Published in final edited form as:

Child Educ. 2012 August 30; 88(5): 304–308. doi:10.1080/00094056.2012.718244.

Children's Learning in the Diverse Socio-Cultural Context of South Africa

Jeremiah Chikovore, Ph.D [African Research Fellow],

Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa; Wellcome Trust Fellow, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, United Kingdom

Tawanda Makusha, M.A [Doctoral Intern],

Human Sciences Research Council; Doctoral Candidate University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Irene Muzvidziwa, Ph.D. [Senior Lecturer], and

School of Education and Development, University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa.

Linda Richter, Ph.D. [Distinguished Research Fellow]

Human Sciences Research Council; Honorary Professor Universities of the Witwatersrand, and KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Abstract

Children develop in several interlocking systems—in the context of their family, and within the interaction of settings such as home, school, and church (Russell, 2011). In South Africa, children's diverse backgrounds within families, neighborhoods and socio-cultural environments provide them with varied experiences and opportunities to learn. Whether growing up in urban or rural communities, belonging to a specific race and ethnic group, or being poor or rich, all imply exposure to cultures, lifestyles, amenities, and living conditions that differ in marked ways (Makoe, 2006). With 79% of the total population being Blacks, the racial and ethnic heterogeneity translates into a complex mix of languages: English, Afrikaans, nine indigenous languages and five Indian languages are spoken (Reagan, 2001).

Children from diverse backgrounds come to school with different experiences, and the schools struggle with meeting their assorted educational needs. The poor performance of learners in South Africa reflects the continued use of an instructional model that emphasizes school-based learning with abstract outcomes, and evaluates pupils on the basis of constructs and concepts that ignore what children know and learn outside the school environment. In the context of South Africa, much attention centres on improving achievement rates within a framework where knowledge is treated largely as objective (Shisana, 2011). Such perceptions of education and achievement ignore other forms and sources of knowledge and seek to fit learners into existing frameworks of formal learning.

In this manuscript, we outline different home and community-based activities that create useful learning tools, and can therefore help bridge the gap between home and school learning environments. The section titled *Children's learning contexts and activities* describes two activities in detail. Then in the section dedicated to discussing curriculum and children's prior experiences, we highlight the mismatches. The activities listed on the table demonstrate the several informal learning activities that occur in various contexts within the environment. The manuscript concludes with suggestions for teachers.

Children's Learning Contexts and Activities

Children take part in various activities within a plethora of networks and settings—from interactions with peers and families and to life experiences in rural and urban areas. A summary of some of the activities and their settings is presented in Table 1. Two additional activities are discussed in greater detail, namely the folktale and *nhodo*, a game played using pebbles. Then, in the section dedicated to discussing the implications for academic learning, mismatch between curricula and children's day-to-day learning contexts is highlighted. The activities listed on the table are shown in order to demonstrate the several forms of informal learning that occur in various contexts within the environment. We conclude with suggestions for teachers.

Folk-tales are constructed and told in captivating ways, and they carry huge entertainment prowess. Diverse types exist in South Africa (see for example Honey, 1910). A common version entails characters—human or animal—partaking in a story with the simple structure of a beginning, climax, and conclusion. The narrative is frequently interspersed with song requiring the audience to join in the chorus, and where some choruses require a form of group activity such as dancing, celebratory clapping, mock fighting, and even scaring each other. Often, the ending takes the form of a moral puzzle for the audience to solve, in part to facilitate the exercise of moral judgment and to develop moral reasoning (Vitz, 1990). Children are motivated by the suspense entailed in the stories, and where they are already familiar with the storyline, by the flair and innovation of the raconteur and participation in group audience and activities. Children thus learn to pay attention and to follow instruction, and are accorded space as active participants in a learning process (Abdi, 2007; Kadodo & Kadodo, 2011). Moreover, many folk tales, although essentially similar in plot, have been adapted in specific languages and therefore provide children with an opportunity to grow their first language. This is critical in the case of South Africa where English is the medium of instruction commonly used in school (de Sousa & Broom, 2011; Heugh, 2010). Through the folk-tale activities, children use their short and long-term memory, exercise abstract thinking, and gain collective problem-solving skills (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989), as well as develop moral reasoning and listening skills.

While listening to folktales, children participate actively, rather than simply and passively listening and trying to absorb material for later regurgitation. Instead of being still and quiet, some young children learn better while moving around and playing. However, as McIntyre (1996) points out, such children are easily considered to be difficult in a formal learning environment and may be sanctioned in ways that not only surprise them but also lead them to take on rebellious attitudes, thereby further affecting their academic performance in school.

A pit and pebble game commonly played by little girls is called *nhodo* in Shona¹ language (Masiwa, 2001). Described as being similar to Jacks (Nyota & Mapara, 2008), *nhodo* involves incrementally drawing out and returning pebbles to a small dug-out hole in sequence. Each movement of the pebbles into or out of the pit is done between throwing another, often larger, pebble in the air and intercepting it without ever allowing it to touch the ground. This game which frequently involves friendly rivalry is often played during times of the day when girls have completed household tasks. Through this activity, pre-adolescent children are able to experiment with and learn about conflict management. For instance, when one playmate accuses another of cheating particularly the one losing in the

¹Shona language is spoken in Zimbabwe, a country located just north of South Africa. Because of similarities of games played throughout the region, we analyze this game in greater detail here as it illustrates well how children gain math and conflict management skills in every day play

competition, they learn to justify and convince the other. This promotes greater social interaction between peers while acquiring motor and endurance skills (Nyota & Mapara, 2008). Children also gain mathematically related concepts such as counting and sequencing, as well as addition and subtraction while learning to count by twos, fours, and other multiples of numbers as they group, separate, and regroup pebbles (Sezer & Guler-Ozturk, 2011).

Curriculum and Children's Prior Experiences

Potential mismatch occurs between what children learn in and outside formal schooling. For instance, the philosophical foundation underpinning education in South Africa may be inconsistent with values and norms of certain groups. The principle of collectivism as opposed to individualism, is encapsulated in the concept of *Ubuntu*, “the capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony, and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining community ... an Nguni (one of the tribes) word from South Africa, (*Ubuntu*) addresses our interconnectedness, our common humanity, and the responsibility to each other that flows from our connection” (Manda, 2011). Formal schooling seems to generally promote what has been called an ethos of individual or field-independent learning (McIntyre, 1996) whereas, in line with the ethos of *Ubuntu*, some children will be accustomed to a group approach to undertaking exercises and getting rewards. The collective value system guides and is evoked in the dynamics of activities such as family meals, where groups of related individuals eat together out of a single plate (see Table 1). In contrast to Western settings valuing competitiveness and enterprise, core values of group communal living in some Southern African societies are empathy, respect of seniority, deference and regulation of impulse. Children socialized according to these values are less likely to value individual competitiveness, and therefore fail to flourish in a formal learning environment which is individualistic in orientation.

In some South African contexts, with basic instructions yet without supervision, children are often sent on errands (see Table 1), and thus go through practical learning and problem solving scenarios, even though this involves making errors such as getting lost along the way. A common response by adults when a child gets lost or suffers minor harm from making a mistake is, for example, reminding children that they have learned a lesson as part of growing up. Therefore, mistakes are anticipated, valued and used as part of character development rather than be considered a sign of incompetence or inability,

The widespread use of English as the medium of instruction is yet another potential source of mismatch. While there is now strong evidence for the importance and effectiveness of formal teaching in children's home language for the first few years of school (Alexander, 2003; Shisana, 2011), challenges arising from the *Apartheid* era remain. For example, during *Apartheid*, it was the oppressive state that instituted school instruction in mother tongue as a way of promoting both racial and ethnic segregation in order to effectively divide-and-rule through “separate development.” Then, Blacks viewed such school instruction as inferior (Reagan, 2001). Today, while the debate has begun to shift towards embracing extra-school literacy activities and indigenous languages, it is necessary to debate the issue of whether the instruction should be in home language or English with sensitivity. South Africa remains a country where multiple languages and cultures exist, but English continues to carry economic and social power. Children who come from impoverished homes also fail to have access to resources required by the schools. Moreover, students are motivated differently, depending on whether their preferred mode of learning is used within the classroom (Hofstein & Rosenfeld, 1996). Teachers are, however, rarely trained to embrace diversity (Hemson, 2006) or to vary learning techniques (Hofstein & Rosenfeld, 1996). McIntyre (1996) has observed that children from minority/subordinate groups

typically possess more adept social skills in dealing with diverse groups of individuals ... tend to be less competitive with their peers, and more sensitive to the reactions of significant adults... . Indeed, their performance is greatly influenced by the teachers' expression of confidence or doubt in their ability... . However, due to mismatches between teaching and learning styles, they may receive fewer positive affirmations from their teachers. (p. 156)

The persistence of a deficit perspective means students and their families are blamed for poor performance in school (see also Ball, 2000; Chaka, 2011). On the other hand, if teachers are able to recognize the positives in their cultural and home environments, such as the richness in children's home language, and not consider these as deficits, then the child is seen in a more positive light. The children may themselves be more receptive to learning.

Conclusions

South Africa is a heterogeneous country, requiring that the educational curriculum and teachers be prepared to deliver and assess their diverse students (Ball, 2000; Hemson, 2006). In practice, it is difficult for teachers to successfully and effectively replicate learning opportunities from non-school settings in formal settings (Fjortoft & Sageie, 2000; Hofstein & Rosenfeld, 1996). Yet teachers can take advantage of learning principles explored here. For example, given that some children learn better through participative activities in open environments (Fjortoft & Sageie, 2000), teachers perhaps can include activities that can be done in open spaces and through field visits.

Teachers may also incorporate what children learn and practice outside school in different ways. For instance, the game *nhodo* can be used to demonstrate numbers, oral counting, and sequencing. Quantities and measurements applied during cooking can be adopted to aid the teaching of mathematics. Whenever children go on errands, they could also be encouraged to estimate the distance by counting steps to a destination and back; they can also estimate speed, make predictions and explore variations. While, in this way, children will learn by practice, they also begin to understand that their lives and experiences in their own varied settings are a valuable and recognized learning resource. At the same time, lessons are made more interesting given the active involvement of students and the personalizing of knowledge through examples that include places and events with which learners are familiar. Thus, going an extra mile here and there can help build bridges between home and school and make learning more meaningful.

References

- Abdi A. Oral societies and colonial experiences: Sub-Saharan Africa and the de-facto power of the written word. *International Education*. 2007; 37(1):42.
- Alexander, N. *An ordinary country: Issues in the transition from Apartheid to democracy in South Africa*. University of Natal; South Africa: 2003.
- Ball A. Preparing teachers for diversity: Lessons learned from the US and South Africa. *Teaching and Teacher Education*. 2000; 16(4):491–509.
- Brown JS, Collins A, Duguid P. Situated cognition and the culture of learning. *Educational Researcher*. 1989; 18(1):32–42.
- Chaka T, Weber E. Education, development and support for multigrade teachers. *HSRC Review*. 2011; 9(3):26–27.
- de Sousa D, Broom Y. Learning to read in English: Comparing monolingual English and bilingual Zulu-English Grade 3 learner. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*. 2011; 1(1):1–18.
- Fjortoft I, Sageie J. The natural environment as a playground for children: Landscape description and analysis of a natural landscape. *Landscape and Urban Planning*. 2000; 48(1/2):83–97.

- Frampong G, Motha C. Testing, testing. First national assessment of Grade 9 pupils shows much work lies ahead. *HSRC Review*. 2011; 9(3):24–25.
- Hemson, C. Teacher education and the challenge of diversity in South Africa. HSRC Press; Cape Town: 2006.
- Hofstein A, Rosenfeld S. Bridging the gap between formal and informal learning. *Studies in Science Education*. 1996; 28(1):87–112.
- Honey, J. South African folktales. The Baker & Taylor Company; South Africa: 1910.
- Heugh, K. When a school principal does not believe in the impossible: From multilingual explorations to system-wide assessment. In: Cuvelier, P.; du Plessis, T.; Meeuwis, M.; Vanderkerckhove, R.; Webb, V., editors. *Multilingualism from below*. Van Schaik; Pretoria: 2010. p. 117–133.
- Kadodo W, Kadodo M. A comparative analysis of primary and secondary school teachers' use of games in teaching English as a second language in Zimbabwe. *Educational Researcher*. 2011; 2(5):1161–1169.
- Makoe MQ. South African distance students' accounts of learning in socio cultural context: A habitus analysis. *Race Ethnicity and Education*. 2006; 9(4):361–380. doi: 10.1080/13613320600957678.
- Manda, D. The Ubuntu philosophy. 2011. Retrieved from www.ubura.org/
- Masiwa, T. Nhodo: An ancient teaching aid. 2001. Retrieved from www.uz.ac.zw/science/math/zimaths/51/nhodo.htm
- McIntyre T. Does the way we teach create behavior disorders in culturally different students? *Education & Treatment of Children (ETC)*. 1996; 19(3):354–370.
- Nyota S, Mapara J. Shona traditional children's games and play: Songs as indigenous ways of knowing. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*. 2008; 2(4):189–202.
- Reagan T. The promotion of linguistic diversity in multilingual settings. Policy and reality post-apartheid South Africa. *Language Problem and Language Planning*. 2001; 25(1):51–72.
- Russell, R. Informal learning in context. 2011. Retrieved from www.informallearning.com/archive/Russell-77.htm
- Sezer T, Guler-Ozturk D. The effects of drama in helping five-year-old children acquire the concepts of number and operation. *Educational Research*. 2011; 2(6):1210–1218.
- Shisana O. Improving education to better life opportunities. *HSRC Review*. 2011; 9(3)
- Vitz P. The use of stories in moral development: New psychological reasons for an old education method. *American Psychologist*. 1990; 45(6):709–720. [PubMed: 2195928]

Picture 1.
Storytelling in Progress. Reproduced courtesy of Africa Bound (www.peacecouncil.net)

Table 1

Illustrations of activities and contexts of socio-cultural learning for children in South Africa

Activity	Context	Example of Applicable Skill
Household tasks (fetching water, cooking, doing laundry)	Family/household	Motor; Time management; Communication and language (through interaction with peers); Leadership; Listening (through being tasked by adults); Responsibility
Having group dinner from a single plate.	Family/household	Sharing/communality; Regulation of impulses/self control (eating meat – a highlight of supper – is often delayed so children can eat starch first); Deference (all steps during eating process, including picking meat and what size one picks, and following order of seniority); Strategic decisions in competitive contexts (where children are many and of similar ages, vigilance and wisdom helps avoid losing out on meal highlights) (see also Nyota & Mapara, 2008).
Observing and modeling of behavior of other senior members of household and of peers	Family/household; Play settings	Gender roles and gendered behaviours
Being sent on errands i) within the household to retrieve or stow away utilities, or being an extra hand around an adult working on a task ii) with messages, or to borrow and return utilities including tools, or borrow cooking aids such as cooking oil, salt, sugar or soap or to buy small groceries at community shops	Family/household	Spatial and memory (when children from 4 upwards go on errands often within a radius of up to 10 kilometres and often on foot); also knowing where specific implements are stowed around the house/homestead); Listening (through remembering exactly what one is tasked to do); Deference (through obeying instructions from elders/authority figures in household/neighbourhood/older siblings); Trustworthiness/responsibility/leadership (through being assigned tasks requiring these) (see also Serpell, 1993)
Tending animals	Family/household	Number and vigilance (through counting animals to determine whether any are missing); Art/moulding (through play with peers); Multi-media communication (through whistling and signalling to peers and to animals); Spatial and memory (knowing exactly which animal is where; familiarity with geography); Problem solving (by tracking lost animals); Collaborative skills/leadership (working with peers and sharing responsibilities); Investigative (using tracks and droppings to trace stray animals)
Home improvement tasks	Family/household	Artistic/creativity such as making colourful drawing on walls ; Leadership (including planning, organizing, decision-making)
Web-based social sites	Internet	Computer skills; Sharing; General and specific knowledge; also Similar skills as in discussion with peers described above
Shopping	Family/household	Budgeting; Numbers; Leadership
Video gaming	Family/household; Peers	Motor/Body kinaesthetic; Spatial; Problem solving; Peers

Activity	Context	Example of Applicable Skill
		Endurance; Competition
Sunday school; Worship	Churches	Moral values; Deference; Socialization; Cooperation