

Editorial: Building Blocks of Knowledge: Investigating Education, Learning, and Knowing in Children and Youth

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We are delighted to present this issue of *NEOS*, entitled “Building Blocks of Knowledge: Investigating Education, Learning, and Knowing in Children and Youth,” as our first issue serving as Co-Editors. This topic is especially important to us both, with Manya’s work focusing on children’s rights to education and Chelsea’s interest in equitable pedagogical practices.

In this issue, we present interdisciplinary perspectives on youth and education, including scholars of anthropology, education, childhood studies, and international studies. With these diverse perspectives, we aim to bridge some of the apparent disciplinary divides involving education and the anthropology of children and youth. Education research often centers on the processes of pedagogy and learning, emphasizing the roles of teachers and learners within designated educational spaces, like schools, while anthropology and childhood studies have focused extensively on how children behave and engage with culture and community, often exploring the experiences of children within educational environments. While the issues at the center of these disciplines are often similar, they are engaged in unique ways, making it hard to create dialogue between them. In the last few decades, there has been a growing movement towards bridging disciplinary boundaries and adopting more active, engaged, and equitable research approaches. This has included expanding research beyond formal settings to encompass informal learning, employing diverse methodologies, and drawing from a range of disciplines (Henze 2020).

This issue strives to participate in this shift and transcend the conventional confines of what education means. Central to this is a departure from traditional notions of education, particularly the hierarchical “banking” model famously critiqued by Freire (1970), which positions adults as active subjects and sole purveyors of knowledge and children as passive, listening recipients. We invited anthropologists and scholars of other disciplines to interpret education not only as a process in which formal knowledge is transferred from an adult to a child but also as a process that moves in other directions and includes social, cultural, and emotional ways of knowing that is transferred between children and their environments.

The articles featured in this issue prompt us to reconsider where learning occurs, going beyond the confines of formal schooling, and critically examines the roles of educators and learners in various contexts. Many of the contributions challenge us to think about what education, learning, and knowing even really mean. What valuable insights can educators glean from the anthropology of

childhood, and conversely, what can anthropologists learn from studying how children engage, resist, and transform learning in different settings? The following articles and commentaries take us outside the formal classroom, into the built world, the natural world, and our communities, shedding light on the diverse ways learning manifests and thrives outside traditional educational frameworks.

The first three research articles and one invited commentary in this collection explore learning in unconventional spaces, defying our preconceptions of formal and informal educational environments. Deepika Ganesh, with Etienne Basson and Michelle Bellino, Diane Hoffman, Joshua Semerjian, and Drew Kahn transport us to new learning environments in South Africa and Haiti, to community rallies and the theatre, respectively.

Ganesh, Basson, and Bellino introduce us to a place-based education (PBE) program, Envirolove, in Lavender Hill, South Africa, which employs outdoor learning for youth in a place deeply impacted by historical and present violence. The authors describe this PBE program as a “third space,” inviting alternative ways of knowing, and connect the idea of “third space” to “safe space.” They argue that PBE allows youth exposed to violence new ways of knowing and (re)shaping their connections to their environments, their communities, and their pasts.

In Haiti, where many children lack access to formal schooling, Hoffman shows how disadvantaged children engage with their environments as a form of self-education. Hoffman challenges us to think about how different traditions of learning are often obscured by traditional (read: Western) definitions, arguing that Haitian childhoods thrive in the collective, spiritual, and natural world that surrounds them, engaging in sensorial and embodied learning with a unique teacher - the environment. Like Ganesh et al., this environment includes knowledge of the natural world, through identifying plants, for example, but for these Haitian children, it also includes the built environment, recognizing the importance of the cultural value of *fomasyon*, with children learning in the household and through informal engagements on the street, such as learning how to repair a bicycle.

Semerjian suggests that participating that educational community-engagement activities help youth to support their youth aspiration and community transformation and helps them fit into social structures while improving relationships across differences. Based on two examples of enacted public actions in which youth participated: one rally on stricter gun control laws and the other on trans and intersex rights, allowed youth to share their opinions and openly support causes they believed in. Semerjian concludes that we should all strive to enact learning through action by “reaching” by engaging youth in activities that focus on improving local conditions. “Reaching” will have the desired outcome of increasing social interdependence and helping youth to move toward a more cooperative personal orientation.

Finally, Kahn's commentary takes us to the theatre, drawing our attention to the power of Story-Based Learning (SBL) to go beyond a single meaningful educational moment and into active identity exploration, community engagement, and conflict management through the Anne Frank Project (AFP). For 18 years, the AFP has served as a social justice program, reaching to places like Rwanda, and utilizing SBL to build community through story-building.

Our last three research articles by Aakanksha D'Cruz, Christopher Chapman, and Natalie Gologorsky point to the embodied, subtextual, and sometimes unintentional learning that children undergo in formal educational spaces and how this relates to issues of power relations between adults and children, control over children's minds and bodies, and the sometimes arbitrary and confusing delineation between childhood and adulthood in knowledge production and sharing. Children and youth often live under various forms of policing, but we also see them utilizing their agency to challenge relationships and frameworks that control their time, bodies, and activities. These articles encourage us to think of education not only as learning of the mind but how bodies accumulate and perform knowledge as well.

D'Cruz analyzes the experiences of how school uniforms for female students in India teach girls social control of the female body. By focusing on the school uniforms and listening to testimonies of female students, we see how children learn through their bodies, and how clothing socializes children not only on their gender roles, but also on issues of class and religion and their specific place within society. D'Cruz focuses particularly on the replacement of skirts with Salwar-Kameez in the 1990s and argues that recent negotiations and enforcement of modesty regulations relate to struggles between socioeconomic classes, religions, and ethnicities in India and correlate with the shifting terrain of socio-political discourse and morality in the era of Hindutva-neoliberalism.

Chapman takes us to an after-school study hall at a residential care facility for elementary school children in Japan, exploring the relationships between adult care workers and the children in care, and how together they create a subversive educational space. Typically understood as a place for formal education, Chapman shares how the study hall becomes a place where power relations are subverted, the knowledge of discipline and abuse are challenged, and the children in care demonstrate how they can use their power to change the care workers' approach to controlling the educational environment.

Based on interviews with adult non-binary and female autistic adults, Gologorsky investigates childhood memories of informal learning to learn how children relate to processes of intellectual inquiry. Gologorsky argues that the particular conscious attention that people with autism tend to pay to their own experiences can provide rich reflective insights into how intellectual inquiries transform from childhood to adulthood. Focusing on "everyday intellectualism," or informal learning that takes place outside of school based on personal initiative that serves no practical or immediate purpose, Gologorsky suggests that looking at these memories allows to analyze the

fluid boundary between childhood and adulthood. Her research might imply that the boundaries between childhood and adulthood may seem so stark because studies often focus on schools and other social frameworks which often change abruptly in this transition and not because of the inherent discontinuity between childhood and adulthood.

The final two commentaries in this issue introduce us to some particularly unique elements involved in broader ideas of education, learning, and knowing. Bertrand Réau's commentary asks us to think about the varying ways children engage with learning and time, drawing us to another aspect of control that educational systems and policy decisions exhibit towards children by creating defined restrictions around formal learning and vacation time. Réau discusses how vacations are not only time for leisure but of specialized, secondary, and ordinary learning (Lahire 2019), providing children with essential socialization skills. Yet, children's vacation time receives much less attention and recognition than formal learning, contributing to social hierarchies and class inequalities.

Finally, Katherine Bruna leaves us with a tool to conceptualize connections between broader concepts and concrete practices that we know (or think we know) about education and learning. Encouraging us to think about education practices with the themes of intention, interaction, receptiveness, and responsiveness, Bruna created the "Grounded Knowing Culture Catcher" as a way to see "culture as interlocking interactive processes" and help us to imagine our own unique experiences with education and knowing as "having liberatory potential." Bruna invites us all "to consider how the authors [in this issue] and the young people with whom they work, in school spaces and beyond, collectively construe the intention, interaction, reception, and responsiveness of their efforts," and poses the question "how are those efforts guided by a sense of culture in, as, and for learning not bound to static identity but fueled by catalytic contribution?" (Bruna has also supplied a printable "Grounded Knowing Culture Catcher"!)

In addition to these fascinating articles and commentaries, we are excited to share that ACYIG had, for the first time, a book prize competition for books published in 2023 focused on the anthropology of childhood. Having received numerous wonderful submissions, the inaugural book prize winner is Camilla Morelli, for the inspiring scholarly work, *Children of the Rainforest: Shaping the Future in Amazonia*. This remarkable ethnography following indigenous Matsigenka children raises critical questions about children's agentive roles in modern times and the role of anthropology in unpacking them. We encourage you to look at Julie Spray's book review, which shares impressions from Spray's students and experience incorporating the book into teaching a course titled Global Childhoods.

Another submission, *An Ordinary Future: Margaret Mead, the Problem of Disability, and a Child Born Different*, by Thomas W. Pearson, received an honorable mention in the inaugural book prize for its compelling insights on childhood, disability, and anthropology. In their review, Lee

O'Donnell and Manya Kagan share some of their own impressions from reading this book, which simultaneously weaves together a deeply personal narrative and rigorous, in-depth academic engagement.

We end this issue with a tribute to Mexican Anthropologist Valentina Glockner Fagetti, who passed away in December 2023, written by her friend and colleague, Gabrielle Oliveira. Valentina worked on the topics of migration and childhood, and was a founding member of [Colectiva Infancias](#), a collective of women specializing in social studies on childhoods in the Global South. Her engaging and incredibly beautiful work on the project *Childhoods in Motion: An Ethnographic Mosaic of the Americas* can be viewed [here](#).



Valenita Glockner Fagetti

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