

Chapter 10

Embracing Diversity in the Classroom: A Cross-cultural Perspective

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Chapter summary

This chapter offers a critical discussion of diversity and children's role as active participants and co-constructors in their own learning across home and educational settings in two distinct cultures. We argue that addressing issues of diversity and child agency requires an understanding of the broader context of children's learning within and beyond the early years setting – such as the family, home and community as key sites of socialisation which inform children's development. The discussion begins by considering different conceptual frameworks of development and learning, including neo-Confucian philosophy on the importance of human and social relationships in child development. We also look at western theorisations of learning as discursive and social (Vygotsky, 1978) and at the concepts of habitus, field, social and symbolic capital as a theoretical framework (Bourdieu, 1977) to explore and understand the ways in which children around the globe draw upon their social and cultural networks to negotiate their identity and position as learners. Finally, we discuss the implications of these conceptual frameworks for early years and primary practitioners in terms of evaluating their own pedagogical practice when engaging with children from diverse backgrounds and in diverse cultures.

During a recent interview with a nursery teacher in an inner-city primary school in England, the experienced teacher briefly described the diverse group of young children who, year after year, begin their formal education in her class:

Teacher: It's very much representative of our area, a very multicultural class with a high number of children with English as a second language and children coming in at a lower level than the national average

Researcher: In what way?

Teacher: Speaking, listening, emotionally ... personal health and social ... and their imaginative play, in most areas, probably their worldly experiences are quite limited and we have quite a large number of special needs. (Interview conducted by Cremin *et al.*, 2013)

The nursery teacher, Jean,¹ went on to describe how she uses playful pedagogy to encourage all children to be active participants in their own learning in the belief that play underpins understanding. Yet she had found creating the conditions to promote playful learning very challenging, partly due to the difficulties of enabling play among such a diverse group of young learners, but also due to the early education climate of accountability in England, where teachers, in Jean's view, 'have all these pressures from the curriculum, from many parents, from the Head' to produce hard evidence of young children's learning. Faced with these daunting challenges, how can early years and primary practitioners help children by enriching their personal and social resources through opportunities to play?

We address this fundamental question by placing the notion of educational equality at the heart of this chapter. We foreground the importance of thinking creatively about building inclusive learning communities that embrace diversity for our youngest members of society, whatever their background. All children live in diversity along intersections of gender, race, culture, class, ability and other differences, which contribute to their holistic experiences and

emerging identities as effective and competent learners. Children's experience of diversity and difference constantly evolves and equips them with varying degrees of cultural and social capital from which they are able to negotiate their understanding of the world. Through illustrative examples of practice in England and Singapore, we emphasise the importance of providing opportunities for children from diverse backgrounds to contribute and engage in the learning process, by creating pedagogical spaces from which practitioners are able to innovate and challenge normative approaches to practice, especially when working within the structure of a mandated curriculum. We begin by reflecting on neo-Confucian and Vygotskian conceptualisations of learning as community-based, discursive and social, then we move on to Bourdieuan concepts of habitus, field and social and symbolic capital.

Children negotiating their position as learners

Within the field of early years and early primary education in the western and non-western world,² there has been widespread recognition of the important role children play in negotiating their position as active learners in their everyday environments (for example, Anning *et al.*, 2009; Clark and Moss, 2001; Prout and James, 1997; Li *et al.*, 2012). In sociological research, children have come to be viewed as co-constructors of their own lives and cultures, through observing and participating actively in the community and society in which they live (Rogoff and Wertsch, 1984; Rogoff, 2003; Mayall, 2002; Corsaro, 2005; Tobin *et al.*, 1991; Tobin, 2007).

Research has shown that cultural traditions and differences are vital in shaping the norms of teaching and learning across educational settings (Rogoff and Wertsch, 1984; Rogoff, 2003;

Tobin, 2007; Li *et al.*, 2012; Wong, 2008), and that distinct, localised philosophical and theoretical frameworks influence the way that children and their learning are constructed. In a non-western context, the childhood historian Dardess (1991) traces the history of childhood in pre-modern China and highlights the central role of Confucianism in shaping pedagogy and children's learning in Chinese societies. He contends that Confucian teachings are aimed at fostering in children at an early age a distinctive social and cultural identity as defined by primordial ties within ethnic, kinship and familial groups. The notions of 'childhood' and 'a Confucian child' are first and foremost intertwined with the child's identity as part of the Chinese culture and community as a lived reality, rather than as an independent identity or sense of self. More recent literature also highlights the influence of Confucianism and its modernised form of neo-Confucianism on educational practice, as commonly observed in contemporary early years settings and primary classrooms in many Chinese societies (Li *et al.*, 2012; Tang and Maxwell, 2007).

As the cornerstone of Chinese tradition, Confucianism continues to have a pervasive influence on Chinese educational thought and practice. The overriding philosophy is that children's learning takes place in social and communal contexts, and that the traditions and norms of the society and community make a critical difference to the way children learn or feel. The findings of an ethnographic study of two Chinese kindergartens, for example, reveal that children are encouraged to become active learners in a communal learning environment, with a pedagogical emphasis on group learning and a collective teaching approach rather than focusing on independent learning and the individual child (Tang and Maxwell, 2007). From the teachers' perspectives, the study showed that such an approach was particularly effective for both pedagogical and practical reasons, given the large group of learners. Research also shows that the influence of neo-Confucianism as a philosophy and theory of education has

been instrumental in promoting the cultivation of children's sense of cooperation and collaboration in the classroom. While recognising the inherent hybridities and variations within cultures, researchers have foregrounded that these principles of collectivity and collegiality are highly valued in Chinese societies, based on the belief that children learn best from each other as active and social learners, and that cultural values and social beliefs play a key role in shaping children's learning strategies and educators' teaching practices (Wong, 2008; Li *et al.*, 2012).

In a western context, much of the work on children's role as active learners builds on the ground-breaking socio-cultural theory of cultural psychologist Vygotsky (1978) whose works highlight the participatory nature of learning, where children appropriate the conceptual resources of the cultural world they are born into. From this socio-cultural perspective, development is viewed as a process of gradual internalisation proceeding from the social (*interpersonal*, i.e. between people) to the individual (*intrapersonal*, i.e. within the mind of an individual). For learning to occur, both interpersonal and intrapersonal processes must be experienced: at the interpersonal level, the learner's understanding is hazy, whereas at the intrapersonal level the learner tries to make sense of new knowledge and connect it to what he or she already knows (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). Vygotsky argues the learner is often reliant on the support of either an adult or more knowledgeable peer to guide and share problem-solving, in situations where the child can take the initiative but is supported when necessary. Gradually, the child can begin to take control and the adult or peer can step back and act as a less involved yet sympathetic supporter. In this way, the child becomes more familiar with new concepts and, over the course of time, these concepts become incorporated into the child's repertoire of understandings. Of course, children can learn on their own, but Vygotsky argues that there is always a 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD), i.e. an area of learning

between what a child can do independently and what the same child can do when supported by a more knowledgeable other (Vygotsky, 1978).

Applying Vygotsky's socio-cultural perspective of learning to their observations of mother/child dyadic interaction, Wood *et al.* (1976) developed the concept of *scaffolding* to describe how mothers offer contingent, graduated assistance to help their children achieve complicated tasks which they would not be able to complete on their own. The concept of scaffolding subsequently led to changes in how the role of the teacher was perceived in classroom contexts: teachers were encouraged to scaffold learning by constructing external knowledge in classroom discourse, so that knowledge could be internalised by children and this process would gradually contribute to their own understanding (see Edwards and Mercer, 1987; Edwards and Knight, 1994). However, the principles of scaffolding are based on mothers guiding individual children through one-to-one interaction within relationships that are characterised by high levels of trust and intersubjectivity. These favourable conditions for learning only rarely occur in classroom situations, where one or two teachers may be responsible for up to 30 children (or more in some cultures) and this makes it difficult for teachers to offer contingent support for each child. There may also be a lack of shared language and certainly an imbalance of power and knowledge between the teacher and child.

Furthermore, activities in the classroom are usually initiated by the teacher rather than the child, so a child might not feel motivated to engage in a particular classroom-based learning activity. Research into scaffolding in the primary classroom suggests that if classroom learning is pre-planned and teacher-led, then it risks becoming ritualistic rather than principled, with children going through the motions of completing the tasks they are set, but with no final handover of knowledge (Edwards and Mercer, 1987). To resolve this problem,

Mercer (1994) proposes that scaffolding in a group situation can work if teachers adopt a democratic teaching style and allow the synergy of a learning group to develop, where children are able to see the reasons for learning and are free to experiment with and talk about tasks. Bruner (1996) adds that it is incumbent on the teacher to understand what individual children already know, to ensure they are familiar and comfortable with the language and format of activities, and to maintain collaboration and negotiation.

However, a pedagogic model of scaffolding largely assumes that knowledge can be ‘handed over’, and does not fully allow for the idiosyncratic world views held by different teachers and different learners. In this chapter, we argue that Bourdieu’s (1977) theorisation of *field*, *habitus* and *social* and *symbolic capital* offers a complementary and nuanced understanding of classroom practice which takes account of the diversity and idiosyncrasies of how individuals’ personal, social and cultural knowledge and experience shape their active participation in learning.

In Bourdieu’s theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1977) human action is viewed as being constituted through a dialectical relationship³ between the individual’s thought/activity (the habitus) and the objective world (the field). Bourdieu conceives of social and cultural spaces as ‘fields’ in which individuals learn certain ways of being, doing and interacting. For example, the field of education is characterised by its own aims, objectives and principles, yet these change as learners move through different phases (such as the sub-fields of early years, primary, secondary and tertiary education) and are mostly implied tacitly rather than made explicit.⁴ As individuals move from one field to another, such as from home to nursery or

from nursery to primary school, their interactions in the new setting become dependent upon the affinity and/or disaffinity between the more familiar field (home/nursery) and the new field or sub-field (nursery/primary school).

Habitus describes how, through ongoing social interaction in different fields, each individual subconsciously observes and assimilates the principles of practical action in each new field and in so doing acquires a system of generative schemes and dispositions in each field. By existing in social spaces, individuals encounter familiar and unfamiliar fields, but they always carry with them their previous experiences and the generating structures that characterise their habitus. In a familiar field, there is a high degree of congruence between the habitus and the field, but in an unfamiliar field, such as experienced by young children during the early days, weeks and months of nursery education, there may be a low degree of congruence. The congruence will inevitably vary from child to child: if there is a high degree of congruence between the social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the learner, the teacher and the modus operandi of a phase of education, then educational 'success' is more likely. If there is a low degree of congruence, then 'success' is less likely. But these are not fixed states of being. Rather, there is a dialectical negotiation between the individual's habitus and the field, with the potential for the field to become embodied in the habitus and for the habitus to constitute the field as a meaningful world endowed with sense and value. Through ongoing social interaction in new fields, each individual *subconsciously* acquires and adjusts to the systems, the kinds of language, generative schemes and dispositions they encounter in those fields, and, in so doing, equips themselves with what Bourdieu (1977) terms *social, cultural and linguistic capital*. If a child feels they belong to a new field, then the values and modus operandi of the new field gradually become a part of the individual's habitus.

Bourdieu's theory is, therefore, highly compatible with Vygotsky's: the habitus is formed in response to external social structures and can be viewed as the internalisation of those relations. But the process of internalisation is not assured – it is dialectical and any knowledge exchange is always contingent on the degree of fit between the field, an individual's habitus and how successful they are at adapting to the social, cultural and linguistic capital that characterise the new field. As a young boy and native speaker of Gascon (a now dead language of the French Atlantic Pyrenees), Bourdieu himself felt out of place when he first started boarding school, and came to realise:

Rather than providing equal opportunities and a meritocracy, schools were a kind of cultural filter through which children passed. Those with the necessary cultural dispositions gained from their family backgrounds found themselves to be as if a 'fish in water', swimming with the current; those without such prerequisites had the opposite experience and were themselves continuously ill-at-ease in the academic environment. (Grenfell, 2009, p. 440)

Bourdieuian theory has made a significant contribution to our thinking about childhood – children are no longer viewed as passive and vulnerable beings whose development and learning are determined by a physiological and biological process. Rather, they are competent individuals whose realities and experiences are socially and culturally constructed, and mediated by a complex web of values and beliefs. We adopt this approach to describe how young children participate actively in the social world of nursery education, and how teachers can include familiar frames of reference and resources to enable young children to build social networks and to appropriate cultural knowledge. We suggest that this sociological framework allows for children to be viewed as able and active agents who have the

competence and capacity in their own right to understand and make meaning of the world, and recognises children's competence in strategically negotiating their roles and agency as expert individuals and learners.

Key questions for reflection

What problems do teachers face if they try to employ the theoretical concept of scaffolding to support learning in the classroom?

In what ways can the work of Bourdieu help us to understand how school systems can serve to reproduce social and cultural inequalities and to create more equitable educational environments?

Early years and primary education as pedagogical spaces for embracing diversity

Given the well-established links between children and their socio-cultural context, the role of early years and primary educators in creating a pedagogical space for children to be valued as participants and co-constructors of their own learning is crucial. Ang (2010) argues that, as cultural and educational institutions, early education settings are microcosms of the wider society. They reflect the inherent complexities of a world that is typified by diversity and plurality, offering children opportunities to understand and learn about the complexity of the world around them. Issues of diversity and child agency therefore remain at the heart of education practice as those who work with children on a daily basis share a commitment to providing high-quality educational experience where all children feel valued as active co-constructors of their learning.

However, mandatory national curricula tend to reflect, explicitly and implicitly, the values of dominant social and cultural forces and, in the case of the revised *Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)* (DfE, 2012) and *National Curriculum* (DfE, 2014) in England, to base normative models of development on linguistically, socially and culturally specific criteria. These normative expectations can act to compound wider issues of inequality and social justice which in turn remain problematic in practice.

Key questions for reflection

In what ways can early years educators be responsible for the delivery of statutory curricula facilitate, recognise and be responsive to the diverse realities of children in their setting?

How can children be supported and empowered to respond positively to diversity?

Example 1

In this first example of creating pedagogical spaces that embrace diversity and promote child agency, we focus on data from a study of young children in an inner-city nursery and primary school in England, in the classroom of the nursery teacher, Jean, who was introduced at the beginning of this chapter. In this study, we were asked to evaluate a particular teacher training programme for storytelling and story-acting, called the Helicopter Technique (Cremin *et al.*, 2013), and we observed how the programme was delivered in three nursery and three reception classrooms (three- to five-year-old children). These settings were all operating within the revised *EYFS* (DfE, 2012) which places a strong emphasis on normative models of linguistic and cognitive development. The teachers were keen to counter some of

these rigours by creating learning spaces where all the children in their classrooms would engage actively in their own learning. The Helicopter Technique is based on the storytelling and story-acting curriculum developed by Vivian Gussin Paley in the 1980s, which is used fairly widely in the USA, but remains comparatively unknown in other countries (see Paley, 1990, 1992, 2004).

In essence, this story-based pedagogy involves the teacher listening to short stories told by individual children during the course of a school day (around four or five stories in total each day) and transcribing the stories verbatim, usually in a dedicated 'Story Book'. There are a few fixed rules: the child's story can be about any topic of the child's choosing, but only as long as one page in the Story Book, and the teacher must not suggest any corrections or changes to what the child says. Later the same day, the story is acted out by the whole class on an improvised stage, which is made quite simply by creating a large rectangle with masking tape around which the children and teacher(s) sit. The storytellers can choose which character they would like to be in their own story, and subsequent roles are assigned to each child in turn around the stage. Paley argues that these rules have proven to be the most democratic way to ensure each child is offered an equal opportunity both to tell and to act out a story (Paley, 1992). At no point are children coerced into taking part in story-acting or storytelling if they prefer not to. Over time, we observed in each class how all children opted to take part in the storytelling and story-acting after just a few weeks. From a Bourdieuan perspective, we can argue that, among the complexity of activity the children experienced in the *field* of the nursery classroom, the predictability of the Helicopter Technique, with its clear parameters and set format, offered an increasingly familiar territory where the children felt valued, safe and motivated to become active participants in an enjoyable and shared activity.

Initially, the teachers enrolled in this training programme had many concerns: that ‘doing anything with this class as a whole class is quite challenging’; that the technique would be too intimidating for ‘shy’ children or for those with low ‘resilience’; that the story-acting session might fail as ‘just keeping them focused is quite hard work’. Teachers were particularly concerned about the value of the technique for young children in the early stages of learning English, and that by telling their stories children would expose the ‘differences in the way that they’re using language’.

However, as the teachers’ confidence grew, and as more and more children opted to become actively involved in this new activity, the teachers’ fears were assuaged. As Jean commented towards the end of the training programme, she found the technique was ‘fantastic for their development and for their understanding of the diversity in the classroom’. So why was it so successful? Here, we present two short examples which illustrate the potential of the Helicopter Technique as an inclusive activity where children in classroom communities that are characterised by diversity are all included as active and valued participants.

Jean described one English-speaking four-year-old boy, Adair, as ‘very, very shy’; although he seemed to enjoy role play, he was reluctant to speak in class: ‘Normally, when you ask him to come and do something with you, you just get one or two words.’ However, during an interview conducted during the sixth week of the training programme, Jean described how Adair soon took to the Helicopter Technique, and began to participate actively after watching other children tell and act out their stories in class: ‘in that situation he’s really confident, and he must have realised that I was totally relaxed. I was writing down what everybody was saying, and not sort of expecting something from him.’

Jean explained that Adair tended to choose characters ‘from stories that we’ve done in school, and presumably stories he has at home’. For example, during the second week of the programme, he told a story which drew on the traditional tale of Little Red Riding Hood:

The big bad wolf skipped to the Grandma’s house. And gobbled the Grandma up. Red Riding Hood came to Grandma’s house. And she can’t stop him. And he started to gobble up Little Red Riding Hood.

The underlined words were roles Jean identified for children to act out later: to promote the inclusion of multiple child actors for each story, roles were assigned to both animate and inanimate story components. Here, roles were assigned to the wolf, Grandma’s house, Grandma and Red Riding Hood. By week 7, Adair continued to build his narratives around traditional tales, and to add in characters from popular culture:

The buffalo and three cows and Donald Duck came and Mickey Mouse came. And the duck was in the pond crying because the water went. And the little duck ate breadcrumbs. The little bear came and had a sleep. And then Goldilocks came. Goldilocks took her clothes off and had a sleep. And then it was raining and they all had their umbrellas.

Jean commented how the technique allowed quiet children in her class, like Adair, to ‘shine’ and gave them ‘a voice and an arena that they wouldn’t have otherwise’. The storytelling started to build bridges between the field of the school environment and the individual children’s

‘habitus’, allowing teachers to gain insights into children’s personal interests, concerns and home reading practices which they quietly and confidently shared through their stories.

Similarly for bilingual and multilingual children, the technique offered a collaborative environment for self-expression. Four-year-old Elana, of North European and Nigerian parentage, was learning English as her third language when she joined the nursery classroom, and Jean commented how much she had learned about Elana through her stories, which had ‘the same theme all the time ... it’s always something to do with home and coming to school’. Some were very short, as the following example illustrates:

My mum drive me to school. And we take off school bag now. We play with (girl’s name) and (girl’s name) too.

By sharing her stories in class, Elana was able to bring herself and her home world into the classroom. This in turn enabled the teacher and support workers to understand her interests and concerns, and to incorporate these in their support for her learning. Normally quiet and withdrawn, Elana began to enjoy acting out roles, and Jean particularly valued the opportunities the acting provided for children to engage with the meanings of words by attempting to represent their materiality through embodied action:

Elana did a very good house and I was quite impressed with that and she’s EAL as well so I think it’s working quite well with our EAL children because all the courses I’ve been with to do with EAL and language it’s about them knowing the objects to be able to know the words, and for her to know the word and to then act out that word that’s quite impressive.

To summarise, the Helicopter Technique offered opportunities for children to exercise their agency, self-determination and decision-making as young literacy learners in the classroom. Overall, we observed approximately 130 children taking part in the programme, and focused on eighteen case study children from diverse backgrounds. We found strong evidence that the technique contributed positively to children's self-expression and confidence in the classroom; also teachers commented how it enhanced individual children's 'profile within the class', and how they 'are able to show themselves in a different light to the other children because they might be very good at making up stories or acting out stories which other children will enjoy'. Through their ongoing participation in the technique, individual children appeared subconsciously to acquire the kinds of language and participatory dispositions expected in the storytelling and story-acting, and, in so doing, equipped themselves with a small but significant quota of social and linguistic capital.

Example 2

A short narrative observation from an ethnographic study of preschools in Singapore offers a second interesting example of practice which illustrates the importance of children's role as active participants not only in their own development but also as co-constructors of skills and values that afford them social and cultural capital. The nursery, Dixie Kids Childcare Centre, is a preschool in Singapore which offers full and partial day care for preschool children aged eighteen months to six years.

The term 'preschool' in Singapore generally refers to two main types of provision: childcare centres and kindergartens, which differ mainly in their function and hours of provision.

Kindergartens cater for three- to six-year-old children and offer daily sessional educational programmes, ranging from two to four hours per session, while childcare centres generally provide full day care, with many settings also offering infant care for children aged two to eighteen months. In addition to these main providers, there are also private for-profit settings, religious-based kindergartens and semi-government-funded and voluntary not-for-profit settings. Primary schooling in Singapore refers to compulsory education which lasts six years for children aged seven to twelve years. While compulsory education and the primary school curriculum are regulated and maintained by the Singapore Ministry of Education, preschools are relatively more autonomous, having the independence to determine the curriculum and stipulate their own goals and approaches (Retas and Kwan, 2000). As with many predominately Chinese societies in the Southeast Asia region, where Chinese make up the majority ethnic group, Singapore's education landscape is influenced by traditional Asian, neo-Confucian values rather than the more individualistic values of western societies, with a strong emphasis on the values of social cohesion and community-building to create a learning culture in educational settings, and ultimately in the wider society (Mortimore *et al.*, 2000).

Like most childcare centres in Singapore, Dixie Kids is open six days a week, 7am to 7pm during week days and 7am to 1pm on Saturdays. Over 90 per cent of the 64 children enrolled attend full time. The children and families are diverse, reflecting the plurality of the population and multicultural community living in the surrounding local neighbourhood. The setting was part of an ethnographic study which explored the nature and diversity of preschool provisions in Singapore. Sustained observations undertaken of the setting over two years for three to six weeks at a time showed a distinctive feature of the centre was its emphasis on group learning and socialisation, particularly mixed-aged interactions where the children are often encouraged to play and interact across the age groups. The routine at Dixie

Kids allowed a large proportion of time and ample opportunities in the curriculum for extended mixed-age and group socialisation from the toddlers to the older five- to six-year-olds. When asked if there was one aspect of the setting's practice that she thought was particularly important for the children's learning, Rena, the setting's principal, responded: 'learning to be part of a group, mixing with different children, all children in the centre from the groups and classes, learning to get along with one another'.

The setting was organised according to age-related criteria: a playgroup for children eighteen months to two years, a nursery class 1 (N1) for two- to three-year-olds, N2 class for three- to four-year-olds, kindergarten 1 (K1) for four- to five-year-olds, and kindergarten 2 (K2) for five- to six-year-olds. However, during the observations it became clear that while these categorisations were necessary for administrative purposes of documentation and registration, the divisions between them were not always sustained in practice. The physical environment of the setting, with its open plan layout and low-level shelves used as improvised partitions, led to children across the ages constantly streaming in and out of the 'classes' throughout the day, interacting and stopping to chat with each other or just pausing to observe what the other children were doing. When, as often happens, a child gets distracted and wanders off to another group, the practitioner or children from the other group incorporates them into their activity. Communal spaces were also included in the design of the centre, and these further encourage the children to play together. Older children frequently interact with the younger ones as they go about their daily activities, helping them with everyday tasks such as putting their shoes on, getting their water bottles, resolving peer conflicts or simply walking the younger children to the toilet. The children spontaneously move around the open space of the centre and interact with each other throughout the day across the different groups.

In many ways, the children's free movement is facilitated by the setting's layout, reflecting the pedagogical emphasis on group work and collaboration, with the more confident ones helping the less confident. The daily curriculum was structured around mixed-aged activities, where all the children (from two- to six-year-olds) would come together to engage in communal activities such as during meal times, morning assemblies, play and nap time, early evening get-togethers before leaving for home, or playing outdoors in the neighbourhood playground with other local children. The children are taught to learn together and learn from each other, rather than explore their learning individually. This pedagogical practice may seem markedly distinct from many early years settings such as those in the UK, where the organisation of children by age groups remains the norm. Dixie Kids' practice encourages us to rethink the age-based determinations which govern the way early years provision is delivered in many settings, and instead offers a view of early years education which prioritises peer learning and children's active engagement in their social contexts. In their study of *Preschool in Three Cultures*, Tobin, Wu and Davidson (1991) contend that preschools are essentially cultural institutions that both reflect and support the cultures of which they are a part. It could be argued that the pedagogical practice in Dixie Kids is culturally imbued and influenced by the neo-Confucian philosophy of the importance of human relationships and social relations rather than a more individualistic approach to development and learning. There is a harmony in the way the design and pedagogy in this centre steer children towards group participation, and provide them with opportunities to experience being members of a community where they can learn from each other and, in the process, acquire social and cultural capital by becoming imbued with the skills and values that are most highly prized in their community and beyond. When considering the children's experiences in Dixie Kids, there is, therefore, a need to acknowledge that the broader discourse of culture, community practices and socialisation are significant for the way

children negotiate their own learning and identities. These experiences afford the children in the centre what Bourdieu (1991) refers to as *habitus*, acquired social dispositions and frames of reference, where they can develop different ways of thinking about and acting upon their social interactions in their cultural worlds. These frames of reference serve to equip the children in Dixie Kids with the symbolic capital that they need to engage with others in their everyday lives within and outside the setting (Bourdieu, 1991).

New visions

In describing how children and their learning are conceptualised in various parts of the world, we are faced with different cultural descriptions of children's role as learners within a broader, richer perspective of how children develop and learn. The examples above remind us that early years and other educational settings are essentially key sites of socialisation which inform and are informed by children's experiences as active learners, albeit in contrasting cultural and geographical contexts. From a cross-cultural perspective, both communities in which the above two examples are placed generate their own meanings of children's experiences and ways of learning. The purpose of the examples is not to be representative of particular cross-cultural assumptions as no comparison can be accurate or straightforward; what they do show, however, is that, with given variations, the children in both contexts show the situated nature of learning as a form of social practice and negotiation that is richly embedded in cultural values. Both vignettes illustrate how children learn and develop in myriad ways that are more often than not centred around their spontaneous 'everyday' socialisation and informal activities that are not 'designed' or created artificially through the enactment of a formal prescribed curriculum. It is also clear from the examples of practice that there exist varying degrees of cultural and social capital which children are able to draw

on from both within and outside the early years setting to negotiate their classroom-based socialisation and co-construct a shared learning space. We suggest that Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, social and symbolic capital offer valuable insights that can deepen understandings of young children's active meaning-making. As early years practitioners know all too well, a child's knowledge is only made evident when it is exercised, but there can be many mechanisms at play in an early years environment that mitigate against young children exercising their agency and displaying their competency. In this regard, the concept of *habitus* is particularly well suited to the study of interaction in diverse social environments and offers a useful tool for understanding the impact of context on young children's meaning-making.

Yet, it is ironic that even as research shows a key feature of young children's learning is its contextual and contingent nature, situated in localised social and cultural practices, practitioners are increasingly expected to work within the confines of a mandated national curriculum which assumes a standardised context and universal, normative measures of children's development and achievement. The danger is that the role of early education under such conditions is relegated to preparatory support for formal schooling, tasked with the prime goal of meeting national and international educational performance targets, rather than as a key site for personal, localised socialisation and agency. As Dahlberg and Moss (2005) suggest, 'preschools are increasingly bounded by other normalising frameworks either required by government or offered by experts: standards, curricula, accreditation, guidelines on best practice, inspections, audits, the list rolls on'.

The move towards a 'school readiness' agenda in a climate of educational accountability and assessment, as brought about by changes to the early years curriculum in England in recent

years, has fuelled deep concerns that the increased emphasis on educational targets, learning goals and professional accountability has become a major characteristic of early years practice (Ball, 2003; Pugh, 2010; Moss, 2006).

Key questions for reflection

How appropriate is it to implant a standardised educational framework onto children whose learning and backgrounds are so diverse and still very much evolving?

How can early years settings offer an empowering pedagogical space for children to learn and develop within a domain of their own design at their own pace?

The potential for children's individual and collective agency is immense. In this chapter we have drawn on the work of Bourdieu (1977, 1998) to understand how school systems can serve to reproduce social and cultural inequalities and to discuss how teachers can create ways in which children are proactively engaged not only in the shaping of their own learning and social environment but also shaping and supporting the learning of other children. We argue for the importance of thinking creatively about building inclusive learning communities for our youngest, for the need to offer opportunities that involve children in empowering ways which recognise children's competences, interests and experiences. Children's meaning-making is inextricably interwoven within the contexts of their socio-cultural environment as they build their knowledge and experiences with others around them. Drawing on the discourse of the sociology of childhood and socio-cultural theory, it is, therefore, important to understand how children's agency shapes, and at the same time is influenced by, their experiences in the family, early years setting and wider community life. The challenge for practitioners and all those who work in the early years is to take seriously

the agency and rights of children in their own learning and development, especially in the midst of increasing surveillance and accountability in a highly politicised and evolving sector.

Teacher education/training task

Task 1

Think about the diversity of the children in your setting. Consider how this influences and impacts on the way you plan and deliver the curriculum. Drawing on the theoretical perspectives introduced in this chapter about Bourdieu's concepts of social and symbolic capital, how would you create spaces within the curriculum for the children to negotiate and exercise their autonomy, and build on their prior knowledge and experiences to contribute to the learning process? Produce a list of examples of how you would go about creating an empowering and inclusive environment that values children's agency and symbolic capital. Discuss this with your peers or colleagues.

Task 2

This chapter contends that the expectations of a formal prescribed curriculum can sometimes pose challenges for practitioners when driven to meet certain educational targets or goals. This is incongruent with research evidence which shows that children's learning takes place both formally and informally beyond the preset curriculum in the everyday contexts of the family, home and community as key sites of socialisation which inform their overall development.

Reflecting on your own practice, consider some of the tensions or challenges that you face when supporting children's learning within the expectations and confines of the curriculum in your setting. How do these challenges impact on your practice? How might you rethink or redesign your practice to support children's learning beyond meeting these educational goals or targets? You may wish to approach some of your colleagues to find out the tensions and challenges they face. Have they experienced similar challenges and how do they address them? This will no doubt create the basis for an interesting and thought-provoking discussion.

Notes

¹ All participant names and locations are pseudonyms.

² The authors recognise the complexities in the use of language, especially in polarised constructs such as 'western' and 'non-western', 'East' and 'West'. While acknowledging the need to problematise these concepts, the phrase 'western and non-western world' is used here in the broadest sense to refer to the largely contrasting geopolitical borders between Euro-America, Africa and Asia, and the varying differences in histories, traditions and cultures within and across the regions.

³ The term 'dialectic' implies the presence of disagreement, and it is not synonymous with *debate* or *discourse*. In the latter, there can be discussion without fundamental disagreement, whereas in dialectics there is always a tension to be resolved (or not). Here, the tension is between an individual's habitus and the particular field encountered by that individual.

⁴ For more detailed discussion, see Grenfell and James, 1998.

Further reading

Young, M. (2013). Overcoming the Crisis in Curriculum Theory: A Knowledge-based Approach. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*. 45 (2). 101–18.

This journal article discusses the term ‘curriculum’ and offers different theoretical perspectives of how the term can be conceptualised. It is useful in problematising our understanding of the nature of curriculum (what it is for and for whom) and the implications for pedagogy and teaching practice.

Ball, S. (2003). The Teacher’s Soul and the Terrors of Performativity. *Journal of Education Policy*. 18 (2). 215–28.

This academic paper discusses the origins, processes and effects of performativity on education. It argues that performativity is a new mode of state regulation which makes it possible to govern in an ‘advanced liberal’ way, but which requires individual practitioners to respond to targets, indicators and evaluations and to set aside their personal beliefs and commitments.

Bourdieu, P. (1998). *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

In this book Pierre Bourdieu clarifies his theoretical approach and his ‘philosophy of action’, which is condensed in the key concepts of habitus, field and capital. He emphasises the two-way relationship between the objective structures of social fields and the incorporated structures of the habitus. This is not an easy read, but provides an accessible route into Bourdieu’s theories.

Paley, V. G. (1990). *The Boy Who Would be a Helicopter: The Uses of Storytelling in the Classroom*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

In this book, Paley describes her pioneering work on storytelling, focusing on the challenge posed by the isolated child to teachers and classmates in the classroom community. It tells the story of Jason, described as ‘a loner and an outsider’ and how, through his storytelling, he ultimately became included in the social world of his classmates. As Paley recounts Jason's struggle, she presents a vision of the classroom as a crucible where the young discover themselves and learn to confront new problems in their daily experience.

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