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The Role of Cultural Artefacts in Play as Tools to Mediate Learning in an Intercultural Preschool Programme

KELLY HENNIG
ABC Head Start, Edmonton, Canada
ANNA KIROVA
Department of Elementary Education,
Faculty of Education, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada

ABSTRACT Starting with the research question 'What is the role of play as a means of genuine inclusion of home language and cultural traditions in an intercultural early learning programme?', the article focuses on the role of cultural artefacts in a programme in which the majority of the children were refugees from Africa. The sociocultural theory of learning of Vygotsky and the activity theory of Leontiev provided the theoretical framework for the study. From a sociocultural perspective, materials are cultural objects within the social context and their use and functions are adaptive, depending on the activities that are also social. By engaging in these habitual activities and interactions, children become a part of their cultural world. Ethnographic data collection methods were employed to address the research question. A description of a play episode was used as an example of a young child's use of her appropriated knowledge of a particular cultural practice (singing while doing housework) and a cultural object (artefact) as a *tool* to mediate her learning. The authors argue that the example demonstrates that the presence of cultural artefacts allowed the child's home culture to emerge as the dominant one in the early childhood setting. The authors believe that the mindful, deliberate introduction of cultural artefacts by the first-language facilitators and cultural brokers who were members of the classroom teaching team allowed the child to consolidate her learning from both her home and her school environments in a manner consistent with her cultural background. The study suggests possible tools and forms of analysis that provoke early childhood educators to extend themselves outside of their own knowledge systems so that they can better facilitate children's ongoing negotiations among their multiple worlds.

Responsiveness to the Diverse Needs of Young Children: a persistent struggle

School populations in Canada increasingly include children from a multitude of sociolinguistic, cultural and socio-economic strata. In 2006 alone, 51,322 children under the age of 15 entered Canada as permanent residents, which made up 21.9% of the new arrivals in that same year (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2007). As immigrants and refugees, these children have an array of pre-migration, migration and settlement experiences. For them, schooling is a process through which they must come to terms with societal expectations while trying to remain connected to family and culture (Knörr, 2005; Kağitçibaşi, 2007). Often, children are required to choose the *world* in which they will belong and are forced to navigate between two identities. Lippitz describes this struggle as follows:

> As a student in school, the child, in his or her person, is split: On the one hand, there is the individual in the plenitude of the child's biographical experiences and adventures, which remains

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> foreign to the teacher; on the other, there is the child in his or her role as a student, a role which is a foreign imposition, ultimately remaining external to the child. (Lippitz, 2007, p. 83)

Similarly, Brooker (2009, p. 126) stated that children are acculturated to schools, which requires that they become 'a different kind of child from the one their family and community created. For those who [succeed], it [is] a remarkable triumph of energy and determination'. If children are to become confident learners, as educators we will be required to deeply consider how we might assist them in navigating between their varied worlds and exercise agency within their lives.

Unlike the diverse backgrounds students come from, few teachers are newcomers to Canada and even fewer are visible minorities or second-language speakers (Kirova, 2008). Thus, teachers in general and early childhood educators in particular can find it difficult to fully understand the world views of children in their classroom whose experiences might be vastly dissimilar to their own. In the face of the diverse student body, however, early childhood educators are hard-pressed to actualise classroom environments that respect and accommodate multiple perspectives and that are genuinely responsive to the diverse needs of the children (New & Beneke, 2009).

The mainstream response to the increased diversity among student populations of all ages has been to *represent* it within the classroom couched in a developmental frame of the universal child (Penn, 2005). In early childhood settings, for example, a litany of reference books (Copple, 2003; Gonzalez-Mena, 2008) and educational play props are available as references to assist teachers in creating environments that are more reflective of the diversity within them. Additionally, developmentally appropriate practice and anti-bias frameworks have articulated a set of guidelines that outline how early childhood practitioners can assist children to achieve *optimal development* (Bredekamp & Copple, 2009) and *prepare* them to resist institutionali*sms* (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). However, a body of critical literature strongly suggests that these practices reduce culture to representative features (dress, food, dance, etc.) and profess predictability in the face of complexity (González et al, 2005; Kirova, 2008). The struggle in the field persists as it attempts, on the one hand, to develop environments and practices that are responsive to the diverse needs of young children in today's classrooms (Espinosa, 2010) and, on the other, to provide universally applicable guidelines that establish *quality* early childhood educational environments for all. The tension is evidenced in the most recent revision of developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp & Copple, 2009), in which guidelines for early childhood environments, programming and materials are provided. These guidelines perpetuate the assumption that only particular types of environment are appropriate for children. This begs the question of who determines what *is* and what *is not* appropriate, and for *whom*. If we truly acknowledge the existence of multiple world views, how, then, can we presume to determine universally appropriate environments and practices?

Attempts to 'find a unified, universal formula for relations with the environment' (Leontiev, 2005, p. 10) did not begin with the first publication of the developmentally appropriate practices (Bredekamp & Copple, 1987). In his critical study of the environment in the pedological works of L.S. Vygotsky, Leontiev (2005, p. 10) concluded that both Western and Soviet psychology equally (mis)understood environment as an '*external factor*' (original emphasis), and contrasted the activity of the child and the environment in which it takes place, instead of seeing them in their essential interrelationship that belongs to the interaction itself. He further explained: 'A given *object as an environment* exists only in relation to a certain subject ... A given object becomes the environment only when it enters the reality of a subject's activity as an aspect of this reality' (Leontiev, 2005, p. 12; original emphasis).

If materials, props and books in current early childhood classrooms are seen simply as *external factors*, they are reduced to means of representing cultural differences based on the array of skin colours within our classrooms (Johnson, 2005). Such a view leads to the folklorisation of culture, where materials such as cultural artefacts are often marginalised to the role of display in the classroom, preventing children from developing any relational meaning through genuine engagement with them. A deeper exploration of the relationship between the materials *as an environment* and the individuals in the contexts – both children and teachers – is called for. In a context in which there is a complex fusion of cultures, world views, experiences and knowledge systems, how do we situate materials within the classroom in order to provoke and guide children

in a way that is most meaningful to them – that is, through activities that allow them to enter into a relationship with the material world that surrounds them?

The purpose of this article is to present one aspect of a multifaceted study at an intercultural preschool programme that has made an effort to develop practices which challenge the superficial representations of cultural diversity. Thus, it can be seen as a case of what preschool programming might look like if we were to seek the deeper meaning of living and teaching in a culturally diverse world. The aspect of the project described here explores the role of material (cultural) objects as mediators within the preschool classroom. We argue that sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978) in general and activity theory (Leontiev, 1978) in particular can serve as the basis from which early childhood educators can find ways to create spaces that allow for 'multiple, even contradictory cultural identities [to] exist' (Kirova, 2008, p. 118). Within this theoretical framework, what is particularly useful is the notion of the human environment as 'a dynamic unit of *artefacts*, *social others*, and *self*' (Bang, 2009, p. 163; original emphasis). This notion is shared by Cole (1996), for whom the environment is not only the (physical) surroundings, but also the particular reified wholeness of cultural and historical processes available in an activity setting. For Leontiev (2005, p. 24): '[the child's] reality takes shape under specific socio-cultural conditions . . . initially this is always external activity related to material objects of the reality that surrounds the child'.

Culture and Material Objects: theoretical perspectives

Sociocultural theory goes far beyond the one-dimensional view of culture commonly represented in multicultural classrooms: a static, homogeneous, frozen-in-time, normative 'entity' that 'does things to people' (Hoffman, 1996, p. 549) or, as Trueba (1992, p. 80) puts it, is 'some sort of amorphous, reified static entity that causes people to behave in certain ways, to express and exhibit certain values, beliefs, and practices'. Instead, sociocultural theory views the cultural world as fluid and ever changing, with each new generation not only appropriating past cultural practice, but also furthering both activities and tools to be used in the future (Stetsenko, 2009). Iljenkov (1977, cited in Hedegaard, 2007, p. 248) pointed out that: 'by perceiving, handling, or acting in relation to objects, a person relates to the way previous generations have perceived, handled, and acted with these objects'.

Consistent with sociocultural perspectives, other theoretical discourses have given considerable attention to the impact that material objects have on our lives. Ethnographic studies have explored how objects reconnect us with cultural identity (Trofanenko, 2006). Material anthropology acknowledges the evolution, history and reciprocal nature of *things* in everyday life (Miller, 2010). Miller (2010, p. 53), in crediting Levi-Strauss's theory as having an impact on his own theorising, commented: 'Objects make people. Before we can make things, we are ourselves grown up and matured in the light of things that come down to us from the previous generations'.

Adams (2008) acknowledged a blend of social science influences in her discussion of the invitational address of things. She stated: 'things gather (assemble) and stay (stabilize and sustain) human practices. Each new thing congregates us differently, involving us in new practices and ways of being and knowing the world' (Adams, 2008, p. 171). She continued by describing the invitational quality of material objects as 'merely the opening bar of the rich symphony of possible conversations that may ensue as we engage with things' (Adams, 2008, p. 180). Harman (2002) added to the human science dialogue as he outlined an *object-oriented philosophy* that explores the metaphysics of things, the embodied nature of material objects, and expression beyond physical properties and function. Sociologists, too, have written about human interaction within the context of material culture. Brown (2004) explored the *socialising* ability of material objects, and Dant (1999, p. 3) wrote about how material objects serve to tie us to one another, how we 'express ourselves as a part of society through the way we live with and use objects'.

Materials in Early Childhood Settings

Each of the perspectives mentioned briefly above views objects as culture-bound and contextual; each gives credence to the role of objects as having a defining influence on who we are as human beings. Sociocultural approaches situate materials as cultural objects within the social context and

recognise that their use and functions are adaptive, depending on the activities that are also social (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2001; Göncü et al, 2007). From the sociocultural perspective, development is occurring largely through the everyday activities and interactions of individuals and their social partners (Tudge & Odero-Wanga, 2009). By engaging in these habitual activities and interactions, children become a part of their cultural world. As Stetsenko (2005, p. 72) points out: 'human development is based on active transformation of existing environments and creation of new ones achieved through collaborative processes of producing and deploying tools'.

If we are to acknowledge the importance of objects in the classroom as *socialising agents*, we need to go beyond the simple presence of these materials in an environment in which everything is designed to be educational, child-sized and safe, and thus representative of only one culture – the school culture. Each of us is a member of a particular cultural group. We need to consider how materials in the classroom are connected to each of our lives outside the classroom and what the cultural significance of these objects represents to the members of the classroom community (Holzman, 2009). Since no object is culture-neutral, we need to recognise that when we bring an object into the classroom, we also bring a particular cultural meaning and a cultural way of using the object. Thus, the school environment is 'loaded with values' (Bang, 2009, p. 164), which are both *historical* (i.e. from the perspective of a given society and community of practice) and *functional* (i.e. from the perspective of the individual). The classroom, then, is, as Bang (2009) further suggests, the intersection of historical values with functional values relative to a child.

We argue that only when an object is situated in the classroom environment as a means of bridging that object's 'functional significance' in relation to the child's cultural knowledge of the object can it serve as an intermediary for children to find and resolve their sense of self in a place in relation to others.

Play as 'Social Practice' and the Role of Objects

Vygotsky's (1978) conceptualisation of the role of play in the process of internalisation or appropriation of skills that first exist on the interpsychological plane before they exist on the intrapsychological plane is central to the understanding of play as a cultural activity. Vygotsky (1977) believed that, in pretend play, children recreate real-life events regardless of the fact that they take place in an imaginary situation of the play. The imaginary situation allows children freedom from the constraints of the real world that surrounds them, and stimulates them to try on social roles and skills that they do not yet have a mastery of. He writes:

> in play a child creates an imaginary situation ... Imagination is a new [newly formed] formation which is not present in the consciousness of the very young child ... and represents a specifically human form of conscious activity ... Action in the imaginative sphere, in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary [not imposed] intentions and the formation of real-life plans ... all appear in play and make it the highest level of pre-school development. (Vygotsky, 1977, p. 552)

Therefore, the freedom created by the imaginary situation in play not only allows children to play with play objects (i.e. toys), but, most of all, to play with the meanings they assign to these objects, and thus to use higher-order mental processes based on signs and language as mental tools.

Building on Vygotsky's (1977) theory of development and the role of play in it, Leontiev (1981) explained children's engagement in play with their desire to act like an adult, which they cannot do in real life. However, he took Vygotsky's theory further by suggesting that play is a leading activity in preschool. Leontiev (1978) used the concept of leading activity to distinguish particular types of interaction between the child and the environment that produce major development accomplishments, provide the basis for other activities, and induce the creation of new mental processes and the restructuring of old ones. Leontiev (1977, p. 2) defined activity as those processes 'that realise a person's actual life in the objective world by which he is surrounded, [his] social being in all the richness and variety of its forms'. The role of material objects can play a significant part in the dialectic nature of an activity system. As 'a unit of life that is historically determined and social in origin' (Göncü et al, 1999, p. 154), an activity has a purpose driven by a need (for example, grocery shopping to satisfy the need for food), which motivates an individual to engage in the activity.

In his major work, 'The Psychology of Play', Elkonin (2005b, p. 39) puts the role that a child takes on in play as the 'central aspect, which unites all the others', but which cannot be played without appropriate actions associated with it. He explains:

> There is a close functional interconnection and paradoxical unity between the role and the nature of the actions that correspond to it. The more general and abbreviated the actions in play, the more deeply they reflect the meaning, goal and system of relationships in adult activity that is being recreated. (Elkonin, 2005b, p. 40)

Recent cross-cultural studies (Kamp, 2001) confirm Elkonin's (2005) suggestion that children model substantial aspects of their play on adult activities. It is in the context of understanding play not only as a universal but also as a culturally mediated phenomenon, in which the environment influences the themes of the play, that we discuss the impact of objects on the content of the roles – the human activities, work and human interactions in their everyday reality that are reproduced in play. Kamp's (2001) study brings insight into our understanding of the reciprocal nature of the relationship between culture and play: through engaging in play activities, children learn social roles and (typical) cultural values and norms, and through the creativity and innovative problem solving that occur in play, the new generation contributes to further development of the (given) culture. Provided that different objects associated with different types of human activities have different functional values, the question becomes: What kind of features should the environment have in order to support such activities?

In addressing the question, one can consider Elkonin's (1977) view suggesting that for play to develop, the environment needs to allow children to progress within the continuum from the adult-mediated, object-oriented activity of toddlers to the learning activities of primary-grade children. From this point of view, with the child's growing knowledge of reality grows his or her ability to move from modelling real-life objects, actions and relationships to isolating and abstracting their essential features. Thus, the nature of play materials should change from mostly realistic or real-life objects to more open-ended materials that allow for modifications and *playful* or pretend/symbolic use. However, considering that, in many African cultures (Katz, 1986), children's play occurs in the context of work and chores, and that the Western-style schooling now imposed on the majority of countries in the world has also imposed many 'typical European educational games based on French or Anglo-Saxon models ... as alien cultural items on the children of these countries' (Rossie, 1984, cited in Marfo & Biersteker, 2011, p. 77), the question of the environment in an intercultural context with predominantly African-born refugee children is still open for exploration.

The Study: an exploration of an alternative approach to developing an intercultural preschool programme

Context

In 2007, the board of trustees of the local school district in a medium-size city in Western Canada realigned some district funding to enable the implementation of an innovative support model to better serve English-language learners, including refugee and immigrant children and youths. The intent was to provide access to culturally and linguistically diverse resource staff, provide English-language learning services in school sites, and increase collaboration with families and communities through community agencies and organisations (Kirova, 2010). The goal of the design was to create an environment of responsive programming by fostering a genuine dialogue amongst partners as the project progressed.

As part of the larger initiative, an intercultural early learning programme was funded by the public school board in an attempt to address the life circumstances and particular needs of preschool children from refugee families. As members of the steering committee that was charged with the development of the programme and that met on a monthly basis, the authors of this article were involved with the programme at its inception and had a vested interest in the programme's goals and findings for its broader application within the early childhood education context in which the study took place.

Research Questions

The purpose of the larger study – one aspect of which is described here – was to examine the benefits of an intercultural early learning programme for supporting children's first language while also facilitating English-language learning, and which was also culturally sensitive and inclusive of the newcomer families' perspectives. Therefore, one of the main research questions explored in the larger study was: What approaches to curriculum and pedagogy lead to the genuine inclusion of English-language learner children's home languages and cultural traditions and to English-language and Canadian cultural traditions in early learning programmes based on simultaneous first-language and English-language development? Since activity theory places play as the leading activity for preschool-age children (Elkonin, 1977; Leontiev, 1978), the following sub-question is explored in this article: What is the role of play as a means of genuine inclusion of home language and cultural traditions in an intercultural early learning programme?

With sociocultural learning theory and activity theory as our foundation, we regard the use of material objects in children's play as an example of children's knowledge of the culturally relevant ways of using the objects and of the children's ability to deviate from this use as they use objects as tools to negotiate their place both in school and the larger world.

Participants and Setting

Twenty-one children and their families participated in the third tier of the study described here. The children were from the following language backgrounds: Somali, Arabic, Nuer (Sudan), Tigre (Ethiopia), Dinka (Sudan) and Serbo-Croatian. All of the children were attending the intercultural early education programme at a public elementary/junior high school in an area of low socio-economic status and with a high density of culturally diverse populations. More than 20 languages were spoken by the children attending that school and nearly half of the children in the programme spoke Somali. The programme took place four mornings a week and was attended by an English-speaking classroom teacher and three first-language facilitators (FLFs), who spoke Arabic, Somali or Kurdish as their mother tongue. Therefore, the children who spoke these languages received support for their language and culture as part of the programme, and all of the children were able to engage in intercultural and multilingual experiences.

Since the programme's first goal was to provide cultural and linguistic continuity for young newcomer children through first-language and English instruction, both the classroom staff and research team made a deliberate and considerable effort not to represent their culture or first language in a superficial or tokenistic way. Rather, there was a shared desire to find spaces for the children to foster their interests and engagement in cultural practices supported by the FLFs. Over the summer months following the second year of the programme, Maryam, the FLF from Somalia, had returned to her home country and brought back to Canada a number of everyday cultural objects (artefacts), including kitchen items, baskets and musical instruments.

At the start of the new school year, these objects were placed on a table for the staff, parents, community members visiting the programme and children to view and explore. They became a natural focal point of the classroom environment, so it was decided by the classroom team and the researchers that they were to be used as tools around which first-language vocabularies could be built and as a means of introducing the culturally relevant ways of using these objects to the children in the classroom. Considerable enthusiasm was expressed by the Somali FLF, who viewed the plan as an opportunity to feature her culture and educate the children about the objects and the cultural practices associated with the use of each item.

Research Methods

Qualitative data collection methods, which were largely ethnographic in nature, were employed in the study (Agar, 1996; Gobo, 2008; Heath & Street, 2008). These methods included: focus groups (Bloor et al, 2001) with community members, parents, classroom teachers, FLFs, school administrators and all other stakeholders, including community-serving agencies and policy makers; research conversations (Herda, 1999) that allowed for participants from diverse cultures to work together and assess their actions; focused observations that described and recorded classroom

behaviours and practices as they occurred; and photographs and video recordings that regularly captured the children's play and the introduction of particular cultural artefacts to the whole group. All videotaping was done by the first author of this article, who, as a participant-observer (Merriam, 1988), had become a regular visitor to the classroom and whom the children looked forward to playing with in the classroom's cardboard hut.

Analysis of the focus groups and research conversations consisted of examining, categorising and thematically organising the data collected during the focus groups and research conversations to address the first two research questions of the proposed study. Analysis of the focus group data involved three steps: indexing, management and interpretation (Creswell, 2005). Videos were viewed several times by the research team, conversations captured on the video material were transcribed verbatim, and both the accuracy of the meaning and the cultural intent of the observed behaviours were checked with the FLFs and cultural brokers.

Introducing Cultural Objects

In consultation with the classroom team, the researchers suggested that one Somali cultural artefact would be introduced each week during circle time; this session would be videotaped and then analysed. The introduction would be conducted by Maryam, in both English and Somali, with the children and adults encouraged to ask questions, contribute to the introduction and handle the object in some way. Following the introduction, the artefact would be placed in the classroom's dramatic play area for children to interact with on their own.

At times, an activity coincided with the introduction of the artefact, such as a song that could be combined with actions like harvesting, sweeping or crushing grain. In an interview conducted prior to introducing the objects into the classroom, Maryam expressed the importance of reminding children of their home culture and showing them how these objects had been used in the past and are still used today in day-to-day tasks. Near the conclusion of the interview, she stated: 'If [the children] didn't learn from me, how would they teach their own children?' (6 October 2009).

While circle time allowed for a common experience, free-play time allowed for the children to manipulate the artefacts to their own ends. In Figure 1, children interact with a *kal* ('pestle') and *mooye* ('mortar'), which are traditionally used for grinding grain or spices.

Figure 1. Children crushing grain during circle time.

As researchers, we were interested as to whether the children's interactions would mirror the adults' or whether they would create other meanings for these items:

> What happens when the [artefact] is removed from the cultural context in which it was designed, created and used? Are attributes/functions conveyed to the new user? Does [the artefact] take on new meaning? Or is the object's intent reduced somehow, does it become more obscure? Perhaps the attributes are malleable, constructed and negotiated as is our identity. Perhaps the object can serve as a silent intermediary to the co-construction of worlds that come together. How can [cultural artefacts] be instructive? How does the adult's presentation of the object influence the child? And what will the child do with the object if the intent presented is one that

> is foreign to them? Can they create new meaning? Does the object take on another role? (Participant-Researcher's Journal Entry, 22 September 2009)

While the video and observational data was collected by one of the authors, we both engaged in biweekly conversations, which brought up a renewed set of questions that emerged from the data.

Data Collection: initial challenges

The busy classroom schedule and many interruptions hindered the participant- researcher's ability to speak at any length or in any depth with the classroom staff. The journal excerpt below expresses some of the initial frustrations:

> From the beginning there was never a formal plan [the decision on how to introduce the objects was left to the FLFs], the first time the objects were introduced was somewhat awkward. The introduction was conducted as one might introduce them to a group of adults. As the presentation of artifacts moved towards conclusion, the conversation was largely between adults rather than directed to the children. It was the adults [the other FLF and parent visitors] that asked questions and to whom Maryam responded. (Participant-Researcher's Journal Entry, 6 October 2009)

However, since the research question was about the role of play as a means of genuine inclusion of home language and cultural traditions, observation and the video data collection focused not on the way the objects were introduced, but rather on the children's individual engagement with the artefact after it had been introduced to the whole group.

Play Episode: 'The Crushing Song'

On 28 October 2009, Maryam introduced the *kal* and *mooye* as one of the cultural artefacts to be presented and later placed in the dramatic play centre. The transcription of the play episode included below does not focus on the circle time presentation, so the following background is pertinent to understanding the transcription. While Maryam introduced the *kal* and *mooye* and the actions associated with grinding the corn, she sang throughout. She did not spend time instructing the children about the song and did not even mention the words of the song; rather, she automatically began singing while crushing the grain. None of the children were singing during circle time as they engaged in the activity.

When asked about this after circle time, Maryam related that songs in her cultural practice (Somali) are sung to offset the monotony of repetitious daily tasks. The words, she said, were relatively insignificant in that they largely described the action being conducted. The words, like the task, were repetitious. The proficiency and ease with which Maryam engaged in this task were both subtle and artful. The rotating of her hand and the manner of securing the base of the *mooye* were not aspects of the interaction that were demonstrated to the children.

Two weeks after the presentation of the artefact and its subsequent placement in the dramatic play area, the following episode occurred. Two girls (Sabeen, from an Iraqi background, and Nansi [1], from a Sudanese background – see Figure 2) were playing in the 'house'. The participant-researcher joined them in the area when they were using the *kal* and *mooye*.

Sabeen said very little and primarily engaged in what would be described as parallel play or solitary play with the objects. In contrast, Nansi, as usual, was a driver in the play centre. In this and other play episodes, she demonstrated a considerable amount of competence in her play and interactions. She has presented herself in other situations as a child who directs the play of other children and one who is familiar with the tasks of care within the home (cradling, feeding infants, food preparation, etc.).

Figure 2. Sabeen and Nansi in dramatic play.

The transcription captures only part of the play episode that day and includes several breaks. The intention here is to focus on the song Nansi has constructed, rather than the entirety of the interactions between all three participants in the play episode. (Note: throughout the transcription, italics are used to indicate melody or singing.)

Nansi: [*starts to hum*] *Hum, hum.*
Researcher: [*humming softly*] *La, la.*
Nansi: I'm going to put my voice in [*indicates the voice recorder*]. My voice?
Researcher: Oh yeah, your voice is in there. Look, I'll show you. See, it's on. Yeah, your voice is in there.
Nansi: Okay. Now I'm going to sing now.
[*Children talking and playing together, unrelated to singing vignette. Play focused on feeding babies and filling a Dhiil with toy eggs (a Dhiil is another Somali artefact in the dramatic play area that is traditionally used to store milk and water).*]
Nansi: Okay. Ready ... to crush ... one, two, three, four.
Researcher: One, two, three, four. You're going to crush it now?
Nansi: One, and a two, three, four, and five, five, five – *crush, crush, crush, crush, crush* [*researcher in background, mimicking singing*], *crush, crush, crush, ricky, ticky maman a nee ... crush, crush, crush, crush, ticky, ricky ... tricky, ticky, melody.*
Researcher: I'm going to add some of this [grain]. I wonder if I could crush in here [*taking the metal* kal *and* mooye].
Nansi: You can do it.
Researcher: Show me.
Nansi: Do it like this [*firmly gripping the stick and crushing the grain*]. Don't make noise. No noise. Just do it, okay.
Researcher: No noise.
Nansi: No.
Researcher: Like no singing or no banging?
Nansi: No banging, only singing.
Researcher: Oh…
Nansi: Singing and, you know, crushing.
Researcher: What do you sing?
Nansi: Huh? I'm singing a crush, crush song.
Researcher: A crushing song?
Nansi: Yeah, a crushing song.
Researcher: So ... what does the song say?
Nansi: Huh?
Researcher: Is it, is it a ... ?

Nansi: I'll show you. You have to listen to me.
Researcher: Okay, I'll listen to you.
Nansi: One, two, two, three, three, four, five – *crush, crush, crush, crush, crush … icky, ticky bumblebee … crush, crush, crush, crush, crush … make a cake as fast as you can.*
Researcher: Okay, so – *crush, crush, crush, crush, crush … making a cake as fast as you can.* Is that what you said? Okay.
Researcher and Nansi together: *Crush, crush, crush, crush, crush, make a ticky bumblebee, and make a cake as fast as you can.*
[*Nansi talks about feeding her 'babies' with the mixture being crushed in the* mooye. *Once the babies are fed we begin to crush again.*]
Nansi: Yeah – *crush, crush, crush, crush, crush,* [*together*] *make a icky, ticky bumblebee and make a cake as fast as you can.* Yes, we got it!
Researcher: We got it. Right through.
Nansi: Okay. I'll do it all by myself, then you do it all by yourself, okay?
Researcher: Okay.
Nansi: *Crush, crush … make a ticky bumblebee … don't say your name for me. Researcher*: Oh. You changed it. Okay, so … I'll try that one, is it my turn?
Nansi: Yeah.
Researcher: Okay – *crush, crush, crush, crush, crush, icky, ticky bumblebee …* [*researcher and Nansi together*] *don't say your name for me* [*laughter*].
Nansi: Yes, yes, you did it!
Researcher: So, I … I have to try and remember it.
Nansi: No, now you have to make … change it – *crush, crush, make a face, ticky, ticky, make a face.*
Researcher: [*laughing*] I won't remember that – *crush, crush, make a face*, right?
Nansi: Yeah.
Researcher: Ah – *icky, ticky bumblebee …*
Nansi: Yeah. Sabeen, are you done? [*During the activity, Sabeen had been repeatedly scooping grain into the wooden* mooye *with a wooden spoon. She had just begun to crush it.*] Good job! Okay, let me crush for you [*taking the* kal *and* mooye *away from Sabeen*] – *crush, crush, crush, crush, crush, make a icky, ticky bumblebee.* See, I learned her how to crush! Like my Mom learned me how to crush!

Commentary on the Play Episode

We have selected this play episode to illustrate how a child used play to integrate her learning from school and home. Singing is a prominent feature not only in Somali, but also in Sudanese culture – a cultural feature that is preserved and practised on a daily basis in many households after they have settled in Canada. On numerous occasions, both the Somali and Sudanese FLFs were observed humming or singing quietly throughout the day. As with the *kal* and *mooye*, other artefacts were introduced with accompanying songs. Some songs were playful, some soothing (lullabies) and some were designed to accompany activities, such as games. Many more were simple melodies, descriptive of a task. It was no surprise, then, that Nansi was also fond of singing throughout the day.

What was interesting in this episode was the number of versions of the song Nansi created within a very short time frame. Evidenced here is the process of negotiation as she integrated (in English) her cultural practice of singing a song (appropriated knowledge as an internal mediator or tool at her disposal) and the playful aspects of a North American preschool song about bumblebees and baking cakes. Although these two elements of the song did not appear to the outside observer to be related, the fact that Nansi fumbled through several versions until she was quite clearly satisfied with the end result suggested otherwise. Her natural blending of these two sets of expectations based on cultural practices shows how the familiar practice of singing mediated the activity from which a new composite song emerged.

It is important to note here that we do not consider the song as an outcome that could have been predicted or predetermined as a goal; it was neither predetermined nor provoked by a teacher or by the researcher as another (familiar) adult in the classroom. In fact, it is clear in this example that Nansi was the more knowledgeable participant who guided the researcher (learner) through

the activity (play). Of interest is the manner in which she guided the interaction. Nansi did not tell the researcher what to do, sing along with him or correct him. Rather, she allowed him the freedom to expand the song. When she said, 'now you have to make ... change it', she was assuming that having seen the demonstration, the researcher would imitate her improvisation. This practice of *teaching* was consistent with other classroom observations regarding the differences in adult–child interactions between the FLFs and children in the programme; the practice also was demonstrative of how Nansi operated within the same set of expectations. In adopting the role of a *mother*, her subtle knowledge of learner–instructor interaction became apparent to the researcher. Her final comment – the only one directed towards the other child, Sabeen – showed that Nansi assumed that Sabeen, too, had learned to *sing and crush* simply by being present: 'See, I learned her how to crush! Like my Mom learned me how to crush!'

In an attempt to understand the meaning of the episode, we need to consider the material artefact itself as mediator (tool). Although the focus, to this point, has been on the construction of the song, we cannot help but wonder to what extent the artefact was a key tool that provoked, facilitated and contributed to the sustained interest of Nansi throughout this script. The play episode is a powerful example of how the cultural artefact allowed Nansi to become engaged in play that is much closer to children's play in her native Sudan. Katz (1986), who researched environmental learning in a small central-eastern village in Sudan, noted that the most striking aspect of the children's lives was the fusion between the activities of work, play and learning in time, space and meaning. For Sudanese children, work and play are a 'rich unity' that 'overshadowed formal means as the way in which children acquired, experimented with, and consolidated environmental knowledge' (Katz, 1986, p. 47). In the play episode, Nansi was *playing work* – pretending to crush grains while singing. While this was an activity she had observed women in her home/community doing, and perhaps had participated in, the song she was singing was a pure experimentation with her newly acquired English language. Thus, the consolidated learning from her environments – both her home and her school environments – was evidenced in this short play episode. This example demonstrates how the child reworked her knowledge of two sets of expectations (rules) and emerged from the activity with new knowledge.

From a pedagogical perspective, the mindful, deliberate introduction of an object and its placement in the dramatic play area allowed Nansi to become situated as the cultural expert. The researcher's lack of knowledge and proficiency, both in the song and the activity, gave Nansi an opportunity to extend and negotiate the activity without adult interference. In this case, the adult did not have a role in mediating the learning for Nansi; rather, the cultural artefact provoked Nansi's exploration within the context of play. In this example, we can also see how the cultural artefact became 'the environment' (Leontiev, 2005), because it entered the reality of Nansi's activity as an aspect of her reality – her home, not her school reality.

Researchers' Reflections

Several observations are of importance to us as we consider this episode. Although the initial research question revolved around exploring children's play as a means of genuine inclusion of home languages and cultural traditions in an intercultural early learning programme, it was our expectation that play was only one of the many different ways in which children's home language and cultural traditions would be present in the classroom. However, the classroom team struggled to find ways of genuinely including the children's home languages. For the most part, home languages were used for clarification, direction and songs. Even the discussion and interpretation of the songs were conducted in English, which, in fact, was the common language shared by the adult participants. A continuous effort was required for first languages to become a dynamic part of the programme. However, the cultural traditions, not the home languages, found ways of inserting themselves into children's play and provoked the adults to find other examples of shared cultural practice (such as the making of bread). The example demonstrates how the cultural practice of singing while crushing grain was blended in Nansi's play with her new language – English. This blending of cultural tools, both material (the *kal* and *mooye*) and symbolic (singing a song and the English language), shows children's creative ability to appropriate cultural tools in the different worlds in which they live, and to use those tools masterfully when they need them.

We believe that the presence of cultural artefacts and practices, acting as mediators, allowed the children's home culture to emerge as the dominant one. Had the cultural objects not been present or had pseudo-objects (plastic play props) been inserted instead, the central space would have been occupied by items unfamiliar to the children. With heavily contextualised props in a Western frame (by the use of primary colours, for example, or the representation of diverse stereotypes), the English-speaking teacher would be seen as dominant and as the holder of the mainstream knowledge system and concepts. Such practice, as exemplified in its extreme in post-colonial school systems in Africa based on Western philosophies, has failed 'to guarantee the cultural identities of Africa's children' (Marfo & Biersteker, 2011, p. 73), and could not have led to any different results in a Western context such as the one in which the study reviewed here took place – a context in which 80% of the children were refugees from Africa.

Instead of enlarging the gap between the culture of schooling and the culture and life experiences of the children and the FLFs in the programme, we brought cultural objects into the school context, which, as we observed over the course of the study, served as a point of pride not just for Maryam, but also for the other two FLFs. There was a shared desire to bring in or demonstrate objects and to share childhood stories and cultural traditions. A sort of friendly competition emerged within the classroom. Towards the concluding weeks of the participant-researcher's observations, each FLF rotated in and out of the circle time, spending time singing songs, playing games and telling stories. Thus, the voices (not the language) of each tradition grew stronger with each passing week.

Changes within Ourselves: renewed efforts

The impetus for the study was provided from the ethnocultural communities' desire to develop new ways of working so that spaces were opened for adults and children to engage with one another from a more equitable standpoint. As early childhood educators, we were challenged to create environments that were truly intercultural (Kirova, 2008). We needed 'to acknowledge that multicultural education can be rendered less effective and holistic by a superficial festival or 4-D (dance, dress, diet, dialect) approach' (Swee-Hin, 2001, p. 14). We needed to move our educational efforts towards ones that went beyond display and representation to ones of engagement, activity, agency and identity. However, through our involvement in the programme described here, we discovered how difficult it was to make a real shift from *being aware* of the need to challenge the dominant ways of thinking to *really changing* our ways of thinking while operating from within the system that needed changing. We needed tools and forms of analysis that provoked us to extend ourselves outside of our own knowledge systems and critically assess whether our current ways of interacting required adjustments (Wertsch et al, 1995).

Reflected in the participant-researcher's field notes are our own difficulties in accepting 'other ways' of demonstrating an object to the children at the beginning of the project. The introduction of cultural objects was described as 'being more geared towards adults than to children', and we wondered if such an approach would result in any independent use of the objects in children's play. It was only when we observed the skilful use of these cultural objects by most of the children that we realised that the *method of introduction*, too, had to be culturally situated. Taking into consideration the larger cultural context of the children's home lives, we came to realise that the direct – or what we would call *didactic* – instruction about the use of an everyday object, such as a cooking tool, was perfectly *appropriate* if the child was expected to use it to help in the kitchen, and only secondary to play with it. Our (Western) separation of *work* and *play* prevented us from seeing how work and play being together in the home lives of the children in the programme should find its way into the classroom as well.

In this study, we learned that by observing children's interactions and heightening our capacity to respond, we could create learning environments that are responsive to the culturally different ways in which children play and learn. As we did this, we came to understand diversity not as something that we need to *represent*, but as an essential and fundamental condition for learning, as well as an outcome of each learning activity. We began by asking ourselves the following questions: How do we as educators respond to what we observe? What elements of our learning environment provoke children towards construction of meaning and their sense of

multiple selves? How do they learn and develop ways of being in a world that asks them to be a part of many worlds? We also began to listen more attentively not only to what is said, but to what is not said in the context of our early childhood classrooms. As one of the cultural brokers participating in the study stated during a planning meeting: 'If we listen, children will show us what they need to learn' (Kurdish cultural broker, focus group, May 9, 2009).

At the end of the project, we were convinced that there could be a number of starting points for other early childhood educators in their own journey to a genuine shift in practice. Some may share our and other Vygotsky followers' optimism (for example, Engeström, 2007; Stetsenko, 2009) in the ability of cultural-historical activity theory to 'overcome some of the most profound problems that have plagued both educational theorizing and practice' (Roth & Lee, 2007, p. 186). Our experience in the study, however, made us a little more humble in this belief. The study showed us that theory alone cannot change practice – practice-generated theory is what will lead to a real shift in the field. We believe our struggles with finding ways to meet the varied needs of children from diverse backgrounds are still riddled with tensions. But these tensions can be productive if we engage in a deeper cross-perspective dialogue. The intercultural learning project featured in this article began just such a process for us. As a focal point to our dialogue, this process allowed us, the children and the adults to refocus our gaze and listen with greater appreciation to the worlds we come from and those to which we will belong in the future. We concur with Reagan, who, in his analysis of non-Western educational traditions, stated:

> We must learn to recognize that different groups may, as a consequence of their socio-cultural contexts and backgrounds, possess ways of knowing that, although different from our own, may be every bit as valuable and worthwhile as those to which we are accustomed. (Reagan, 2005, p. 3)

Furthermore, if objects define us and our interactions, we learned that we are required to pay closer attention to the introduction, placement and role of materials in our classrooms as cultural mediators of learning. In drawing attention to objects as *active mediators* that have potential to shape but not determine action, we provide children with additional means by which they can construct learning experiences that are relevant to their lives (Wertsch et al, 1995). In trying to better understand children's situated environment, we need to move our focus away from the teacher and teacher-constructed environments (props, toys, plastic furniture, etc.) towards the children as their own agents of learning, and to integrate everyday objects from their multiple worlds to act as intermediaries within the classroom (Hedegaard, 2007).

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Note

[1] All names used in the article are pseudonyms.

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KELLY HENNIG has worked in a variety of roles for the Interagency Head Start Network programmes in Edmonton, Canada, over the last 16 years. He has worked as an early learning teacher and a Head Start supervisor, and currently is a planning and evaluation coordinator with ABC Head Start. His work includes planning for responsive programme delivery, developmental evaluation and policy development. His research interests include exploring alternative means of representing young children's learning and social policy related to poverty reduction. In addition to completing a Master's degree in Early Childhood Education at the University of Alberta, he has completed an applied degree in Human Services Administration at Grant MacEwan University, Edmonton. *Correspondence*: kellyandtyra@gmail.com

ANNA KIROVA is Professor of Early Childhood Education at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada. Her research interests include understanding the culturally and linguistically diverse children's experiences of loneliness and isolation at school, and the possibility such an understanding offers for culturally sensitive pedagogy. Most recently, her research has focused on collaborative research with children, the use of arts-based methodologies with vulnerable children, and community-based participatory research aimed at developing an intercultural early learning programme for immigrant and refugee children, in which children maintain their home language and culture while learning English. *Correspondence*: anna.kirova@ualberta.ca