

Awareness for early childhood educators: Working in different cultural contexts

Kim Jenson | *Teacher, International Kindergarten, Zhuhai, China*

A professional educator situated in a cultural context significantly different from their own may encounter many opportunities and challenges that can influence their participation in this learning and professional community. In order to overcome cultural barriers that could potentially hinder their teaching instruction and professionalism, a teacher in this situation must acknowledge the traditions, values and beliefs of the predominant culture. Through accepting the differences and actively seeking ways to effectively engage with their colleagues and classroom pupils, a teacher can learn how to be an active and valuable member of this community to ultimately benefit the learning environment they intend to create.

A professional educator working in a community of learning where the predominant cultural context is significantly different from their own experiences many challenges, yet in this context there are also opportunities. Culture is a set of practices, beliefs and values that give order and meaning to the life of a group, with “learned language, beliefs, values and behaviours infused into every aspect of [their] lives” (Evans & Gunn as cited in Gunn, Bennett, Evans, Peterson & Welsh, 2013, p. 3). Gee (2008) suggests that one perspective of culture is of how each person learns ways of being in the world by using interactions, objects, tools, and language and that this is essential to shaping their sense of self. Culture is also the base on which a person can establish and build their funds of knowledge and identity. A person’s funds of knowledge and funds of identity underlie their general function and development in society, while their individual identity actively defines them (Cooper & Hedges 2014; Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2013). Within a culture, a person’s knowledge and identity are based on cultural factors. These factors can be exclusive or share similar aspects with other cultures, but between significantly different cultures they can be extremely diverse. In a community, individuals develop an identity associated with that community. They learn to share and participate within the group, as in a community of learning all members are active. No role is considered passive as participants master the knowledge and skills of the community, learning from old-timers in the process of becoming full participants in a sociocultural practice (Cooper, 2014; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1994). The main objective for a professional educator in this context is to overcome the obstacles and utilise favourable circumstances in determining how they can become active members and obtain full participation in this community.

Due to the differences in social beliefs, community traditions, behavioural values and language between the professional educator’s culture and the predominant culture, there are both initial opportunities and challenges around working in this community of learning. Understanding and accepting the diversity between their cultural funds of knowledge and the predominant culture’s practices is an essential starting point for a professional educator to work mutually with others in the community of learning. An initial opportunity for the professional educator is that through appreciating and being aware of the differences between the cultures, they may then be able to identify and recognise their own cultural identity in this context. Knowledge of an identity, whether one’s own or of others, requires “an understanding of the funds of practices, beliefs, knowledge and ideas that people make use of” (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2013, p. 31). Before mutual cooperation and participation in a community of learning can begin, a professional educator needs to be aware of and understand their own cultural identity so that they can understand others (Gunn et al., 2013). Therefore, by acknowledging their cultural identity, a professional educator will understand and recognise their own cultural funds of knowledge and appreciate and value those of others. In an early childhood setting respect for cultures is a key component for teachers’ understanding and practice (Ritchie, 2010). By participating in a

significantly different cultural context, a professional educator can begin to understand their own cultural identity and they are better able to reflect and see their cultural identity as part of a larger multicultural society (Gunn et al., 2013).

The quality of participation in a community of practice creates the need for belonging and membership in this community (Banks & Mhunpiew, 2012; Hodges, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991;). Interacting with other members in the community of learning, such as other professional educators whose cultural background is significantly different, is an opportunity for a professional educator to establish connections that will further their participation in the group. Through professional dialogue, a professional educator gains an opportunity to form stronger relationships and promote better cultural understandings with their colleagues, leading to greater knowledge of each other through interaction and collaboration, while also having the opportunity for personal reflection on their professional identity in this context. Thus, this leads to a more successful learning community (Grey, 2011; Iyer & Reese, 2013). Grey (2011) also noted that in an early childhood setting, professional dialogue is a medium between teachers to develop and understand each other's values "while alleviating the tension that may form within a teaching team if conflicting personal theories are not well understood" (p. 23).

Learning from and actively interacting with other members to acquire knowledge and better understand the predominant culture is an opportunity for a professional educator. Equally "through sociocultural practices, individuals not only learn the actual activities, but they also learn to be members of these social and cultural communities, to experience themselves in a particular way" (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2013, p. 34), ultimately increasing their participation in the community of learning. However, an obvious challenge presents itself in this context. If the values and beliefs of the predominant culture are too separate in practice, participation in the community can be hindered. Wenger (2010), when discussing boundary interactions, comments that "if experience and competence are too disconnected, if the distance is too great, not much learning is likely to take place" (p. 126). A teacher who cannot connect and adapt to the learning context they are in will experience difficulty and frustration. If they cannot adjust their teaching style and beliefs to communicate adequately they will not be able to participate effectively in this community of practice. To connect to a community through participation, a newcomer must identify and find a place. This presents a challenge if the cultural way of understanding is too diverse (Hodges, 1998; Wenger, 2010). When cultural differences create a barrier, the opportunity to achieve full participation in a community of learning can be denied to a professional educator.

In an early childhood context, differences in teaching strategy and developmentally appropriate practice obstruct the creation of participatory relationships in a community of learning as the cultural way of understanding young children "is not necessarily shared or understood or valued across different cultures" (Rogoff et al. as cited in Barron, 2009, p. 347). This challenge is probably the most serious one an educator could face.

In relation to the previous discussion, if a professional educator overcomes a cultural barrier, another challenge presents itself. They must now negotiate and form an alternative identity that aligns with the predominant culture's beliefs and values. To successfully accomplish this, a professional educator must combine the knowledge and skills gained from the predominant culture with their prior knowledge in order for the culture to be understandable and relatable to them. However, Gee (2008) cautions that the acquisition of 'the new way of life' may not align well with one's own cultural identity. If there is internal resistance between their cultural funds of knowledge and the predominant culture's values and practices, an appropriate alternative identity suitable for the community of learning will not form, hindering their participation. Furthermore, even if an alternative cultural identity to suit this context was achieved, their original cultural identity may be considered a permanent barrier, therefore continually blocking their prospects of becoming full members in the community (Wenger, 2010). If a professional educator experiences diversity and difference as an obstruction because some members of the community of learning may not easily accept

them, they will fail to become members of the community, or only achieve limited participation, even if they have a situated identity in the community of learning (Iyer & Reese, 2013).

In an early childhood setting within a community of learning, a teacher should be involved in the lives of the children they teach with keen awareness of their wellbeing. In a significantly different cultural context, an educator must have sociocultural mindfulness and hold affirming views towards diversity (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Although there is an opportunity in establishing professional relationships through dialogue and interaction with other educators on the path to full participation in a community of learning, there is a challenge concerning children. Whereas adults are more open and accepting of diversity and forming cross-cultural relationships, young children are less inclined to form connections with those that are different. Different aspects may include differences in physical appearances, communication styles, beliefs and attitudes (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Forming connections with children in the community of learning will be difficult if they are initially unsure of a teacher. Likewise, however, the professional educator may also find it difficult to relate to the children. As children learn the cultural practices and language used by their families and communities, for a professional educator to form authentic connections with them the teacher must be motivated to understand the students' experiences and adjust their understanding and perspectives of them (Genshi as cited in Cooper & Hedges, 2014). Molina (2012) quoted a teacher, Ramona, who commented that "she can never really understand her student's experiences unless she lived them herself" (p. 228) yet knowing through experience is not as advantageous as forming authentic connections, especially with young children. Cooper and Hedges (2014) comment that "teachers need to be trustworthy and respectful and make appropriate efforts to overcome any barriers that may exist to working in partnership" (p. 171). A teacher needs to make meaningful attempts to connect to the children, to further form interactive relationships. Patience and an understanding of the child's mindset towards difference can overcome such challenges.

Through these interactive relationships, an opportunity presents itself by using the children's funds of knowledge as an opportunity to learn about the deeper cultural development of the children in this community of learning as teachers can look to children as a source of knowledge (Keat, Strickland & Marinak, 2009). Being culturally responsive begins by building relationships as a way to better understand students, and this can be achieved through meaningful engagement with a child's home culture, language, values and beliefs (Ritchie, 2010; Toppel, 2015).

Originally from Aotearoa New Zealand Māori and Pākehā descent, I moved to Southern China as an early childhood teacher, and although English is a predominant global language, many people in China do not speak it. Mandarin quickly became my second language as it was the most effective way to connect to the community. Through the language and friendships, I began to understand the cultural values and beliefs. With this ability, I was therefore able to develop trusting and authentic relationships with the children I taught. One way to facilitate trust and build upon these relationships was through acknowledged communication. Although I was employed to provide an immersive English environment and to only speak English to the children, depending on the situation I would use Mandarin. For example, if a child approached me and said they had a sore stomach, I acknowledged that I understood them because their care and wellbeing came before all else. Children respond to this. If a teacher only ever spoke English to the children this could potentially hinder the interpersonal relationship.

Interactive communities are important when teachers create connections with others using their cultural, social and educational background as a brokering tool, and the cultural development of a child is supported through relationships between them and the adult (Fleer, 2012; Iyer & Reese, 2013). Furthermore, in this community of learning context, the child's intercultural understanding will also be developed. An intercultural understanding between a child and professional educator also presents an opportunity for enabling further learning through the co-construction of roles.

Tamati (2005) used the term *rourou* (basket) as a metaphor for co-construction. Each person has a *rourou* of prior knowledge, understandings and experiences. Thus when a child and teacher can intermingle their *rourou* with one another, these understandings are merged. This contributes to each other's overall knowledge and there is importance in seeing children as "a source of linguistic and cultural knowledge" (Souto-Manning as cited in Keat et al., 2009, p. 14). Gee (2008) commented that people can be tools for learners to mutually gain knowledge and by encouraging interactive relationships involving co-construction, an educator has the opportunity to further deepen their knowledge of the predominant culture as seen by a child.

However, the effectiveness of intercultural relationships, especially those between a professional educator and a child, can be obstructed if the cultural languages are significantly different from one another. This instantaneously presents a challenge for the professional educator in the community of learning as "a critical boundary object is the existence of a common language that allows people to communicate and negotiate meanings across boundaries" (Wenger, 2010, p. 128). Between adults and children this can adversely affect the professional educator's inbound trajectory towards full participation as language is usually considered an essential brokering tool towards effectively crossing boundaries.

Language is about communicating experiences and perspectives to one another about the world, therefore establishing cultural boundaries. Consequently if a professional educator fails to know the language, no deep learning can occur, possibly moving them towards non-participation in the community (Gee, 2008). The professional educator will be marginalised in the community because they lack the necessary language skills to communicate. This will inevitably restrict their participation in the group and they will experience exclusions from the normal practice of conversation (Hodges, 1998; Wenger, 2010). Both children and adults need a common language to create interpersonal and intercultural connections with others. Especially with children, interactive dialogue between a child and teacher supports the child's development towards the habit of learning (Ritchie, 2010). Children commonly reference home, people and experiences in their conversations and language is an effective boundary tool to form relationships with them (Carr & Lee, 2012). Either a professional educator overcomes this challenge by learning some vocabulary and phrases in the language or they must continue to accept their marginalisation and non-participation in the community.

A challenge for a professional educator in a community of learning where the predominant cultural context is significantly different from their own is effectively blending the cultural aspects between home and school towards creating a relevant learning environment for the children. The professional educator may have difficulty associating with the child's funds of knowledge and merging their pedagogy based on their own funds of knowledge and background towards creating a relevant learning environment. It is essential "that teachers have some understanding of the cultures of the children they teach and ways children's play and interests may reflect these understandings" (Cooper & Hedges, 2014, p. 171). As Fler (2012) notes, "some experiences set up by educators do not connect with children's everyday lives" (p. 87). A child moulds reality based on their experiences and circumstances. Therefore a professional educator needs to be aware of a child's prior knowledge relating to a learning topic in a school setting and the different experiences in their everyday lives. Through reflection a professional educator can make diversity part of their teaching, where this blending of boundaries between home and school life can be achieved (Alcock, 2010; Lenski, Crumpler, Stallworth, & Crawford, 2005; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). The challenge is that the professional educator must review their assumptions of a child's culture and values and work towards understanding these differences compared to their own (Lenski et al., 2005). Home visits are an effective strategy for learning about children's lives outside the school as they allow for a deeper understanding of some of the children's experiences before they attend school. The professional educator can angle this challenge towards an opportunity by observing and talking with parents and other community members (Barron, 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). By making meaningful connections with the family and identifying and responding to the child's funds of knowledge, the professional educator can further

understand the culturally specific methods of interaction and participation the child will have in a school setting (González & Moll as cited in Ritchie, 2010).

When a professional educator has established connections with the home environment to appreciate the child's prior experiences and funds of knowledge, a challenge will be to ensure they create a relevant learning environment for their students that reflects the predominant culture's practices, societal rules of behaviour and values. The professional educator needs to put aside their own ideas of teaching methods, cultural influences and styles if they do not reflect those of the prevalent culture. This can be a challenge to a professional educator if the philosophies and rules of teaching in this community of learning are significantly different to their own. Children learn by observing and listening to others. They learn through collaboration with other children and adults by participating in activities that are connected to the current practices of the community. However, in an early childhood setting, children can be separated from 'real life' involvement in their community; hence they may not participate or observe in authentic cultural life (Barron, 2009; Brennan, 2007; Rogoff, 1994). Cultural learning styles within a learning environment also need to be considered by the educator as young children usually are not aware of how their culture influences and affects their learning and communication styles (Toppel, 2015). Thus, it is the professional educator's responsibility to make sure the children in the community of learning have adequate cultural representations, appropriate instruction and tools appropriate to their cultural learning styles in their early childhood environment. Values of the family are reflected in a child's interests and when a teacher is aware of these sociocultural influences, it supports them in not only forming positive relationships but scaffolding appropriate learning instruction (Cooper & Hedges, 2014; Montalvo, Combes & Kea, 2014). However, as children learn best when they link prior knowledge to new information, a professional educator has the opportunity to understand the child's funds of identity and select learning materials relevant to their culture and experiences, therefore creating a curriculum that is responsive to the needs of all the children (Cooper & Hedges, 2014; Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2013). In addition, a central idea to a community of practice and learning is that people learn through participation with others, "learn... in situ" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 31). The knowledge of the community is stored in the network and the practices of the group and immersion into this practice gives a person their identity (Gee, 2008). Hence, even though a professional educator is in an early childhood situation where they may be the only culturally different individual, their own identity within the community of learning can still continue to develop through interaction with and understanding of the children. By creating a relevant learning environment that shows their understanding of the predominant cultural beliefs, the professional educator continues to encourage the development of the individual child's cultural funds of identity, as well as their own.

On the goal towards moving to full participation in a community of learning, a professional educator's main objective is to achieve full participation in this practice. As a newcomer to the community, they will move on an inward trajectory towards full participation, acknowledging the history, traditions, beliefs, values and practices of the predominant culture, learning from other professional peers through professional dialogue and establishing connections with them, further increasing their participation in the community. As a professional educator, they also need to establish relationships with the children they intend to teach, connecting home and school boundaries to create a relevant learning environment, establishing their role in the community of learners. On their trajectory towards full participation inevitable challenges such as cultural barriers are always obvious, especially since the culture is significantly different. Language as a brokering tool will not be useful in successful boundary crossing if verbal communication exchange is too diverse. Moreover, creating an alternative cultural identity suitable for the community of learning may not be feasible if the cultural funds of knowledge are too diverse, and forming connections with young children who are less accepting of difference and relating to them is also difficult. Only through patience, time and openness to diversity will a professional educator move towards full participation in a community of learning where the cultural context is different from their own.

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