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## **‘Our stories were pretty weird too’ – Children as creators of a shared narrative culture in an intercultural story and drawing exchange**

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## ***'Our stories were pretty weird too'* – Children as creators of a shared narrative culture in an intercultural story and drawing exchange**

Oona Piipponen & Liisa Karlsson

Key words: studies of child perspectives, aesthetic experience, third space, community, Storycrafting

### **Abstract**

In today's globalised, interconnected world, intercultural learning is relevant and necessary for children of all backgrounds and ages. This study investigates how a shared narrative culture forms between primary school children in Finland and Belgium during an intercultural Storycrafting and drawing exchange. Ethnographic and narrative data are analysed by following a chain of related situations over the course of the exchange. The findings show that a shared narrative culture was negotiated in a third space between the Storycrafting communities, where the third space was constituted by narrativity, imagination, emotions, creativity, communality and cultural repertoires. To conclude, pedagogies of intercultural learning should engage children aesthetically and narratively and include opportunities for developing connections between and within children's communities.

### **1. Introduction**

It is no longer enough to view intercultural learning as a skill set acquired by individuals; instead, children need to learn how to create shared understandings within and across communities. The most challenging global problems, like climate change or a global pandemic, cannot be solved locally, but require intercultural communication across a global network of communities. In a time when 'globalised fear enters into national discourses', intercultural learning should begin from a young age and engage with children's actual

experiences (Bash, 2014, 78). So, this research investigates intercultural encountering from children's perspectives, viewed jointly with their communities (Karlsson, 2020).

In traditional intercultural exchanges, children are rarely valued as creators of culture (Piipponen and Karlsson, 2019). What counts as culture is usually defined by adults, especially in institutional settings (Spyrou, 2011). However, if researchers want to understand children's ways of connecting with each other, they should 'engage with children's own cultures of communication' (Christensen, 2010, p. 145). We set out to investigate how a shared narrative culture developed in a children's story and drawing exchange, where children could freely choose what kinds of stories they wanted to tell using the Storycrafting method (Karlsson, 2013).

This study investigates an intercultural exchange that took place between mostly 10–11-year-old children in a school in Finland and an international school in Belgium. The children were active creators of cultural products in the form of stories and drawings. Allowing children to act as creators of culture provides them with meaningful, personal experiences that are a starting point for future intercultural encounters. To understand the processes that produce these experiences, we ask the following research question: How is a shared narrative culture formed during a Storycrafting and drawing exchange?

This kind of exchange differs from traditional intercultural exchanges, which tend to focus on cultural products rather than processes (Alvaré, 2017). Focusing too much on cultural products (foods, dress, traditions) tends to promote a static conception of culture, which may even reinforce essentialism, stereotyping and exoticism (Alvaré, 2017; Hummelstedt-Djedou et al., 2018; Lau, 2015; Mackenzie et al., 2016). We were interested in the process of intercultural encountering where the children did not exchange cultural facts, but rather they exchanged their ways of thinking, telling and feeling. We wanted to understand how mutual

understanding and dialogue formed in these conditions, which we call reciprocal intercultural encounters (Piipponen and Karlsson, 2019).

Narratives have the power to encourage emotional connections and empathy, which are central to meaningful intercultural encounters (Venezia, 2013). From a very young age, children are familiar with communicating about their thoughts and understandings by telling and listening to stories (Bruner, 1986; Puroila, 2013). In his seminal work, Wells (1986, p. 194) explains that ‘storying’ is a ‘fundamental means of making meaning’ for children as well as adults. Narrating produces culture as a dynamically evolving process: stories are altered or reproduced with each retelling and new stories emerge as situations change. We set about ethnographically following the progress of the children’s shared narrative culture. We were cognizant that our approach should capture different ways of knowing through language, emotions, senses and imagination, as children learn and express themselves through multiple modes (Bland, 2012; Christensen, 2010; Honkanen et al., 2018; Kinnunen and Puroila, 2016; Puroila et al., 2012). We allowed ourselves to think narratively (Bruner, 1996) to access the children’s shared narrative culture.

We begin by outlining our theoretical backdrop, which is founded on the theories of Bruner (1986, 1996), Dewey (1927, 1934/2005, 1938/2015) and Bhabha (1994). The research methods are then described. The bulk of the paper is dedicated to a narrative reconstruction from the ethnographic data, which retells a chain of situations that unfolds during a Storycrafting exchange between two schools in different countries. We finish by reflecting on the findings through the central phenomena of community, aesthetic experience and third space. The conclusions pave the way for future research.

## 2. Theory

In this section, first we will define the concept of culture, then theorise about children as creators of narrative culture (Bruner, 1996). Next, we will discuss the role of aesthetic experience as the starting point for cultural change, and reflect on how aesthetic experiences can lead to Dewey's (1938/2015, p. 36) concept of 'growth' within and between communities. Finally, we show how interaction between communities in a third space allows children to negotiate new shared understandings (Bhabha, 1994).

### 2.1. *Culture as a process*

We argue for a dynamic definition of culture rather than viewing it as a static entity. In our previous work, we have defined culture as 'a process that continuously shapes shared meaning systems through interactions' (Piipponen and Karlsson, 2019, p. 592). Cultural knowledge is (re)formed in the interaction between a subject and the world (Dewey, 1938/2015). Further, drawing from Bruner's (1991, 1996) narrative mode of knowing, we suggest that cultural knowledge is stored, organised and passed on in narrative form. We understand narrative broadly as oral, written, visual or non-verbal communication which takes a storied form, and which is situated in a context (Bruner, 1991; Puroila et al., 2012; Siim, 2020). Although some intercultural theories emphasise learning that happens within the individual (e.g. Bennett, 2009; Byram, 2008; Deardorff, 2015), we favour an intersubjective approach to learning that happens within and between communities (Bruner, 1996; Itzigsohn, 2016).

### 2.2. *Children as creators of culture*

Children's culture can be understood in many ways: cultural products created by adults for children, cultural activities performed together by adults and children, or children's own culture, which children create together with their peers (Mouritsen, 1998). In this paper, we are interested in children as creators of culture, whilst acknowledging that children's culture

is not separate or unconnected to the cultural world of adults (Corsaro, 2003; Johanson, 2010; Köngäs, 2018). Especially in institutional contexts, children's cultural production may be bounded by adult-imposed norms (Hohti & Karlsson, 2014; Popp, 2015; Spyrou, 2011). Current research promotes the view that children should be seen as active participants in society (Horgan et al., 2017; Kostet et al., 2020; Spyrou, 2020; Weckström et al., 2020). Children's culture is composed of the cultural products they produce, as well as the cultural repertoires of knowledge and practices that are accumulated and shaped through experience (Gutiérrez and Rogoff, 2003).

Children access and share narratives in their interactions with others (Bruner, 1996). Narratives are experienced holistically through the senses, emotions and imagination (Dewey, 1934/2005; Puroila, 2013). Bruner (1986, 1991, 1996) calls this the narrative mode of knowing and argues it is how humans make sense of their lives: 'Narratives accrue to create [...] a culture, a history or [...] a tradition' (Bruner, 1991, p. 18). Narratives communicate past and current cultural conventions, but also allow alternative futures to be imagined (Bruner, 1996; Rosiek, 2013). Telling a story allows a child even to re-create the self (O'Reilly, 2019). Dewey (1934/2005) highlights the imagination is where the new and the old are combined or reconfigured. Each time a story is told or listened to, it changes to fit the internal and external conditions of the given situation (Dewey, 1938/2015). This dynamic quality makes storytelling a good way for children to participate as creators of culture. We suggest that the aesthetic nature of storytelling has the potential to effect a transformation process in its participants.

### *2.3. Aesthetic experiences lead to growth*

An aesthetic experience captures not only language, but also emotions, senses, and imagination in the process of making meaning (Kinnunen et al., 2016). For Dewey (1934/2005), an aesthetic experience is the purest form of experiencing which can take place

in institutions such as museums, as well as in one's everyday life. It is formed as a person perceives an art product actively as a result of reciprocal interaction between the object and the perceiver. In the words of Dewey (1934/2005, p. 168), 'there is a difference between the art product (statue, painting or whatever), and the work of art. The first is physical and potential; the latter is active and experienced. It is what the product does, its working'. An aesthetic experience is actively made, not passively received. An artist combines senses, emotions and meanings with the material world through the imaginative process (Dewey, 1934/2005). The beholder, also, enters a unique experience by blending his or her cultural repertoire with the experience communicated by the artwork (Dewey, 1934/2005). This reciprocal interaction could be viewed as a mode of engagement for human encounters more generally, not just encounters between human and work of art (Weddington, 2004).

According to contemporary research, making art provides a site where children can actively create new understandings that can lead to further encounters (Askins & Pain, 2011; Rusanen et al., 2011). For example, oral storytelling or drawing can be seen as open-ended spaces for narration (Einarsdottir et al., 2009; Siim, 2020). Narratives combine language, senses, emotion and imagination, and produce an aesthetic experience for both teller and listeners (Kinnunen et al., 2016). The aesthetic quality of narratives thus sets them apart from other forms of communication.

Every aesthetic experience transforms the subject; in other words, the experiencer is moved or affected emotionally by the work of art, or another aesthetic experience, in a way that changes the way they view the world (Dewey, 1934/2005). Undergoing a succession of transformative experiences leads to growth (Dewey, 1938/2015). The concept of growth has a particular meaning in Dewey's philosophy. It refers to experiential learning, which simultaneously increases the potential for further growth in the future (Dewey, 1938/2015).



Growth is a social process, where the community supports the growth of the individual, and the individual should in turn contribute his or her talents to the community (Dewey, 1927). Synergies between different community groups support mutual commitment to shared issues (Dewey, 1927; Nelsen, 2016). We argue that the interaction of two communities reaches a new level or a ‘third space’ when the participants create a new way of being together (Bhabha, 1994; Zhou and Pilcher, 2019).

#### ***2.4. Growing together in a third space***

The third space generates something beyond hybridity of cultures; it is an in-between space where the participants negotiate a shared understanding (Bhabha, 1994). Bhabha (1994) theorises that rather than being a fixed, unified system, culture is performed through a process of ‘enunciation’ or negotiation in a third space between subjects, and the interpretation of meaning is always ambivalent. This means that meanings can be transformed in ways that resist hegemonic narratives, which represent the ideologies of dominant cultural groups in society (Bhabha, 1994; MacDonald, 2018).

Although the third space was originally conceived in the context of postcolonial textual interpretation, more recently it has been appropriated into the field of intercultural studies as a way to explain complex identities of subjects who traverse more than one culture (MacDonald, 2018). An essentialist reading of the third space concept reproduces a subject who is ‘stuck between two cultures’; however, a non-essentialist reading sees the third space as a site of on-going negotiation (Zhou & Pilcher, 2019, p. 3). We apply the term to describe the negotiation of meanings that takes place between the storyteller and audience in a particular situation, mediated by the texts (children’s stories and drawings). In this study, a children’s intercultural exchange of stories and drawings produce aesthetic experiences for children in both participating schools, and over time the two communities grow together in the third space to form a shared narrative culture.

### 3. Method

This section will review the context of the study, how the data were produced, the research ethics, and how the data were analysed.

#### 3.1. Context of the Study

The study took place between classes of an international school in Belgium (School B) and a school in Finland (School F) during the academic year 2016–2017. The schools were selected based on an existing collaboration between the first author, who was a teacher in School B at the time, and a teacher in School F. Table 1 gives an overview of the participating schools and students. To protect the anonymity and privacy of the participants, background data collection was minimised to data that was relevant for the analysis process, and was presented qualitatively or in categorised form.

	School B	School F	Total
Regional location	Wallonia, Belgium	Kymenlaakso, Finland	2 regions in 2 countries
School type	All-through school (ages 2,5–18)	Primary school (ages 7–13)	2 schools
Roll (to nearest 10)	Whole school 640 Primary school 280	Primary school 170	n/a
Participating classes and students	Fifth grade, three classes (age 10–11 yrs), 34 students	Grade 4, one class (age 10–11 yrs), 15 students	4 classes, 49 students
Participants according to sex	17 girls, 17 boys	9 girls, 6 boys	26 girls, 23 boys
Number of nationalities represented by participants	19	1	20 nationalities

Table 1. Description of participating schools and students.

Most of the children in both schools were aged 10–11 years, with a few 9 or 12-year-olds in the international school classes. School B is a private, fee-paying school that follows an international curriculum. The three fifth grade class teachers (Teachers B1, B2 and B3) often organised the project as co-teaching sessions, so that the teacher-researcher (Teacher B2)

could take the lead as she had run the Storycrafting exchange twice before. A total of 34 students representing 19 nationalities participated from the three classes (only two did not receive parental permission to participate). The composition of nationalities was heterogeneous, representing nationalities from Europe, Asia, North America and South America (from most to least frequent). Several participants had dual nationality.

School F is a public primary school in a small municipality in a predominantly rural area. In 2016, 6.7 % of children in the municipality lived in families where at least half the income came from basic social assistance (OSF, 2020). Fifteen fourth grade students from Class F participated in the exchange (two did not have parental permission). All the participating students in Class F were Finnish. Teacher F had a decade of experience using the Storycrafting method with her students. This was the second year the Storycrafting exchange took place in School B and the third time in School F. The classes will be referred to with a code, for example Class B2 (School B, Class 2).

### **3.2. Data production**

The data production took place ethnographically during intermittent sessions over the school year. It developed organically to fit each school's schedules and practices. During the Storycrafting exchange, the children told stories orally in their school language (English or Finnish). The Storycrafting instruction is as follows: *Tell me a story, any story you want. I will write it down exactly like you tell it. When the story is finished, I will read it out to you and you can make any changes or corrections* (Karlsson, 2013). The stories were told as a class, as a small group or individually. Either the teacher or a classmate would scribe. The teacher-researcher translated the stories both ways. They were uploaded onto a shared cloud drive, which all the participating teachers could access. The teacher would then read the partner class's story or sometimes several stories aloud to the children, first in the school

language and then in the original language. After that, the children drew a picture of the partner class's story, and told their own stories to send back to the partner group. For each drawing, the class teacher prompted the child to 'tell me about this drawing' and the child's words were noted down. The drawings were scanned or photographed and uploaded to the shared drive, then shown by the partner teacher to the receiving class. Many of the drawings and stories were displayed in the classroom. A total of 44 stories and 143 drawings were completed and collected. At the end of the project, the children in Class B2 wanted to write a thank you letter. Class F reciprocated with their thank you letter. The letters have been included as part of the data.

In order to obtain contextual data about the Storycrafting exchange, the teacher-researcher kept a researcher diary of notes and observations (13 entries, 10 pages). The participating teachers' email correspondence was also included in the data (45 emails, 14 pages). A semi-structured interview was conducted with Teacher B3 about her perceptions of the Storycrafting exchange. The interview was audio-recorded and transcribed in full (00:28:27, 13 pages). Any data in Finnish has been translated by the first author. All names are pseudonyms.

Follow-up interviews were conducted in March 2020 with eight of the same children in School B. While the processing of the interview data is at its early stages, we have included some of the children's comments to compare their perspectives against the findings.

### **3.3. Ethics**

The study has conformed to the ethical recommendations of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2009; 2012). Written informed consent was sought from the children, their parents, the teachers, the head teachers and, where appropriate, the local municipality. All participants received information sheets explaining the purpose of the research and how

the research data will be used. The teachers also discussed the research verbally with the children, who were able to ask questions and seek to clarify their understanding with a familiar adult. The anonymity of the participants was guaranteed.

The teacher-researcher was in a distinctive position as both a class teacher as well as the coordinating researcher. On the one hand, she was an authority figure for the participants; on the other hand, she knew the fifth-grade children in School B well, so she could respond sensitively to arising issues. The research was implemented as a school project, so the children did not encounter any additional strain from participating. It was made clear to the children that their participation in the project would not influence their grading or assessment, and they could withdraw consent at any time.

### *3.4. Analysis method*

The situations that unfolded in the classroom could not be captured through content analysis, but it was by combining the data that a fuller picture became knowable. The analysis process has been influenced by the ‘thinking with theory’ approach, where the purpose is to push thinking to its limit by ‘plugging in’ data and theory in multiple variations, focusing on processes rather than concepts (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012, 2017). For example, rather than analysing the content of a story in isolation, the researchers also considered what was going on as the story was told, and how significance shifted when the processes were viewed through the lenses of theory.

Initially, all the data were organised chronologically and both authors read through them several times. After an initial foray into content analysis proved unsatisfactory, as the content could not explain how a culture was formed, the authors began paying attention to things ‘in between’ the data, such as emotions, intentions, reactions and ideas that were not fully captured in texts, but were discernible when the stories and contextual data were pieced

together. These subtle connections within the data, together with both researchers' existing theoretical interests, guided the selection of theories. Bruner's (1986, 1996) and Dewey's (1927, 1934/2005, 1938/2015) theories and the data were then read side-by-side as well as separately over two more iterations, narrowing down the focus of the research. During this stage, the first author kept a reflective diary.

The authors then reflected together, and decided to focus on a chain of data extracts that they kept returning to in their conversations, because the situations that the data described appeared to exhibit patterns that could answer the research question, 'How is a shared narrative culture formed during a Storycrafting and drawing exchange?' The situations included children who were actively engaged, often laughing, listening intently, including fantastical elements in their storytelling and describing the stories as 'weird' or 'fun'. The significant data extracts were organised chronologically, and then the first author wrote a narrative reconstruction of them, drawing also on her memories, to illustrate how a shared narrative culture had formed. Following further discussion between the authors, theoretical analysis was integrated into the narrative reconstruction to illustrate the connections between the empirical data and central theories. At this stage, we introduced Bhabha's (1994) third space concept into the analysis to draw together the conceptual strands into a theoretical model of the processes that produce a shared narrative culture (see Discussion). We acknowledge that this is one possible narrative of many that could be told about the data.

#### **4. Findings: Linking Together a Chain of Situations**

In this section, a chain of related extracts was drawn from the data, visualised as a timeline in Figure 1. As we read the data and theory together, we noticed that the situations were regularly coloured by emotions of joy, excitement and anticipation, and the children actively wanted to participate in the creative process of telling stories. There was a strong sense of

community, evidenced in the following sections. These observations support our claim that telling and illustrating stories produced aesthetic experiences (Dewey, 1934/2005). The stories that the children exchanged with each other were imaginative and fantastical. Initially it seemed difficult to comprehend how a mutual connection could be formed between the partner classes through these types of stories. But as we read the data and theory together, we came to realise the complex cultural repertoires in which the children participated. They understood the messages by thinking narratively (Bruner, 1986, 1996). We followed how this shared narrative culture formed over time through negotiations in the third space (Bhabha, 1994) from the perspective of the teacher-researcher's class (B2).

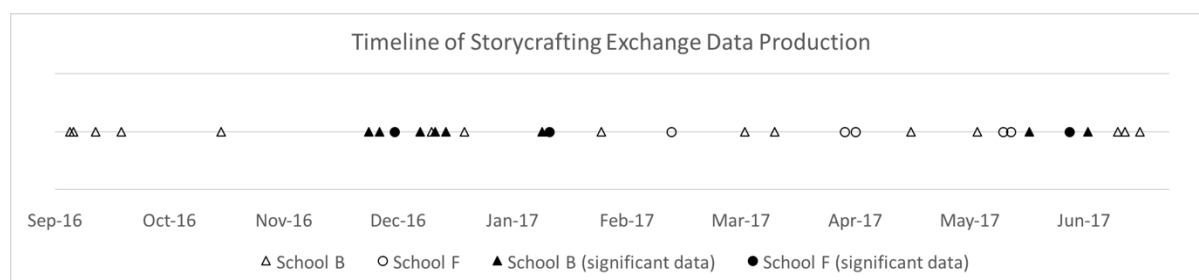


Figure 1. Timeline of all types of data production, with significant extracts highlighted.

#### 4.1. Starting with shared laughter

The tone of the intercultural exchange was set by the first story that Class B2 told together as a group. Although each child in the class had already been familiarised to Storycrafting by telling a story individually to the teacher, the first whole-class story that would be sent to Class F was shaped into a strong, collective experience. The story was called ‘Two Cool Boys and a Quarter of a Fish’ and each child had a turn to tell over two lively sessions (between 30–45 minutes each), so that the resulting story was ‘owned’ by everyone. The teacher scribed the story onto a laptop computer. Luke began the story with a description of ‘two cool boys’, who Luke and his friend Zackary at the beginning of the second session

decided to name after themselves. Adding something as personal as your name into the story shows that it was meaningful for the two boys.

One day there were two friends called Luke and Zackary of 10 years old walking in the street. Walking with sunglasses and singing a rap song called 'I Mean It'. (*Class B2, story extract, 25/11/2016*)

As the next teller took over, absurd elements began to enter the tale. For example, when the Zackary character jumped into his neighbour's pool, a fish swam into his ear. The style changed from a realistic description of events into magical realism, where fantastical elements interweaved with everyday life. There was collective laughter each time there was an unexpected turn in the story, but tension also started to form as the boys' and girls' plotlines began to compete:

At the point where Melissa introduced the unicorns and dragon [in the story], there seemed to be a collective sigh from the boys' side, although they did not protest openly. Luke had earlier expressed concern at what might the other children do to 'our story'. However, upon Zackary's turn this conflict was verbalized into a 'rap battle', and the unicorns and dragon fainted, and the 'cool boys' became the winners. (*Class B2, researcher diary, 25/11/2016*)

The boys and girls were seated in a circle on the carpet, with boys on one side and the girls facing them on the other. Everyone was emotionally involved in the story. Teacher B3 was 'struck' by the communal spirit of Storycrafting:

They were very respectful of the rules that one person is talking and when it's your turn, it's nobody else's turn and you can go as long as you want. [...] I think the children reacted really positively to that. (*Teacher B3, interview, 27/6/2017*)

For the children, the story was 'active and experienced' (Dewey, 1934/2005, p. 168). The tension between the competing plotlines added excitement to the storytelling. Typically, a teller enjoyed adding a funny turn to the story to incite more laughter, before letting the turn pass to the next child. This created a rhythm to the storytelling, punctuating the telling with humorous or exciting turns, which became a model for the narrative culture during the rest of the exchange. Thus, storytelling became a third space where the class's narrative culture was negotiated anew.



#### 4.2. *Drawing from shared cultural repertoires*

Hearing the partner class's story and drawing a picture enabled the children to actively engage with the story by making connections to their existing cultural repertoires (Gutiérrez and Rogoff, 2003). The children in Class F engaged mostly with the funny or unexpected events in the story 'The Two Cool Boys and a Quarter of a Fish', just like the storytellers had done. Despite never having heard this story before, the children could access its meanings through the narrative mode of knowing (Bruner, 1986; 1991). Visualising the events of the story is an active process in the imagination of combining one's cultural repertoire with the current situation (Dewey, 1934/2005). Each child drew a picture, which often reflected the exciting or unusual details such as the unicorns and dragon battling (3 drawings of 11), the fish in the ear (1 drawing), or unicorns with rainbow afros (7 drawings). The drawing activity guided children to choose scenes from the story that were visually appealing, familiar or drawable. Although the colour of the unicorns was not established in the original story, in five of the drawings the unicorns were pink. This suggests some children based their interpretation on a familiar image of a unicorn from their cultural repertoire. Thus, each time a story is experienced aesthetically, a new layer of interpretation is added.

A few days later, Class F told a story to send back to their partners. The tale was very action-oriented, composed of short simple sentences, almost in a list-like way.

Once there was a tiger. The tiger went to the store. He/She<sup>1</sup> bought a bag and some paint. He/She went home. He/She painted the bag pink and threw the bag in the bin. Then he/she went to the store again and bought a new bag. He/She went to the neighbour's place and popped the bag. He/She went on a mountain. He/She jumped down from there. He/She went home and heated the fireplace and began to make food. He/She ate the food. He/She made more food and threw them out the window. He/She noticed that the house began to burn. He/She shouted, 'The house is burning, have to move!' That's the story, the end. (*Class F, story, 2/12/2016*)

The events seem unconnected, but follow the same kind of fluctuating rhythm as 'The Two Cool Boys [...] story. The story was read aloud to all three classes in School B. The children

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<sup>1</sup> In Finnish, the gender-neutral pronoun *hän* was used.

listened in a state of lively curiosity, and drew their pictures mostly huddled on the floor in small groups of friends. Of the drawings responding to the ‘Tiger’ story, 25 out of 30 focused on the most dramatic scene where the tiger was moving out of his burning house. Rather than focusing exclusively on *why* so many the children chose to draw the final scene of the story, we propose accepting that it was interesting and enjoyable for them to do so. In a recent interview, Gareth and Luke remembered that drawing ‘was the most fun part’. Luke goes on to explain that this was ‘because there were lots of pictures that made me and my friends laugh’. Drawing was one way of entering the third space, where the story was reinterpreted as a negotiation between the text, the individual, and the two communities. This negotiation was multimodal, involving not just verbal language, but also motor skills, emotions, the drawing materials, imagination, relationality and the participants’ cultural repertoires. The process created a shared cultural repertoire of told and drawn narratives within and between both Storycrafting communities.

#### **4.3. *Creating ‘weird’ stories as a community***

What was told before inspired what was told after when the next stories were created in pairs or small groups in School B. This shows that the children flitted in and out of the third space over time and over several sessions of Storycrafting exchange, making it an ongoing process rather than a fixed outcome (Bhabha, 1994). Luke and Zackary told a story called ‘The Two Weirdos’, which continued the same theme as ‘The Two Cool Boys’, telling about their namesakes. In this context, ‘weirdo’ seemed to have a favourable connotation as a quality that bound the two friends together. In fact, the term ‘weird’ appears to be used by many children in connection to humorous, surprising and fantastical elements. For example, some fantastical events occurred in the story ‘The Two Weirdos’: ‘When Luke went to the bathroom he somehow made it that there was no gravity. Then the water went out of the toilet

and there was a wale [whale] inside it.’ An ordinary space (the bathroom) becomes extraordinary in the story world, adding emotional thrill to the teller as well as the listener.

At this point, the Storycrafting activity had become important for reinforcing a sense of class community. Many of the groups in Class B2 wanted to read aloud their stories to their class before sending them to Finland. Luke and Zackary shared their story first. The audience listened intently and laughed out loud every so often. The story had references to popular culture, such as the singer Shakira, the famous painting *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci, and a YouTube phenomenon called the ‘Shark-ira dance’. Someone in the audience let out a disbelieving utterance: ‘Shakira dance?’ One of the boys explained, ‘There’s a dance called “Shark-ira” dance, but we wanted to change it to Shakira to make it funny.’ This short episode displays that children are knowledgeable about cultural products in their (Western) culture, but that they are also actively part of remaking that culture, such as in this instance through word play between ‘Shark-ira’ and Shakira. At the same time, the boy’s explanation reinforced the idea that the shared narrative culture has elements that are ‘funny’ or weird. It was important to experience reciprocal interaction within the children’s own class, as this helped them to engage in the same manner with the partner class.

#### ***4.4. Appreciating the shared narrative culture of ‘weirdness’***

Central to the intercultural exchange were the children’s opportunities to listen, view, appreciate and react to the narratives. When the stories and drawings of ‘The Two Cool Boys and a Quarter of a Fish’ and ‘Tiger’ were first displayed, the children of School B gathered round curiously. In Classroom B2 exclamations were uttered upon seeing Class F’s illustrations of their story:

‘Look Zack, they drew you with glasses!’

‘They’ve illustrated our story!’

‘Cool!’

‘This is the weird story.’ (Class B2, researcher diary, 16/12/2016)

This short episode displays the unfolding of an aesthetic experience, reciprocal interaction within and between the classes, and traces of a shared narrative culture. The children momentarily traverse a third space (Bhabha, 1994) as they interact affectively with the drawings and their classmates. The narrative mode (Bruner, 1986, 1991) enables the children to recognise the scene in the drawing where the boy called Zack has a fish in the ear (Figure 2). The drawing reciprocates the feeling of fun when Class B2 first told the story. By illustrating the stories, children from Class F have become co-creators of the shared narrative of ‘the fish in the ear’. Furthermore, one child explicitly identifies the work as ‘the weird story’, perpetuating the narrative culture of ‘weirdness’.



Figure 2. A drawing by a student in Class F in response to the story ‘Two Cool Boys and a Quarter of a Fish’ by Class B2. The author described the drawing as ‘A fish is in the ear!’

Late in the school year, the teacher-researcher asked her class (B2) for feedback about the project. ‘The Finnish children must think we are absolutely crazy,’ said one child (Class B2, researcher diary, 22/5/2017), attempting to take the perspective of the partner class. ‘Crazy’ follows the same line of interpretation as ‘weird’, which is still, even with passing time, used to describe the stories, and this time, the storytellers. It is a communal quality that is born in the interactions of the group, not an individual’s characteristic. The child assumes that the partner class’s students, too, can identify the ‘crazy-ness’, inferring a shared understanding.

One of the children suggested writing a thank you letter to the partner class and another asked, ‘Can we send a [class] photo?’ (Class B2, researcher diary, 22/5/2017). The children were given the freedom to organise the writing of a thank you letter. A small group wrote the letter and each child in Class B2 signed their name and wrote ‘thank you’ in their own language. The class photo and letter were sent:

Dear Finnish Friends,

We would like to thank you for exchanging very different but creative stories! We enjoyed reading your stories and we hope you did too! We loved making fun and crazy stories to send to you and illustrating your stories! You must think that we are crazy!

We hope that we carry on story crafting [Storycrafting] for many years to come! (Class B2, thank you letter, 22/5/2017)

According to Teacher F, the students ‘deeply appreciated [...] the photo’ (Teacher F, email, 3/6/2017). The children in Class F decided to reciprocate and sent a thank you letter back.

Due to lacking photo permissions from parents, they could not send a photo, but Teacher F sent a link to the students’ self-portrait artworks. The photograph of the hand-written letter was displayed on the interactive whiteboard for Class B2 to see. It was in Finnish, except for the last sentence, so the teacher translated the letter into English.

Storycrafting was really fun. A couple of us preferred drawing. Most of our class participated. You are quite okay, not silly! Thank you for the weird stories! *Although our stories were pretty weird too.* (Cursive written in English in the original; Class F, thank you letter, 6/6/2017)

There was spontaneous laughter after the mention of the ‘weird stories’. Then Alan said, ‘If they knew us, they would find us weird,’ and all the children laughed again. Doris said, ‘We’re already weird, but when Melissa and I are together, we are even weirder’ (Class B2, researcher diary, 6/6/2017). The letters formalise the emic understanding between the two groups of children that their shared narrative culture is based on telling stories that are ‘weird’ or ‘crazy’, which also reflect the mentality of the tellers in a tongue-in-cheek way. The impromptu thank you letters show that both groups appreciated the exchange and were proud of and delighted by the shared narrative culture they had created together.

At the end of the exchange, Teacher F reflected on this invisible bond between the two classes:

There is something about this Storycrafting [method] that is special, which the children just share even across countries’ borders. They communicate among each other, and at least I can’t make sense of it except just a small trace. E.g. during some Storycrafting moments, when creating the group stories I saw their mutual, meaningful glances. (*Teacher F, email, 3/6/2017*)

## 5. Discussion

The aim of this study is to describe how a shared narrative culture forms between two communities of children in a story and drawing exchange. There were three types of processes that were central for forming a shared narrative culture between the groups: the exchange was focused on building community, the children actively engaged in aesthetic experiences, and they created ways to connect with each other in a third space. Children’s comments from recent interviews are incorporated into the discussion to corroborate our findings. The findings elucidate how children form reciprocal relationships with cultural Others.

Firstly, we claim that a strong community orientation in the Storycrafting exchange, in contrast to an individualistic one, was central for forming a shared narrative culture. Many intervention studies and theoretical constructs focus on developing intercultural competence

within the individual (Bennett, 2009; Byram, 2008; Elias & Mansouri, 2020; Deardorff, 2015), but do not deeply consider intercultural learning as a communal process (Itzigsohn, 2016). Following Bruner (1996), we maintain that the process of collectively creating cultural products reinforces solidarity and a sense of community. During Storycrafting, the community provided creative ideas, surprises, entertainment, affirmation and feedback. This is supported by comments from a recent interview with Patrick, who reflected that the stories were ‘better’, more creative, ‘when I made something with a group’ than if he were to tell a story as an ‘individual’ (Class B3, interview, 9/3/2020). In other words, the community supported the individual to grow his potential, and the individual could contribute his ideas to the community (Dewey, 1927; Koivula & Hännikäinen, 2017). Prior research concurs with our findings that children’s joint activity and collective thinking can produce new, shared cultural knowledge (Koivula & Hännikäinen, 2017; Mercer, 2013; Rusanen et al., 2011). Furthermore, educators who use child participatory methods such as Storycrafting can develop a shared culture of participation within a community of educators and children (Weckström et al., 2020).

Recent research has also engaged with the notion that a community orientation supports educative growth. According to Nelsen (2016), creating a community orientation can be as important to growth in social justice education as critical approaches, because social interdependencies foster commitment to shared issues. Although our study did not explicitly address social justice issues such as social inequalities, we suggest that the Storycrafting exchange does develop the children’s understandings of democratic participation and inclusion. This creates a firm experiential foundation for future growth in social justice education.

Popp (2015) draws attention to the power that institutions have in promoting or stymieing growth: growth does not only happen within individuals, but it is mediated through society's institutions. There is not enough space to fully consider to how institutional power has impacted the children's experiences in this study. Briefly, we identified that school structures, such as teacher-student hierarchies, schedules, organisation of learning into subject areas and curricular learning objectives, limited the children's opportunities for free, creative pursuits where they can produce culture on their own terms. Previous research shows that children create subcultures within their peer groups in educational institutions (Corsaro, 2003; Kögäs, 2018). However, in a pedagogical situation, adults often control children's voices and may disregard children's initiatives of cultural production (Hohti & Karlsson, 2014; Puroila et al., 2012; Spyrou, 2011). We found that the Storycrafting method produced a less hierarchical space in the institutional setting, where the teachers stepped back from controlling discourses and allowed the children collectively to lead the process of creating a shared narrative culture. Therefore, the process featured the possibility for children to resist institutional, hegemonic narratives in a third space (Bhabha, 1994; MacDonald, 2018), which they did by introducing narratives from their own cultural repertoires. In sum, we propose that designing intercultural learning experiences should be based on communal processes instead of developing individual knowledge, skills or attitudes in isolation.

Secondly, we claim that an intercultural exchange that promotes aesthetic experience (Dewey, 1934/2005) engages its participants so that they become active creators of culture. A continuum of aesthetic experiences shaped a shared narrative culture. Children's aesthetic experiences combined imagination, narrativity, emotions, communality, creativity and their cultural repertoires in context-bound situations (see Figure 3). Remarkably, in an interview, Arthur and Patrick dwelled on these very components of an aesthetic experience when describing the Storycrafting situations. Arthur remembered that telling stories had been 'very



creative' (Class B2, interview, 9/3/2020) and Patrick added that it had required 'using our imaginations' (Class B3, interview, 9/3/2020). Arthur expanded that telling stories as a group had been an especially creative pursuit, because 'you had to listen to what [...] the other was saying and you had to improvise' (narrativity, communality), and continued that 'it wasn't a stressful job and it was very fun to do' (emotions) (Class B2, interview, 9/3/2020). These aesthetic experiences emerged in everyday life, and yet held the transformative power to captivate the children and encourage 'educative growth' (Dewey, 1938/2015, p. 36). We therefore encourage educators to consider the transformative potential of everyday activities (telling, drawing, viewing, etc.) that include an aesthetic dimension.

Contemporary research supports our conclusion that imagination and aesthetic experiences are conducive to children's intercultural learning. According to Bash, (2014) intercultural imagination is required to engage with both our own preconceptions, as well as socially with others. Imagining positive encounters with another cultural group has shown to increase children's positive attitudes towards that group (Miles & Crisp, 2014). Other studies have shown that creating works of art together can promote encountering between two cultural groups, because the creative process opens up opportunities to negotiate shared realities (Askins & Pain, 2011; Einarsdottir et al. 2009; Rusanen et al., 2011; Siim, 2020). What is important is that the children or young people have the freedom to lead the creative process, as adult-led projects may block the children from engaging in shared negotiation (Askins & Pain, 2011).

Weddington (2004) goes as far as to say that Dewey's theory of aesthetic experience could be applied to educative situations more broadly, not just in the context of making or appreciating artworks. Aesthetic experience could be viewed as 'a form of human interaction creating a new reality for both individuals that could not exist prior to their interaction' (Weddington,

2004, p. 121). Viewing intercultural encounters through the lens of aesthetic experience helps to qualitatively explain why many studies have concluded that contact with another community group does not always lead to developing positive intercultural attitudes (Alvaré, 2017; Walton et al., 2013); we propose it is the aesthetic quality of the encounter which enables the third space to develop.

Thirdly, we claim that by creating a third space (Bhabha, 1994; Zhou and Pilcher, 2019), the two groups of children found a shared understanding on how to ‘make friends’ with a distant Other, forming a ‘we’ relationship that is mutual and inclusive (Piipponen and Karlsson, 2019). Figure 3 illustrates how a third space develops between the communities, with the dashed lines indicating its dynamic and indeterminate nature. A third space is perpetually recreated in the participants’ (inter)actions, such as imagining, telling, reading, listening, drawing, viewing and discussing during the Storycrafting exchange. The two communities found ways to communicate multi-modally, not just through language, but also through images, emotions and humour. The exchange method thus supported the notion that children’s knowledge is multimodal, multi-sensory and involves emotions (Bland, 2012; Kinnunen et al., 2016). It also reflected the performative and contextual nature of intercultural encountering, rather than seeing intercultural communication as a static skill within a person (Holmes, 2015).

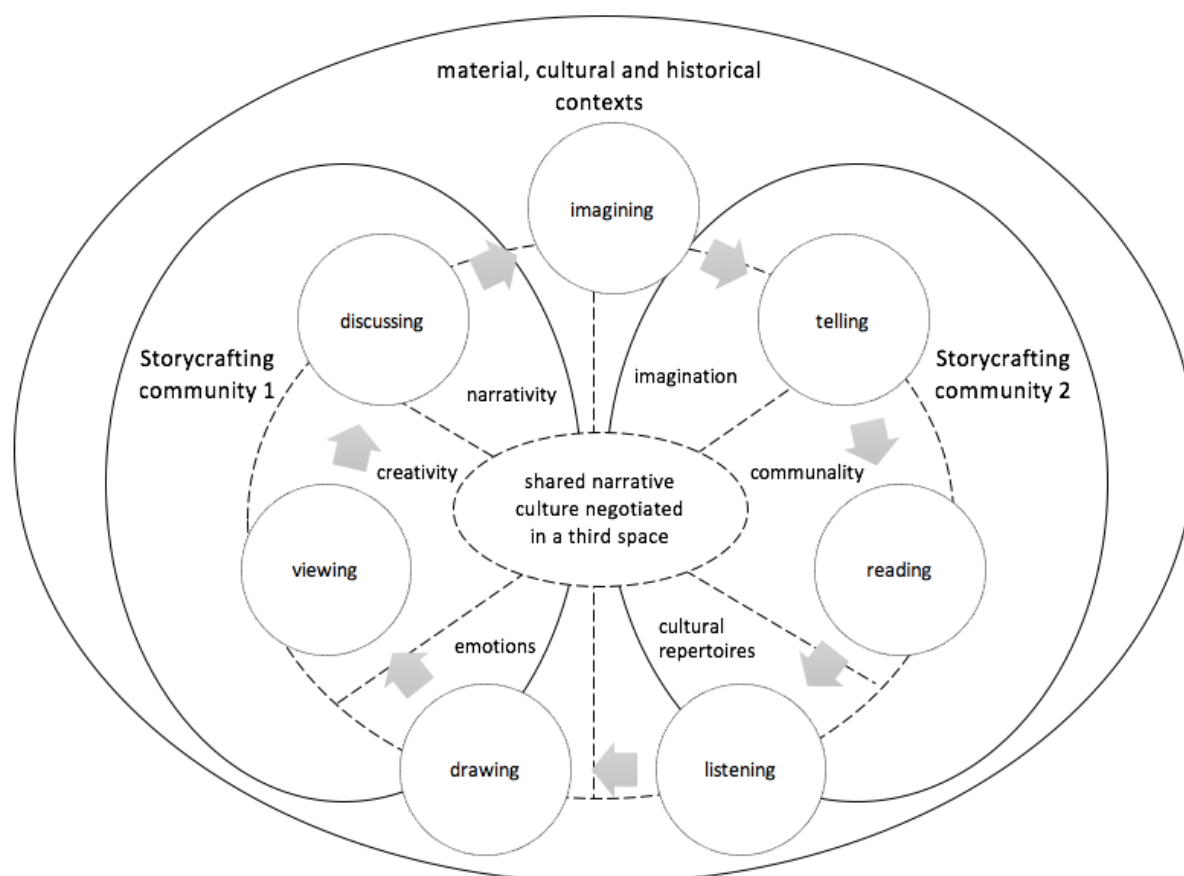


Figure 3. Processes that produce a shared narrative culture between two Storycrafting communities.

The exchange process created a continually evolving, unique repertoire of narratives that was shared by both communities. The ‘fun and crazy stories’ generated laughter and enjoyment, and were reciprocated with stories that mirrored the same emotions. Poppy explained in an interview how she felt she connected with the partner class’s children: ‘I just remember [...] thinking that [their stories] were really weird and funny. [...] Our stories were kind of similar, [...] just having the same style of humour, I guess’ (Class B2, interview, 9/3/2020). The thank you letters also showed that the groups accepted each other’s ‘weirdness’ and viewed it in a positive light. In an interview, Luke explained that he regarded the children in the partner class as his friends:

I could, even with someone pretty distant from me – like they live far away, or that they don't speak the same language – I could still like be friends with them, even by drawing pictures. (*Class B2, interview, 6/3/2020*)

It could be argued that the socio-economic, cultural and material backgrounds of the participants of this study are not that different to begin with, as both schools are located in the Global North. It would be interesting to repeat the project between groups of children in the Global North and South to understand how significant shared cultural repertoires are to forming a connection with Others, and whether globalisation has brought children culturally closer together. Although School B students represented many nationalities, the focus of the exchange was not on national culture. In addition to national groups, the children of both schools belonged to many other cultural groups, such as language, religious, gender, socio-economic, sports, family, friendship, neighbourhood, hobby or interest groups, which all may contribute in different ways to intercultural encountering processes.

We have considered some of the methodological limitations of this study and have sought to counteract them to the extent possible. This is a small-scale qualitative study focused on describing and interpreting a children's shared narrative culture in depth; as such, no population-level generalisations can be made. Yet, the chosen method allowed us to investigate the phenomenon from several perspectives, at close quarters over the entire school year, allowing us to understand the complexity and fine details in the process. Human activity is influenced by multiple aspects, such as beliefs, prior experiences, social norms and relationships, environmental conditions and inherited traits. The ethnographic data cannot capture every detail, and so are by nature fragmented. We have strived to compensate for this issue by triangulating the data collection using multiple methods and multiple sources.

Although a school is a complex research context where it is challenging to distil the impact of action, our approach to data analysis by 'thinking with theory' (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, 2017) enabled us to maintain the complexity and messiness of the development of children's

shared narrative culture when describing the findings. Finally, as is typical of qualitative research, we have interpreted the data from our subjective positions, so we have strived to make those positions transparent to the reader. We have acknowledged the possibility of alternative positions and interpretations. Direct quotations from the data are employed to give some voice to the participants, as well as to allow readers to evaluate the credibility of our interpretations.

## 6. Conclusions

This research has shown that children were capable of forming a shared narrative culture with another group that was geographically distant. They connected by sharing stories that reflected their ideas, emotions, creativity and communities. Stories were experienced holistically and aesthetically, which made them meaningful and emotive for both their audience and their creators. Participating in the project together as a community heightened the experience for the children. Over time, the children developed a shared narrative culture that was based on mutual enjoyment and humour. The ‘fun’, ‘weird’ and ‘crazy’ stories were (re)created in a third space each time the children interacted with them by imagining, telling, reading, listening, drawing, viewing or discussing them.

We have identified some areas that could be investigated in future research. Firstly, understanding the role that that teachers took in the intercultural exchange is significant. What kinds of pedagogical choices supported the development of a shared narrative classroom culture? Further, how did institutional structures influence the outcomes of the intervention? Secondly, we would like to investigate the children’s perceptions a few years after their participation in the project. How did it impact their attitudes towards encountering others? Thirdly, repeating the exchange between schools in different locations globally would provide knowledge about how children connect with each other across the Global North and

South. The impact of age could also be investigated. Answering these questions will help determine the impact of this kind of affective-experiential approach to intercultural learning.

It is important to investigate how children create a narrative culture that is shared between communities across a great distance, because it presents clues about possible solutions to wicked global problems such as political polarisation or rising extremism. Developing learning models that support children's skills and attitudes towards inclusion, collaboration, participation and open-mindedness towards different cultural groups helps to curb the rise of insularity, racism, xenophobia and prejudice (Elias & Mansouri, 2020). The ability to work together with different people to further a common cause is also central for solving shared global crises, such as climate change or a global pandemic. Stories appear to have a remarkable power to engage, move and bring people together.

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