USING SOCIO-CULTURAL APPROACHES FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

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INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses insights arising from my doctoral study in a New Zealand early childhood setting. I was interested in how young children learn to be part of the group. Using a socio-cultural framework, I carried out a qualitative case study to investigate the enculturation of young children into a group care setting. The field work comprised two phases of data collection over a total period of six months. The first phase involved observations of one child for two weeks in the centre and for a briefer time in his home. The second phase focused on children's and teachers' collective participation in cultural events and was carried out over four months. The particular event that I studied was shared mealtimes in the childcare centre. My observations also included teachers preparing children for meal and rest times.

The participant centre in my study is "community-based" and located in a city in New Zealand. Community based centres are centres that offer childcare provision for non-profit usually organised by a city council and administered by a management committee. This centre provides full day care within the age range of birth to 5 years of age. The centre is licensed for 10 children under 2 years, and 20 children over 2 years, full-day care placements. The majority of children in the centre were from families with two parents both of whom worked full time. Families in this study were predominantly European and middle-class, although children from Maori, Pasifika, Indian, and Asian families also attended the centre during the time of data collection. Collective permission was sought from all of the participant children's parents/guardians, teachers, and parents attending the centre. The number of participant children and teachers fluctuated across the data collection period but averaged at 15 children and 3 teachers per observation.

The site was chosen as it provided many opportunities to observe young children and their teachers participating in the rituals and routines of shared mealtimes. The centre yielded numerous examples of micro-interactions of the event yet situating these within the broader macro context proved more challenging. Recording the historical-cultural

artefacts, and the physical cultural tools used to induct children into mealtimes, helped to address this limitation.

Socio-cultural thinking guided the methodology and throughout my study the research design, socio-cultural theories, and the research topic itself, reiterated and explored tensions between the individual (psychological) and the group (social). Four recurring questions framed the study and form the basis of this discussion. I use these questions to outline various interpretations of the socio-cultural approach and to show how others' thinking addressed my concerns as a researcher. Within each section I provide examples from my data to illustrate theoretical concepts and also my developing understanding of "how to do" socio-cultural research.

The following questions provided a framework for my study:

1)   How will I identify the psychological in the social and vice versa (or what constitutes the individual and the group)?

2)   And a related question … How will I explain agency using theories that promote the self as sociological?

3)   How will I recognise change of form (or transformation) in the individual, social, and cultural domains?

4)   How will I capture complex social phenomena while remaining true to the socio-cultural approach?

1.   How will I identify the psychological in the social and vice versa (or what constitutes the individual and the group)?

Cultural activity provides us with a window into how the psychological informs the social and also how the social constructs the psychological. Psychological phenomena are formed through individuals' participation in collective cultural practices and their use of cultural tools (Ratner, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978a, 1998). According to Marx (1983), macro social systems such as how we arrange for the care and education of young children become powerful determinants of individuals' intrapersonal structures. Activity theorists propose that individuals' participation in collectively organised activity and structures both form and reveal psychological phenomena (Elkonin, 1972; Engestrom, 1996; Leont'ev, 1978; Luria, 1971; Vygotsky 1978a, 1978b; Zinchenko, 1995).

1.1 Cultural practices as cultural tools

Within a cultural historical activity framework cultural tools mediate the individual and the group and are seen as a key that unlocks the complex relationship between the psychological and the social (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995; van der Veer, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978b). This suggests that socio-cultural research should highlight tool creation and use, as these tools explain social and psychological links. Cultural tools are both broad and eclectic, and include social practices (such as rituals), artefacts, and symbol systems (such as language).

In my study, daily centre rituals presented as cultural tools that allowed children entry into group culture (Brennan, 2005). These rituals offered individual children repeated opportunities to internalise collective knowledge and became powerful tools that shaped social life in the early childhood centre (Corsaro 1997, 1998; Singer 1998).

As in the example that follows, there were bedtime rituals that promoted togetherness and unity. Individual children were encouraged to join in with the group and participate in the collective warmth and fun. Affective elements and emotions presented as tools that mediated the individual and the group:

> Three children (all in their underwear) run past Tama and Donna (teacher). They have made a train by each placing their hands on the others' waist. They call out, "Choo...choo..." All are laughing and seem delighted with their game, and continue in this fashion to the bathroom where they have been asked by a teacher to wash their hands. (Phase 2 of data collection; Day 4)

1.2 Points of difference

Socio-culturalists, however, are not in agreement about "how to do" socio-cultural research. Sawyer (2002a, 2002b) draws attention to diverse stances among prominent socio-cultural theorists with regard to how to represent the empirical relationship between the individual and the social. Sawyer (2002a) proposes there are two foundational theoretical assumptions of socio-culturalism. The first puts forward a process ontology of the social world which holds that only processes are real, and that entities, structures, or

even patterns do not really exist. The second assumption promotes inseparability of the individual which means that the individual can not be viewed as separate from the social and cultural context. A common error is for researchers to straddle both positions through embracing theoretical inseparability but continuing to treat the individual as a separate entity in their empirical work.

An example of this was seen in my own work as my initial focus on one child resulted in my failing to document important contextual variables and, most importantly, the relationships between these variables (Hatch, 1995). My method of data collection and analysis had inadvertently separated the individual from the context. This was a significant limitation because the relationship between the individual and the social context is the foundation of socio-cultural understandings and, I also suspected, the process of enculturation. Using the individual child as the unit of analysis, I had fallen into the very trap socio-culturalists have warned against, that is, individual reductionism (Brennan, 2005). I addressed this limitation through extending the focus from an individual child participating in cultural activities to observing how cultural activities invite, promote and maintain children's collective participation. This move signalled a rethinking of my inseparability stance and a gradual move toward a process-analytic approach.

1.3 Mediated action

However, the difficulty with adopting the inseparability view is that social phenomena become, in principle, unanalysable as analysis inevitably entails introducing distinctions between the individual and the social (Sawyer, 2002a). Wertsch (1997) acknowledges the dilemma and proposes that a major problem confronting the socio-culturalist is how to live in the middle and offers mediated action as a unit of analysis. Mediated action occurs through individuals' use of cultural tools and represents the individual and the context through recognising that cultural tools mediate all social activity. Socio-cultural research, therefore, requires careful observation of cultural tools and how these are mediated through individuals' use of them during participation in cultural activities. With my own study, the effectiveness of cultural tools appeared to be highly dependent upon interpersonal factors such as the relationship between teacher and child. Intimate, interpersonal moments mediated social rules and I concluded that the manner of

communication was as important as the message itself in terms of imparting cultural information:

> Paul leaves the table and lies on the toy cot in the home corner. Anna (teacher) asks him to return because it's too early to leave the table and tells him he hasn't finished his sandwiches. Paul resists. Anna picks Paul up, cradles him in her arms, smothers him with loud kisses and carries him giggling back to the table. (Phase 1 of data collection; Day 5)

This teacher's physical insistence of compliance was warm and affectionate, and created a spontaneous opportunity for her to reconnect with this child. I interpreted this teacher's gesture as a willingness to accommodate the child's perspective even within non-negotiable parameters. In this way the group requirement became an enjoyable game for the child, and the teacher achieved her goal of ensuring his ongoing participation in the routine.

As the fieldwork progressed I was reminded how teachers are constantly faced with situations where they need to highlight the significance of their requests to children, however, due to social and cultural restraints are not permitted to engage in emotionally charged, affective displays commonly used in most private, family situations (Dencik, 1998; Singer, 1998). These teachers used humour (a culturally acceptable affective display) to communicate important messages to the children in their care. Teachers could not risk jeopardising tentative attachments with children when the foundation of many aspects of centre life was dependent upon children experiencing a trusting and safe environment. I interpreted teachers' use of fun and humour to be a way of mediating cultural rules and expectations that enabled them to forefront individual relationships while simultaneously strengthening the collective culture.

2. How will I explain agency and motivation using an approach that promotes the self as purely sociological?

Recent interpretations of socio-cultural theories highlight willingness to participate in cultural activities and tend to overlook the range of individuals' responses including resistance to participation (Lektorsky, 1984). This "willing" collective-participatory focus

has obscured the unique character of person-to-person exchanges but Lektorsky argues that diversity of responses to social messages demand the socio-culturalist's attention. Nevertheless, agency is a difficult concept to explain within a framework that promotes the self as sociological in formation and nature.

Vygotsky (1978a) viewed agency as an inevitable outcome of individuals' participation in social systems. As individuals experience irritations they assert agency but these expressions are always permeated with social characteristics and values. Agency defines the individual as distinct from others, yet the irony is that this distinctness is only revealed within the context of the group.

2.1 Agitating the culture

I found that evidence of agency was often seen in individual children's unwillingness to participate in centre practices. Resistant responses seemed to reflect individual choices about whether to accept or reject social messages. I interpreted these expressions of agency to be "children agitating the culture". Cultural agitations provided valuable insight into the way group activities and practices are constantly audited and changed in accordance with individuals' decisions about whether to accommodate, appropriate, or reject social suggestions.

> Nicola stands up and is asked by Donna (teacher) what she is doing. Nicola replies, "Just getting a drink." She returns with a cup of water, sits down, turns around on her chair, gets off her chair then sits down on the floor underneath the table. Donna tells another teacher that she needs a spoon to feed a toddler her yoghurt. Nicola seizes an opportunity to roam and quickly gets up off the floor and exclaims, "I'll get it for you." The teachers comment on her helpfulness and Nicola beams. She returns from the kitchen grinning widely and hands the spoon to Donna. (Phase 2 of data collection; Day 6)

Nicola sat "under" rather than "at" the table and from this position could eavesdrop on the teachers' conversation. They seemed unaware of her presence. On overhearing a teacher's request for assistance she exploited the "sit down" rule and offered to help. This offer was gratefully received by the teachers and legitimised further wanderings including a trip into the kitchen (an area usually out of bounds to the children). What had begun as a

transgression of a rule resulted in her gaining both the teachers' permission and approval. This was an innovative expression of agency borne out of her initial unwillingness to participate in a group activity.

Ratner (1997) extends Vygotsky's notion of agency and applies it to socio-cultural theory in this way. He claims, "Cultural templates penetrate to the innermost of people's souls, and mould emotional life and somato-psychic reactions in stereotyped and patterned ways" (p.17). Ratner concludes that expression of individuals' emotions and agency are wholeheartedly structured by cultural systems and environments, suggesting to the researcher that talk about agency and emotion, is at the same time, talk about society.

Furthermore, children's transgressions of rules created a sense of "them" (adults) and "us" (children) that served to bond and consolidate children with their peers and distinguished them as a subculture within the adult-dominated centre culture. This subculture provided me with further insight into how the structure and cultural arrangement of the childcare centre continued to shape psychological phenomena and psychological-social links.

3. How will I recognise change of form (or transformation) in the individual, social, and cultural domains?

Socio-cultural research highlights the importance of individuals' participation in cultural activities and practices but has been less able to capture the changing and temporal nature of activities, tools and practices. At first it appears that Vygotsky's zone-of-proximal-development goes some way towards recognising change of form and transformation in socio-cultural domains. However, Smagorinsky (1995) and others have alerted researchers to the difficulties of researching in the zone, although this concept is commonly promoted in socio-cultural theories of learning and development. Smagorinsky puts forward as evidence the plethora of research that focuses almost exclusively on dyadic and small group interactions to the exclusion of macro-sociological influences on the zone, and argues that these studies demonstrate a truncated interpretation of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development because they fail to take into account important macro influences. This is a fatal flaw, given that the macro-sociological influences provide insight into social and cultural transformation at both the individual and group levels.

3.1 Struggling with the methodology

Engestrom (1987) responds that activity theory has the potential to explain change of form and transformation, through documenting expansive cycles across time, yet socio-cultural researchers have yet to learn how to document temporal influences successfully. Ratner (2002) supports Engestrom's claim and says that it is the misuse of socio-cultural methodology, rather than faulty theory, that fails to document the changing macro-sociological influences on cultural tools and practices.

Ratner (1997) concedes that, while some studies include passing references to macro-sociological influences, these generally remain undeveloped both theoretically and empirically. He argues that failure adequately to consider practical, social, concrete activity obscures the changing, evolving nature of social systems and institutions and also the ways that individuals affect these changes. Documenting expansive macro-sociological cycles over long periods of time is beyond the scope of most studies. Yet I discovered that influences of time are captured in traditional events which become evident when adults pass on to children the valued practices and activities from generations past. Each generation retains, discards, and appropriates aspects of traditional practices in accordance with their own social agendas and circumstances. The following data further illustrate this point.

3.2   Capturing time through tradition

Becca was a teacher at the centre and also the mother of Nicola who attended the centre. Becca discussed her family's, specifically Nicola's, part in their family's Halloween celebrations the previous evening:

> Some of the children are discussing Halloween and dress ups. Becca (teacher) tells them that Nicola (her daughter) dressed up as a "fairy witch pumpkin" at their Halloween party at home. When a child queries this combination Becca explains how Nicola wanted to be all of the characters as she couldn't decide on just one. Becca goes into detail about Nicola's costume and explains to the group that it was part-witch, part-fairy, and part-pumpkin. Michael interrupts and calls out, "A crown...crown...I have a crown." This prompts the other children to elaborate on their costumes and characters, and their families' celebration of this event (real and imagined). In the midst of the Halloween sharing one child notices a scratch on his friend's arm and asks what happened. The children speculate about the cause of

the injury and Becca encourages them to elaborate on the cause of the injury and, continuing in the spirit of the Halloween urges, "You can make the story a lot more fantastical than that..." and leads them in whimsical story about "...Halloween monsters and heroes..." and weaves a story about unintended but unavoidable injuries incurred in the interests of saving people. The children listen intently spellbound by the prospect of Becca's story. (Phase 2 of data collection; Day 10)

Becca's sharing prompted other children to relay their own experiences of Halloween. She taught children about this traditional event through personalising the tradition and sharing her own family's celebration with the group. Becca's retelling of how Nicola appropriated the event when she dressed up as several mythical characters, rather than the usual one, illustrated the dynamic, changing nature of culture. Becca in her role both as a mother, and a teacher, was encouraging children's appropriation of a traditional event to meet contemporary circumstances. Chaiklin (2001) and O'Donnell (2001) maintain that traditional events are an important means of transmitting the culture because they retain aspects of the past yet are appropriated and re-interpreted by each new generation.

In addition, Geertz (1994) proposes that the function of any recurrent traditional event is the part it plays in the social life as a whole, and the contribution it makes to the maintenance of the structural continuity of the given culture. Halloween, however, provided an interesting example of cultural continuity as it was unlikely that these children's parents would have celebrated this particular event during their own childhoods (if they had been living in New Zealand at this time). The globalisation of such cultural events demonstrates the well documented influence of the media on socialisation practices and suggests that in contemporary society the media may now be sharing the role of the experienced cultural member (Brennan, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002). It also reminds us that the nature of participation in specific cultural events has consequences for the participants and also for preserving aspects of cultural continuity.

3.3   Cultural auditing

In a similar episode Becca (teacher) passes on information about another historical event—Guy Fawkes:

Becca (teacher) is seated at the lunch table and tells the children, "I was sitting at my computer and all the children were asleep in their beds and I heard boom! I thought oh my goodness it is fireworks." Becca throws up her arms, widens her eyes and conveys surprise and excitement to the group. All the children begin talking at once with great excitement. The children each talk about their family's celebrations and experience of fireworks. (Phase 2 of data collection; Day 11)

Valsiner (1997) argues that the role of semiotic mediation is of crucial relevance to enculturation as it makes the transfer of cultural knowledge from immediate experiences available for use in new contexts. Becca's and the children's conversations mediated their home experiences of the fireworks celebration and their combined stories constructed a new, collective interpretation of this historical event. Becca initiated and directed the conversation in a manner that allowed even the children who had not celebrated this event with their own families to be part of it. In this way these children were introduced to the cultural significance of the event for other families (and perhaps future generations).

3.4   Holding on to what's of value

The teachers wove together macro events with micro experiences. This strategy provided children with an authentic but personalised experience of culture, a sense of group membership, and most importantly this strategy allowed for cultural continuity. Cultural continuity is an important feature of enculturation and is seen in the handing on of philosophies, values, norms and traditions from one generation to another (O'Donnell, 2001). This centre's collective enactment of traditions and celebrations ensured that valued aspects of the wider culture were preserved and continued by the next generation. For the researcher, collective re-enactment and re-storying of cultural events provides evidence of temporal-historical influences in social practices and activities (Brennan, 2005).

The centre was situated near a church and on this occasion church bells rang out just as the children were sitting down to lunch:

Sinead (teacher), Becca (teacher) and Donna (teacher) are seated at a lunch table preparing for lunch. Suddenly the church bells from a nearby church ring out around the room. The teachers call out to the children with excited urgency,

"Ssssh...ssssh...listen...listen to the bells...the church bells." (They drop their voices to a whisper indicating intrigue and wonderment.) The children chorus, "Church bells!" Most of the children stop eating their lunch and look up and out in the direction of the window and pair off into excited conversations about the bells ringing. (Phase 2 of data collection; Day 7)

The teachers immediately drew the children's attention to the sound of ringing bells and once again communicated to them through modelling an exaggerated affective state (delight and wonder) that this was a special and unusual occurrence to be valued and shared. Wertsch and others speculate that the transmission of culture arises from a pattern of continuity that is maintained with the past, and through new members agreeing upon and adopting the previously established meaning of practices, symbols, and signs (Ratner, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978a; Wertsch, 1993). These teachers taught the children appreciation and the relevance of an age-old sound (the tolling of bells) that was imbued with cultural symbolism and connection with times past. The ringing of church bells was an unexpected sound in this built up, urban area and would have had held little meaning for the children in terms of their contemporary experiences. The teachers communicated to the children the cultural significance of this ancient sound and in doing so connected the children to their wider cultural and historical community.

3.5   Cultural ontogeny

At first this term appears to be an oxymoron as ontogeny refers to the development of an individual from conception to maturity as contrasted with the development of a group or species. Valsiner and Hill (1989) maintain that social conduct is in fact a product of cultural ontogeny as once established, personal understandings of courtesy regulate future social interactions, the nature of interpersonal relationships, and eventually cultures. Valsiner and Hill view rules of polite conduct as being both a product and the mediator of cultural history. Their theoretical interpretation recognises how cultural practices are transformed and changed. An example from my data shows how rules about polite behaviour have the potential to influence macro-sociological practice, and how adults, in the first instance, guide these social behaviours:

> Donna (teacher) leaves the table and Tama begins singing a song but substitutes one of the words with "bum". Donna calls out to her, "Do you want to leave the table Tama? We are not happy with that language." Tama laughs and continues to sing the "bum" song. Her peers are giggling and smirking behind their hands.
> (Phase 2 of data collection; Day 7)

The teacher responded to Tama's "impolite behaviour" by re-iterating the consequences of her actions and appealed to a collective, external authority with the use of the term "we". In this way she clarified conditions of group membership through promoting the message, to be part of this group, individuals are required to behave in certain ways and respect certain rules.

Pontecorvo (1998) maintains that there is a range of situations which show how children and adults learn the discursive social practices of their culture which involves passing on moral values, rhetorical forms, and rules guiding social conduct. When children resist social suggestions this resistance results in children having to account for their behaviour and offers adults additional opportunities to reveal the rule or expectation. I observed that teachers capitalised on children's resistance and used individual transgressions as opportune platforms for public statements of social rules and expectations.

4. How will I capture complex social phenomena while remaining true to the socio-cultural approach?

To a greater or lesser extent, each of the previously discussed questions goes some way to answering this final question. To recap, socio-culturalists have focused on individuals participating in mostly micro activities as a way of capturing and explaining many forms of social phenomena. Observation and analysis of participation in cultural activities and practices provides insight into how people survive, develop, and exist as cultural beings.

Ratner (1997) identifies five elements of socio-cultural phenomena as guidelines for socio-cultural research: cultural activities, cultural values, physical artefacts, psychological phenomena, and agency (or individual responses). He argues that these primary elements should be viewed as interdependent and nested within each other.

Cultural historical activity theorists Leont'ev (1978) and Luria's (1971) activity systems provide an example of this interdependence as the activity system highlights the reciprocal nature of activity. As the actions of an individual develop in a collective activity system, the individual's actions will continue to develop this same system.

Activity theorists (Chaiklin, 2001; Leont'ev, 1978) argue that if we are to understand social phenomena we need to focus on the concrete characteristics of social life. Elucidating the concrete cultural characteristics of social phenomena requires an examination of the particular traditions and rituals of each community. Knowledge of these concrete manifestations of a culture will show how the psychological and the social are inextricably linked. Activity theorists conclude that when adults emphasise cultural-historical communality through the enactment of traditions such as Halloween, and Guy Fawkes (the events discussed in this paper) they create a common history between generations that builds the link between the here-and-now within the broader dimensions of time and space.

I concluded that the complexity of social phenomena is seen within each interaction and cultural practice. Miller and Goodnow (1995) define cultural practices as the smallest units of a social setting or of a social organisation which involve recurrent categories of talk or action that hold analytical significance for the researcher. Although participants tend to view these activities as unremarkable features of their daily lives, the socio-culturalist, through documentation and theoretical analysis, singles them out as remarkable insights into psychological and social learning and development, but most importantly as evidence of links between psychological and social phenomena (Ratner, 2000). In this, the researcher is presented with "participation in practice" as a unit of analysis for socio-cultural research. Participation in cultural practices captures change and transformation, reveals individual and group links, and acknowledges the complexity of social phenomena.

A significant insight for me as a socio-cultural researcher was the importance of the unit of analysis. Theoretically I presented the unit as cultural activity and practice, and attempts to maintain empirical and theoretical congruence resulted in the object under study shifting from a child participating in cultural activities, to children participating in a collective cultural event, to studying cultural events themselves. Guided by socio-cultural

thinking I had discovered a way of collecting and analysing data to reflect more closely the individual-social relationship but I was still unsure how to represent this in the text.

5. Summary and implications

After several unsuccessful attempts at organising my data into separate themes, I came to realise that some themes were inseparable. Theoretically and empirically I identified four themes that reflected the same questions I had posed at the beginning of my study. The first theme concerned *relationships and relating to others.* This theme illustrated the highly social nature of psychological phenomena and the inseparability of the individual and the group. Relationships and relating to others revealed the social construction of even personal phenomena such as emotions and the way in which interpersonal experiences formed intrapersonal understandings of social information. *Tools and tool use* the second theme showed how cultural tools significantly challenge the boundaries between the social and individual. Cultural tools, whether material or psychological, linked individuals to their culture and emphasised how human activity is always mediated by tools but in the broadest sense. Tools were created and transformed through individuals' use, and carried with them aspects of contemporary culture but also the historical remains of their origins. The third theme *agency and resistance to participation or acceptance of social suggestions* offered a socio-cultural definition of agency and showed how individual resistance to others' suggestions provided opportunities for cultural transformation and change. Individual expressions of agency interrupted and agitated the group culture, and in doing so, provided space for cultural adaptation. The fourth and final theme *cultural continuity* presented enactment of traditional events as evidence of macro-sociological, historical-temporal influences in everyday cultural practices. These events showed how valued aspects of a culture are preserved and handed down from generation to generation, across time and place.

The four thematic elements appeared repeatedly throughout my data analysis, and were evident in even the briefest of interactions leading me to conclude that it was these elements that constituted socio-cultural research. In turn I felt satisfied that the combination of these units represented the micro, macro, and temporal influences that are central to maintaining theoretical and empirical congruence within socio-cultural research.

5.1   Implications

Using a socio-cultural framework for my own study has caused me to reflect more deeply on other's use of this approach for early childhood research. It seems that the early childhood community at large has taken a certain amount of theoretical licence in adopting socio-cultural concepts and making them fit their own situations and settings. This was a concern articulated by Cullen (1996) when *Te Whāriki* the national early childhood curriculum (founded on socio-cultural principles of learning and development) first emerged as a guiding curriculum document for early childhood education in this country. Cullen supported the socio-cultural underpinnings of this document yet queried teachers' and researchers' ability to grasp complex theoretical concepts and apply them to early childhood practices. More recently Cullen and others have expressed similar concerns in relation to early childhood assessment practices in New Zealand (Anning, Cullen, & Fleer, 2004).

Burman (2001, p. 14) proposes it is acceptable to engage in some "cultural and disciplinary tourism" and experiment with ideas from outside Western psychology and education, but I would query whether socio-cultural theories in relation to early childhood care and education practices and research have moved too far away from the intentions of the original authors (Vygotsky, Leont'ev). An example is seen in New Zealand's early childhood educational discourse where the significance of social mediation in Vygotskian theory is constantly emphasised yet the concept of cultural tools has received much less attention:

> …despite its theoretical power for explaining the mediation of learning via resources and materials in early childhood settings. It is likely that the delayed interest in cultural tools in early childhood research was part of a broader failure to recognise the historical dimensions of Vygotsky's theory (Anning, Cullen & Fleer, 2004, p. 176).

Failing to capture the complexity of a socio-cultural approach in research practices will affect our understandings of how individuals, societies, and cultures evolve and develop. At best, using a truncated approach will create partial understandings of learning and development, and at worst, distorted or inaccurate theories. My own experience of using a

socio-cultural approach taught me the importance of maintaining theoretical and empirical congruency at every stage of the research process and also that context is everything.

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