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School Readiness in a Multicultural Context: an Exploration of the Issues Using Cultural Psychology as an Appropriate Methodology

Abstract

Historically there have been inequities in access to school in South Africa. Differences in languages have also contributed to difficulties. In the present study a Grade One class was observed for a term as they entered formal schooling. Cultural psychology was used as the method, developing a description of the context and narrowing the observations to ten and then five children. Five school homes visits were done and one of these case studies is described here. Given the socio-economic literacy context, the child did extremely well, being self-motivated and supported by an aware single parent. The usefulness of the Cultural Psychological method is described.

Key words: *School readiness, Cultural Psychology, school literacy, parental involvement, primary/elementary school, reading, literacy, methodology.*

Introduction

It is surely the case that schooling is only one small part of how a culture inducts the young into its canonical ways. Indeed, schooling may even be at odds with a culture's other ways of inducting the young into the requirements of communal living. Our changing times are marked by deep conjectures about what schools should be expected

¹ Sundelowitz carried out the fieldwork described in this article (Sundelowitz, 2001). All communication regarding this research should be directed to him.

to “do” for those who choose to or are compelled to attend them – or for that matter, what schools *can* do, given the force of other circumstances. (Bruner, 1996: ix)

Children are inducted into formal education through a process that is not of their own volition. They might apply choice at a later stage of the education process – such as subject choices in high school and even more specifically in choice of careers and the tertiary institutions where they need to train for these careers – but even at that stage they are still often carrying out a design that has been mapped out for them by parents and have been enculturated into following an ‘appropriate’ career path. Although there might be a ‘plan for the future’ in existence when children start primary or elementary school, the vision of the plan is not their own, nor do they have the capacity to consciously embrace this vision. School readiness then, is the first vision of parents for their children.

It is the responsibility of the people who culture the child’s environment with the expectations and practice of education – both parents and teachers as purveyors of grander cultural schemes – to prepare the child for formal schooling. Sharing of responsibility and collaboration is needed for school readiness to be most effectively cultivated in children. They cannot get there on their own.

The criteria by which children are judged as having failed at school – if it is indeed a result of not having been *ready* for school – demonstrate an expectation of a uniform standard of performance. This expectation in itself entails a retrospective domino effect of expectations: children are expected to be alike enough to be able to fulfill generic performance assessment criteria; they are expected to have been equally well-prepared for school through access to the same material and socio-cultural resources; and their parents are expected to have the resources – both in terms of their own literacy ability levels and orientation, as well as material means – to be able to adequately prepare their children for school and to continue supporting them in school. How could we most productively describe the nexus and movements embodied in this multi-faceted situation?

The paradigm adopted for this study was Cultural Psychology: it opens up issues and alerts people with these issues to their full complexity. The main proponents of Cultural Psychology are here taken to be Shweder (1991), Bruner (1996), Cole (1996) and Wertsch (1998). As a point of departure for this paper, a preliminary description is offered of a unit of analysis for this paradigm. Cultural Psychology looks at *cognitive activity* both within individual subjects as well as the *social activity systems* themselves that have historically engendered this cognitive activity. Furthermore, the social systems that maintain and further develop such activity need to be included in a conceptualisation of a unit of analysis (Cole, 1985). Cole (1985:158) provides the following points of summation,

There is a basic unit common to the analysis of both cultures' and individuals' psychological processes; this unit consists of an individual engaged in goal-directed activity under conventional constraints; this unit is variously designated an "activity," a "task," an "event"; in the main, particularly where children are concerned, these activities are peopled by others, adults in particular; the acquisition of culturally appropriate behaviour is a process of *interaction* between adults, in which adults guide children's behaviour as an essential element in concept acquisition/ acculturation/ education.

It is, however, concomitant with the dynamic focus of Cultural Psychology which sees the human psychological condition as being embedded in a richly textured contextual tapestry which is woven together through threads of activity. The thread or yarn with which the tapestry of the South African context is embroidered comes from a variety of sources which are both local and imported. There is also an interesting ambiguity in this notion of "yarn". There is also a yarn (as in story) behind each thread of yarn that embroiders the South African cultural context. Cultural Psychology thus provides a useful paradigm for research in cognitive studies in South Africa in all its richly textured diversity.

The focus on *culture* in Cultural Psychology is on culture as a non-generic and variable concept, and the emphasis for research is on variety within historical/cultural contexts. An emphasis on exposing a variety of – rather than on 'controlling for' – variables serves to direct research attention away from *generic individuals* studied *in vitro*, to the *in vivo* context textured by the enmeshed threads that are the legacy of the present South African schooling system. *In vitro* research refers to a "grotto" type of controlled laboratory experimental setting created under more mainstream paradigms in psychology. *In vivo* refers to "the market place of semiotic transactions" (Miller, 1987:195) of human activity systems where the focus is on real life situations rather than on a test-tube view of context.

Rather than examining behaviour under a "grotto conception of mind" as found in an experimental laboratory, Miller (1987:195) points out that Vygotsky shifts the focus of research endeavours to "the market place of semiotic transactions". The implication of this metaphor is that research should be located within the *in vivo* milieu of the behaviour being investigated; in the case of the present study, in a classroom in a school and "the examination of learning activities in the classroom" (Goodman, 1990:122) should be considered as a legitimate pursuit for Cultural Psychology. Miller's market place metaphor further provides a useful vehicle for exploring and explaining other theoretical aspects of the current research.

The specific task of this research

This study involved looking at the school readiness process and early Grade One process in an urban, Johannesburg school. One of the most immediately noticeable features of the classes that were observed in the pilot study conducted at Mifflin School in 1998, was the number of non-native speakers of English that were in the class. Such students demonstrated varying facility with the medium of instruction; “More than fifty percent of the children speak an African language. Most of them are not fluent in English” (Sundelowitz, 1998:4). Such children face a double disaffection; they are faced with negotiating the unfamiliar culture of a formal school environment as well as having to deal with the daily business of the school in a language that is not their mother tongue. The case study under scrutiny shows how one family resolves the challenges of multilingualism.

The proposition that children entering Grade One arrive in *various states of readiness* to use the tools of formal education feeds into the concept of school readiness which underpins this study. “Readiness is not determined solely by the innate abilities and capacities of young children; rather people and environments help shape children’s readiness” (Kunesh & Farley, 1993:1). Readiness can therefore be said to be dependent – to a large extent – on what, how and who has prepared the child for school: “Readiness, like development, is related to the resources and demands of the context” (Graue, 1998:14). “Demands of the context” speaks to the domain specificity of the issue and “any time we engage in such domain-specific comparisons, we can expect cultural differences in the abilities that individual culture users will have developed to achieve the required level of proficiency” (Cole, 1993:202). Individual abilities – and therefore states of readiness – vary both between and within school classes or groups of children. There is also the danger that, “normal developmental differences among groups of children may be misinterpreted as ‘evidence’ that minority children are not ready for school” (Prince & Lawrence, 1993:4). The term “minority children” above should be read as “majority” in application of the quote to the South African context and would then specifically refer to children who do not come from a traditionally white middle class background which is the social stratum that “Model C” schools historically catered for.

The concept of *school readiness* could validly be construed as placing the onus almost entirely on the child as being ready for school. However, *schools* also need to be ready for children starting their school careers. With appropriate structures in place,

... ready schools help children master literacy, numeracy, and other skills and use their knowledge to make sense of their world. Ready schools recognise that self-esteem stems from competence – from

students doing tasks that are engaging and challenging, and gaining the ability to solve problems with what they have learned. (Shore, 1998:10)

Schools need to ensure that all children are able to fulfill their potential, regardless of what their background is. “Ready schools foster bonding between teachers and students, recognising that in many communities the differences between teachers and children” (*ibid*:12) and between teachers’ backgrounds and children’s home backgrounds may be of greater significance than expected. These differences have implications for the educational policy in schools in so far as how cultural, racial and linguistic issues are used to inform practice.

First encounter: against all odds – the story of Phumla

The cultural divide between home and school is obvious for children who are not native speakers of English. In many instances, children from low-income . . . families must also bridge a cultural gap as they move from home to school. For all these children, the initial transition from home to school can be stressful, and how it takes place matters a great deal. (Shore, 1998:6)

Phumla’s – the case study child in this article – transition to Mifflin School was not a difficult one although she had come from Xhosa speaking home to an English medium mainstream school, and although she had come from a low-income home which did not display the material accoutrements of a “Maintown” house that could be considered concomitant with an orientation to mainstream education (Heath, 1994; 1984). Mrs H. – her class teacher – found that “she was lovely from the start”, and at the end of the first term when Mrs F. reviewed her work she thought that Phumla was “well adjusted” (*op.cit.*). This was a child whose mother had been actively involved in her learning, and “evidence points to the fact that children are more successful in school when their parents are actively involved in their learning and show an interest in their progress” (Wright, Germino, Hausken & West, 1994:1).

Phumla worked well from the beginning of the year and consistently throughout the first term. There are only two tasks that she was not rated highly on, but these do not undermine the overall picture. Nor does her low rating on two tasks for the time taken to complete them detract from her overall competence, as this ‘slowness’ speaks more to the care and precision with which she worked than to tardiness or lack of ability to complete the task in time. Mrs H. had remarked that, “Her work is always beautifully done. It doesn’t matter how long it takes, she’ll settle down and do the task. She doesn’t slack off” (*ibid*:3).

Phumla was fastidious during this first term of hers in Mrs H's class. She was also able to be sociable without losing focus on the task at hand – “Everything well done at the same time as being very chatty with K.” She was superb in making her own sums and for one maths lesson where each child was given an abacus to ‘calculate’ with, I asked her “Do you use an abacus or do you just do it in your head?” Phumla replied, “I just do it in my head!” She had worked without the mediation of the abacus and had still managed to complete more sums than the other children. She was fulfilling her mother's expectations. Ms G. (Phumla's mother) had clear expectations of what Phumla should be getting from Grade One – “some kind of guidance, writing and reading skills, involvement in sports” – and was confident that Phumla was getting this and she was satisfied with Phumla's progress – “she is improving very well” (*ibid*:1). Phumla made good progress through the first term of Grade One and it occurred as it did because she was one of those,

... children who enter elementary school with good social skills, the ability to handle frustration and stress, physical well-being and age-appropriate motor skills, and a solid base of language and cognitive skills, [who] are able to take advantage of the learning opportunities offered by the school. (Doherty, 1997:23)

Phumla's Home

The home visits were conducted in pursuit of as yet unidentified contextual layers and threads of activity with which to weave the picture. Cleave, Jowett and Bake (1982:91) point out how the temptation exists, when focussed on a research context such as a school, to think of children solely in terms of this context. They point out that children,

... spend far less time in these situations than they do at home. So a study of children's experiences would be seriously lacking if it ignored that powerful mediator of continuity, the family, and in particular the part played by the parents.

Blatchford, Battle and Mays (1990) point out that research into school readiness needs to look at more than the classroom and the immediate point of entry into formal schooling. They say that,

... consideration of transition should not begin and end simply with a study of how children react to entry, but should also cover the situation prior to entry, in terms of the experiences of children in their home environment and the views of their parents, for these are important determinants of children's behaviour at (primary school) and of the extent to which the families' needs are being met. (*ibid*:2)

Although in the present study homes were not visited prior to entry to Grade One, and although a causal analysis was not being sought, the quote from Blatchford *et al* points out how data from interviews in the children's home can be used to augment each child's portfolio of abilities, capacities and proclivities.

The format of the home visits was that of a structured interview. "The structured interview is one in which the content and procedures are organised in advance. This means that the sequence and wording of the questions are determined by means of a schedule ..." (Cohen & Manion, 1989:309). The structure entailed in using a structured interview format for the home visits helped to ensure that certain categories of information – specifically: 1. *Family Background, Values and Identity*; 2. *Parental Expectations and Support of the School and Schoolwork*; 3. *Family Interactive Style*; 4. *Factors Relating to School Readiness*; and 5. *Description of the Home* – that were identified as being relevant to the research task were covered in the limited time allotted to the interview which was one to one and a half hours.

Phumla's Background

'Surprises can be quite lovely at times – quite useful'. It seems to us that this excitement of discovery should be one of the hallmarks of qualitative research, and it is much more likely to happen when we have left ourselves open to the unexpected. (Ely, Vinz, Anzul, & Downing, 1997:238)

Phumla was a wonderful surprise. She had not stood out, as such, at the beginning of the term. She was just this quiet and competent little girl who just went about her business. Mrs H. thought that Phumla "was lovely from the start". I was not aware of her from the start. I only gradually became aware of her as being distinctive when I started reviewing her work for the various applications of my observation instruments. I was impressed by the consistent quality of her completed tasks and I started paying her more attention. I started observing her more closely when I made my first selection of ten pupils for possible case studies, and then I really started paying attention to her once her mother (Ms G.) had been canvassed for and had signed her consent for Phumla to participate in the study.

It was when I met Phumla and Ms G. in their home that my biggest surprise came. The family lived in a sparsely furnished one bed roomed apartment in a big block of apartments in the middle of Hillbrow, an extremely densely populated "Flat Land" (flat = apartment) area of Johannesburg with a high crime rate and with associated trafficking in drugs and in sex work. Ms G. had warned me not to park in the streets and to try to arrange to be dropped off which was what subsequently happened. The building in which the family lived was a building

with a security check-in desk and turnstile restricted entry through which there was a constant flow of people. There was no place in the building for Phumla to play. It was not an affluent, material resource-rich environment that Phumla was living in.

Not only were resources limited, but so was the time that Ms G. had to spend with her daughter due to the nature of her job. With all the apparent lack of what is generally considered necessary to get a child ready for mainstream formal education, how then had Ms G. ensured that Phumla had developed such “a sense of industry and productivity, which [has promoted such] a positive self-concept and sense of competence” in Phumla (Huffman, Mehlinger, & Kerivan, 2000:4). How this had been managed was the astonishing aspect of Phumla’s story.

Historical Threads

Phumla was born on the 22nd of July, 1991 in the rural village of Ekangara in Kwandebele in the far northern part of South Africa. The family, although they have chosen to live in an Ndebele area, are Xhosa by birth and origin and originally come from the area of Transkei in the Eastern Cape – Transkei was a Xhosa “National State” during the Apartheid era. Phumla was raised in her earliest years by her grandparents. This was not done in abnegation of parental responsibility on the part of Ms. G., who was living and working in Johannesburg most of the time. Mrs. G. made sure that she kept her finger on the pulse of Phumla’s development and thereby maintained her role as one of the essential coordinating adults of her daughter’s literacy (Cole, 1997), and thereby her preparation for Primary School. She may not have been able to be there for official parents’ evenings, but when she managed to visit the family in Ekangara, she made a point of going to visit Phumla’s teachers to discuss Phumla’s progress.

Phumla’s contact with her grandparents is still very strong. When she visited them in July, she “took all her books there to show friends and family how well she can read”. They are, after all, very much part of her socio-emotional context, both presently, and historically. “The socio-emotional context of early literacy experiences relates directly to children’s motivation to learn to read later on” (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998:2). The context of Phumla’s early years must have been rich and nurturing emotionally – how else would she have turned out to be such a “Well adjusted!” child (Mrs E: autonomous reviewer) – and she likely was well fed and clothed, although there is no indication, either from her home in Hillbrow or from the rural context of her upbringing, that there was great wealth or abundance of resources. However,

... poverty is not always associated with the lack of mediated learning experience and the resulting low level of functioning, and favour-

able material conditions of life do not preclude the lack of mediated learning experience (Feuerstein, Rand & Hoffman, 1979:72).

Although there may have been a paucity of material resources, there must have been appropriate mediational means which enabled or facilitated her school readiness.

Ms. G. is very much configured into the network of “causes and effects” of Phumla’s readiness of school: “Causes and effects must be seen as configured in networks – themselves deeply influenced by the local context” (Huberman & Miles, 1994:435). Parents when asked about why they consider education important, will generally – in prolepsis of their child’s future – identify “success in school [as] an important contributor to children’s later economic well-being” (Cole & Cole, 1996:540), *viz.* they need an education to get a job. Ms G. does make this link but she adds to this the vision of “education is important to equip a child as a leader of tomorrow”, thereby demonstrating a broad vision of possibilities for Phumla’s future.

Ms. G. is a nurse in an oncology unit at a clinic in Johannesburg and is herself using education to ‘improve’ her possibilities. Her view of education and its importance in equipping the leaders of tomorrow, however, shows a vision that expands beyond what is possible for herself and her daughter to layers of context that lie outside of their own immediate ‘needs’. She furthermore, in her philosophy and practice, has maintained strong links with her ethnic roots. Her and her daughter’s education is being conducted through the medium of English, and for Phumla in a mainstream school. However “the mother insists that the child must know her own language” – and Xhosa is Phumla’s first language and the language of her home – and although they are Reformed Presbyterians, a strong cultural identity as Xhosa people is being maintained. The loom holding the evolving tapestry of Phumla’s life is firmly anchored in her cultural past, not letting her forget where she has come from, and preparing her for a future of many possibilities.

The arrangement for readiness resources and their use in this home is a demonstration of how interdependent or intersubjective activity can co-exist in an environment that is supported by the clear and positive intentions of an enabling other (Khisty, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978) such as Ms G. is – despite ‘apparent’ temporal, physical and material limitations. Phumla has all the necessary school tools such as paper, crayons, pens, markers, scissors and colouring in books and is not reliant on adult guidance to use them. Nor does she have to be prompted to use them. Ms G. told me that she often “finds area in a mess after work from Phumla cutting and colouring in”. Although there is no computer in the home, when she has the time, Ms G. takes Phumla to a friend’s house where Phumla plays games and “can paint and draw on the computer”.

Was she ready for school?

Having grown up in a rural community like Ekangara – a community that has lived close to the land, land which they did not own or could not own under the Apartheid regime – and having come from a background that is historically at the very least rural working class, one would have expected Phumla to have taken on habits of literacy that lie somewhere between those of Trackton or Roadville children in Brice-Heath's terms (Heath, 1982, 1984, 1986a, 1990, 1994).

The children of both Roadville and Trackton do not fare well in formal schooling, and neither group has the receptive and productive skills and values surrounding reading and writing that fit those described for “modern” communities. Written materials are not major sources of information for either community, and neither group writes to distribute ideas beyond their own primary group. In neither community does literacy bear any direct relationship to job status or chances for upward mobility. (Heath, 1986a:225)

As can be seen above, Phumla is doing well in formal schooling and she has acquired the “receptive and productive skills and values surrounding reading and writing” that have ensured that she is ready for a mainstream school in a “modern” community (*ibid*). Literacy and education in general is valued in the home and is seen to be “important to equip a child as a leader of tomorrow” and to improve children's “chances of getting a job”. This is the ambitious vision of upward mobility that has informed Phumla's school readiness.

Somehow, within the range of this Roadville/Trackton home, Phumla has acquired the Maintown/mainstream attribute of learning “how to take meaning from books [and] also how to talk about it” (Heath, 1994:79). This has been partly achieved through the quality of the interaction between parent and child. It is more important that the child has exposure to literacy artefacts and activities: the quality of this exposure is critical. Ms G.'s positive parental attitudes (Blatschford *et al*, 1982) and the non-intrusiveness of the stress of her own personal schedule – a fact that in itself could lead to “negative parent interaction” and the resultant increased “likelihood of child behaviour problems such as aggression” (Doherty, 1997:75) – have allowed Phumla the opportunity to “practice routines which parallel those of the classroom” (Heath, 1994:79) and have thereby prepared her for and supported her in her first term in school.

Ms. G. does not read bedtime stories to Phumla (Heath, 1982, 1994; Teale, 1984) but Phumla reads to herself and her mother only helps her if she can't read something. She has never really had anyone reading *to* her as such. Although Phumla will and does read on her own – she even reads her mother's books but she “prefers reading about animals” – her mother does listen to her reading, even if it is

late at night after her shift at the hospital. Aside from her school books or reading books from school, Phumla has “no books at the moment. They are all at home in Kwandebele at her gran and friends”. Phumla did have some books at preschool and she did read these although it was not established if her grandparents had read to her. Books and book knowledge, however, are valued in the home that I visited – Ms G. says that through books you “are able to learn what is going on” and “the more you read, the more your language improves” (*ibid*) – and Phumla has been appropriately familiarised with the “literary heritage of the culture” of formal schooling, and through the input from the stories she has read – as well as from her mother, grandparents and preschool teachers – has been “socialised into a particular pattern of attitudes and values” that has made her ready for school (Teale, 1984:118).

Conclusion

The fact that children are individual and that each child has had life experiences which are unique – and that these life experiences have influenced their opportunities for learning – has strongly influenced the methodology adopted for this study. The targeted Grade One community of learners were observed from within their classroom community where five diverse case studies were eventually selected for the way in which they represented themselves and a diversity of socio-cultural and historical stories. Sundelowitz was researcher, participant and constituting element in the evolving situation definition of the first term classroom activity/practice. He was both a bricoleur and was part of the bricolage. As a Cultural Psychologist conducting research, he was both a bricklayer constructing stories out of local materials as well as having situated himself as a natural brick in the locals’ contextual frame.

The breadth of texturing content that was included in this study was made possible by not setting parameters for what counted as valid sources and by not excluding unexpected data from the evolving case tapestries. This is the strategy that opened up and helped embroider five possible case scenarios. These stories represent only a small part of the diversity of socio-cultural historical contexts from which children move onto the track of formal education in South Africa. There was diversity during the Apartheid years although children were separated out and educated according to their racial groupings. Now that there are schools – such as Mifflin School and other historically “Model C” schools – where children from the previously separated groups can be educated together and where the range of possible socio-cultural backgrounds has been increased in a manifold way, further

extensive and intensive research work is needed that can honour and acknowledge the new diversity.

Such work is possible under the paradigm of Cultural Psychology, which has opened up our understanding of the possibilities of different types of school readiness. Here the view of the development of children is teleonomical and thereby open-ended and non-generically orientated, where a study such as this one is not an end but a beacon to future possible research in the field of education in South Africa, where the end is just the beginning.

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