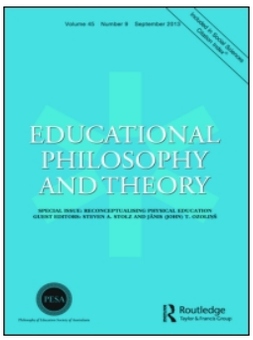

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'Being in the World': The event of learning

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Abstract

This paper employs an eclectic mix of paradigms in order to discuss constituting characteristics of young children's learning experiences. Drawing upon a phenomenological perspective it examines learning as a form of 'Being' and as the result of learners' engagement with the world in their own, unique, intentional manners. The learners' intentions towards their world are expressed in everyday activity and participation. A social constructivist perspective is thus employed to present learning as situated in meaningful socio-cultural contexts of the everyday, lived world and as a form of participation in those settings. These characteristics of learning are brought together into a holistic, synthesised model, a Gestalt of learning. The proposed synthesis has relevance for and is applicable to educational contexts as a means of making sense of children's learning experiences and of promoting and facilitating them.

Keywords: Being in the world, intentional structures, learning as situated, learning as a form of participation, phenomenology, social constructivism.

Introduction

Young children's learning processes are explored in order to identify some of the characteristics and dimensions that are an integral part of the learning experience. Rejecting a positivistic view of learning as propositional knowledge, externally constructed and offered to the learner to 'absorb', the argument here is that learning is best understood as a phenomenon that involves the learner inhabiting his/her world and his/her attempt to make sense of its structures.

In the course of their everyday living children encounter numerous experiences, to which they may relate in different ways, *purposefully*, depending on their understandings, predispositions and individual processes; 'intentionally'. These subjective ways of relating to the world translate into different modalities of 'Being in the world', or else, different ways of 'intending' towards the world and its objects. Learners' intentions towards their world, thus, influence their actions, ways of participating in everyday settings, and the meanings they attach to their experiences.

The phenomenon of learning, thus, is perceived as a 'holistic' structure that involves the learner's subjective processes and the ways they are expressed through

these different intentions towards his/her everyday world. It also involves the means by which these intentions manifest themselves in different forms of participating in settings and assigning meaning to them.

In this holistic approach, the discussion borrows from a number of theoretical perspectives in order to synthesise a learning model that can be employed to understand and facilitate young children's learning experiences. It draws upon a phenomenological perspective to examine learning as an individual's engagement with his/her lived world and the actualisation of his/her intentional structures. The learner's different intentions towards his/her world may be expressed in explicit actions and modes of participating in activity settings. This model of learning thus draws upon social constructivism to explore the ways learners' intentionalities are expressed in situated activities that derive meaning and purpose from the context, as well as in forms of participation—in ways of doing.

None of the characteristics of learning discussed here exists independently; rather it is argued that they are parts of a wider whole—a Gestalt of learning. However, for purposes of discussion, the holistic 'construct' must be viewed through each of its constituting parts. First, each part-dimension of learning is presented separately and then illustrated with examples drawn from an Early Years setting where the first author has worked. Presentation of each particular is followed by a re-construction, where all 'gestalten', or parts of the Gestalt, are re-constructed into their whole, a Gestalt of learning.

The examples do not claim any scientific validity for the theoretical claims, nor provide empirical evidence of the truthfulness of the new theoretical construct. Instead they serve the purpose of illustrating theoretical ideas and suggesting possible application of the learning model in the field of educational praxis. Both authors work as educationalists and the theoretical constructs proposed here are developed only as a means of making sense of our lived experience with children.

An examination of children's different intentionalities can offer useful insights into the ways they perceive, make sense of and engage with their world. As such it may have profound implications for the pedagogic relationship. An appreciation of the learner's personal, subjective and individual modes of being in his/her world enables educators to promote positive, meaningful, relevant and effective learning experiences. The relevance, applicability and implications of the synthesised model and its constituting parts are also examined in this paper.

Theoretical Background

'All theories of learning are based on fundamental assumptions about the person, the world and their relations' (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 47). One understanding of theories of learning perceives relations between learner and world as fixed, static and unproblematic. Here, learning is seen as the acquisition of knowledge that is externally constituted (in the world) and offered to the learner to 'take in'. Such conceptualisations view knowledge as 'propositional', 'abstract' and 'objective', a 'given' that is 'stable', 'fixed' and 'out there' (Hager, 2005; Guile, 2006; Boghossian, 2006). The role of the teacher is to show the learner how the machine works

(Boghossian, 2006); whereas the learner is seen as a 'repository' where knowledge can be stored for later use (Guile, 2006).

For Hager (2005) the process of learning is commonly related to a number of assumptions that have far reaching educational implications. Learning seen as the acquisition of 'true propositions' is replicable for different learners who 'absorb' knowledge in a 'de-personalised', 'neutral' and 'objective' manner. Such knowledge acquisition can be located in a 'theoretical framework' where the learner deals with 'abstract ideas' that require 'thinking', rather than 'doing'. Theoretical knowledge is ranked higher than practice. These assumptions about the nature of knowledge and the ways it can be 'transmitted' underpin the formation of educational curricula in which the person, the world and their relations are perceived in a fixed, static and non-problematic manner. Accordingly learning can be prescribed, functionalist, abstracted from its context and functionality and the object of centralised decisions about what should be taught, when and how (Hung & Der-Thanq, 2001; MacLeod & Golby, 2003).

Emphasis on the transmission of propositional, abstract, replicable and 'universal' knowledge neglects significant aspects of the learning dynamic, as the authors experience it. Their argument here is that learning should not be reduced to a series of binary oppositions and dualistic views of internal/external and theoretical/practical. Nor, therefore, can it be seen as a 'one size fits all' process. The model of a Gestalt of learning proposed here views learning as a phenomenon that is experienced by individuals as they engage in and intend towards their lived world in their unique, subjective modes.

Learning as the Expression of Intentional Structures and as a Mode of Being

Learning, as a human activity, takes place in the lived world of everyday experience. For Husserl (1967), the first environment into which we are born and to which we belong is that of our natural world. It is present for us in every waking moment. There is an immeasurable quantum of information about the external world that we encounter constantly. Through our experience we learn what things are, why they are and what their use is.

The natural and social surroundings of young learners may thus be seen as the field in which their everyday experience, action, interaction and agency are located. In this field, Merleau-Ponty (1962) would argue, learners and world are intertwined and interdependent. All experience of the world must involve an active consciousness, or else an engaged mind, which 'reaches out' to the world; and also a body, which has a physical presence and lives the experience (the terms 'mind' and 'consciousness' are treated as synonymous in the phenomenological writings presented here and are thus used interchangeably).

This suggests that the learner and his/her world cannot be perceived separately, via a binary distinction. Rather, the learner's activity, thought processes, interactions, behaviours, intentions, emotions and attitudes are all situated in his/her world, of which (s)he is part. The learner, as a physical presence and as an active mind that attempts to grasp the meaning of the world, is seen as inseparable from

his/her lived world. This unity between the individual and world is implied by the term 'Being-in-the-world' to express Man's modalities of experiencing and making sense of the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Similarly, the learner's lived world is also inhabited by others' Being-in-the-world, with their own activities, interactions, intentions and attitudes. The social world is considered a significant aspect of the learner's everyday experience and is named 'Being-in-the-world-with-others' (Heidegger, 1935, 1978).

A common phenomenological proposition is that all mind's activities have a *purpose*; they are intentional. Since every act of consciousness is intentional, consciousness is by no means an empty concept that exists independently of its surroundings in its own fashion. On the contrary it is always directed towards an object, it is always 'consciousness of something' (Kockelmans, 1967, p. 119).

It follows that learning, in this sense, be seen as the outcome of the connection that develops between mind's intentional acts and the object they are directed towards. The connection that develops between the act and its object results in the constitution of *meaning*.

In their everyday engagement with their lived world, individuals perceive it from different standpoints, depending on their past experiences, their understandings and interpretations of situations, their attitudes, volitions and targets at any particular time. In other words, the learners' Being-in-the-world and Being-in-the-world-with-others can be seen as influenced by past experiences, individual traits and the current situation. Mind's intentional structures reflect each individual's relation to the world, which in turn influence his/her mode of engagement and learning experiences. As such, learners' intentions towards the world may be a legitimate field of study leading to a better understanding of their individual characteristics, predispositions and processes; and, in effect, to the planning of suitable and relevant learning experiences.

Accessing someone's intentional structures, however, is not a straightforward process. Merleau-Ponty (1962) offers a distinction between two types of intentionality, one more explicit and accessible than the other. The first is termed 'intentionality of acts' and expresses our volitions and targets explicitly. It aims at the achievement of a clear and recognisable target. We are aware of it and we consciously and voluntarily take up a position in order to achieve it. In their everyday, lived world, young learners may set a goal, decide to play a certain scenario, choose playmates and toys to perform their roles. Intentionality of acts manifests itself in direct and explicit behaviours, where individuals have a clear idea of what they want to do and they do it.

The second, 'operative intentionality', may be less clear and explicit. It is hidden; it is rather 'felt' than explicitly 'known'. It is characterised as 'that which produces the natural and ante-predicative unity of the world and of our life, being apparent in our desires, our evaluations and in the landscape we see, more clearly than in objective knowledge, and furnishing the text which our knowledge tries to translate into precise language' (Spurling, 1977, p. 17).

Operative intentionality seems to relate to a pre-reflective and intuitive mode of engaging with the world. It is ante-predicative, pre-thematic and its function is to

create our way of being in the world, the context within which our being can be expressed.

When we have an explicit project in mind, a clear, specific intention like climbing a mountain, both modes of intentionality are functioning. The first, intentionality of acts, tells us that the purpose is to climb the mountain, so we need to make practical arrangements in order to actualise it. Operative intentionality, however, searches and evaluates the potentialities of the environment and of our body, makes the mountain look climbable, friendly or hostile, within reach or dangerous, always in relation to 'us' (Spurling, 1977).

Where intentionality of acts informs our specific actions, helps put our volitions into action, and is seen as a way of doing and knowing 'how to do', operative intentionality creates those volitions in the first place. It is determined by who we are and how we feel about the world and about ourselves, in the first place. Operative intentionality refers to our mode of Being.

Both types of intentionality are necessary preconditions for any sort of engagement with the world and learning. Operative intentionality creates the 'setting', the general picture and scheme of things, based on which different specific and explicit intentions are fulfilled.

So that, though difficult to fully conceptualise, young children's operative intentionalities (as expressed by their attitudes, emotions, behaviours and interactions with others) are an important source of information for educationalists, offering insights into the ways children are predisposed towards their world, the ways they perceive themselves and relate to others. Observing children's 'intentionalities-at-play' enables teachers to gain insight into individuals' learning processes, interests, perceptions, current understandings and interpretations of their world; and of themselves in the world. As such, they suggest an effective point to start planning activities and learning experiences that appeal to those interests and predispositions; and are thus relevant and purposeful for the learners. The following transcript of a Reception class activity in a Greek school illustrates children's 'intentionalities at play'.

Observation 1: Intentionalities at play

> *Role-playing 'families' and 'shop keepers':*
> *L. is standing in front of a table by the household tray and puts some bottles in order. A group of peers are sitting behind her, on a bench. She is playing the role of 'mum'. She touches T's forehead to see if he has fever. She pretends that she is cooking and she stirs the 'food' with a 'spoon'. She offers N. a 'drink'. Other children, not participating in the role-play, are passing in front of the household tray. She asks them if they want to 'buy' anything from her 'shop', indicating objects placed on a table, in front of her. A boy starts disarranging the object she has put on display and L. tells him not to touch anything because 'this is not a game—this is a shop where customers buy things'. She then moves to the 'sink' and pretends she is 'washing the dishes'. Another girl is holding a tray with plastic plates and cups and L. asks her if she wants to be the 'servant'. She asks 'her children' where 'dad' is and whether he is back from 'work' yet. Then she lies down and her 'children' 'take care of her'.*

In this scenario a group of children enacts a 'familial environment'. In their intentionality of acts they carry out certain tasks and manipulate their environment in certain, meaningful ways. Intentionality of acts assists them to take action and play their roles effectively—'mums' wash dishes, cook and take care of their 'children' and 'children', in turn, are mostly taken care of.

In order to carry out those intentional acts, however, the participants need to have an operational understanding of what those roles involve and of their preferences and predispositions towards these roles and that scenario. At the same time they appreciate how to carry out the activity successfully. This prior—unreflective and primordial—understanding relates to the child's predispositions and ways of being in the world and constitutes the 'horizon' where the specific, intentional acts are located.

Observation 2: 'Giving birth'

> *During free activity time N., who usually interacts with her friends, is playing alone. She picks a doll, puts it under her top and lies on a bench. She is lying on her back, with her legs bent and open and the doll under her top. At the beginning she is just looking at the ceiling, but after a few minutes she starts 'moaning', making sounds of 'pain'. She seems to be 'in labour', but nobody around her notices. Children are passing by, engaged in their own play. She keeps 'giving birth' for a while, until a boy notices her and approaches her. He does not seem to understand what she is doing and he asks her what is wrong with her and why she is lying there. She does not reply, but only points towards her stomach and slightly lifts her top. The boy takes the doll out, as he is still looking at her. She takes the doll from him and, without making a comment, places the doll on her chest. The boy walks away and N. stays there, lying on the bench, with the doll on her chest.*

This represents the experience of 'giving birth'. The four-year-old girl acting the scenario had recently gained a baby brother. She appears to be familiar with some aspects of the process of 'being in labour', including the body position of the woman, the pain involved and holding the baby after the labour.

Her intentions are to re-create the setting, where operative intentionality manifests itself as the volition to engage in such a scenario; whereas her intentional acts include all the steps she takes (finding a doll, lying down on the bench, and so on) to fulfil her volition.

The boy who unknowingly acts as her 'doctor' does not share her sense of that scenario. He does not remain engaged for long and he does not improvise or continue the play. This context may not be within his interests, current experience or predispositions, it does not appeal to his operative intentionality, which is, thus, expressed by the intentional acts of remaining uninvolved and eventually walking away.

Children's intentionalities can be captured in play whenever they engage in activities and interactions in their everyday, lived world. Those intentionalities, as ways of engaging with the world, differ depending on the learner's moods, preferences, interests and understandings of the world at any given time.

The immediately preceding two observations supply rich sources of information concerning the participants' perceptions of their world, their understandings of the structures of that world, personal interests and volitions in those particular instances. Imaginative play, in particular, can provide an appropriate context in which children's constructions of their world and of themselves in it can be observed. 'Imaginative play' is here seen as 'the child's way of creating and expressing personal meanings against a background of shared meanings in daily life' (Mook, 1998, p. 231).

The children's operative intentionalities inform their choice of activity, of roles and of the ways they relate to each other. Their operative intentionalities create the 'framework' of engaging with their world in a particular way and at a particular instance, based on which intentionalities of acts are then performed. Their intentionality of acts involves a series of voluntary acts with a specific target. It involves 'doing', or expressing their Beings-in-the-world.

The children's intentional structures and ways of making sense of their world and of themselves do not, of course, remain static. They go through constant transformations, as the learners' knowledge and understanding change and as they encounter new experiences. Their perceptions of the world and engagement with it may also be altered, as the result of their ongoing lived experiences.

Learning is an integral part of this process of engagement with the lived world. It is the product of the person's everyday, lived experience and, as such, it can be facilitated by focusing upon the learners' subjective and unique structures.

In his discussion of the meaning of 'pedagogy' Van Manen suggests that the basic presupposition in our pedagogic relation with children should be to understand them as unique, separate individuals who experience the world in their own, subjective ways. 'Pedagogy as a form of inquiry implies that one has a relational knowledge of children, that one "understands" children and youths: how young people experience things, what they think about, how they look at the world, what they do, and, more importantly, how each child is a unique person' (Van Manen, 1994, p. 3).

Phenomenologically treated, any learning experience involves a learner who inhabits his/her world and intends towards its different objects. The learner's different intentions are, thus, situated in specific contexts with context specific conditions, purposes, requirements and modes of acting. The 'situated' nature of intentions, and of learning, is discussed next, with references to a social constructionist perspective.

The Situated Nature of Learning

For the social constructivist it is proposed that learning is always 'situated', that is it emerges and becomes meaningful in social contexts where the learner interacts with his/her world. Instead of treating knowledge as sets of external, abstract, universal propositions that are offered to the learner to absorb, social constructivists assert that learning emerges from 'meaningful' contexts in which participants assign significance to behaviours, activities and interactions. Learners do not copy reality from the outside, but rather construct reality through their engagement in meaningful contexts (Boghossian, 2006).

Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 33) argue that 'there is no activity that is not situated' since learners are necessarily involved in their everyday world and the attempt to make sense of it in its different dimensions and manifestations. This engagement involves the 'whole person', rather than a 'mind' that absorbs externally constituted knowledge; it also embraces the learner's relation to the world and to others in that world.

The presence of a relational quality between the person and his/her world is supported by Van Manen who claims that: 'Children do not grow in isolation or simply from within, such as seeds or acorns. It is only in certain relational contexts that the thinking life, the developing identity, the moral personality, the emotional spirit, the educational learning and socio-psychological maturing of the young person occurs' (1994, p. 141).

Several authors (cf. Sainsbury & Walker, 2005; MacLeod & Golby, 2003; Hager, 2005) agree that the nature of learning is 'social' and 'situated within a context' with its given demands, conditions, sets of relations and targets. No learning experience can be perceived separately from its context, since it is the latter that gives it meaning, substance, purpose and applicability. Knowledge should not be seen as a 'mental state' but rather as 'an experienced relation of things'. It has no meaning if abstracted from those relations, or from its social context (Hung & Der-Thanq, 2001).

Learning, an understanding of the world and of the self as a part of the world, is the result of engagement with social surroundings and the product of interaction with others in different contexts. So understood, learning does not only occur through formal instruction. Rather, it takes place whenever learners engage in social settings and become part of the social and cultural worlds they inhabit. 'Important learning is taking place in natural or "real life" contexts' (MacLeod & Golby, 2003, p. 350).

This notion of learning as dependent upon its socio-cultural context is a central theme in Vygotsky's social constructivist approach (1978, 1999a). He maintains that all learning originates in the social world. From the beginning of life, the child interacts with its surroundings. 'Caregivers' mediate between the child's needs and the external world; they assist and regulate child performances. In these interactions the child is introduced to 'psychological tools' and cognitive behaviours that will one day become part of the child's own psychological functioning.

In Vygotskian theory 'psychological tools' are artificial, social devices that cultures construct in order to 'manipulate' their world, explore their environment, communicate and transmit knowledge across generations. Such tools include language, systems for counting, maps, schemes, diagrams, writing, and other sorts of conventional signs (1978, 1999a).

As they participate in everyday, meaningful and purposeful activities children are introduced to psychological tools as a means of playing a part in the social setting. They are initiated by others for purposes of communication, understanding and carrying out specific actions. Psychological tools are thus linked to the specific context and are perceived as serving a function. They are employed in their situational context as a necessary means of carrying out an action. Gradually the learner comes to conceptualise their functionality and starts to use them in different contexts, as a

means of regulating his/her own thought processes and engagements with the world (Vygotsky, 1978).

Observation 3: Preparing a card for Mother's day

> *The teacher explains that the children's project for the day is to prepare a card for their mums. They can make a drawing and they can also write a short message, explaining why they love their mum. During circle time the teacher asks each of the children the reason they love their mums. She writes down each child's statement and later copies it on a separate piece of paper. She hands out cards and each child makes a drawing on one side of the card. She then gives each child his/her statement-reason for loving his/her mum and asks them to copy it on the other side of the card.*
>
> *The children appear to be engrossed in their activity. Most of them cannot read yet and are not familiar with all the letters of the alphabet. The teacher gives them suggestions about copying each letter in turn, starting from the top left corner of the card, writing on the lines that are drawn on their cards and leaving spaces between words. Copying a whole phrase is not an activity they are familiar with yet, but they all appear to take up the challenge. When they meet a difficulty they ask the teacher to show them how to draw a particular letter. This activity lasts considerably longer than others, but there are no distractions. The group of 5 year olds is engrossed in the serious job of writing a message for their mums.*
>
> *At the end of the day, during circle time, the children discuss their impressions of the day. The principle focus of their interest seems to be the card they prepared earlier. They make comments about the phrases they wrote and how 'nice' their cards look. They ask each other about the phrases they wrote, the letters they had to draw and the way they drew them. Some of the children comment that their mums will be really impressed with their present.*

Vygotsky would claim that the outcome of this activity was the transmission of psychological 'tools'—in this instance 'writing'. This was initiated in a social setting, introduced and assisted by others (a teacher).

'Writing' is one of the 'acquisitional learning' objectives of schooling and the subject of many educational activities. For the children, however, the activity is not significant because they 'did some writing' but because they successfully conveyed a message to their mum. In line with the phenomenological perspective employed here, the young learners' intentional structures were directed towards producing something that makes sense, has purpose and meaning in the social worlds they inhabit. The participants in the writing activity expressed clear and explicit 'intentional acts' of completing the card. Shaping letters, stripped of their context, might not make sense, or else constitute a recognisable and legitimate intention. The psychological tool of writing is not for them a learning objective—an end in itself. Rather, it is a means of achieving another end. Writing, in that setting, was introduced within a context; as a tool that facilitated the production of a card.

Shorn of its social and relational context, writing a short phrase may be without purpose, meaning, or interest for young learners. Writing in itself may not easily

relate to other activities in their everyday lives, unless it is purposeful. A 'tool' is only perceived as such if the learner understands *what it is a tool for*, which entails knowing the wider context and its function. In this extract writing became a tool for the achievement of an explicit intentional act.

Chaiklin and Lave argue that populist theories of learning and schooling fail to acknowledge the importance of context. Such theories propose knowledge and knowledge transmission as having an 'abstract', 'decontextualised' character, but '"decontextualised learning activity" is a contradiction in terms' (1993, p. 6).

Context-specific learning experiences are effective in enabling the learner to perceive the learning outcome as a clear, meaningful and purposeful activity; and to engage with it in an intentional manner.

'Situating learning' within a social context of meaningful and purposeful activity is, thus, presented here as one of the components of the learning model suggested. This dimension, of course, cannot be seen as separated from the learner's activity—his/her forms of engagement in those social situations.

Learning as a Form of Participation

In order to explore learning expressed as 'participation in cultural practices', Lave cites an example of the mathematics enacted activity that takes place in grocery shops. It involves 'being "in" the store, walking up and down "aisles", looking at "shelves" full of cans, bottles, packages and jars of food, and other commodities' (Chaiklin & Lave, 1993, p. 4). Shopkeepers engage in activities that help maintain the shop, employing 'constructs', or 'tools' that have been culturally transmitted, such as 'mathematics'. In their 'communities' of practice they perform actions that have clear intentions and, in doing so, they develop necessary skills.

'Learning', in this context, is not simply manifested as unmediated practice. On the contrary, learning emerges from a praxical engagement. As Lave and Wenger argue: 'learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world' (1991, p. 34).

This suggests that instead of treating learning as an abstract category that also involves application in practice, we should perceive the process of learning as emerging in everyday, social practices. That is, learning is seen as *a way of doing and as a form of participation* in our social worlds; a praxis.

Hager (2005, p. 656) explores the role of action in the learning process and concludes that fundamentally learning is about acquiring certain 'capacities for action'. Effectively, rather than seeing knowledge acquisition and action as two separate and distinguishable categories, the two should be perceived as integral and inseparable parts of the same process: learning. In this conceptualisation of learning as a form of action the 'process' and 'products' of learning are inseparable. 'The process facilitates the product which at the same time enhances further processes and so on' (Hager, 2005, p. 658). In other words, action and participation in activities assist the acquisition of skills, whilst at the same time the acquisition of skills facilitates advanced participation and action.

Participation in social practices involves changes in performance, knowledge and understandings. Learning involves a change in knowledge, understandings and

subsequent performance. In this sense, the two notions, learning and participating in situated activity, may be seen as mutually constitutive.

In their everyday, lived worlds, individuals take part in severally situated, purposeful activities where they play different roles, interact with others and demonstrate different levels of engagement. Their degree of participation may be more 'primitive' and 'peripheral' when they are newcomers but gradually, as they acquire the necessary understanding and skills, their role becomes more central.

Lave and Wenger call this early, developing level of engagement in social practices 'legitimate peripheral participation'. 'Learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the socio-cultural practices of a community' (1991, p. 29). Changes in the type and degree of participation enable individuals to operate in different contexts, with varying demands and conditions (Guile, 2006).

The notion of legitimate peripheral participation implies a change in understanding, mastery of skills and increased performance, all of which are seen as the end products of 'learning'. It constitutes a central theme in Vygotskian theory (1978, 1999b), where learning is perceived as a change from 'dependent' to 'independent' performance.

The end product of learning is the learner's transition from other-regulation to self-regulation. Self-regulation, a key Vygotskian notion, is defined as 'the child's capacity to plan, guide, and monitor his or her behaviour from within and flexibly, according to changing circumstances' (Moll, 1990, p. 130). Self-regulation *per se* does not sit well with simplistic prescriptions of learning outcomes by external agencies.

In order to explicate the learner's transition from other to self-regulation Vygotsky introduces the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is the difference between the learner's actual capacities and his/her potential. The zone thus represents all those skills that the learner is *in the process of* mastering, or the learner's potentiality (Vygotsky, 1978).

Working within the learner's ZPD, or elsewhere Zones of Potentiality, awakens several developmental processes (Vygotsky, 1978). It also implies a more capable other, who supports the learner's transition from 'other regulation' to 'self regulation'.

During communal activity with more capable others the 'novice' is assisted to acquire the skills necessary in order to complete the activity. Initially the more capable other controls the environment and the learner's role is more 'passive', or 'peripheral'. Gradually, as the learner becomes more familiar with the setting, his/her participation increases. The end product of this process is the learner's acquisition of understanding and skills and subsequent ability to perform independently (Hung & Thanq, 2001; Sainsbury & Walker, 2005).

Vygotksy ascribes to this process of increasing participation four stages, during which the learner gradually achieves self-regulation (Vygotsky, 1978, 1999b).

He argues that the child is not able to create a conceptual world from 'scratch'. Instead 'children need to appropriate the conceptual resources of the preexisting cultural world, which are transmitted to them by parents, other adults, and peers' (1999a, p. 427). This process can be characterised, figuratively, as 'osmotic'—i.e. where interaction or interchange occurs through mutual penetration.

Transmission of 'conceptual resources' occurs during participation in activities, where the learner and his/her co-participants assume different positions, roles and degrees of engagement, depending on their current understanding and skills. Gradually, through continuous engagement, the roles played by each participant change, in accordance with developing understanding and acquisition of necessary skills. Self-regulation, as the end product of learning, is reached when the learner has assumed a central role in the activity, can guide and monitor his/her own performance and can transfer the acquired skills to other contexts and activities.

This aspect of Vygotskian theory is particularly pertinent to this discussion since it explores the processes by which children can learn by 'doing', or by participating in shared activities with others. It assumes a process of enhancing one's performance as the result of action and interaction in shared projects. It also assumes the role of a 'more capable other', who acts as a 'model' and thus demonstrates the skills that are necessary for the completion of the joined activity.

The notion of learning as a mode of participation accords with a phenomenological perception of learning and the expression of intentional structures that guide the learner's modes and degrees of engagement. Through operative intentionality the learner is intuitively and pre reflectively predisposed in certain ways towards the setting and its demands. Consequent upon pre thematic operative intentionality, participants direct their explicit and intentional acts towards achieving an outcome. Learning as participation is thus seen as an expression of intentional structures at play.

Vygotsky makes several other assumptions concerning the learner's acquisition of knowledge: through the process of *internalisation* and the significance of *instruction* as a mode of teaching. Internalisation has certainly been interpreted differently (see Sainsbury & Walker, 2005) and also challenged for its implications of a dichotomy between internal and external worlds (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Such assumptions would contradict the main tenets of this article concerning the inseparability of the 'inner' and 'outer' worlds of the learner. In contradistinction to some parts of Vygotksian theory, the emphasis here is simply to engage those concepts that are sympathetic to the central themes of the phenomenon of learning proposed.

Vygotskian perceptions of learning as a form of participation in shared activities and as a form of increasing engagement are employed here to explore the ways children's intentional structures may express themselves as different means and degrees of participation.

Observation 4: Preparing a poster

> *This is a long-term (one week), whole class project. The teacher explains to them that they will produce a big poster, covering a whole wall, about their island. They need to consider and decide what they want their island to have and then draw it. They should also label the different objects they draw.*
>
> *At 'circle time' they make suggestions and the teacher adds them to a list. They decide that their island needs to have houses, schools, roads, shops, adults, children, animals, cars, bicycles, trees, flowers, parks and so on. They also suggest that they should extend their plans to the surrounding sea. They want to make boats, ships, fish and dolphins. Every day, at circle time, the children*

decide what they are going to draw for the day. Each pupil chooses from the list of objects and discusses ways of drawing it.

The teacher has put up blue display paper covering the whole wall. She has stuck a round, irregular shape at the centre of the blue display paper, explaining that this will be the 'island'. Children should draw different objects, colour them and then cut their outlines with scissors. Those will then be pinned onto the 'island', or glued to the 'sea'.

When drawings are completed the children engage in labelling the different objects. The teacher has given them cards with the written word (including the words 'sea', 'island', 'school', 'tree', 'park', and so on) and the learners need to copy the word and then find the object it refers to and glue it to the right position. The whole class is engaged in the project, each child participating depending on his/her interests, preferences and self-perceived ability. Some children choose to make 'simple' drawings, as they claim, or copy shorter, 'easier' words. As they are engaged in drawing and writing they often break up to find a picture from a book, to examine a picture (similar to the one they want to draw), or to ask each other's help and opinion. They frequently approach the teacher and ask for suggestions concerning what they are trying to do.

As they copy the words some children approach the teacher more frequently to ask for further suggestions (ways of shaping letters). The more confident children copy more than one word and label the objects themselves, without asking for directions. Some other pupils seem to be more challenged by the role they have to play and thus ask for others' assistance.

When the poster is ready the whole class sits around the circle and discusses. They all agree that they like the result and begin claiming ownership of what each contributed. Finally they 'read' the labels that are pinned on the poster.

This class activity claimed to facilitate several prescribed 'learning outcomes' in the curriculum, such as category formation and grouping of objects, links to numeracy, knowledge and understanding about the physical world, fine motor skills, writing, reading, personal, social and emotional development. Preparation of the poster is valued as offering the children a rich learning experience. The pupils' achievements are seen to depend upon their active, continuous and varying participation.

Coincidentally, however, they have to play different roles, contribute in different ways and carry out several actions in order to reach a target they can make sense of and find purpose in—in other words to engage in the contextualised nature of learning, discussed earlier.

Additionally, through action, or participation in practice, they are assisted in developing the necessary 'skills'. In order to manage their parts they must adopt the necessary skills. Those skills, or cognitive tools, such as shaping letters and labelling, are the prescribed learning outcomes of the formal educational curriculum. They are treated as forms of knowledge to which pupils are required to attend. For the learners, however, the purposefulness of this interaction and

engagement consists in participation in a common target, which is the production of the poster. In this sense, participation in this shared project, in a field of practice, facilitates the acquisition of cognitive skills.

Each learner participates differentially depending on his/her intentional structures. Operative intentionality may inform the learner of his/her familiarity, self perceived ability and preferences. It presents the activity as 'do-able', 'difficult', 'threatening', 'enjoyable', or otherwise. It is in operative intentionality that the learner has his/her initial predispositions towards the activity. Those are then manifested through his/her intentional acts of participating in different ways, to different degrees; or refusing to become part of the setting. At the same time participation, and its pre supposed intentional structures at play, enable the learner to 'interact' with others and cooperate. His/her Being-in-the-world-with-others enables him/her to perceive others' roles, contributions and perhaps to directly imitate or follow suggestions, and seek assistance in order to perform.

Some children appear able to assume a more central role, whereas others make more 'peripheral' contributions. Sometimes a child seems to move from peripherality to a more central position during engagement with the activity. These varying modes and degrees of participation may reflect the learner's changing intentions, as the task may 'feel' increasingly more 'manageable' and the self, perhaps, more 'able to manage it'. They may also reflect the assumptions of others concerning the learner's ability and performance. Thus, the observer's perceptions and expectations may influence the learner's operative intentionality towards considering the task 'manageable', or 'unachievable'; and the self being 'able to manage' or 'falling short' for the requirements.

Moving from peripheral to more central positions may thus require a number of conditions. This change of role, as a gradual process, presupposes increasing familiarity with skills and requirements, but also an operative intentionality that perceives itself, and is perceived by others, as 'able to manage', or willing to 'try'. One's personal, subjective predispositions towards one's lived world appears to be an influencing factor and a constituting part of the phenomenon of learning.

A Reconstruction: The Gestalt of Learning and its Applicability

The term Gestalt is employed here as synonymous with 'form', or 'structure' and 'refers to the ability of an organism to function in a global, structured way, exhibiting a general co ordination of its parts oriented towards the achievement of certain goals or intentions' (Spurling, 1977, p. 14).

Gestalt is a holistic structure, a system of interconnected parts, each of which is seen as a part of the whole. The parts of Gestalt, gestalten, constitute parts of a structure, a complete system of parts in co-ordination. Gestalten carry the whole picture of the world, which may nevertheless be seen as constitutive of smaller parts. These parts, however, can only have meaning and significance if associated and interrelated with each other and with the whole structure.

Identifying the relationship between Gestalt and gestalten should not be taken to mean that each constituent part remains fixed and unchanged. On the contrary,

each part, and the whole, is seen as in constant flux. As children relate to and engage with their lived world they gain experiences, assign meanings to those, behave according to each situation, context, current knowledge and personal processes. The Gestalt of Learning is, by definition, in constant motion since learning involves 'new ways of being'; and different ways of being facilitate new learning experiences.

Despite constant exchanges the relationship between parts and whole remains the same, since in order to maintain a Gestalt relationship between the parts what needs to be preserved is their 'system' of interrelationships (Kanizsa, 1994).

The learning model explored in this paper also employs a Gestalt, one that captures learning holistically, as a human activity, situated in a social world; the lived world of the learners. In the course of everyday lives each engages with this world in different ways and attempts to assign meaning to it in its different contexts and manifestations. Learning is seen as a mode of Being-in-the-world and Being-in-the-world-with-others; and as the outcome of the relationship between the individual and his/her world.

Learning is not achieved only in 'the mind' of the individual, independent of its experiential context. Rather, the learner and the world are inseparable. Equally, one cannot talk about learning if there is no 'mind' engaged in the process. The phenomenon of learning and the person attending to it are perceived in an indivisible way, given that 'there is a phenomenon only when there is a subject that experiences the phenomenon' (Araujo-Sadala & de Camargo-Ferreira Adorno, 2002, p. 283).

This paper offers a rationale for proposing a Gestalt of learning. In order to study the interconnectedness between the individual and his/her world in the learning process we require a composite theoretical framework that considers the learner's unique intentions towards the world, and the world of others, and the ways those influence his/her engagement and the forms of engagement (s)he chooses to become part of.

It is argued above that learning does not take place in a vacuum and exacts more than the acquisition of abstract, propositional knowledge, which is constituted externally and offered to a passive mind to assimilate. Rather, learning involves the subject's intentions, 'situated in context', where there is a meaning, a purpose and significance attached to the activity. It also involves the learner's praxical participation in activities, where s/he participates in social activity and gradually moves from less to more central positions; together with mastery of necessary skills. In the participatory process, the skills to be mastered are identified as 'tools' that the learner intends towards and attempts to master in order to play his/her role. Rather than ends in themselves, the skills are offered as means to a different end: the learner's full participation.

Shrinking from generalised statements concerning what learning should be for everybody and at all times—'one size fits all'—this discussion proposes that each learner has a past life, idiosyncratic experiences, individual processes and attitudes. These predispose him/her in certain ways towards his/her lived world, engagement with it and interpretation of it. Each learner's Being-in-the-world, and Being-in-the-world-with-others are thus considered to be the starting point, since they refer to modes of engaging with the world and its objects, a praxis. 'Intentionalities at play' also rely upon the context, that is, are 'situated' and thus given 'substance' and 'purpose'. As such these, interconnected, modes constitute a 'Gestalt of learning'.

Viewing the process of learning as a holistic structure is central to assisting our understanding of children's learning experiences and consequently in planning educational activities that promote each learner's Gestalt. Such activities involve meaningful and purposeful projects, where learners intend towards the situated activity because it 'makes sense' and relates to their everyday, lived worlds. Further, these activities are based on the learner's interests, targets, predispositions and, in general, intentional structures in order to enable each child's individual contribution. Classroom projects that involve a number of roles and flexible positioning of the participants are therefore quintessential. They provide opportunities for gradual development and increased participation, as the children feel ready to move to more central positions.

Conclusion

A new synthesis, a Gestalt of Learning, creates a number of possibilities for the planning of effective educational experiences. The thesis argued here is that children's learning experiences are facilitated if we recognise the ways in which knowledge can be constituted and promoted. Rather than treating it as an 'external sign' that is offered in an abstract and instructional fashion the Gestalt of learning proposes that it should be made available to the learners as a 'means', or else, as 'tools' that can assist their participation in practice and help them reach a purposeful, meaningful goal—the completion of a socially situated activity.

Moving away from conceptualisations of knowledge as 'universal' and 'stable' across settings and participants, this learning model borrows from phenomenology to highlight the significance of the 'actor', his/her background and intentional structures.

The learner's operative intentionality constitutes his/her primordial, pre-reflective dispositions, attitudes and ways of being in the world. His/her intentional acts are, thus, the specific modes of action informed by the background of operative intentionality. The learner's intentional structures direct his/her participation, interests, volitions, targets and predispositions towards any learning experience. As such they are significant constituting elements of the phenomenon of learning.

Knowledge is constituted whilst children act and participate, coincidentally, in the fulfilment of a recognisable goal that is in line with their own, unique, intentional structures.

Importantly, a Gestalt of learning may be formulated in any context, at any time and employing any activities and engagement, as long as the three constituting parts—a meaningful social context, participation in that context and consideration of what intentional structures each participant brings to that context—are preserved.

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