

Communities of learning in early childhood education: Supporting reciprocal relationships with refugee parents at the Centre for Refugee Education

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Abstract

People create stories to explain and make sense of their environment and events within it. In early childhood education in the Centre for Refugee Education, Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre, Auckland, these stories from past and present fulfil an important role. Through them, teachers and parents share previous experiences which impact upon and are reflected in the planning and the assessment of language learning. This paper examines visual depictions of language episodes and how appreciation is deepened through photographic image deconstruction and reconstruction. A series of photographs of early childhood situations were presented twice for interpretation. Initially they were shown to parents as 'gestalt' images from which written interpretations were developed. Later the photographs were also discussed with the children. This approach heightens interpretation and centralises parental involvement in language acquisition. We propose that this 'novel' approach to qualitative research represents a valid 'method' for researchers as well as language teachers who work with families.

Context and scope of this paper

This paper focuses on four dimensions. First, we explore the varying contexts that newly arrived refugees have experienced and from whom stories can be developed which parents and children can use to acquire language within a temporary community of learning and practice. Second, we comment upon the time constraints of the programme at the Centre for Refugee Education (CRE) which demands, *ipso facto*, that the most targeted of teaching be undertaken in order to meet the very specific but wide-ranging needs of newly arrived refugees. Third, we want to describe an on-going project on the uses of visual prompts (photo elicitation) we have developed for qualitative analysis and action learning. We conclude by considering some fresh questions that have arisen during our further investigations of what we now euphemistically refer to as the 'jigsaw effect'.

One of the best known Maori proverbs asks 'He aha te mea nui?' 'What is the most important thing?' and the answer is 'He Tangata, he Tangata, he Tangata'. 'It is people, it is people, it is people'. Communities of learning, or communities of practice as they are now more frequently called, reflect this with their inherent commitment to, and emphasis on, the importance of people and their relationships to each other within a community as it develops. In this paper we describe such a community of learning that develops for every intake of refugee families who participate in the Early Childhood Centre within the CRE, Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre (MRRC). It is a community of language acquisition where each person, across the approximately 26 days across which the programme operates, is sometimes a teacher, sometimes a learner.

Within this particular community of language learning, as with every such community that develops, it is the relationships between participants which are most important; they are begun, nurtured and encouraged to evolve and grow at the CRE and typically thrive beyond it. These relationships, even within the short duration of the programme, are intense, long lasting and crucial to the refugee families being able to heighten their understanding of their roles in supporting their children's present and future learning. Shared life stories and experiences, especially between newly arrived refugees, therefore, become an integral dimension of such relationships and a key to improved language development.

Stories which we tell to others in order to explain who we are, or in order to make meaning of prior experiences, reflect early socialisation within particular cultures and societies. They enable us to share the reservoir of experiences we have had. All such stories are uniquely different and their very distinctiveness affects present and future ways in which we make meaning from new situations. Clearly, therefore, how we make meaning from unique stories becomes an important consideration with respect to how individual programmes of learning are framed for those whom we teach. Equally, such stories have considerable bearing upon ways in which we prompt parents to support their children's learning because making meaning from stories moves participants beyond using only one interpretation of each teaching and learning moment.

New Zealand accepts six groups of refugees annually. They come for permanent resettlement to Aotearoa New Zealand from refugee camps that have been established in countries from across the globe and from first countries of exile. Sometimes as offspring born within these situations, they have been spared the experiences associated with initial reasons for leaving homelands.

When refugees arrive in New Zealand, they are brought directly to the MRRC where they spend their initial six weeks and during this time, they attend the CRE. The early childhood dimension of the programme introduces children to education for the zero to five-year-old age group and also gives parents experience in ways of supporting their children's learning within the expectations embedded within the New Zealand context.

However, for many participating families, the concept of being separated from their children at this age and leaving them with comparative strangers is completely alien. Indeed, the challenge of coming to terms with the very idea of an education programme that is aimed at very young children is also completely foreign to them. Clearly, therefore, the processes of initiating and building trust as well as developing reciprocal relationships between teachers and family members are of vital importance. At Mangere, we have come to see this as best happening within a community of learning within which we are all members. Relationships are thus more than vital – they are of paramount importance. Central to this is the notion that we are all social beings and that we create meaning in our lives through our ability to engage successfully in the world in which we live (Wenger, 1998). In other words, the ethos of the community is that we are brought together as humans who share minor and safe dimensions of ourselves whilst actively listening to others. And then, as we feel comfortable and safe, we might become able to share our more personal knowledge and our deeper stories.

Refugee families, by virtue of their arrival into Aotearoa New Zealand, enter a very different world from that to which they were accustomed. Challengingly, they are expected to 'engage successfully in ...' their new unfamiliar world. We reason here that learning to succeed is less overpowering when it occurs within a community of learning where the emphasis is on belonging, doing, experiencing and becoming (Wenger, 1998, p.5). This also reflects Bishop's (2003) ideas about the importance of teaching and learning situations where roles of teacher and student can be dispersed differently at different times. Under such circumstances, each is, in fact, sometimes teacher, sometimes learner.

Indeed, the idea of learning within a community environment is often a very familiar concept for refugee families as it is universally for families. Often, as children grow, parents, grandparents or others in the immediate community show children appropriate skills; they teach them how to move their hands into the right places, to talk about what they are doing, to follow certain rules of procedure, etiquette and so on. At other times, parents may sit and talk about events that have happened, thereby helping children to make sense of things as they narrate their stories and listen to the responses and questions of their listeners. Such processes are very much oral and practised within communities of commonality.

However, at the same time as they are either learning or further developing their English language skills, parents must also begin to come to terms with, and begin to master, a new set of roles and responsibilities for the New Zealand context. In many of their countries of origin, parents did not play a large part in their children's formal school-based learning. However, in the Aotearoa New Zealand context, the opposite is generally true. Expectations that they should assume partnership roles in their children's educational endeavours and journeys are placed on parents from early childhood education settings and schools. Hence, having clarity about these matters and being able to work successfully through them has important implications for parents and children.

The project

Coming to this conclusion was one of the major outcomes which emerged from a short teacher practitioner inquiry we undertook during 2006. The aim of the project was to improve the logistics of using and analysing photographs in research. We wanted to achieve consistency and rigour of data management and analysis across a large group of photographs and over multiple revisits across time. For this purpose, Hansen devised a new approach to using software (QSR NVivo) for recording our analysis which Perry then trialled at the Centre for Refugee Education. That procedure has been outlined elsewhere (Hansen & Perry, 2007a, b).

As the project developed, we came to ask if we were actually seeing what we were describing in the analysis of each photograph, or was what we thought we were seeing the result of being privy to particular (*emic*) professional knowledge, i.e. knowledge gained by virtue of being an insider. To test this we gave a sample of the photographs we had taken to four other people, each of whom was familiar with the early childhood education context in varying ways and we asked them to 'write what you see'. Interestingly, similarities between what each of the four people saw and described were very small indeed, i.e. there was a marked absence of concordance between the reporting of what the four thought they saw.

Refugee families have experienced things which differ significantly and profoundly from us. This has important implications for the ways in which we conduct assessments and introduce educational planning procedures. Clearly, as teachers, what we see and write about an episode may not necessarily be consistent with how the learner has perceived that same event. So we took the somewhat unusual but imminently sensible step of asking them. And we were answered with stories that were immediately intense and deeply thought-provoking. The stories presented powerful language and social learning opportunities.

The usual format of 'learning stories' (Carr, 2001) is that teachers write the 'story' of a learning event for an individual child or children and may or may not add digital photographs. These stories typically include some indication of how this event can be developed into additional activities to further stimulate the children's thinking and interest. A point of concern with this is that it is the *teacher's* interpretation based on *his/her* previous knowledge and experience. This issue is greatly amplified at Mangere because the children speak many different languages and more often than not interpreters are not available to ask the children what they are actually doing. This means that teachers' interpretations have no checks and balances. Hence, planning which flows from a particular learning episode is based upon only teacher interpretations rather than being about the child's true strengths, interests and authentic experiences.

Consequently, teachers at the CRE have sought to develop systems of assessment which are cognizant of children's prior learning events. Most importantly, they have developed such assessments in ways that are fully inclusive of parents who may not understand English well or even at all.

Teachers now routinely take a series of digital photographs of children engaged in activities at the centre and use these to inform their planning. These photographs are then displayed at the centre for parents to see. The photographs invariably delight parents and initiate conversations between them and/or their children and/or the teachers. Parents also ask questions which are valid for them personally and typically such questions stem from their previous knowledge and experience. Conversational emphases are less likely to be directed by teachers having interpreted what they think parents need to know and what they need to learn from parents.

Questions may initially be articulated through interpreters but as relationships grow and trust forms, tentative attempts emerge at using English and/or at teachers answering the refugees in their first language. Importantly, this enables refugees to share, with acceptance, confidence and integrity, dimensions of their former life.

From this work, we have come to consider additional perspectives to learning stories. The photographs that we once put straight up on the wall and left for parents to consider now travel a different and far more direct route. Instead of one set of photographs there are now three. The teacher's story of the event comprises one route; a second route (with the help of interpreters writing in English and translating the child's first language) tells what the child wants to say about the event. The third route, again with interpreter help, involves gathering the thoughts of parents and caregivers with respect to what they see.

These thoughts can involve parental interpretation of events that have happened at the CRE, or can flow from commentary initiated and provided by parents and caregivers about their previous experiences. Alternatively, they may comprise comments about what their children are doing. We have found, far more often than not, that what teachers thought they saw and subsequently wrote about, is far from what the child was actually doing. In other words the validity of what teachers were writing was almost always flawed. Significantly, having recognised this, we now know that there are many perspectives involved in the stories that can be ignited by photographs and hence, the potential for achieving rich and valid interpretations greatly expands. Such expansion invites better language teaching.

These moments of sharing of past experience, personal stories and flashes of insight represent points at which real language learning can occur. Such learning is not just about the accumulation of knowledge, but rather is concerned with precipitating understanding through reflection which in turn initiates personal change and growth. These moments are usually punctuated by laughter, our laughter! Ours, however, is often laughter of embarrassment triggered by our realisations about just how wrong our assessments have been and just how far away from the real interests and strengths of the children a programme can become removed.

As these pictures and stories are often very proudly displayed on the wall, they draw in other refugee families who may not have early childhood aged children. Conversations and questions then cross sector boundaries and incorporate other stories so that the ensuing kaleidoscope of interpretation within this community of

learning moves and grows as it manifests meaning and learning. All of this can happen with the minimum of a common language, relying heavily on impact and potency of the visual.

Everyone sees things differently. Even if we are all inspecting the same object at the same time or the same images at different times, or the same event from a range of locations, our perceptions of what we see vary enormously for such is the uniqueness of human interpretations. This then, along with the matter of how refugees tell their stories and the significance of how those stories relate to their children's participation encourages their important input into supporting their children's learning. In doing this we more validly portray the multiple 'jigsaws of reality', and accord dignity not only to phenomena that surround us but also to the people who construct those realities. We want them to become empowered to achieve this as 'partners' - we want them to construct their truths and help us to learn from them.

To achieve this we need to be aware that every part of who we are influences each small step in our 'individual sense-making journey' (Berger, Blomberg, Fox, Dibb, & Hollis, 1972). In our increasingly high-impact visual world, therefore, the force of what we see is apparent even though we are frequently oblivious to what we see. This is so because of the impact of sensory overloading.

Using photographs to elicit other ways of seeing

So what are photographs and where within the visually harried and chaotic world of today do they fit? At a very cursory level, they are an image of something that *is*, or a capturing of something that *was*. Perhaps we can even think of photographs as representing their own reality - as fresh representations which assume a validity of their own (Edwards, 1992).

Irrespective of this, whenever we take photographs, our pictorial framing instantly becomes at once a construction and an interpretation; a glimpse of our own and also someone else's reality. In other words, a photograph is socially constructed (Becker, 1979). Equally important is the debate about whether or not photographs are data in themselves or are instead a way of *storing* information that can be analysed in order to create data (Emmison & Smith, 2000). In our view, a photograph represents a source of information in its own right from which data can be extracted; it is, in effect, a latent data source which invites interpretation. The outputs of that interpretive exercise become data which can be used for both research and teaching.

In research, we invariably have a predilection for completing analyses. Thus, ensuing stories are not necessarily just about what has been found, but equally, can be concerned with what has *eluded* researchers. Hence, we concur with Becker (1979) who reasons that it is also important to consider, as we look at an image that has essentially had a frame put around it, what may have been left out and why it has

been omitted. We contend that for language teaching and research alike, this is an important issue to explore.

Thus, photographs are an important information source in qualitative research and in language teaching. Anthropologists have known this for a long time and have routinely used pictorial artifacts to ply their discipline (Collier, 1979). In education, during teacher-initiated learning moments, pictures of all kinds are also routinely used to encourage children to discern. However, we are suggesting that authentic *in situ* photographs are a more valid platform to deploy when *unlocking* stories. Quite simply, we reason that authentic photographs can be used as effective educational heuristics, a device for releasing interpretations that add meaning.

At the CRE, as noted above, we took the bold step of asking the people who had been photographed to tell us about what was going on. The first time we trialled this gave rise to a moment of intense learning; a moment of great meaning-making that involved and amazed the parents of the child who had been photographed. We had spent the morning in the sandpit where, whilst the water trough was filling, one of the children lined up buckets along the edge of the sandpit. Each was very carefully placed and where there was danger of spillage another was placed to catch the water. We took a series of pictures as he did this and noted the story as it was unfolding. At morning tea we showed the photographs to his father and told him, through an interpreter, what had happened. He sat, silently listening, and after a moment looked up and said 'How could he know that? He was just a baby'. Upon probing further, we were told that this was how the family had lined up the buckets before they drew water from a well. All of the parents who were present looked at the pictures and talked about how children learn at this early age. The interpreter wrote the story in the first language and then in English as the father spoke about it.

In the following days, the conversation and questions about how children learn continued and parents paid great attention to subsequent pictures. Clearly, the photographs had triggered for parents heightened appreciation about the education of their children and how their children grow, learn and develop. Afterwards, and as a result of this experience, the relationships we had been slowly developing suddenly began to grow at great speed. The parents could see that their culture and their experiences were valued; skills they had and which their children displayed were accorded great importance by the community of learning and practice that was in operation.

The matter of ethics surfaces here. At the CRE, many conversations occur between staff and refugees. We continuously, therefore, as staff, become privy to informal knowledge about families, their backgrounds and their problems. We gather such professionally privileged information not only from our own colleagues but also from others domiciled within other professional sectors of the MRRC. Thus, in a manner bounded by professional ethics which pertain not only to our own divisions, but also to the Centre as a whole, we are able to access sometimes sensitive information from a variety of sources. However, informed approval remains a necessary condition for being able to access such data and this must happen on an

instance-by-instance basis rather than as a blanket approval obtained from at-risk refugees immediately after arrival.

Typically, previous experience of working in early childhood education plays an informative role as do interactions between children and teachers. Each transaction adds a piece to the developing picture. Sometimes the fit of each piece is not exact; sometimes it is a very small piece of information. But each piece adds knowledge and has the potential to become data when analysed. To that end, it is important to realise that while many snippets of information are sourced, it ultimately remains the responsibility of the teacher to validly assemble and interpret them. However, such perceptions of validity are *etic* in nature; that is, they are based upon the personal early socialization and later experiences of the teacher, not the child. It is the teacher who is looking in. As we advanced our work and research, we became increasingly aware that this *etic* approach was problematic because we did not necessarily know what the children were doing in their play. In short, we realised that many of our interpretations were likely to be wrong or at least contestable.

So if we then reject (or at least question) the picture of the child we have been developing through our Eurocentric eyes; if we contest each of the small pieces of information that have been used to assemble a two-dimensional teacher-compiled image of the child, it becomes possible to argue that the emergent picture is invalid. And if we turn such a composition on its side, and ask parents what *they* see, it becomes strongly apparent that there are *other* possible pictures which might be far more valid. We can in effect, achieve an entirely alternative understanding. Such alternative understanding, we propose, has considerable relevance for targeted language teaching practices.

We have found that when responding to our question 'what do you see in the photograph' refugees talked first about things that were most important to them. We believe that they may do so because points they notice first provide evidence of what is immediately important for them as individuals. Thus such responses may provide pointers about where to start in guiding parents to support their children's learning and in the kinds of conversations and stories that will be meaningful to parents in their sense-making progression. We argue, again, that appreciating this is important for language teachers.

Conclusion

This project has shown, and continues to show us as teachers and researchers, that the possibility of developing a 'true' partnership with both parents and their children is of crucial importance not only for early childhood education but also for enhancing the nurturing of language acquisition. Stories that are developed by children and their parents in partnership with teachers to showcase children's learning, clearly work wonderfully well. This is not surprising as they are much more authentic, far more 'real' which has a ripple effect in the lives of refugee families. For early

childhood education, and for language learning generally, the clear value of a less formal approach is unquestionable. Such an approach must be not be characterised by impersonal teacher-developed drills, but rather, has to be steeped in authenticity.

Note

For those who are interested in the technical procedures involved in this kind of analysis, please contact the authors at www.woodhillpark.com.

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