

Response to Gloria Quinones and Marilyn Fletcher's "Visual Vivencias"

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On my initial reading of this chapter I was struck by its clarity in relation to the research journey that unfolds about a young Mexican boy, Cesar, and his homework activity through the employment of analytical snapshots that are underpinned by carefully articulated methodological imperatives. The detailed description of the methodology that underpins this data provides the reader with a rare glimpse into what, I believe, constitutes a new and exciting operationalisation of sociocultural theory in the form of *Visual Vivencias*. I am in no doubt that, for this reason alone, the chapter will be inspirational for researchers grappling with meaningful ways of entering into the complex world of the very young child.

The interpretation of Russian *perezhivanie* in relation to Spanish *vivencias* is a particularly interesting and fruitful contribution to the research arena, especially when considered from a cultural-historical standpoint. In this location the authors seem to be suggesting, with Vygotsky (1994), that lived emotional experience of the individual learner is the central point of gestalt for the researcher; and that it is located in the dialectical relationship that takes place between the environment and the child's emotional engagement with that environment. I interpret this to mean that the environment, per se, holds relevance to the child's learning or experience only when it is imbued with meaning through interaction. This is an important claim for research with very young children, since, as the authors point out, so much research with this age group (including in a non-Western society such as Mexico) is heavily weighted by measures of competency against predetermined measures that are located "in the environment" without consideration of emotional engagement, meaning and experience on the part of the learner.

The "wholeness approach" to research advocated by the authors in their research design represents considerable challenges when we consider affect and cognition as a dynamic system in unity. It is one that has perplexed researchers across the globe and, in early childhood research, led to the development of significant frameworks for analysis (see for example the work of Carr, 2009, and Clark, 2007, among others). Several neo-Vygotskians have attempted to respond to the challenge drawing specifically from Vygotsky, including the foci of analysis model (Rogoff, 1995) and activity theory (Engstrom, Miettinen, & Punamaki, 1999). In this chapter, the authors draw from Hedegaard's (2008) framework—a recent addition to the field which bears close allegiance to these models; and invites the researcher to view institutional practices and individual activities as interrelated concepts. However, Quinones and Flerer go further to suggest that a wholeness approach should also be concerned with intellect and affect, providing additional

provocations to guide the researcher towards dialectic approaches in research activity. It is here they invoke *perezhavanie* as a unit of analysis.

If we take this idea seriously, as these authors most certainly have, the researcher must somehow search for meaning from the perspective of *this* child in *specific* contexts (that is, the life-world of this child), while recognizing the prevailing influences of the wider world—a constant quest for researchers and teachers alike in claiming any interpretation of “voice”; and one that is at the very heart of this collection. With Hedegaard’s inspiration, the authors of this chapter have a means of doing so. As many of the contributors have already pointed out, this is not an easy task when the very young child does not share the same semiotic language system as the adult, in particular the researcher. It was exciting, therefore, to read of the authors’ cognisance of non-verbal forms of language in understand the *vivencias* of Cesar, and the important part they play in meaning-making for the very youngest learners. The sections which explore skills and non-verbal communication provide a particularly useful example of how interpretation might be possible using *Visual Vivencia* as a methodology. Given Vygotsky’s (1997) claim that infants do not have the capacity for human speech, this section provides a very useful embellishment of the way a young child engages with human speech in subtle yet complex ways.

I was consistently drawn to the authors’ interpretation of *perezhivanie* throughout this chapter. This is a Russian concept also employed by Voloshinov (1973), who suggests that meaning is always evaluative and therefore must have significance for the particular group in which acts take place (Liberali, 2009). Bakhtin’s additional use of the Russian term *postupok* (Bakhtin, 1993)—an answerable act or deed—suggests that the gestalt of this lived experience is determined not so much by the environment in relation to the individual, but by the *people* in that environment and the strategic orientation of the individual toward them in the language acts they present (Marjanovic-Shane, in press). Given that *vivencias* is also proposed as an extension of the term, and that it seems to take into particular account the strong influence of family and society, I wonder if further attention to these orientations would be valuable in studies of very young children across cultures. In making this suggestion it occurs to me that there is much scope for enriched interpretations of key theoretical constructs when language is shared across cultures and societies as a means of understanding complex ideas. Such an approach, however, requires reflexive positioning on the part of researchers if their ideas are to be taken seriously across cultural and conceptual borders, and less universal certainty than many researchers are accustomed to. The dialogues that take place around these concepts help us to clarify our meaning as well as those of others, and to recognise the interpretative (and cultural) nature of research in this domain.

In any case the authors’ solution is sought in an approach they carefully describe as a “dialectical-interactive”. This method, developed by Hedegaard and Fleer (2008), allows the researcher to study everyday activity, in this case homework, in complex ways that fulfil their promise of expanding on the notion of *competencia*

to take account of the dialectics at play. Like others in this book, their route is through video, and the employment of stimulated dialogue using that video. Here the emphasis seems to shift from “*child vivencias*” to those of “*mother and child vivencias*” (although this is not explicitly expounded) as a unit that are assumed to share the same emotional experience or speak for one another—a notion I ponder since I concur with Linell (2010) that the infant needs to be treated as a research subject in their own right (however hard that is). Having said that, it is important to note that the examples provided in this chapter are part of a larger study involving home and school dialectics that are not discussed here, so the emphasis was less on the home as a sole institution than the home environment as an important part of the wider educational experience. Such is the value of research of this nature, since the authors are able to recognise a far more complex picture by investigating such systems.

On a more pragmatic level, it was surprising to learn that Mexican approaches to very young children are so heavily influenced by discreet competencies with such emphasis on skills and physical development. It caused me to reflect on the significant influence and power wielded by educational institutions on what families see as important learning—an aspect of discussion that this research explores in the wider study. However, I would suggest that the researchers’ choice to focus on homework as a leading activity for investigation lent itself more to this scholastic emphasis than other activities may have. It would be interesting to see this research repeated, in the home, with other cultural activities in mind, since it is likely that these hold significant emotional value to the child (indeed, it could be argued that they would hold *more* emotional value to Cesar). As one of very few sociocultural studies that has been conducted in this locale, this chapter provides a beacon of hope in research that is conducted in and between home and other locales; since it is clear that any cultural-historical interpretation cannot ignore this significant institution in the life and learning of a young child. In Cesar’s case, the chosen *vivencia* raise important, but unexplored, questions concerning the emotional value of homework as an educational activity for the very young child despite its value to his family.

To conclude, not only does this chapter provide important incentives for researchers to consider the wider contexts of the child’s life world, but it also sets the scene for future research that investigates the *vivencias* of young children in an increasingly diasporic world (I make this claim for both the researcher and the researched). The inspirational examples outlined here, underpinned by a unique methodological framework, provide a potential route to the emotional lived experience of the infant and toddler as a means of bringing cognition/competency and emotion into dialectic interplay. Moreover, the notion of *visual vivencia* provides researchers with inspiration to go beyond current frameworks to develop methodologically sound approaches that best suit their purpose. Theorising of how best to understand and appreciate young children, through such exploration, is a route we must inevitably take if we are serious about deepening our understandings of our youngest children, ourselves, and the societies in which we live.

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