CULTURAL CHALLENGES FOR THE DESIGN OF SCHOOLING IN THE URBAN NEIGHBOURHOODS OF BALTIMORE CITY, USA AND RURAL NEIGHBOURHOODS OF KATETE DISTRICT, ZAMBIA[1]

Robert Serpell

University of Zambia
PO BOX 32379 Lusaka
Zambia
serpell@umbc.edu

RÉSUME. The theme of this symposium, "towards a school curriculum that is locally and culturally appropriate," affords me a welcome opportunity to reflect on the various theoretical, methodological and application strategies that we deployed in two long-term research projects with a view to ensuring that their findings would indeed contribute to that agenda. I shall begin by explaining the purpose of a broad theoretical framework that has emerged from the studies, and then consider some of its limitations with respect to guiding the processes of research and policy development.

MOTS-CLÉS : culture, design of schooling, Baltimore, Katete.

Introduction

My central thesis will be that if the ideas that emerge from educational research are to have a sustainable impact on the practices of education in the real world, they must be appropriated by those who manage the actual delivery of those practices, i.e. in the case of preadolescent children, their teachers and parents. The teachers and parents who currently hold responsibility for the basic education of children in low-income, marginalized communities are generally quite far removed from the discourse of academia. When we consult them, we need to take into account their perceptions of us as researchers, and the goals and concerns that motivate their everyday practices. Only if those concerns are addressed by researchers from what is perceived as a credible standpoint will their recommendations have any likelihood of making a sustainable impact on the practices of the educational system.

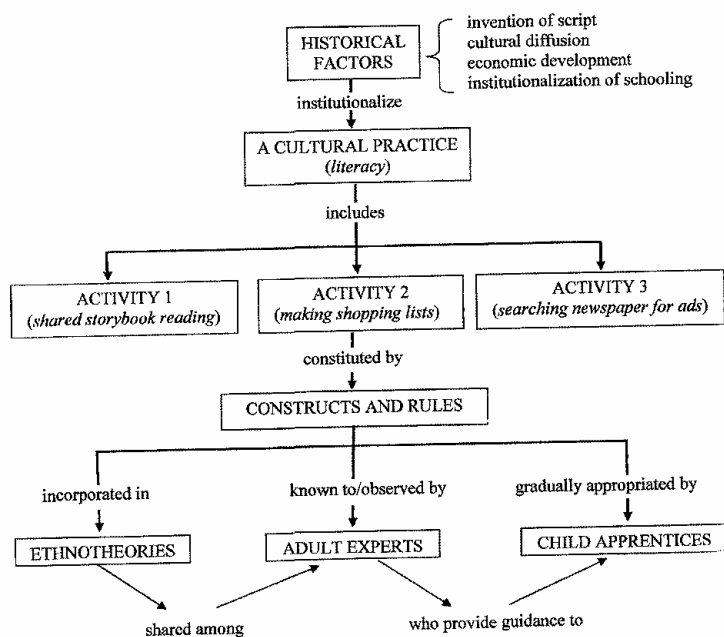## 1. An overarching theoretical framework

FIGURE 1.1. The appropriation of cultural practices through participation in activities with guidance by experts in light of their ethnotheories.

Figure 1. *theoritical framework*

The diagram presented in Figure 1 is less ambitious in many ways than the framework proposed by Pierre Dasen (2003 p. 143) or indeed the earlier frameworks proposed by Whiting and Whiting (1962), Berry (1976), Jahoda (1980) and Triandis (1984), that in various ways inspired the integrative framework proposed by Segall, Dasen, Berry and Poortinga (1990, 1999). One feature of my diagram, however, that sets it apart from those more ambitious models is that each of the links between the boxes is specified with an explicit verbal description rather than just an arrow. Frijda and Jahoda (1966) pointed out long ago that, when the arrows linking the boxes in such diagrams are all supposed to represent a causal relationship, the framework as a whole appears to defy empirical evaluation.

Maybe some would argue that in this day and age, with the advent of more sophisticated computer-mediated data analytic techniques such as multiple-regression-correlation (MRC) analysis and structural equation modeling (SEM), there is a genuine possibility of testing those complex models against reality. In MRC and SEM, the arrows get to be specified as weights indicating the degree of correlation (positive or negative) between the variables. Moreover the framework is often conceptualized as a schematic representation of a system rather than a chain of causal influences. Hence in Dasen's (2003) integration, the concentric circles often used to represent Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory are adopted in preference to the information-processing tradition's flow diagram of boxes and almost all the arrows are bidirectional.

In my diagram, the relations proposed between theoretical constructs in adjacent boxes are mostly neither casual nor correlational.   The diagram sets out to "unpackage" (Whiting, 1976) the construct of a cultural practice by showing that it includes a variety of recurrent activities, and that ethnotheories relate on the one hand to the implicit rules that constitute those activities and on the other hand to the processes of socialization through which adults guide children to appropriate cultural knowledge as they develop from apprenticeship to expertise. The model is inspired by the notions of guided participation (Rogoff et al, 1993), and of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991) which in turn built on the insights of Vygotsky (1978), as interpreted by Cole (1985), Wertsch (1985) and others, about the embedding of children's cognitive development and education within a sociocultural and politico-historical context.

This framework was developed in the process of planning with my colleagues Linda Baker and Susan Sonnenschein to undertake a longitudinal investigation of the appropriation of literacy by children of various families in the multiracial, multi-cultural American city of Baltimore (Serpell, Baker Sonnenschein and Hill, 1991). My colleagues were both Americans familiar with the Baltimore ecosystem in which they had for some years been investigating parental ideas about the socialization of literacy. My experience, on the other hand, was grounded principally in studies of the cognitive development and socialization of Zambian children, notably in the rural District of Katete. The framework was conceived as a shared resource for understanding the early literacy development, socialization and education of children across those two very different eco-cultural contexts.

We were attracted by Super and Harkness's (1986) conceptualization of the "developmental niche", and by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systemic perspective on the ecology of human development. And we were inspired by Scribner's (1985) seminal essay on Vygotsky's uses of history, and by the account by Rogoff (1990) and others of the process of guided participation. The diagram seeks to integrate the complementary notions of literacy as a cultural practice (Scribner & Cole, 1981) and as a developmental accomplishment (e.g. Snow, 1991) within those various levels of analysis: the macrocultural, the familial and the interpersonal, and is designed to guide the reader's thinking from one level to another.

The narrative of the diagram begins at the top with long-term historical processes that explain why children in both urban American Baltimore and rural African Katete were expected to learn to read and write the Roman alphabetic script, in a school setting that brings children together in age-graded classes, for explicit instruction by professionally trained teachers, much as they are in the public schools of many contemporary societies, ranging from Switzerland to Brazil. Next the diagram illustrates how the cultural practice of literacy that has thus been institutionalized over the course of history includes a wide range of recurrent activities, many of which take place outside of schools. It then proposes that each of those activities is constituted by a set of constructs and rules. Finally, the socialization of children is mapped onto this cognitive activity structure through the guidance provided to child participants by literate adults, who draw not only on the constructs and rules that they know as part of their literacy expertise, but also on implicit theories of child development, socialization and education that they share with other adult members of their community.

These implicit theories incorporate the constructs and rules that constitute such activities as shared storybook reading, making a shopping list or searching the newspaper for adverts. Each of those activities was described by Heath (1983) as prevalent in one or more of three contrasting communities whose cultural practices of literacy she studied in the Southern USA; yet none of them would be widely understood in rural African communities such as Katete. We expected to find them represented with varying frequency at the four different "social addresses" that we sampled in the city of Baltimore. And indeed we did find, using an ecological inventory to guide in depth interviews with the parents of each child is our study cohort, that, when the children were in pre-kindergarten, 100% of the middle-income parents, whether African–American or European–American, reported daily engagement in storybook reading with their child, whereas only 56% of the low-income African-American parents in our study did so, and only 33% of the low-income European-American parents (Serpell et al, 2005, Table 3.2).

In addition to the frequency with which primary caregivers engaged in such literacy activities with their child, we explored the kind of guidance that each caregiver provided to the child for his or her participation in joint activities. We invited them to demonstrate the activity of shared storybook reading, and on another occasion invited the child to engage in a joint writing task with an older sibling or friend. We also asked each parent or primary caregiver to explain in her own words what various recurrent, joint activities in the child's everyday life at home meant to the child and to her as the caregiver.

My enthusiasm for the insights afforded by the framework of Figure 1 derives from its capacity to articulate these different, complementary levels of analysis, situating particular families within an ecocultural context that has its own historical dynamics that lie, at least in the short-term, beyond the capacity of individual actors to modify directly (Serpell, 1995), and situating the explanations of child development and socialisation offered by individual parents within the shared system of cultural meanings on which they draw, and the recurrent activities to whose rule-constituted structure they refer.

2. Misgivings

Yet, I am dogged by an uneasiness that arises from representing these actors and lay theorists/interpreters in the third person – as she or he or they, rather than as we or you. The framework seems to present the world as though the author and audience are looking down at the world from an external viewpoint. This stance of "objectivity" is very popular in social science, and has been critiqued by Berrien (1967) and others as implying some kind of cognitive superiority, akin to that imputed in Greek mythology to their gods, who were conceived as looking down on the activities of humans from the vantage point of Mount Olympus.

Reading Homer's account of the Olympian gods in the modern era of technology, they sound as though they were equipped with some kind of zoom-lens and directional microphone, allowing them to watch and listen in to the most intimate conversations among mere mortals and decide whether or not to intervene. But in the real world that we inhabit, there are no magic zoom-lenses for entering into the subjective worlds of others. Even if we design intrusive forms of espionage, we can only discover what other humans think, how they interpret their own actions and those of others by engaging them in discourse. And the way in which that discourse is couched depends on the role that the investigators negotiate for themselves in the society in which they operate.

At least three challenges confront the validation of locally appropriate educational research. (1) The investigator(s) must negotiate a socioculturally legitimate role for themselves in the local community.

(2) They must express their research findings in ways that connect with the various perspectives of diverse audiences within that community. And (3) they must find a way of mobilising sustainable sociocultural change in the direction implied by their interpretation of those findings.

The findings of researchers who fail to meet the first of these challenges are liable to be dismissed as irrelevant, or (worse still) as informed by hostile or mischievous motives. Yet legitimacy in the eyes of one constituency may not guarantee it for other constituencies. Indeed, in some cases it may even be construed as taking sides in a pre-existing division of opinion within the community. Indeed, the notion of partnership in development aid is fraught with problems of ownership (Higgins & Rwanyange, 2005).

3. Cross-cultural communication: negotiating the middle ground[2]

One way of capturing the challenge of cross-cultural communication is to construe the author and audience as viewing the world from different perspectives.

---
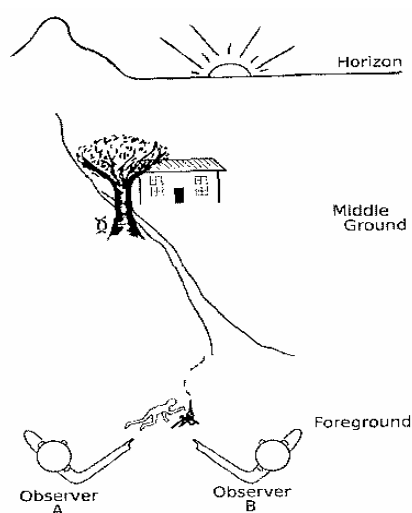
[2] This section and the next two sections of the present paper draw extensively on the text of Serpell (2006).

The schema shown in this figure provides an illustrative metaphor. In the bottom left and right corners of the schema, are the head and shoulders of two observers of the world. In the foreground, close to both of them a young child is approaching a fire. This is an ostensible element of the world they can both reach out and touch. They are both pointing at it, and are in a position to include it within their secondary intersubjectivity (Trevarthen, 1980). At the top of the schema is the horizon, which looks much the same to both observers: a mountain sloping down to the shore of the lake and the sun setting over the water.

In the middle ground is a cluster of items. Both observers can see the tree, and the house next to it. But from where observer A stands, the view of the path as it reaches the tree is obscured, so that she cannot tell exactly whether the path leads up to the front door of the house, or merely passes by the house. Observer B, on the other hand, can see, from where she stands, that the path goes right between the house and the tree, and continues on towards the mountain. What observer B cannot see is the sack leaning up against the tree, although it is clearly visible to observer A. In short, certain features of the world they both observe, are clearly visible to one observer and invisible to the other. Communication about these features of the middle ground, between the ostensible scene close to them and the distant horizon that they share, will require reciprocal efforts of the imagination from both of them to incorporate them in an intersubjectively shared view of the world.

Table 1 (adapted from Serpell, 2006) outlines the approach adopted in our Katete and Baltimore studies to addressing the epistemological challenge posed by different perspectives.

ostensible referents	invitation, negiciation, intermediary, construct	shared horizons
Katete study *(adult interviews)*		
actual children + Naturalistic vignette of situations arising in village life	Selection of individuals for task responsibilities + Explanation of criteria of selection	Authority of adults to assign children such task responsibilies
Baltimore study *(parental ethnotheory interviews)*		
actual children and network of kin + Inventory of recurrent activities in child's home	Interpretation of meaning of selected recurrent joint activities for the focal child + Interpretation /evaluation	Existence of a developmental niche constituted by a stable activity structure

	of the same activities from the primary caregiver's perspective	

Table 1. *Components of the process of cross-cultural communication: examples from the different studies*

In the next two sections, I describe these strategies in more detail.

4. The significance of schooling: life journeys in an African society

This study (Serpell, 1993) traced the lives over a period of fourteen years of a cohort of 50 children born into Chewa families clustered in small villages and engaged in subsistence agriculture in Katete, a district of Zambia's Eastern Province. The project began with an attempt to understand the context of primary socialization of children born into this rural community before they entered the local primary school. A major methodological concern at the outset was how to avoid biasing the elicitation procedure towards the perspective on which public schooling is based. We therefore introduced our interviews as an opportunity for us (teachers from the national university and a local primary school) to learn from the respondents (responsible adults in the context of village life) about the development and socialization of children in that context. We emphasized that every society has its own views on how to raise its own children, and that our goal in this inquiry was not to teach but to learn from the Chewa people about their own views.

We focused the entry-point for cross-cultural communication on actual children as ostensible referents, by assembling a group of children of approximately the same age (based on information that we had collected through a preliminary demographic survey), and first establishing that our informant knew each of them by name. We also made allusion to some shared horizons such as the authority of adults to assign children practical task responsibilities in the course of everyday life, while setting the scene for our naturalistic vignettes of hypothetical situations that might arise in village life. (These vignettes had been generated in advance through a process of brain-storming among researchers, teachers and parents familiar with the pattern of life in a Chewa village.)

We then invited our informants to indicate which of the designated individual children they would select for a given task responsibility in that hypothetical situation. For instance, one of the vignettes was as follows:

Suppose that one day you are down by the stream, washing your clothes, and you see that the place where you usually spread them out to dry is muddy today, and this group of girls is with you. Which of them would you send to search for another good place to spread your clothes ?

Once the informant had nominated a specific child for the assignment, we went on to ask her to explain her criteria for that selection. Sometimes the respondent's initial reply would focus on such variables as age or kinship status. But in such cases we always pressed for a more substantive reason, pointing out that all the children in the designated group were of similar age, and all were members of the village, kinship-based community. Out of this semi-structured interview process, we negotiated with our informants a set of constructs that were meaningful to them for the evaluation of children's behavior in relation to the demands of everyday life in the sociocultural context of village life. These constructs were intermediary in conceptual level between concrete, ostensible individuals of a particular gender, name and place of residence, as well as a particular age and kinship status, on the one hand, and certain highly abstract, general principles that served, on the other hand, as a shared horizon that warranted the possibility of a meaningful conversation.

Articulating the system of meanings embedded in Chewa culture that informs those intermediary constructs, including *nzelu, ku-chenjela,* and *ku-tumikila* has been the subject of extensive subsequent research, on which I have drawn to interpret various aspects of the life-journeys of the young people whose behaviour we first viewed through the lens of conversations with adults who knew them in the context of their home community. The constructs have been systematically compared with English constructs such as *intelligence, cleverness* and *responsibility*, as well as constructs in French, Baoule, Bemba, and several other African languages (Serpell, 1989), highlighting commonalities and contrasts. And I have drawn on that contrastive analysis as a frame of reference for interpreting the interweaving of European and African cultural systems of representation in the bicultural repertoire of Zambian school teachers and their students (Serpell, 1993, Chapter 4; Serpell, 1996, 1999). The middle ground between ostensible referents (actual children and concrete tasks) and shared horizons has thus been gradually articulated as a focus of contestation between different cultural systems of meaning and practice, each of which lays claim to define important pathways of opportunity for children growing up in contemporary Zambian society.

5. Becoming literate in the city: the Baltimore Early Childhood Project

This five-year, longitudinal study of the processes of becoming literate was focused on a sample of 80 children between the ages of 4 and 8 born into low and middle-income African-American and European-American families in the American East Coast city of Baltimore. The study was an attempt to understand, in several contrastive sociocultural groups, the interactive processes through which children explore and gradually appropriate cultural resources in the environment, including the practices and technology of literacy. Since society takes an active interest in promoting this aspect of child development, our study also focused on the context and processes of cognitive socialization. The city in which the study was situated, like many other American cities in the 1990s, included an impoverished center characterized by high rates of adult illiteracy and high school 'drop out', along with other features of what some authors have termed a growing urban 'underclass'. The city also contained a few wealthy neighborhoods and a substantial, middle-income residential zone where school attendance and adult literacy rates were much higher.

In order to permit valid comparisons across such diverse groups, we considered it methodologically essential to define the focus of our inquiry broadly enough for parents with limited, weak or aversive personal histories of contact with the school system and its agenda not to perceive us simply as agents of the school. The approach we adopted was to ground our discussion of ideas with parental caregivers in their own, relatively spontaneous formulations of what are salient activities in their child's everyday life. This called for a gradual process of invitation to dialogue, which included a series of steps. These are listed in Table 2, reproduced from Serpell, 2006, where a more detailed account of the process described in this section is presented, together with illustrative examples.

5.1. Connecting with caregivers' everyday understanding of child development and socialization: steps in the process adopted by the Baltimore Early Childhood project

Step 1: building rapport in the recruitment process

Step 2: inviting participants to define their world in the Diary

Step 3: broadening the scope of discussion with the Ecological Inventory

Step 4: eliciting the insider's "meanings" attributed to recurrent activities

Step 5: inference and tentative formulation of socialization goals

Step 6: negotiated specification of socialization goals

Step 1: building rapport during recruitment

A stratified sample of schools was chosen to represent four contrasting 'social addresses' (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983) within Baltimore City's complex ecosystem: low-income, African-American, low-income, European-American, middle-income, African-American, and middle-income, European-American. School Principals were approached by a multicultural team of researchers with the request that their school host the 5-year, longitudinal project. Each of the schools that we approached catered to a neighborhood with a demographic profile that represented one or more of these social addresses. Letters were sent home inviting parents to meet with one or more members of the research team at the school, where an individualized, face-to-face discussion was held of the objectives and methods of the study, and parents were invited to give their informed consent to the participation of their child and family in the project. These discussions afforded an opportunity to build rapport with parents, setting the tone for subsequent interviews, and highlighting the theme that our purpose was to learn about the family's approach to child-rearing rather than to impose or advocate an 'expert' point of view.

Step 2: inviting participants to define their world

By inviting her first to maintain a record for a week of what happens in each day of her child's life, we left each respondent free to define her own focus. Low literacy levels were accommodated by offering participating parents the choice of recording their diary on a cassette recorder or in a booklet.

Home visits were arranged to follow up the diary with a series of semi-structured interviews, and observations, which took place one or two times a year over the next 5 years. The first home visit included steps 3 and 4:

Step 3: broadening the scope of discussion

Our Ecological Inventory served as a checklist for systematically reviewing with the informant each of several distinct types of literacy-related activity in which the focal child participates.

Step 4: eliciting the insider's 'meanings' for ostensible activities

From the initial description of the child's daily life in the diary, (in some cases further elaborated in response to the Ecological Inventory) we selected a set of recurrent activities in which the child engaged with a familiar co-participant, and probed the caregiver to articulate the personal meanings that she imputed to each activity and what she thought it meant to her child.

> 'What do you think this activity means to (the focal child) ?'

> 'What does it mean to you as her parent?' (or other caregiving role, as appropriate).

Step 5: inference and tentative formulation of parental goals

From these samples of the caregiver's ideas, as well as a lengthy conversation focused around an ecological inventory of the child's home environment, we extrapolated inductively a tentative formulation of several developmental goals informing the caregiver's approach to child-rearing. This step of our elicitation procedure may be regarded as the most constructively hermeneutical part of our investigation of caregiver ethnotheories. Each interviewer met with one of the principal investigators of the project to review in detail the caregiver's responses to the first ethnotheory interview. Together they searched the responses for expressions of value by the respondent, and inductively derived a set of implicit socialization goals that appeared to inform the meanings she had imputed to the various recurrent activities in her child's everyday life.

Step 6: negotiated specification of socialization goals

These focused interpretations were presented to the caregiver in a further round of discussion, conducted on the second home visit, and she was invited to reject, reformulate, and/or endorse each of them as one of her goals for her child, and then to add to the list. The process of negotiating consensus about the definition of her goals for her child often involved the mother citing illustrative examples. Parents also sometimes took this as an opportunity to enunciate an explicit philosophical principle. Each caregiver was also encouraged to add goals which they felt were important but had not been identified by the investigator.

Socialization goals are part of the middle ground that was negotiated in our ethnotheory interviews. Caregivers described their child's life in terms that made sense to them, and the research team inferred from those descriptions what appeared to us to be socialization goals. We presented our tentative hypotheses to the caregiver and asked whether they were a good match for the world as seen from her perspective. She, in turn, elaborated, corrected, or confirmed our draft list of her goals, prompting us to revise and or extend it. Eventually the two parties reached consensus on a list of goals that the caregiver endorsed as her own.

6. Policy implications

In the remaining two sections of this paper, I will consider the main policy implications derived from these two studies and assess the prospects for their making a lasting, beneficial impact on the practices of educators within the locally prevailing public system of educational provision.

The central policy implication[3] derived from the Katete study was stated in the concluding chapter of *The significance of schooling* as follows.

"The bird's eye view from which policy is generally formulated has certain strategic advantages, but these are gained at a price which should not be regarded as inevitable. The criteria for monitoring   and   evaluation   of   a   school's performance need to be expanded to   include   accountability   to   its   local clientele, if the cycle of disempowerment of marginal communities is to be broken...

"Part of the solution to this dilemma," I suggested, "may come from developing alternative methods of aggregation which recognise the integrity of individual persons over time and the salience of the individual school as a pivot around which the accountability of the educational system to consumers must be negotiated" (Serpell, 1993, 266).

Two notable suggestions for the reform of practice in this regard were advanced.
(a)   Treating schools as nodes in the design and implementation of public policy. This notion was operationalised in a later paper (Serpell, 1999, 2001) with three concrete proposals:

- Establishing several parallel tracks leading to complementary, locally valued outcomes, such as agricultural production, home-based care for a sick sibling or parent, participation in a community service project, or in a local drama

- Selection quotas to guarantee a certain minimum number of secondary school admissions for each primary school fielding a given number of

---

[3] Other policy implications identified, that space does not allow me to discuss in detail in this presentation were: Focus on curriculum content, and medium of instruction; Expansion of the clientele of primary schools to include children with disabilities and adult learners who did not complete the primary course in the normatively prescribed age-range of their development, and The role of teachers in bicultural mediation at the interface between cultures.

candidates, and inviting the primary school to contribute to the selection criteria for allocating those places

- Bonding for payback by those few graduates of the primary school who secure places at secondary school outside the community to return periodically to their home community and perform some kind of community service.

(b) Expansion of the local service functions of primary schools to include serving as
- a community library,
- a forum for citizens of the neighbourhood to come together to discuss current national affairs, and
- a base for outreach services by itinerant teachers to stimulate and support home-based education for children with severe disabilities.

The first two of these functions are in reality already served informally by many primary schools in Zambia and elsewhere in Africa, and the third has been quite successfully implemented at a few sites in Zambia, Kenya and Zimbabwe. However, they tend to receive only token recognition by national Ministries of Education. My recommendation was that they should be accorded greater official legitimacy in the terms of service of teachers and the performance criteria by which the schools are evaluated. The rationale for doing so is that they can serve to foster stronger community ownership of the institution of public education, to demonstrate in tangible ways its local relevance, and to manifest the reality of life-long learning. Parents who visit the school to discuss current national affairs, to consult the national newspapers (or, indeed, as the accessibility of the new ICT grows, to browse the internet, and/or to send and receive personal email,) are afforded a richer kind of opportunity to engage with the literate culture to which primary schooling is designed to offer an entrée than when they merely send their children there to attend classes (Serpell, 1997). An exciting case study of the impact of introducing internet access at a rural primary school in Ghana is presented by Pryor and Ampiah (2003).

The theme of promoting local accountability is shared across both the studies, although the way in which it was operationalised in the Baltimore study is addressed more to the teachers than to the planners, recognising both that central government planning is less salient in the USA than it is in Zambia (and indeed most sub-Saharan African nations), and that teachers in the USA are somewhat more accessible as an audience for academics to address than teachers in Africa. It is still too early to assess whether Linda Baker, Susan Sonnenschein and I achieved our goal of writing a book that would be read and understood by inservice teachers in the USA.

In our interpretation of the policy implications of our findings in the Baltimore study, we focused more directly on what can be done by teachers and parents to articulate a productive commitment to cooperative communication. We recommended that teachers give systematic attention to building effective home-school partnerships, by

- negotiating with their students' home caregivers a shared understanding of each child's individual strengths and needs

- identifying recurrent literacy-related activities in which their students engage outside of school, and

- identifying key socialisation agents within the child's home as potential partners in promoting the child's development.

We also endorsed some broad national policy recommendations put forward jointly by the American National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 1998) and the International Reading Association (IRA) as representing "expert consensus" on how parents can best support the early appropriation of literacy by their children:

- engage in shared book reading
- provide frequent and varied oral language experiences
- encourage self-initiated interactions with print
- visit the library regularly
- demonstrate the value of literacy in everyday life
- promote children's motivation for reading
- foster a sense of pride and perceptions of competence in literacy
- communicate with teachers and be involved with school

7. Prospects for sustainable impact

To mobilise sustainable sociocultural change is one of the great challenges facing policymakers in many different fields of endeavour. In Africa this is often referred to as the agenda of national development. Skepticism about that formulation is abundant among social scientists (eg Rist, Sabelli & Berthoud, 1986). Yet, when we dig deeply into the connotations of many seemingly detached social scientific inquiries, it becomes apparent that value judgments of one sort or another are almost always present. To my mind, it is difficult to justify the demands placed by systematic inquiry on needy individuals, families and institutions in low-income, marginalised communities without holding out the prospect that the knowledge and understanding generated has the potential to contribute to the creation of a better world. However, that ethical obligation may be fulfilled in various ways.

The Olympian perspective tends to favour a blueprint approach to intervention in social affairs. But, as Korten (1980) has argued with compelling evidence, development projects that have successfully gone to scale more often seem to have followed a "learning-process approach", that "embraces error, plans with the people, and links knowledge building with action". Thus, one of the best strategies for a researcher to promote the implementation of policy recommendations emanating from research may be to cultivate an understanding of those implications among practitioners well placed to implement them.

In Baltimore, in the wake of the Early Childhood Project, we attempted to recruit the imagination of a sample of serving Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten teachers through a seminar and project-based training opportunity, entitled "Cooperative communication among teachers and parents about the emergence of literacy in sociocultural context" (Serpell et al., 1996). Some of the emergent findings of the ongoing research project, as well as some reports of successful intervention projects reported from elsewhere were presented to the participants by way of orientation. And the teachers were invited to engage in free-wheeling discussion of their own, related experiences. Each teacher then developed her own classroom-based project under the tutorial guidance of a university faculty researcher and implemented it over the next three months with periodic support from a member of the research team.

The greatest challenge of this work was to foster a productive integration between the teachers' prior lived experience of communication with their students' families, which had often been quite frustrating, and the research literature on more successful, cooperative forms of teacher-parent communication. A unique contribution to this process was made by Linda Gorham, an experienced preschool teacher who, as a Graduate Research Assistant, had conducted interviews with families of the Early Childhood Project, gaining a strong appreciation for its empathetic perspective on parental ethnotheories, and mastery of the theoretical literature informing this and other cultural studies of early literacy socialization in low-income, urban American families. In the seminar discussions that we held with in-service teachers, the ostensible referents were their actual students, who subsequently became the focus of these teacher-researchers' cooperative communication with the students' families, as part of the action-research projects they designed and carried out. The principal investigators, all university faculty without preschool teaching experience, shared as a horizon with the teachers a general desire to enhance the effectiveness of teacher-parent communication. But the negotiation of middle ground in defining and implementing the teacher-research projects was especially facilitated by the bicultural mediation of Linda Gorham who shared with the teachers one body of knowledge and expertise, grounded in her experience as a practitioner, and shared with the university researchers another, complementary body of concepts grounded in research. Note that the credibility of a bicultural mediator in such discussions arises from the fact that both parties know that she has seen the world from their perspective.

The optimism that inspires such work with teachers rests on the premise that their vocational motivation and enduring interest in children's minds can sustain teachers in the process of revising their practices. Akyeampong, Pryor and Ampiah (2006) report from their experience with Ghanaian primary school teachers that they often have tacit professional knowledge that can be recruited in the course of training:

"…when teachers talked about their experiences, they actually focused on very important professional issues relating to teaching and learning, but sometimes used language that was misleading. However, given opportunities to explain themselves, their language had relevance and meaning to their experiences of the curriculum. This occurred when they were asked to relate their discussion explicitly to what happened in their classrooms and yielded the most encouraging results." (p. 172).

In-service training of professionals is just one approach to the agenda of mobilising progressive change in the field of public education. Papers like this one may also be regarded as a form of application, designed to capture the imagination of an influential audience, and recruit their participation in a programme of planned change. Another, complementary strategy is to demonstrate the feasibility of an alternative practice. This was the purpose of engagement by a team of university researchers in Zambia with a team of practitioners committed to the implementation of the Child-to-Child approach in a set of rural primary schools in Zambia's northern province (Serpell & Mwape (1998/99); Serpell, in press). By showing how an innovation works in practice and documenting its positive outcomes, practitioners and policymakers can perhaps be convinced that its theoretical rationale is not just "pie in the sky"!

Beyond such external inputs, the community of policymakers and practitioners may often benefit from strategic assistance from academia. Building consensus within the community may be facilitated by assisting leaders to articulate the case for an innovation so that they are better equipped to champion the cause and to counter ill-informed criticisms from conservative elements. Academics can also play a role in the co-constructive design of plans of action, in the design and delivery of training programmes for trainers of trainers, etc, and in the design of a system of participatory monitoring and evaluation as part of an implementation programme. Doing so may not earn them as much credit within the academic community as conducting research and publication of its findings in peer-reviewed journals. But it may make a big difference between whether their ideas find their way into practice and make a lasting impact in the real world.

Certain aspects of the ideas set out in the formal publications emanating from the two projects described in this paper have found their way into public policy. It is difficult to make a case that either study played a critical role in bringing about that process of social change. Many other factors have impinged on the climate of thought in the public policy sphere of education in the past few decades. It is nevertheless gratifying to see that the concepts of community participation and local accountability have acquired wider currency in the pronouncements of educational policymakers and practitioners[4]. Moreover, even the principle of using children's home languages as media of initial literacy instruction, which for a number of years was firmly rejected by the Zambian government (Ka and Serpell, 2003), has found acceptance as a foundation of the current policy, known as the Breakthrough To Literacy programme (Tambulukani et al, 2001). Regarding the Baltimore study, I noted above that we included in our interpretation of its implications an endorsement of certain guidelines for parents already enshrined in the "expert consensus" published by two high profile institutions. By doing so, we formally associated the study with that consensus, which had in fact taken into account some of the early reports and conference presentations emanating from the study, as well as inputs by one or more of the authors to consultative processes through which the expert consensus was generated. Ultimately, the "mainstreaming" of ideas originating from research represents the best evidence of their appropriation, and of what some may be willing to celebrate as progressive cultural change.

Bibliography

Akyeampong, K., Pryor, J. and Ampiah, J.G. (2006). A vision of successful schooling: Ghanaian teachers' understandings of learning, teaching and assessment. *Comparative Education, 42* (2) 155-176.

Berrien, F.K. (1967). Methodological and related problems in cross-cultural research. *International Journal of Psychology, 2*, 33-44.

---

[4] Important words of caution in this regard have been expressed by observers of the international development scene, such as Rose (2003), who found that in Malawi the concept of community participation has been "marketised" by development agencies in such a way that it focuses exclusively on the role of communities in resource mobilisation, without offering them any genuine opportunities to participate in decision-making, and intensifies inequalities between men and women in the community. Likewise, Pryor (2003) comments on the abuse of the concept of "community participation" as a top-down agenda, suggesting that it tends to "put the cart before the horse". "Improving the quality of education in rural Ghana such that it delivers basic literacy and is relevant to the concerns, needs, and future lives of those it serves, is a complex issue, requiring simultaneous change on several fronts. If one wants to stimulate community involvement in school, one has to encourage at the same time school involvement in the community"(p.15)

Berry, J.W. (1976 *). Human ecology and cognitive style : comparative studies in cultural and psychological adaptation.* New York, NY: Sage.

Berry, J.W. Poortinga, Y. Segall, M. and Dasen, P.R. (2002). *Cross-Cultural Psychology: Research and Applications.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press

Bronfenbrenner, U. & Crouter, A. C. (1983). The evolution of environmental models in developmental research. In: W. Kessen (Ed.). *History, theory and methods, Vol.I, Handbook of Child Psychology.* New York: Wiley.

Cole, M. (1985). The zone of proximal development: where culture and cognition create each other. In J. V. Wertsch (Ed.), *Culture, communication and cognition: Vygotskian perspectives* (pp. xx-xx). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dasen, P.R. (2003). *Theoretical frameworks in cross-cultural developmental psychology.* In T.S.Saraswathi (Ed), Cross-Cultural Perspectives in Human Development: Theory, Research, and Practice (pp. 128-165). New Delhi: Sage.

Frijda, V. and Jahoda, G. (1966). On the scope and methods of cross-cultural research**.** *International Journal of Psychology, 1*, 109-127.

Habermas, J. (1984, 1987). *The theory of communicative action, Vols I and II* (Transl. T.McCarthy). Boston: Beacon Press.

Heath, S.B. (1983). *Ways with word*s. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Higgins, L. & Rwanyange, R. (2005). Ownership in the education reform process in Uganda. *Compare, 35* (1), 7-26.

Jahoda, G. (1980). Theoretical and systematic approaches in cross-cultural psychology. In H.C. Triandis and W.W.Lambert (Eds*), Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology, Vol. 1:perspectives* (pp. 69-141). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Ka, O. & Serpell, R. (2003) Le defi d'integration des langues et cultures africaines dans les programmes de scolarisation en Afrique Noire**.** In Gohard-Radenkovic, A., Mujawamariya, D. & Perez, S. (Eds). *Integration des minorities et nouveaux espaces culturels* (pp.251-272*)*. Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang.

Korten, D. (1980). Community organization and rural development: a learning process approach. Public Administration Review, 40, 480-511.

Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation.* Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Pryor, J. (2003). Community participation in rural schooling: the cart before the horse, a case study in Ghana. (www.fiankoma.org/content.asp?page=papers) (accessed 13 June 2007)

Pryor, J. and Ampiah, J.G. (2003). Understandings of education in an African village: the impact of information and communication technologies. Report of DFID Research Project Ed2000-88 (www.fiankoma.org/content.asp?page=papers) (accessed 13 June 2007)

Rist, G., Sabelli, F., and Berthoud, G. (1986). *Il était une fois le développement*. Lausanne, Suisse: Editions D'en bas.

Rogoff , B.(1990). *Apprenticeship in thinking: cognitive development in social context.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Rogoff, B., Mistry, J.J., Goncu, A. & Mosier, C. (1993). Guided participation in cultural activity by toddlers and caregivers. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 58* (7, Serial no. 236).

Rose, P.   (2003). Community participation in school policy and practice in Malawi: balancing local knowledge, national policies and international agency priorities. *Compare, 33* (1), 47-64.

Scribner, S. (1985). Vygotsky's uses of history. In J. V. Wertsch (Ed.), *Culture, communication and cognition: Vygotskian perspectives* (pp. 119-145). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Scribner, S. & Cole, M. (1981). *The psychology of literacy.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Segall, M.H., Dasen, P.R., Berry, J.W. & Poortinga, Y.H. (1999). *Human Behavior in Global Perspective: An Introduction to Cross-cultural Psychology.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Serpell, R. (1989) Dimensions endogenes de l'intelligence chez les AChewa et autres peuples Africains. In J.Retschitzki, M..BosselLagos & P.Dasen (eds), *La recherche interculturelle, Tome II* (pp.164 -179). Paris, France: Editions l'Harmattan.

Serpell, R. (1993) *The significance of schooling: life-journeys in an African society.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. (345 ps.)

Serpell, R. (1995). Situated theory as a bridge between experimental research and political analysis. In L.Martin, K.Nelson, & E.Tobach (Eds.) *Cultural psychology and activity theory: essays in honor of Sylvia Scribner* (pp. 21-42). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Serpell, R. (1996). Cultural models in indigenous socialization, and formal schooling in Zambia. In C.-P. Hwang, M.E.Lamb, & I.Sigel (Eds.) *Images of childhood* (pp. 129-142). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Serpell, R. (1997). Literacy connections between school and home: how should we evaluate them? *Journal of Literacy Research, 29* (4), 587-616.

Serpell, R. (1999). Local accountability to rural communities: a challenge for educational planning in Africa. In F. Leach & A. Little (Eds) *Education, Cultures and Economics: Dilemmas for Development* (pp.107-135). New York: Garland.

Serpell, R. (2001)**.** Responsabilite vis-a-vis la communaute rurale: un defi pour la planification de l'enseignement en Afrique. In A.Akkari, R.Sultana, & J.-L. Gurtner (Eds) *Politiques et strategies educatives: termes de l'echange et nouveaux enjeux Nord-Sud* (pp. 215-243). Bern, Suisse: Peter Lang.

Serpell, R. (2006). Negotiating the middle ground between the ostensible and shared horizons: a dynamic approach to cross-cultural communication about human development. In J.Straub, D. Weidemann, C. Kölbl, & B. Zielke (eds.) *Pursuit of Meaning: Advances in Cultural and Cross-Cultural Psychology* (pp. 393-433). Berlin: Verlag.

Serpell, R. (in press). Participatory appropriation and the cultivation of nurturance: a case study of African primary health science curriculum development. Chapter for P.R.Dasen & A.Akkari (Eds) volume to be published by Sage.

Serpell, R., Baker, L., & Sonnenschein, S. (2005). *Becoming literate in the city: the Baltimore Early Childhood Project***.** New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Serpell, R., Baker, L., Sonnenschein, S., Gorham, L., Hill, S., Britt, G., Butler, B., Guelta, J., & Holmes, D. (1996). Cooperative communication among teachers and parents about the emergence of literacy in sociocultural context. Final Project Report to the National Reading Research Center (University of Georgia, University of Maryland College Park). (*ERIC document* ED 414566.htm)

Serpell, R., Baker, L., Sonnenschein, S. & Hill, S. (1991). Caregiver ethnotheories of children's emergent literacy and numeracy. Paper presented at a symposium on the socio-cultural context of development, 11th Biennial Meetings of the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development (ISSBD). Minneapolis, MN, July 1991.

Serpell, R. & Mwape, G. (1998/99). Participatory appropriation of health science and technology: a case study of innovation in basic education in a rural district of Zambia. *African Social Research, 41/42*, 60 – 81.

Snow, C.E. (1991). The theoretical basis of the Home-School Study of Language and Literacy Development. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education, 6*, 1-8.

Super, C.M. and Harkness, S. (1986). The developmental niche: a conceptualization at the interface of child and culture*. **International Journal of Behavioural Development, 9*** (4), 545-569.

Tambulukani, G., Sampa, F.R., Musuku, R., & Linehan, S. (2001). Reading in Zambia: a quiet revolution through the Primary Reading Programme. In S. Manaka (Ed), *Proceedings of the First Pan-African Reading for All Conference, August 1999*. Newark, NJ: International Reading Association/UNESCO.

Trevarthen, C. (1980). The foundations of intersubjectivity: development of interpersonal and cooperative understanding in infants. In D.R.Olson (Ed) *The social foundations of language and thought: esays in honour of Jerome S. Bruner* (pp. 316-342). New York, NY: Norton.

Triandis, H.C. (1984). Toward a psychological theory of economic growth. *International Journal of Psychology, 19***,** (1-2), 79-95.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes***.** (Edited by M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner & E. Souberman.) Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Wertsch, J.V. (1985). *Vygotsky and the social formation of mind***.** Cambridge, MA: Harvarad University Press.

Whiting, B.B. (1976). The problem of the packaged variable. In K.F. Riegel & J.A.Meacham (Eds), *The developing individual in a changing world*. Chicago: Aldine.