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# Creating polyphony with exploratory web documentation in Singapore

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**WE INTRODUCE AND REFLECT ON** *Images of Teaching*, an ongoing web documentation research project on preschool teaching in Singapore. This paper discusses the project's purpose, methodological process, and our learning points as researchers who aim to contribute towards inquiry-based professional learning. The website offers a window into some Singaporean ways of working with young children in preschool settings; it contains video examples of authentic classroom teaching, contextualised with teacher reflections, artefacts, and interview transcripts. Based on two years of reflection and research meetings, we discuss four key learning points: a) utilising the affordances of web technology to create heteroglossia; b) the need to diversify 'best practices'; c) encouraging dialogue and interrogation; and d) the need to see ourselves as knowledge brokers.

## Background

In our urban and socially diverse city-state of Singapore, preschool teaching is often stereotyped by the public as mere childminding or academic preparation for formal primary schooling. In addition, many parents and student educators may have difficulty locating the specialised knowledge required in exemplary early childhood education. This is because much of early years education either looks easy or is playful and deceptively effortless on the part of educators. This view of early childhood education as an easy task is further exacerbated by generally low expectations around professional qualifications. And yet, in our encounters with preschool educators, we have seen thoughtful practice and a high level of dedication to the profession. This paper describes the purpose of the *Images of Teaching* web documentation research project, our ethical and methodological process, and discusses theoretical perspectives that have shaped our work.

## Purpose of Images of Teaching

We set out to explore ways to harness the affordances (Norman, 1999) of web technology to create rich multimedia 'texts' on teaching moments that would

be publicly available to anyone over the internet. To respect educators' perspectives and pedagogies, we have titled the website *Images of Teaching* (<http://imagesofteaching.rdc.nie.edu.sg/>) to connote multiplicity in good teaching practices instead of a determinate set of universalised 'best' practices. The website's construction was inspired by the *Gallery of Teaching and Learning* created by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and, more specifically, the work of Thomas Hatch (e.g. Hatch, Bass, Iiyoshi & Pointer-Mace, 2004; Hatch, 2006; Hatch & Grossman, 2009). The focus of our project is on capturing but a slice of each educator's classroom practice in a historical moment.

Initially, we had embarked on this work for utilitarian reasons, mainly to contribute to emerging local early childhood research on curriculum and pedagogy. However, in the course of documenting the practitioners' work, our own assumptions about 'quality' teaching were challenged on numerous occasions. As early career educator-researchers shaped by discourses originating in North America and other English-speaking nations, we were critical. Yet there were times when our Singaporean sensibilities made us pause and reflect on whether our critique was based on culturally relevant considerations.

In the same way that our encounters with these images of teaching have made us critically reflexive (Finlay, 2002), our goal is for these web documentations to: a) challenge public stereotypes about preschool teaching or universalised notions about 'best practices' (Bailey & Pransky, 2005; Gupta, 2006); b) provide a knowledge generation tool that would support educators' reasoning and cognition (Putnam & Borko, 2000); and c) provide educators with the opportunity to identify otherwise discrete theories and be able to enquire into the real-world complexities of teaching diverse groups of children (Gay, 2000; Hyun, 2007; Kilderry, 2004).

## **Ethics and methodological process**

We recruited a total of 11 educators by January 2011 (four Chinese language and seven English language teachers) through community nomination (Ladson-Billings, 1997) and much persuasion. We began by inviting kindergarten educators nominated for the annual Outstanding Kindergarten Teachers' Award organised by the MoE Preschool Branch. And eventually we documented a range of well-respected educators from both commercial and non-profit preschools (kindergartens and full-day childcare programs), with and without religious affiliations.

We included video data in addition to more traditional sources of data in order to create richer representations of teaching and learning (Flewitt, 2006); we generated videotaped observations, audio-recorded conversations with each educator, and gathered artefacts ranging from written educator reflections, teaching resources, and what some of the educators' termed as their 'lesson plans'. The multiple sources facilitated our creation of a website that had text from the interviews and reflections, photographs and videos. We documented the work of most of the educators over at least three lesson observations (April–October 2009). Each educator had the autonomy and flexibility of deciding when they wanted us to be present. The videos are supported by web pages filled with contextual information culled from the interview transcripts, to invite viewers to understand each educator's journey as an educator, her/his personal beliefs and professional principles, her/his explanation of the activities captured on video, overall information on the children, as well as information on the preschools. We divided most of the video clips into blocks of about 10 to 15 minutes as far as possible. Essentially, we wanted verisimilitude so that viewers would resonate with these real classroom situations, without compromising each participant's level of comfort in sharing possible imperfections.

We gave all the educators DVDs of their own recorded lessons and interview transcripts, and made sure that every educator (as well as the children and their principals) was comfortable with what would eventually be displayed on the website. We obtained informed consent from the educators and the children's parents, and face-to-face assent from the children (Conroy & Harcourt, 2009) in most classrooms that allowed us to do so.

Throughout the drafting process, we were open to educators' suggestions and we would make adjustments. The process of waiting, negotiating, drafting and editing was more tedious than we had anticipated, but it was important for us to have a website that respected the educators' voices and would not support stereotyped images of preschool teaching.

## **Reflections and theoretical discussion**

Drawing upon a reflexive research process (Finlay, 2002) and two years of research meetings and discussions, we present a theoretical discussion of the learning points that we have gathered as researchers and educators. This theoretical viewpoint builds on existing literature and frames the *Images of Teaching* as a professional learning tool, moving it away from the usual 'best practice' showcase that is so commonly found. We discuss four key learning points from our efforts in creating *Images of Teaching* for professional learning.

### **1. Affordances of web technology, creating heteroglossia**

In this project, we learned to make the most of the affordances of ordinary web technology. Affordances refer to the perceived properties (Norman, 1999) of the website we have created, and the usability of the website given our knowledge of our target audience. The website has a mix of text and pictures. As we created the website's multiple images of teaching, we were reminded of Bakhtin's concepts of heteroglossia and polyphony from his dialogic theory (Holquist 1990). We see the possibilities of this website in inviting viewers to actively 'dialogue' with the juxtaposed and multifarious images of teaching practices.

Many theoretical utterances have shaped the website (including our own), and represent a range of desires, including those that seek to shape and standardise world views and those that seek to disrupt and destabilise hierarchical views about preschool teaching (Holquist, 1990).

We feel that none of these teaching videos and images are going to produce a singular meaning for anyone, thus encouraging debate among early childhood professionals.

## 2. Diversifying images of 'best practice'

Having documented 11 practitioners, we agree with Bailey and Pransky (2005) in arguing that 'the very concept of universalised best practices is really a chimera in light of the wide body of research that conceptualises learning as a profoundly cultural process' (p. 20). As Rogoff puts it in her version of sociocultural-historical perspective, 'Humans develop through their changing participation in the sociocultural activities of their communities, which also change' (2003, p. 11). The contexts in which we live and learn are constantly shifting. Through the *Images of Teaching*, we are saying that, as academics, we do not claim to know what is best for every child in Singapore even if we have our personal biases and theories about what might 'work'.

In urban Singapore, educators find themselves in a dilemma when re-imagining pedagogy for a largely unknown twenty-first century world. On the one hand, there seems to be a need to move away from drill-and-practice as the one true pedagogy even though it may have served us well since the birth of our republic in 1965; on the other hand, educational trends persuade us to be more progressive, constructivist, or look towards Reggio Emilia. However, would a swing from largely collectivist values in our cultural context towards individualist values be appropriate for all our families? Even with a national curriculum framework recommendation and guidelines (MoE, 2003) and a preschool quality accreditation in place (MoE, 2011), we would not want every educator to work in formulaic ways with *other people's children* (Delpit, 1996). The *zeitgeist* requires us to constantly reconceptualise (e.g. Kessler & Swadener, 1992); we need to avoid creating the same historical pendulum swings in search of the elusive 'best' educational approach.

## 3. Dialoguing and interrogating assumptions

Reflective practice is the term often used to refer to practitioners' ability to 'look back' thoughtfully so as to evaluate their own practice and that of others, in order to improve teaching and learning. This construct has been upheld as the foundation of quality teaching (e.g. Brookfield, 1995; Gore & Zeichner, 1991; Schön, 1983; Wood & Bennett, 2000) but we echo Genishi and Goodwin (2008) in their call for educators to 'push ourselves beyond comfort zones' (p. 278) in these times when diversity has become the new norm.

We see an urgent need for whole communities of educators not to reflect simply out of compliance but in order to identify hidden assumptions in their practice (Wood & Bennett, 2000). Terms such as 'developmentally appropriate practice', 'play', and 'project approach' have diversified the discourses of early childhood education in Singapore, and so have

'documentation' and 'reflective practice'. However, there is a need to interrogate tokenistic interpretations of these concepts.

Many educators may be swept up by fashionable currents, be unproductively busy and, as a result, become less reflexive and self-aware (Reay, 2001), or lose sight of the very children they work with. In neo-liberal times, it is easy for educators to fall into the trap of promoting what Dewey considered anaesthetic educational experiences (1934/1980), a mechanical experience in the process of teaching and learning. Most recently, under the newly established regulatory gaze of quality preschool accreditation by the government (MoE, 2010), entire preschools are given a stamp of approval by trained assessors. Although the accreditation serves a purpose, the award must not be mistaken for high-quality teaching in individual classrooms at all times, for all children. At the end of each day, it should be every educator's responsibility to actively reflect on what transpired in the classroom.

## 4. The road ahead as knowledge brokers

Several educators and principals we have spoken with have expressed gratitude that, 'We finally have something of our own! I don't have to keep looking in UK, Australia, or USA websites'. We are encouraged by such remarks, yet we do not want this 'something of our own' to be romanticised but to strengthen professional learning. With this humble contribution made possible by the 11 teachers and willing children, we see our role as university academics becoming like knowledge brokers (Meyer, 2010), facilitating the generation, connection, transformation, and distribution of educator knowledge(s) across national boundaries, and across the divides of commercial and non-profit sectors, as well as that of kindergartens (under the auspices of the Ministry of Education) and childcare centres (regulated by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports) (MCYS, 2010).

## Conclusion

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As we continue to hone our craft as knowledge brokers, we are more than ever convinced of the need for versatile and thinking educators who are sensitive to the changing socio-cultural contexts of contemporary childhood(s). The *Images of Teaching* is but one avenue by which we can contribute towards an internationally polyphonic texture in the discourses of early childhood education.

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