. The notion of using a common research implement (be it a survey, an interview schedule, a particular assessment measure) across a range of contexts, communities or cultures is simply not appropriate. In thinking about any research which involves interviewing young children the researcher needs to consider how to design, structure and implement a process and interview schedule that is sensitive to the context of the particular children. Further, s/he should take into account the cultural tools and artifacts that are relevant to them. In the context of a Minority world preschool, for example, tools and artifacts might include language, as well as resources such as jigsaws or dressing-up clothes, role-play or nursery rhymes (Edwards, 2000).

Thus, in planning and conducting interviews it becomes necessary to go beyond thinking about merely the questions one will ask, and the responses of individual

children, but in particular to examine the *relationships* and *interactions* within and beyond (that is, present and distant) an interview activity, as well as the *cultural context and artifacts used within that context.*

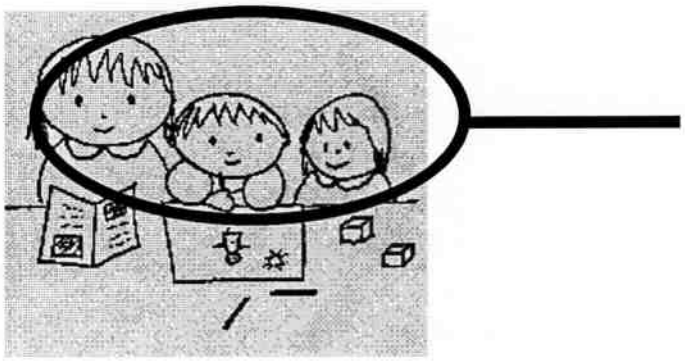
Rogoff (1998) suggests that this examination can effectively be done by applying 'lenses' to, and analysing, the personal, interpersonal and community planes of activities or contexts of interest. For example, in Figure 1, below, a lens is applied to the personal plane within the activity. This focus on the personal should not be confused with the model that is used in traditional approaches to research, where the emphasis is on finding out what the individual child *thinks* or *knows*. Although the child is highlighted, the interpersonal relationship and the context remain 'in the picture'. While one plane is in focus, the others remain in the background. To understand each requires the involvement of others (Rogoff, 1995). Further, from a sociocultural research perspective the attention goes beyond a simple consideration of a child's acquisition of knowledge to examine *participatory appropriation*, or "the process by which individuals transform their understanding of and responsibility for activities through their own participation" (Rogoff, 1995, p. 149).

Figure 1: Personal Plane of Analysis (Robbins, 2002, adapted from Rogoff, 1998, Figure 14.1, p. 688.)



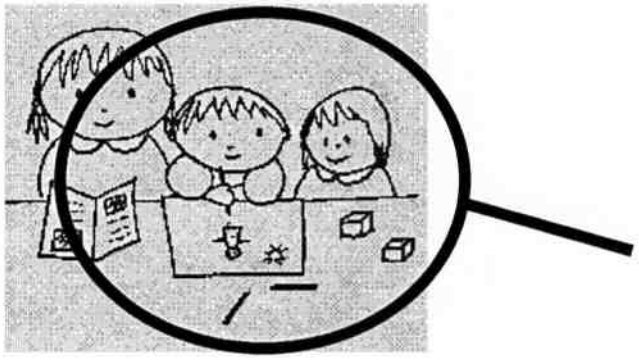
In Figure 2 the analysis shifts from merely the individual to the interpersonal – encompassing interactions, relationships and collaboration. In sociocultural research this includes an examination of the process of *guided participation*, a term that "stresses the mutual involvement of individuals and their social partners, communicating and coordinating their involvement as they participate in socioculturally structured collective activity" (Rogoff, 1995, p. 146). In conventional research methods this plane is rarely examined adequately, and therefore much important and relevant information is often missed.

Figure 2: Interpersonal Plane of Analysis (Robbins, 2002, adapted from Rogoff, 1998, Figure 14.1, p. 688.)



In Figure 3 the focus is on the mutual embeddedness of the individual within the whole cultural or institutional context, including the artefacts being used in the context, the ways of learning and skills emphasised, dominant views of the community or institution, the codes of behaviour, the forms of communication utilised, the genres of conversation, and so on. The focus, too, is on *apprenticeship*, studying "active individuals participating with others in culturally organized activity that has as part of its purpose the development of mature participation in the activity of less experienced people" (Rogoff, 1995, p. 142). That is, it includes not simply looking at how individuals interact, but how people are 'enculturated' into societally-valued activities and communities of practice.

Figure 3: Community Plane of Analysis (Robbins, 2002, adapted from Rogoff, 1998, Figure 14.1, p. 688.)



Therefore, bringing a sociocultural perspective such as this to the interviewing process means that it is not simply the child, as a single unit of analysis, nor a group of children, that is examined, but importantly the interpersonal and community or contextual factors as well, and their mutual collaboration and interrelatedness.

INTERPERSONAL ISSUES

Reflection on interpersonal issues involved in interviewing, thinking about how collaborative relationships can be established, and how the research process can become a participation *with* children rather than *on* children should be at the forefront of studies involving interviews. Undoubtedly too, any researcher who wishes to interview should first become very familiar with the context as well as the children who s/he wishes to include in the study. According to Grieshaber (2001, p. 140), "The first stage of the (research) process ... involves gaining insight into the world view of the potential research participants". This is as true for studying children in a state primary school or community child care centre in suburban Christchurch or Melbourne, as it is for studying children in the Cook Islands, Sweden or anywhere else in the world. Teacher-researchers obviously have a great advantage here over other researchers who are not a part of the day-to-day lives of young children! However, any researcher who intends to study children needs to spend time reading about the context in which s/he will be working, as well as being a participant observer, in order to gain some understanding of the experiences, activities, beliefs, communication forms and styles, and the artefacts and tools important to them.

One of the specific issues to address is the role of *questioning* within the context or community of the proposed research. Berk and Winsler (1995, p. 16) explain that:

> In [Western] middle-class homes children are frequently asked instructional questions that adults already know the answers to, such as, 'What colour is that car?', 'What's the shape of the puzzle piece?', or 'Do you have just as many pennies in your pile as I have in mine?' But these questions are rare in other communities that value and promote quite different discourse styles. This underscores an additional premise of sociocultural theory: Ways of thinking are socially situated not just at the level of dyads and small groups but also at the broader institutional and cultural levels within which face-to-face interaction is embedded (Vygotsky [1930-1935] 1978; Wertsch, 1991a). The 'instructional questioning' so pervasive among middle-class parents is similar to the type of discourse that takes

> place in schools, and it prepares children to be successful communicators in classroom and testing situations. Many investigators have observed that the difficulties faced by non-middle-class children in Western schools are partly the result of a mismatch in communication between home and classroom (Edwards, 1989; Heath, 1989; Miller-Jones, 1989; Rogoff, Mistry, et al, 1993).

An example of this is given in the following anecdote from Fleer and Williams-Kennedy (in press, cited in Fleer & Robbins, 2001) in relation to the conversational genres used by some Indigenous Australian peoples – genres which differ from those known-answer styles used and valued in so many Minority world early childhood centres in Australia:

> My grandmother she believes you don't ask questions, you should just watch and listen. In some communities you only watch and listen. In some communities it is bad manners to ask too many questions. was always taught by my grandmother that you don't ask questions you watch and you learn; you don't question things; copying rather than asking questions. (Fleer & Williams-Kennedy, in press, cited in Fleer & Robbins, 2001)

Therefore, when interviewing, if use is made of certain research methods with which children of a specific community or context are unfamiliar or uncomfortable (for example, 'instructional questioning' or known-answer questioning), the danger can be that the research 'findings' position these children as 'deficient' in their thinking, learning or development (Fleer & Robbins, 2001). This is one of the problems of the 'universal norms' view mentioned earlier.

It is also important to recognise other interpersonal issues such as the following. In any study involving children, regardless of their specific cultural context, the researcher has more power within any relationship with children - simply because s/he is an adult and larger, more knowledgeable, and more in-control of the relationship and context. For instance, the person who initiates the conversations or asks the questions is, more often than not, the one who controls the dialogue (Lindfors, 1999). In addition, children will be more reserved with adults with whom they are not familiar and comfortable, and may refuse to participate altogether, particularly if the child is 'singled out' for an interview, rather than being in a more relaxed, and perhaps more customary, group setting. A problem, too, if any interview is too formal or unnatural is the likelihood of children feeling that the adult is more knowledgeable, and there must be a 'right answer' to the questions s/he is posing.

Participation in interviewing often involves creative efforts, therefore, on the part of the researcher to adjust communication, and particularly conversation and questioning, to fit with the context and familiar patterns and styles of the children.

EXAMINING THE PERSONAL, INTERPERSONAL AND COMMUNITY PLANES

The remainder of this article focuses on research that I am currently undertaking, talking with young children about certain natural phenomena. The investigation is being carried out in the junior primary and preschool classes of a school in the outer south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne, Australia. Prior to the commencement of the study, I spent a number of months acting as a participant observer within the school, getting to know the children, teachers and the school and preschool contexts. The actual research activity consisted of 'interviews', which I prefer to describe as conversations or dialogues, with the children completing drawings as we talked. Within this particular school and preschool context drawing is used frequently in classroom work, with the children appearing to enjoy it. It thus is a significant cultural tool or artifact within this context.

Using drawing in interviews with young children is not new (see, for example, Fleer, 1997). James, Jenks and Prout (1998, p. 189) in discussing ethics and techniques for studying children, assert that:

> Through their schooling, in industrialized societies at least, children are accustomed to paint and draw and are actively encouraged to express themselves on paper. Having been taught these skills, they use them daily and, unlike most adults, are accomplished practitioners. It behoves us to make use of these different abilities rather than asking children to participate unpractised in interviews or submit them unasked to our observational and surveilling gaze.

It is important for me to state that, at this point in my research activities, it is not individual children's acquisition of particular knowledge that I am examining, but rather how children's participation (and my own) in an 'interview' activity changes during the course of the experience, how roles and responsibilities within the experience ebb and flow, and how various cultural tools are employed by the children during the event. In addition, I am not collecting children's drawing in order to 'analyse' them at a later stage. This, I believe, is no different from collecting children's isolated bits of knowledge and thoughts in order to dissect and assess these also at a later stage. Within sociocultural research there is no place for focusing on static and disembedded 'end products'.

Cognition cannot be treated merely as stored possessions (what children know or remember) or artistic outcomes (*finished* drawings or paintings). Instead the attention should be on the active changes involved in the unfolding activity in which children are participating (Rogoff, 1998). As one of the often referred to clichés of many early childhood educators goes, it is the *process* rather than the *product*. Therefore, it is not the individual child that is taken outside of the activity to become the basis of analysis, but rather the sociocultural activity of the interview, considering the contributions and interweaving of the individual, the interpersonal and community processes.

It is also essential to recognise that this research activity undertaken is itself a cultural artifact. The fact that the interviews were semi-structured and led by myself were the result of my following a particular research format, and therefore a specific cultural intervention, formed by all kinds of historical, political, social and cultural traditions, values and ways of behaving.

Part of my study involved my talking with children about what they think happens to the sun at night time. One of the children in this study was Ollie, aged 5.6 at the time of one of the interviews, a portion of which is represented below. It would be impossible, and quite inappropriate, to concentrate simply on what he says about the sun, ignoring all the other facets of the experience – and yet that is what is so often done in relation to conducting and analysing interviews with children. Instead, as described above, it would be far more fruitful to examine the experience from the perspective of the personal, interpersonal and community planes. Questions to consider when reading through the following extract include:

- Who is the 'expert' and who is the 'novice' within the experience?
- Who is attempting to lead or guide the activity and how is this being done?
- How do the roles change or coordinate?
- How is involvement in the activity stretching understanding of the participants as they attempt to seek some sort of 'common ground'?
- Is there evidence of any change in the participants during the process, which contributes to the unfolding event?
- What specific cultural tools are being used in the activity?
- What purposes are these tools serving – for example, organising thinking, communicating with another, expressing ideas...?
- How is the cultural institution of 'research' impacting on (or even hindering) the experience?

What other cultural factors, such as values and belief systems, are impacting on the situation?

JR: I wonder if you can tell me, what do you think happens to the sun at night time?
Ollie: ...Don't you know this?
JR: Well, I was hoping you might tell me!
Ollie: Well, I know what happens.
JR: Mmmm?
Ollie: When the sun comes down, the moon comes up.
JR: Mm-huh. That's right. So, when the sun comes down...
Ollie: The moon comes **up** (demonstrates with hand)
JR: Where does it go to, though, when it comes down?
Ollie: It comes down in the...west. And it goes all the wa'...all the way to the **east**. And it comes up in the **east**.
JR: How does that happen?
Ollie: Easy. Just like this (demonstrates with hand)...It just in it's turn, I think. Maybe it's just...maybe it's just like...Maybe God knows!
JR: Mm-huh?
Ollie: And I don't know, either.
JR: No? ...Well, if I give you a piece of paper, I wonder if you could **draw** me what you think happens. (Gives him paper)
Ollie: Well, there is one thing I could tell...
JR: Yes? What's that?
Ollie: What about this? The moon comes up from the s... See, the sun comes down from the hot, when the moon comes up from the cold.
JR: So where does the moon come up from?
Ollie: Well, see, I don't know. But I would think it might come from the north.
JR: Mm-huh?
Ollie: Wait a second! Cold nights in Mexico, and...and hot days...in (very softly) Mexico...
JR: How do you know about that – cold and...cold days, cold nights, and hot days in Mexico?
Ollie: Well, usually it's a hot day, and a...cold night. 'Cos usually they have it.
JR: How do you know?

> Ollie: Because my Mummy told me, 'cos, see, I don't think...No, well, Mischa must have told. And I **know** this. How? 'Cos...How can it happen? How can it happen by the sun and the moon...And the moon looks a little bit like this (curls his fingers to demonstrate).
> JR: Like what?
> Ollie: Like this (curls fingers again).
> JR: Mm-huh.
> Ollie: Well, there is one thing...At night, there's always (sings) 'Twinkle, twinkle, little dar'. That's a song about stars.
> JR: That's right. I've heard it. I've **sung** it sometimes, too.
> Ollie: And I've usually have got the stars, and the **moo-oon**...
> (Dialogue continues)

Concentrating simply on what Ollie 'knows' about the sun would present a somewhat limited picture of the complexity of his thinking. Using the three different planes of analysis, I believe, provides a much richer and more comprehensive picture of the competency of young children, than research that focuses simply on what children say or 'know'.

By examining the interpersonal plane, and including myself, as interviewer, in the analysis, we can learn a great deal more about Ollie. For example, though I had set the topic of the conversation, and asked the first question (and thus was initially the 'leader' in the activity), Ollie very quickly assumed a leadership role with his question, "Don't you know this?" followed by the statement, "Well, I know how it happens". This interpersonal lens also allows us to see what Rogoff (1997) calls 'shared thinking', or thinking that evolves from building on the ideas of others through shared endeavours. Thus, we can acknowledge not only Ollie's own personal ideas, but also the ideas that he is building through involvement with family members, in this case, Mummy and Mischa.

The community or contextual plane, allows us, among other things, to consider the impact of various home, school and societal influences, values and beliefs – here, a belief in God as being all-knowing ("Maybe it's just...maybe it's just like...Maybe God knows!"). If this is what is encouraged and supported by significant others, it is part of their shared knowledge and we cannot dismiss the child's ideas as necessarily 'wrong'.

Further, when conventional interviewing methodology is employed with young children there appears to be a tendency to overlook or avoid the "talk of many things" (as the Walrus says in Lewis Carroll's [1952] poem, *The Walrus and the Carpenter*) in order to focus on the 'topic of interest' to the researcher. However, by overlooking the talk about the "shoes and ships and sealing wax, cabbages and kings" (or, in Ollie's case, the west, the east, the hot days, the cold

nights, Mexico...), the consequence is that the researcher may gain an inaccurate or very incomplete picture about children's involved and intricate understandings, ideas and abilities.

The community plane of analysis can therefore also force us to examine the 'ways of behaving' or 'accepted ways of doing things' within various activities. In a more traditional approach to interviewing I might not have acknowledged Ollie's right to have a collaborative role in the dialogue (as opposed to being a 'subject' of research) and ended the interview after he had told me that the sun comes down and the moon comes up, nor have allowed him to 'wander about' in his talking. I might also have overlooked the specific cultural tools, such as the gestures, the pauses, 'thinking out loud', drawing, singing...

This recognition of the importance of cultural tools or artifacts, brought into focus through the contextual or community lens, is one way in which I, myself, as a participant in an earlier interview (part of a pilot study for this subsequent research) changed, as a result of the following incident which is drawn from my research journal:

> Henry, aged five, and I had been chatting while he drew a picture about what happened to the sun at night. Having spent some time drawing the sun and some clouds he then began sketching a house and talking about *Mr. Whiskers*. As we had been talking for several minutes I thought at this point that he had changed subjects and I was not going to discover any more about what he thought happened to the sun at night. *'What's Mr. Whiskers got to do with the sun?'* I thought. As a 'last ditch' effort to bring him back to the 'topic' (or so I thought) I asked:
>
> JR: So what's happening to the sun at night here in your drawing?
> Henry: I don't know.
> JR: What did you tell me before?
> Henry: The sun...the sun goes down. I still wanted to tell you about Mr. Whiskers!
> JR: Mmmm...Did you?
> Henry: Mr. Whiskers, and he says...
> JR: Mr...Who?
> Henry: Mr. Whiskers.
> JR: Mm-huh.
> Henry: And he sings the song, 'Oh, the moon comes up when the sun goes down...' (singing).

What I had overlooked here at this time was that Mr. Whiskers is a stage-name for an Australian young children's entertainer, Franciscus Henri. One of his songs is *Dancing in the Kitchen*, which begins with the lines:

> Oh, the moon comes up when the sun goes down, It brings another evening round... (Henri, 1991)

A critical factor that I had not previously given enough attention to was the 'tool' of singing - so important and relevant in the lives of many young children. Had I not subsequently focused on this singing in conversations, and considered only what children *said*, I might not have appreciated the complexity and richness of their thinking. Singing, I believe, is not just something which is enjoyable, but something which may, in fact, help them organise and express their thoughts, as well as communicate with others. This incident with Henry has lead me to a greater acceptance of singing as a cultural tool during interviews (that is, not overlooking it, nor thinking that it is an inconsequential part of an 'interview activity'), a view which was in fact strengthened during later interviews with other children, as a further extract from the continuing dialogue with Ollie demonstrates. At this stage he is beginning the second of what is to be three drawings about the sun and moon, and is continuing to chat as he draws.

> Ollie: ...I have to...Green one...Now...(picks up green texta)...First I have to do the night sky, which is black. (Exchanges green texta for black. Takes off top and draws across the top of the page)...Mmmm (admiring tone)...That's...night sky...And, **now**, I have to do...the **night grass**...It's very strange, the night. It's very strange.
> JR: Why is it strange?
> Ollie: Because, see...**this** sort is light (indicating a lighter green texta still in the pack), and **this** (indicating darker green texta in hand)...is **dark**.
> JR: Hum-huh. So why do you have to have it dark for night?
> Ollie: (As he draws a line across the bottom of the page) Dark's always for night. Night always has dark. But this...but there is one part...when someone's gonna 'Merry Christmas' ...concert...(The children in the other room have been practising Christmas songs) It's just about out the front...Da, da, dum (ascending pitch)...I have to start from this part. (Sings:) 'Rap, da, dummm, dum; rap, dap, dumm, dum; Rab, dab, dab, dummm. Rap, dap, dap, dum, rab, dab, dab, dummm; rab, dab, dab, dummm; rab, dab, dummm, dummm. When thee ni-ight...has co-mmme, and the land is da-ark; And thee mo-oon...is thee...oo-nly light...we see...Oh, I wo-on;'t...be afffra-

aid...No, I wo-oont...be afff-raid...Jest as long...as you...(softly) stand by mee'. (Louder) **See, that's part!**
JR: Of course, it's part, yes!

The particular song that Ollie is first humming then singing out loud is *Stand by Me*, sung by Ben E. King (Lieber, Stoller & King, 1998). Within a conventional approach to interviewing I may have ignored, or denied, the opportunity for this singing, and yet, seen through the contextual lens, it is an important cultural tool for Ollie, and one that is considered appropriate within the larger context in which the conversation occurred (that is, the school). It demonstrates, too, that he is not only, in part, thinking out loud, but also attempting to explain his thinking to another in his statement, "See, that's part!" As seen through the interpersonal lens, he has made links way ahead of the interviewer, and is trying to lead her to his view! It is an example of both his and my own participatory appropriation. Both of us have transformed our understanding and responsibility for the interview through our participation in the experience. It demonstrates, I believe, just one of the ways in which the activity of thinking cannot be examined in isolation, as it is entwined with the personal, interpersonal and the cultural or contextual.

When we examine and analyse interviews through the personal lens we can focus on each child's participation and engagement in the conversation, how their participation transforms during the activity, their personal communication styles and patterns, their past experiences, influences on their thinking, and so on. Through the interpersonal lens we can consider relationships (both within the interview itself, and at a more distant level), how participation might change during the course of the activity, the sharing and coordination of roles and responsibilities within the experience, guidance and collaboration, the building of shared knowledge (again, both within the interview context and beyond), and so forth. At the community or contextual level we can reflect on factors such as communication forms and styles of the community, the 'languages' used (in this case questioning, explaining, singing, drawing...), other cultural or contextual tools or artifacts, values, belief systems, philosophies (personal and institutional), the purpose of the activity, and the 'accepted ways of doing things'. Furthermore, consideration of the *interrelatedness* of all three planes presents us with a far more comprehensive picture of the child than traditional methods of analysis.

CONCLUSION

So often the data gathered in schools and preschools from interviews with children is used to inform teaching and curriculum design – and yet that 'data' is

frequently obtained in situations where children's thinking and explanations have been limited and restrained due to the consideration for little other than the 'individual' child, and her or his responses only to the 'topic of interest'. However, an interview should not be viewed as a solitary experience, nor as an activity in which two entities participate, isolated in essence from each other, and from the community or institutional context.

It is no longer helpful to analyse what a particular child thinks about a specific phenomenon at a particular point in time as a way of informing our teaching (Fleer & Robbins, 2001). Instead it may be more enlightening and useful to shift the focus to a sociocultural framework, where the unit of analysis is broadened from the individual to include the interpersonal and community contexts and relationships. The 'talk of many things' *is* important and relevant, and provides a far richer view of the child's competency and complexity and fluidity of thought.

This 'talk', though, takes time – a factor which is very important to take into account in research with young children. Without taking time, the intricacy and depth of thinking may not evolve, nor may it become evident to the researcher. Time is required, too, to incorporate specific cultural tools – be they drawing, painting, clay modelling, dancing, poetry, or any of what may be referred to as the hundred languages of childhood (Malaguzzi, 1993). Moreover, the use of cultural tools within interview activities is one way in which, as researchers, we can make our methods more contextually relevant and give a greater participatory role and more rights to children within the research process.

The sociocultural approach, with focus variously on personal, interpersonal and community planes of analysis, has much to offer those considering interviewing as a research technique. Such research methodology when applied to early childhood contexts and topics may provide data which, in turn, might question and challenge some of the existing universal norms and 'truths' about children and childhood.

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