

Researching and theorizing the local in education: Perspectives from Oceania and Asia

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This paper explores the role of local knowledges and wisdoms in educational research and theorizing, drawing examples from Oceania and Asia. It draws on Chen's idea of "internationalist localism" as a lens to explore relationships between local wisdom and traditional cultures in Oceania and Asia, and Western theories of education. Examples are drawn from the island nations of Oceania (including Papua New Guinea), Asia (including Indonesia, Vietnam, and Bangladesh) as well as Australia (including Indigenous Australian settings). In each of these examples, researchers grounded their studies in local wisdoms and traditions, albeit embedding them in broader global contexts, thus achieving, at least to some extent, the internationalist localism advocated by Chen.

Keywords: Asia as method; local knowledge; wisdom; internationalist localism; global theories of education

INTRODUCTION

Educational researchers typically draw on Western ways of thinking and knowing regardless of cultural context. Their research and theorizing are grounded in Western concepts and perspectives on the assumption that the epistemologies and ontologies that underlie Western intellectual traditions have greater validity. While this is appropriate in mainstream settings, such an approach undervalues local intellectual traditions, knowledges and wisdoms, and is not necessarily suitable for local circumstances. However, if we turn to local knowledge to interpret local educational issues in Oceania and Asia, challenges may arise for us. For instance, the so-called "local knowledge" may not be recognized as part of any wider intellectual canon and is often not regarded as acceptable knowledge for educational research. Many scholars in Oceania and Asia have faced dilemmas around these issues of knowledge and location, of universalism and relativism, and much else.

Almost every nation state has a deep core of values about justice and civilized behaviour that is grounded in its ontologies and enshrined in its legal frameworks. At least some of these values are "local", with unique characteristics shaped by the nation's particular history, geography, and religious traditions. Values are transmitted to each succeeding generation by parents, the extended family, and the local community, and by the school

system, formally via civics and citizenship education but more powerfully through curriculum context and process. As an aside here, we do need to recognize issues related to cultural relativism and to moral or ethical relativism. There are limits to the Local. We need to acknowledge that the ontologies and epistemologies of some groups are incompatible with those of the wider society and that defining these limits is extremely fraught. The most obvious examples here are the belief systems of extremist religious and terrorist groups.

In researching the Local, we also need to avoid an oppositional approach, where the local and Global are perceived as antagonistic. Some post-colonial scholars awkwardly trap themselves in such a position, especially those who view “the West as the Other” (Zhang, Chan, & Kenway 2015). To interpret “the question of the West”, Chen (2010) provides “an alternative discursive strategy [that] points the west as bits and fragments that intervene in local social formations in a systematic, but never totalizing way” (p. 233). He further employs the notion of “internationalist localism” to help us deal with the problem of the West:

Internationalist localism acknowledges the existence of the nation-state as a product of history but analytically keeps a critical distance from it. The operating site is local, but at the same time internationalist localism actively transgresses nation-states’ boundaries. (Chen, 2010, p. 233)

It is common sense that concepts and theories arising from different cultural backgrounds (Western or non-Western) need to be Localized to interpret each issue in its specific political, economic, historical, and cultural context. The idea of internationalist localism provides a lens to re-identify the relationship between local wisdom and traditional cultures in Oceania and Asia, and Western theories. In order to root the localized Western theories into local soil and, eventually, become one of the compositions of local culture, it is necessary for the localization of Western theories to adapt to local culture and historical traditions (Zhang et al., 2015).

This paper explores the role of the Local in educational research and theorizing, drawing examples from Oceania and Asia as well as Australia. We define the Local as that which is encapsulated in the ontologies (i.e., the explanations of reality or existence; the belief systems; the wisdoms) and the epistemologies (i.e., the ways of knowing, thinking and understanding) of particular groups of people. It is these that form the deep values of the group, and that find expression in its language. The Local, in this sense, can be as broad as the nation state, or as small as the nuclear family, or even the individual.

PERSPECTIVES FROM OCEANIA

The PRIDE Project

Across the island nations of Oceania, including Papua New Guinea (PNG), the role of the Local in education was extensively theorized by the team implementing the PRIDE Project (Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of Basic Education), based at the University of the South Pacific. The project was established in 2004 by the Ministers of Education of 15 Pacific countries and funded jointly by the European Union and New Zealand Aid. PRIDE was an education reform project, its role being to help develop new national strategic plans for education in each country, and to support their implementation. The Ministers expressed two clear goals: they needed their children to grow up strong in their own local culture and in their cultural identity. They also needed

their children to succeed in the world beyond their shores. In other words, they wanted students to grow up with a deep sense of their local values and identities yet with the skills to walk tall in a global world. They sought the best of both the Local and the Global.

The PRIDE team spent a lot of time conceptualizing this, using as a starting point the *Delors Report*, a visionary document, which was almost ahead of its time and still relevant today. In his preface to the report, Delors (1996) identified and discussed seven tensions that he believed characterize most education policy, planning, and learning environments. He revisited these and added further insights in a later, 2002, paper. Among the tensions he identified were those between the Local and the Global. In exploring Delors's ideas, the team came up with the concept of functional or positive tension, using the analogy of guitar strings which need to be kept in a constant state of tension to achieve the desired outcome of pleasing music. Likewise, educators have the constant challenge of achieving a positive or functional balance between the tensions confronting them as they theorize, plan, and deliver education (Puamau & Teasdale, 2007; Teasdale, Tokai, & Puamau, 2005). From a research and planning perspective, this idea of creative or functional tension between the global and the local has a number of implications:

- A top-down approach simply will not work; we need a genuine bottom-up, participatory processes.
- Local languages are fundamentally important because the deep values and wisdoms of the groups are embedded within them and are expressed through them.
- We need to take a more holistic and lifelong approach to learning with more attention to curriculum context and process.
- Returning to the discourse of Delors (1996), we need to give more attention to: “Learning to Be” and “Learning to Live Together”; to self-knowledge and self-understanding; and to the social and the spiritual.

Papua New Guinea

It is especially challenging for “outsiders” to research local cultures. One of the most effective ways of doing so is by using Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014). Yasuko Nagai's (2000) study of the development of vernacular elementary schools in PNG provides an excellent example. Working with the Maiwala people, a small language group living on the eastern tip of mainland PNG, Nagai gave ownership and control of the research and its outcomes to the participants. The basic features of her research included:

- The participants, or subjects, became co-owners and co-researchers;
- They participated in identifying the research problems and designing the study;
- They helped to gather and analyse the data within their own time-frames;
- They had a key role in acting on the outcomes of the research; and
- They shared authorship of publications (see, for example, Nagai & Lister, 2003).

As Nagai (2000) explains, she developed PAR as a fully collaborative process that used research as a tool for joint problem solving and positive social change:

Using PAR, western approaches have been syncretised with the whole-of-life processes of a local village community in PNG . . . (this) collaborative research project helped the people themselves to solve problems they were confronting in

establishing their own vernacular school. Symmetrical relationships were established between an expatriate researcher and local people, and between western and local knowledge systems. Through this experiential process an alternative approach has been developed that empowers local people to become researchers and to draw upon their own traditions of knowledge acquisition and analysis. (pp. 92–93)

Those who research and theorize the Local from inside their own culture are in a much more privileged position. As “insiders”, they have access to local languages, and to local ways of thinking, knowing, and understanding, thereby enabling them to develop research processes that are deeply grounded in their own culture of primary identity. Teasdale (personal communication), for example, recalls a PhD student from PNG who made an in-depth review of the oral literature of his particular language group. As part of this process, he returned to his village and carried out a series of in-depth interviews with the elders, seeking to explore their wisdom and knowledge about culture and learning.

For his thesis, the student wrote this chapter in his own language. This allowed him to explore the epistemologies and ontologies of his group in greater depth and with greater finesse. He then interpreted and analysed the chapter in English, placing it alongside a more “conventional” chapter that reviewed Global literature relevant to his research. The process of syncretizing the two literature reviews, and providing a coherent theoretical foundation for his research was challenging but achievable. It also enabled the student to develop a methodology built on both the Local and the Global and to carry out research in local villages under the guidance of his elders.

A second PhD student from PNG, Michael Mel (1995; 2000), a Mogeï man from the Mount Hagen region, was likewise encouraged to research and theorize from within his own culture. He used the concept of *Mbu* as the underlying metaphor for his research. As he explains it, *Mbu* describes the inseparable relationship between the individual, on the one hand, and the thinking, feeling, knowing, understanding, remembering, creating, and living of the group. Using a local metaphor such as this proved to be a very powerful way to frame his research. Within his writing, Mel kept re-visiting and exploring its many dimensions. When it came to the structuring of his thesis, Mel reflected on his own Mogeï processes of thinking, knowing, and understanding. Knowledge, in his culture, was embedded *in* stories, and analysed *through* stories. He, therefore, used story-telling to structure his writing, beginning with a story he had heard many times when sitting as a child with his grandfather and the older men of the village. He used the story as a kind of *leitmotif*, weaving it through his analysis to provide coherence. On the way through the thesis, he used other stories to clarify and explain his ideas. It was a subtle process, and one that provided a fascinating foundation for his research and theorizing.

In each of these examples from PNG, the researchers grounded their studies in local wisdoms and traditions, albeit embedding them in a broader global context, thus achieving, at least to some extent, the internationalist localism advocated by Chen (2010).

“Asia as method”

From an Asian perspective, Chen (2010) proposed the important concept of “Asia as method”: the idea of an imaginary Asian anchoring point whereby societies in Asia can become each other’s reference point so that the understanding of the self may be transformed and subjectivity rebuilt. On this basis, the diverse historical experiences and rich social practices of Asia may be mobilized to provide alternative horizons and perspectives. In their book, *Asia as Method in Education Studies*, Zhang et al. (2015)

provide a provocative and suggestive exploration of educational ideas imported from the West. They rethink and re-examine education studies in Asia beyond the Western eye. This book combines the diverse research of local scholars from various countries of Asia, offering examples of what it means to rethink and re-examine education in Asia beyond Western imperialist eyes and post-colonial politics of resentment.

In a case of task-based learning and reflective practice implementation in the Indonesian context, Kuswandona, Gandana, and Rohani (2015) problematize the adoption and adaptation of Western concepts in its education system. They stress that Indonesian education stakeholders are consistently faced with difficulties and challenges in understanding the Western education reform agenda and putting it into practice. Chen's key idea of "deimperialization" helps them raise awareness of the impacts of colonization and Western knowledge structure on Indonesia's education practices, and how his notions of multiculturalism and collectivism operate to shape Indonesia's current education arena. Vu and Le (2015) discussed the emergent language practices and values of young people in Vietnam after the end of the cold war and recent expression of globalization. They value Chen's idea of Asia as method but they place their emphasis not on deconstructing or denying the "West as method" but on referring to the West as an enriching body of knowledge while also drawing on other local points of reference to transform their subjectivities worldwide. Their cases are anchored in some aspects of Chen's work while carefully avoiding both a total reliance on the West as a primary point of reference and a joyous celebration of Asian wisdom.

Wu (2015) engaged one of Chen's key ideas—geo-colonial historical materialism—to discuss intricate trajectories of geographical space and historical and cultural context in relation to colonial and imperial consciousness. She provides examples from a New Zealand context to illustrate the dichotomy of the "West versus Others" to argue that Asia as method can promote dialogue within Asia, "the rest" and the "Third World". Such dialogue can enhance awareness of minority cultural knowledge and resources, the complexity and richness of which would then gain momentum and create currency to achieve genuine cultural responsiveness.

Roside, Siddique, Sarkar, Mojumder, and Begum (2015) examine the practice of applying Western-oriented educational research methods in Bangladesh. They argue that knowledge-generating tools that are useful in one country may not be completely suitable for another country. More specifically, they stress that a research approach originating from Western society may not be well suited to a Bangladeshi context. They not only argue that "Asia as Method" as a complement to Western-generated methods has potential to generate valid knowledge in an Asian context, they also use localized Western methodology as a point of reference when they conducted Asian research.

Each of these four cases provides a response to the dilemma of how to apply Western theories and methodologies to educational research in local Asian contexts. They disclose the base-entity in their countries, in which translating Western ideas and research methods must negotiate with the exotic cultural and local traditions (Zhang et al., 2015). Chen (2010) says:

Each geographic space—be it village, city, region, country, or continent—has its own base-entity and local history with different depths, forms and shapes. The methodological questions are: How can these base-entities be analyzed in terms of their internal characteristics? How can we best identify and analyze the interactions between and among different based-entities? (p. 251)

AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVES

Within a nation state, the idea of the Local can be applied to specific communities or localities. Researching remote rural communities in Australia, for example, Roberts (2014a; 2014b) introduced the concepts of “localism” and “place-conscious education”, suggesting that the school curriculum in small rural communities should be driven by residents’ own local needs and values, defined in their own terms. Recent research on Kangaroo Island, South Australia (Teasdale & Teasdale, in press), for example, provides evidence that there are distinctive local values and mores, and that these are supported by the school. There was one common theme to all interviews with grandparents, parents and young people themselves: the perceived social and cultural benefits of Island life. In particular, they referred to:

- The interdependence and mutual support that characterize social relationships;
- The sense of security, belonging, and personal well-being that children derive from extended family and friendship networks;
- The greater resilience and maturity that children acquire from living in remote settings; and
- The opportunity for children to learn to live in a more environmentally responsible way.

Interviews with teachers confirmed that these values are being reinforced by the local school, especially through curriculum context and process, thereby supporting Roberts’ concepts of “Localism” and “place-based education”. Yet, the school continues to fulfil the requirements of the national curriculum and to produce students who proceed successfully to employment and/or higher education.

Indigenous Australian contexts

Within Australia, the most significant cultural groups are the Indigenous Australians who have occupied the continent for over 60,000 years. Their ontologies and epistemologies are fundamentally different to those of the wider Australian society. In fact, the depth of cultural difference between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians is probably as fundamental as one would find anywhere in the world between two cultural groups. This poses immense challenges for Indigenous Australians and for those who work alongside them as educators. Probably the single greatest challenge in Australian education today is the provision of effective education for remote Indigenous peoples. In a wide-ranging reflection on his work with Indigenous Australian groups over the past 50 years, Teasdale (2017) summarized some basic principles for researching and theorizing education in remote Indigenous Australian settings:

- There needs to be the deepest respect and support for local cultures and languages. The extended family plays an essential role in ensuring that children grow up with a strong sense of their own cultural identity, and of the belief systems and epistemologies that underlie it. This should be the foundation for the delivery of education, especially in the early years.
- Policies of bilingual education and vernacular literacy are needed in remote Indigenous schools. There was some excellent work done by researchers and teachers during the 1980s and early 1990s. It was well supported by Government funding. Some genuine success stories were starting to emerge. But Government policy was reversed, led by the Northern Territory

Government, and most programs were discontinued. We need to re-visit the earlier work, re-conceptualize bilingual education and vernacular literacy in light of recent international research findings, and develop new research projects and programs.

- For remote schools to succeed, the local community needs to feel a sense of ownership and control. We cannot just drop teachers, buildings, and curriculums into remote communities and force children to attend school. During the 1980s, there was Government support for Aboriginal controlled schools, and a support network for those that were established. An evaluation of the impact of capital grants funding on learning outcomes at over 400 remote Indigenous schools (Teasdale, 1994) had one overwhelming finding: the schools that were succeeding were those with a strong sense of community ownership and control, where the community was directly involved in the day-to-day delivery of education.
- Educators need to work closely with local communities to develop models of schooling that are deeply grounded in the Local yet prepare students to engage with the Global. Harris's (1990) ground-breaking theorizing in the 1980s with his work on Aboriginal learning styles and two-way learning, provides an early example of what can be achieved.

Osborne (2013), working with Anangu in central Australia, has developed the idea of a "Red Dirt Curriculum" based on co-constructed knowledge. His research (Osborne & Guenther, 2013) concludes that Anangu have a strong desire for schooling that is grounded first and foremost in the land and their deep spiritual connections with it, yet also provides opportunities for their children to grow up with the skills to live in the world beyond the desert. Some highly significant theorizing has also been undertaken by Yolngu at Yirrkala, starting in the late 1980s, around the concept of "two-way schooling", or "both-ways learning". It is still the basis for education there and in the associated homeland schools. It is one of the few remote settings in Australia where there is a coherent policy and where bilingual education is thriving. The first Yolngu principal at Yirrkala school, a man of great intellect and charisma, summarized his beliefs only weeks before his passing in 2013:

I want to talk about strength, either in English or in the Yolngu Matha speaking domain. We learnt from our elders that language is sacred. Yolngu kids think in their own language which can then inform them about English, about its meanings and its values. I consider Yolngu children in Yolngu schools to be as clever as anyone else in the wide world, and I don't want that cleverness left outside the classroom door. Not for my kids or my grandkids. They should have equal rights, the same rights as any kids in the world, whether they are Chinese, or Balanda, the equal right to learn in their own language (cited by Stockley, 2013, p. 1).

Douglas Morgan is an Indigenous Australian philosopher who has written extensively on the delivery of health and education services to Indigenous Australians (Morgan & Slade, 1998; Slade & Morgan, 2000). Using philosophical analysis as his primary methodology Morgan draws on both Indigenous Australian and Western approaches to philosophy. The theoretical structure of Morgan's (1999) PhD thesis was especially fascinating. Typically, PhD theses are linear. There is a series of chapters that proceed in logical sequence, each chapter dealing with a separate theme or issue, thereby leading to a conclusion. Morgan, however, took a holistic approach, best represented by an Archimedean spiral. Each chapter visited every theme. And each chapter drew the themes together a little more,

until conclusions eventually were reached. Morgan likened it to the decision-making processes used by Indigenous Australians, where a group will talk around and around an issue, ensuring everyone has their say, until unanimity is reached, however long that takes.

Another Indigenous Australian, Lorraine Miller, has used a reflective research process that draws on her exceptional talent as a visual artist. Miller (2009) has a Yolngu heritage, and close links with family in Eastern Arnhem Land. In seeking to research and theorize the education of her people, she found difficulty in using the written word to express her deeper cultural values, wisdoms, and beliefs. She, therefore, painted what she wanted to express using oils on canvas. While painting, she recorded a spoken narrative of what she was expressing. The paintings and the transcribed narrative formed the basis of an MA thesis. It was a powerful and original piece of work, exploring the interface of culture and education in Yolngu settings.

These examples from Indigenous Australian educational settings have one theme in common: the rights of Indigenous Australians, whether in their first year of school or the final year of a PhD, to learning experiences that are grounded in their own local knowledges and wisdoms, yet also embedded in a broader global context that prepares them to live successfully as international citizens.

CONCLUSION

This paper points to the fact that different Locals offer diversified inspirations for the research imagination, which need to be taken into account in the dominant discourse of Western-centralism of education studies (Chen, 2010). For example, largely Local-led studies in the broader Asia and Oceania regions (Australia included) have provided different possibilities for scholars in these contexts to “overcome the limits imposed and shaped by Western academic discourse” (Zhang et al., 2015, p. 33). The paper affirms the benefits of dialogue about *how* to shift away from Western perspectives towards a greater focus on “internationalist localism” in educational research about Asia and Oceania. We believe that this provides a useful ontological and epistemological starting point for deployment by researchers in similar circumstances.

To study the Local is not simply to research and theorize education in a limited geographical space, such as Asia and Oceania. This article moves beyond an obsession with the West and, instead, to studies of education in Asia and Oceania that acknowledge the complex links between history, geography, and knowledge in and about education. In other words, it offers educators from Asia and Oceania the opportunity to study education from local perspectives, fully acknowledging the manner in which local education systems, policies, and practices have differentially mediated Western knowledge in relation to their own specific evolving cultures, contexts, and politics.

Our review also has helped us to move beyond the simple local/global binary divide. It has required an expansion of perspectives. It has meant engaging with complexity. We tried to see ourselves in ways that did not involve the “imperialist eye” or national or cultural identity restraints. In this way, we have identified a surprising diversity of approaches to research that are grounded in local epistemologies and ontologies, yet also are embedded in the global, thus achieving, at least to some extent, the internationalist localism advocated by Chen (2010).

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