

Communal Agency and Social Development: Examples from First Grade Classrooms Serving Children of Immigrants

Jennifer Keys Adair

Kiyomi Sánchez-Suzuki Colegrove¹⁾

The University of Texas at Austin

Abstract

This article explores how children of Latino immigrants responded to a learning environment where they could influence how and what they learned. Using ethnographic data from the much larger Agency and Young Children project in the United States, this article describes how a particular six year old classroom serving mostly children of Latino immigrants responded in ways that not only increased content knowledge in subjects such as science and literacy but also increased the amount of shared or communal agency in the classroom, even affecting the development of social capabilities by the children and teacher alike. Using a conceptual framework borrowed from development economics and particularly the work on agency and capabilities by Sen (1999; 2003), this paper counters a strictly psychological, individualistic version of agency and instead conceptualizes agency as a means to building individual and communal capabilities.

Keywords: Agency, Capabilities, Immigrant, Development, Ethnography

Corresponding author, ¹⁾kiyomi@utexas.edu

“ . . . being free to live the way one would like may be enormously helped by the choices of others, and it would be a mistake to think of achievements only in terms of active choice by oneself” Sen, 1993)

Introduction

Three six years old girls - Elsa, Linda & Gwen - huddle together around a mound of dirt and rocks. They point to the mound, to each other and then back to the mound, their voices rising by the second. “It needs to be higher.” “No, if it is too high then the hole will not work for the lava.” “Wait use these sticks so it can be stronger!” After a few minutes, teachers announce that recess is over but the girls don’t move. One teacher (not their own) yells out to them, “Leave that there, come inside.” The three girls keep working. The teacher gets visibly frustrated and turns to Ms. Bailey, the girls’ classroom teacher, and demands that she get them to come inside. Ms. Bailey walks over to them and asks them what they are working on. Elsa explained that they were finally close to completing a volcano model that they thought might work. They described the parts of the volcano and listed what materials they would need to make a more permanent model. Then, Gwen the quietest girl in the group added, “And now we have to put everything away because the preK kids have recess after us and we don’t want them to get hurt.” Over the next few weeks, the girls spent many more recesses using materials from around the school to make volcano environments. Along with other classmates who eventually joined their group, the girls continued talking about volcanoes. Together, they spent their free time looking up pictures and videos of volcanoes and creating models, designs and experiments to simulate how volcanoes work.

This story of Elsa, Linda & Gwen initiating their own project idea as a small group and without the direct supervision of their teacher has caused a variety of responses in our research study, the Agency and Young Children project (see Adair, forthcoming). Some teachers, parents and fellow first graders like that the girls experimented on their own with studying and building volcanoes. Some worry that the girls were disrespectful or might be at risk of getting hurt without adult supervision. Others wonder what kind of math or reading instruction the girls are missing while out creating volcano models or doing projects on their

own instead of being instructed as a class. While these responses do and will merit much more time and analysis than can be given here, this article concentrates on how specifically Elsa, Linda, Gwen and their classmates responded to a learning environment where they could influence how and what they learned, an environment characterized by an increased sense of agency. How did the children respond to and use the space and time they had on a regular basis to follow their interests and ideas in their learning?

Using data from a much larger ethnographic project in early elementary (preK-3) school sites in the United States, this article describes how a particular classroom serving mostly children of Latino immigrants responded to an increased sense of agency. The teacher, Ms. Bailey, began the year working to offer more opportunities for students to influence how and what they learned. They used project learning¹, Daily Five² reading instruction and created classrooms where children could read and write in multiple locations and positions and where they could gather materials as needed. Children had consistent time each week and almost everyday to design and work on their own learning projects. This time was referred to as “project time” and was almost entirely directed by the students. They could choose the topic, the methods for learning about the topic and how to demonstrate what they were learning. The children’s response to this ability to influence their learning was not so much an individual response but a communal sense of acting, planning, designing, talking, disagreeing, problem-solving, sharing, experimenting, reading, writing, drawing and failing as groups, rather than as individuals.

So, instead of focusing on individual acts of agency, as often is done within developmental psychology and early childhood education (for exceptions see Cosaro, 2005; Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff, Paradise, Mejia Arauz, Correa-Chavez, & Angelillo, 2003), this article borrows theoretical frames from Sen (1999; 2003) and the field of development economics for a more communal approach to agency that pays attention to the development of individuals and groups. We begin by using Sen’s (1999; 2003) conceptualization of agency in the development of nations to think about agency and development within the context of early childhood education. Then, we describe in detail how Ms. Bailey’s class responded to

1 Project learning, as conceptualized in Ms. Bailey classroom, was influenced by the work of Katz & Chard (2000; 1989).

2 Daily Five is a “student-driven management structure designed to fully engage students in reading and writing” (Boushey & Moser, 2006, p.12)

increased agency in the classroom and try to make sense of why their responses were more communal than individual. To do this, one form of communal agency – *initiating and trying out ideas in public* - is explored in detail. We focus on how this form of communal agency led to particular kinds of social development, or as we will argue, the expansion of social capabilities often ignored in the early education of young children of Latino immigrants.

Agency and Development Economics

Agency is examined here as something enacted within the specific space of school and in relation to teaching and learning practices (see Adair, forthcoming). Agency in the context of learning is defined as the ability to influence and make decisions about what and how something is learned so as to expand capabilities. The connection between agency and expanding capabilities comes from the area of development economics, particularly from the work of ul Haq and Sen who argue that agency in the pursuit of development is meant to expand capabilities.

This relationship between agency and development emerged in the 1970s when the United Nations invited ul Haq, Sen and a group of scholar-colleagues to reconceptualize how development labels are assigned to nations. For decades an increase in Gross National Product (GNP) had been the primary means of determining whether a country was considered “developed” or not. This, they worried, meant that a country could be labeled as developed by one indicator (GNP) even if people in that country had little opportunity to participate in markets or more importantly, to pursue what they would like to do and be. Together they created the Human Development Index (HDI) that included GNP as one of many factors determining development status. The range of indicators were meant to get closer to measuring whether people had freedom in their everyday lives to do and be what they desired. In the first Human Development report, Ul Haq and his team argued,

Human development is a process of enlarging people's choices . . . No one can guarantee human happiness, and the choices people make are their own concern. But the process of development should at least create a conducive environment for people, individually and collectively, to develop their full potential and to have a reasonable chance of leading productive and creative lives in accord with their needs and interests. (United Nations Development Programme, 1990, p. 1).

Sen's (1999; 2003) work built on development being the process of enlarging choices, in part, by exploring the concept of agency. He argues that agency is not just choosing something or expressing something but being able to influence and make decisions so that capabilities can expand. Developing means people expanding their capabilities towards embodying the freedom to do and be what they would like to do and be. Sen writes, "The process of development can expand human capabilities by expanding the choices that people have to live full and creative lives" (1999, p. 8). The goal then of any economic development in local, national and/or international terms should be "the promotion and expansion of valuable capabilities" (2003, p. 10). If people are not able to use their agency in order to expand capabilities then they are not developing.

Agency in Early Childhood Education

Although Sen was not speaking directly about agency in early learning contexts, the connection between agency and expanding capabilities has implications for early childhood education. During the volcano project that began on the playground and continued in the classroom over subsequent weeks, Elsa, Linda, Gwen and the other group members developed academically because they learned about the formation of volcanoes as well as labeling, experimentation, the process of creating models and redesigning after a failed attempt. The girls also learned what makes volcanoes possible, the types of environments that volcanoes produce and what makes volcanoes erupt. They learned about chemical reactions that can mimic what happens to real volcanoes. Arguably, they could have learned this content through worksheets, lecture, textbooks or a computer application. They also could have used their agency to work on their own, alone. Instead the girls used and tried out a range of social capabilities in addition to the academic capabilities they were expanding. They created and planned the project together, welcomed members into their group and choose who they wanted to work with, selected materials, asked questions to experts, and then discussed, changed their minds and debated many aspects of the project. The process associated with the learning involved a lot of social development made possible by the constant discussion, arguing and brainstorming.

Communal Agency in Early Childhood Education

When Elsa, Linda & Gwen worked on their models outside and used their agency, they expanded their capabilities as individuals but also as a group. From the perspective of our study, the girls' continuation with the volcanoes and then acting to clean up the rocks and sticks for the younger children was a communal form of agency. Elsa and Gwen offered individual agentic reasoning for why they chose to ignore the first teacher's request to go inside - one being to make the ground safe for the preK children and the other being that they were close to a functional model of a volcano. The girls acted as a group but also used individual agency to support a sense of communal agency as each stayed with the group rather than return to the classroom as first directed. By supporting their individual and communal agency, the teacher was rewarded with insight into their academic knowledge of volcanoes and social knowledge about watching out for the younger children at school.

Communal Agency and Expanding the Social Capabilities of Individuals and Groups.

Agency, particularly a shared or communal sense of agency where students use their agency to work in groups, can expand social capabilities. The girls working on volcanoes learned to make plans, pursue learning despite opposition, create models, problem-solve, plan ahead, articulate motives and consider multiple consequences before making decisions. And the girls practiced empathy, persistence, follow-through, cooperation, and resistance not just as individuals but as a group sharing those qualities. Without a shared experience with a communal sense of agency, such social capabilities may not be so easily developed.

In the model of development economics, it is not just individuals who are expanding capabilities, but also countries and peoples. Sen argues that agents do not act for others but for themselves as members of groups and participants in power (2003). Although the teacher had been giving children the freedom to choose topics as individuals, most often children in this classroom context formed groups around interests and talents and created processes without a teachers' assignment.

Development economics offers a version of agency that is about group or communal influence, participation and decision-making as well as individual acts. Although the term agency has been used throughout the social sciences, it has usually referred to individual action, influence or choice. Even related concepts such as *self-regulation* (Blair & Razza, 2007; Bodrova & Leong, 2008); *self-expression* (Baraldi, 2008), *self-efficacy* (Liew, McTigue, Barrois, & Hughes, 2008; Bandura, 2001); *autonomy* (Kamii, 1984,1991; Reeve, 2009) and *motivation* (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002) are focused mainly on individual development. Corsaro's (2011) work has been helpful to think about children acting not only for themselves but also collectively in response to adults. One of Corsaro's key ideas has been secondary adjustments (2011, p. 44) or the way that children collectively attempt in unauthorized ways to get more control over their lives. This study builds on children's capacity to act collectively but pushes Corsaro's important concept further to ask what types of capabilities are expanded in classrooms serving young children of immigrants when adult control is relinquished and children's collective and individual agency is supported. Individual and collective acts of agency are not exclusive. Individual acts can support collective agency and collective actions could be in support of an individual's agency. For example, Corsaro (2003) writes about a third grade girl, Stefania, who writes a letter to one of the researchers explaining some events and rule-making he missed the day before in order to remind the researcher of the decision-making power of the children. The letter, Corsaro writes, "was a personal production that was grounded in the collective ethos of the peer culture" (2003, p. 221).

Similarly, Rogoff's work (2003) documents a number of individual and collective forms of agency used by children living in traditional indigenous communities in Mexico (see also Correa-Chávez & Rogoff, 2009). Rogoff's work is particularly relevant to this study because she documents numerous culturally relevant, learning acts that occur without adult intervention, usually by children who initiate "pitching in" and participation (Rogoff, 2003; Paradise & Rogoff, 2009). She argues that children's acts are not just either collective or individual but can be both as children act individually to support the larger group's collective agency (Rogoff et al., 2003). After describing Ma. Bailey's classroom as well as our method for documenting how the children and the classroom responded to the increased opportunities for agency, the remainder of this article will focus on one form of communal agency and two types of social capabilities developed by the children in response to the increased collective agency in the space

Ethnographic Method

The Agency and Young Children project is an ethnographic study, combining elements of traditional participant observation methods from ethnography with video-cued methods from Tobin's ethnographic work with Preschool in Three Cultures (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989; Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009) and more recently *Children Crossing Borders* (Tobin, Arzubiaga, & Adair, 2013). First, our research team spent a full school year in two first grade classrooms in Texas, a southern state within the United States. We choose two teachers who wanted and planned to increase opportunities for the students in their classes to use their agency in their learning. During that year, we interviewed the teachers and students individually and in groups multiple times. We also interviewed the parents in focus groups so that they could watch and respond to films of their children in everyday classroom situations. Then we took the film and showed it to first grade parents and students in multiple schools sites in the United States. And we showed it to preK-3 teachers as well as school and district administrators. This article focuses on the first phase and most traditionally ethnographic part of the study where we spent one full school year observing and participating in the first grade classrooms. And we focus specifically on the classroom that had a majority of children from Latino immigrant families.

Our perspective as anthropologists prepared us to look beyond individual forms of agency to see larger patterns in the space and of the collective group. A classroom is not a traditional setting for examining culture or cultural values. Yet, we were interested in many of same things cultural anthropologists seek from groups they study. We wanted to see what was normal and expected in a classroom with an atypical amount of agency for young students, particularly children of immigrants. We were outsiders to the classroom culture and spent a lot of time asking students and the teacher to make sense of activities, comments, conversations and rituals.

We documented patterns of interaction among children in the classroom as well as between teachers and children. We watched what kinds of activities, conversations and practices children did and did not do without consulting an adult. We took special notice of how children used their agency during the day and week when the instructions were merely "to work on their projects." Project time in each classroom became a space to see how young

children of immigrants in the early years of school responded to a classroom with atypical opportunities to use their agency. We were careful to note how students came up with topic ideas and followed their trajectories of ideas, projects and inquiries throughout the year.

Riverside Elementary School.

Ms. Bailey's classroom is within a publically funded school in Texas, a state on the border between the United States and Mexico. The school is located in the urban city core that has historically been home to African American then Hispanic and now Mexican immigrant families. The school mirrors the demographic of the surrounding strong and historic Hispanic community who built up this part of the city over the past eighty years. Despite many families at the school qualifying as "low income" (69%), the area has been in a slow but steady gentrification process. Middle and upper income families have started buying business and residential properties. This shift in demographics has resulted in slightly higher than usual numbers of middle income and White families attending the school. Still, in the classroom we selected there were a significant number of families with at least one immigrant parent.

Ms. Bailey's Classroom.

At the time of data collection, Ms. Bailey's classroom served 22 first grade students, 14 male and 9 female. The class included immigrant children from Mexico yet the majority of children had at least one immigrant parent from either Mexico or Guatemala. Three of the children were labeled as African American, four as White and the remaining fifteen as Hispanic, the labeling categories offered by the school. Twelve of the children spoke only Spanish at home and came to preK at the school speaking Spanish. Ms. Bailey is herself an immigrant from West Africa with three years of teaching experience. She spoke multiple languages including Spanish. Because of this, school administrators sent most children with Spanish speaking parents to her classroom. During the year we observed, students who needed bilingual services were usually taken out of the classroom for English language sessions with a specialized teacher and then returned to the classroom when the lesson finished. Ms. Bailey's classroom was mandated by the school to be an English immersion

classroom. However, Ms. Bailey did use her Spanish at times to translate Spanish to English for the students in her class. For example, in the film we made during the school year, there is a moment when one young student, Jose, used Spanish to answer a question during a whole group discussion. Children used Spanish and English at recess and in the lunchroom. Ms. Bailey spoke comfortably in Spanish to parents who were not comfortable in English.

Data Collection and Analysis.

The ethnographic method for this study included both traditional and video-cued ethnographic methods. The traditional ethnographic portion included over 300 hours of participant observation and interviews with teachers, parents, children and the administrators connected to both classrooms. Currently, we are in the second half of the data collection process, conducting focus group interviews with parents, teachers, administrators and first grade students at multiple school sites. These interviews are meant to document and understand cultural interpretations of agency and what forms of agency are valuable in different kinds of school and community settings.

Trying to understand how the first grade children responded to having agency in their learning draws from data collected in the first half of the project. This data was in the form of participant observation. A team of researchers observed within both classrooms almost everyday for the entire school year August – May. Often researchers assisted the teachers with daily tasks, looking at children's work, listening to students share their writing or project designs, asking questions and helping supervise students who wanted to work on something outside the classroom. Sometimes when asked, the researchers talked through project ideas or brainstormed helpful resources for students who were, for example, wanting to study tornadoes or President Obama's family. The researchers did not however, assist with any direct instruction or assessment procedures. Most days, the researchers filmed and recorded conversations between teacher and students and among students. And researchers took pictures of hundreds of artifacts gathered throughout the year as project topics emerged and were eventually turned into posters, models, experiments, handmade books, mobiles and dioramas.

The videos, recordings, field notes (that included observations and drawings of the

classroom) and artifacts all became part of the analytic process. First, we went through each set of field notes and looked for evidence of communal agency. We tried to pay careful attention to how much the students worked together rather than “independently.” We used video-analysis to look at the videos of the classroom and saw that in most typical days, students chose to work as groups, often seeking out help from classmates (even those not working on the same project) as they went along. This analytic process led to everyday normalized forms of communal or collective agency that students used within their classroom space.

Significance of Studying Agency with Children of Immigrants.

The field of early childhood education needs to better understand and advocate for early childhood practices that offer children of immigrants positive learning experiences during their first years of school (Adair, 2009; Arzubiaga & Adair, 2009; Garcia, 2005; Takanishi, 2004). In Texas, where our study was conducted, over 75% of the children of immigrants in the preK-3 years are Latino, having at least one native Spanish-speaking parent (Fortuny, Hernandez, & Chaudry, 2010). Even while many children of immigrants increasingly have positive learning experiences in public pre-K programs, there is growing concern that early elementary grades are failing to provide the same high level of engagement and enjoyment (Crosnoe, 2005). Children of immigrants often attend elementary schools centered on academic outcomes, with teachers who are pressured to abandon early childhood directives that engage children in learning in many areas of development, including social, emotional, physical, cultural, and intellectual, along with academic (Fuller, 2007; Hyson, 2008). Latino children of immigrants specifically are more likely to attend elementary schools in high-poverty areas that struggle with less experienced and/or skilled teachers, fewer resources, and lower than average academic outcomes than their White, native-born peers (Garcia & Gonzales, 2006; Todorova, Suárez-Orozco, & Suárez-Orozco, 2008). For many Latino children of immigrants, the transition from public pre-K to K-3 also leaves behind a focus on social development and disregards child-centered instruction or children’s use of problem-solving, creative expression, initiative, decision-making or autonomy (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Yoon, 2008).

Ms. Bailey's Classroom Environment and the Presence of Agency.

Ms. Bailey's classroom was noisy and busy with students usually talking to one another. There were multiple conversations going on all the time, usually and even while students were completing work in their math, writing or science journals. Ms. Bailey did not have "independent work" time, which many U.S. classrooms have to promote quiet classrooms with each student completing her or his own work. Instead, finishing work or completing work was usually a collaborative process, much like open concept working spaces boasted at many tech companies in the United States. Students were quiet and listening as a group corner area of the classroom where the whole class met to learn new concepts or talk about discipline issues, also known as "the carpet." The teacher usually sat in a low chair with students on the floor. Multiple students had opportunities to "be the teacher" and sit in the chair, explaining concepts to the class. And students often shared stories connected to books Ms. Bailey had read out loud or a social studies topic she had shared. When students shared their stories, the rest of the students listened carefully and asked questions to the student directly about their story. At these times, Ms. Bailey would sit on the floor with the students while someone shared their story or explanation with the class. It seemed that the spaces typically saved for adults or teachers were also used by the children in the class, freely and without hesitation.

The young children in Ms. Bailey's classroom used the entire space with little differentiation between adult and child space. They made regular decisions about what kinds of topics to pursue as well as what classmates they would like to work with, collaborate with and/or observe for ideas. These activities were not isolated. Students shared a communal sense of agency that created multiple possibilities for expanding social capabilities and furthering social development. The remainder of this discussion will focus on one response to agency - *initiating and trying out ideas publically* - a particular form of communal agency. And we will detail two of the social capabilities (observation, conversation and drawing from others' ideas) that expanded in the class as a result of such consistent, everyday uses of communal agency. We hope to demonstrate how social capabilities were expanded in the students as well as the teacher through the presence of communal agency.

An Example of Communal Agency

One way that students responded to being able to use their agency in the classroom was to try out their ideas in front of classmates. Often, children would be in a conversation and then jump up to demonstrate with their bodies the concept they were talking about. Ms. Bailey's explained one such incident with Jose, a six year old student.

One morning Jorge, Juan, Jose and Charles came in. The window was open and there was a rainbow going through the fish tank. They were all excited. 'Oh my gosh, a rainbow.' And then I see Jose trying to move the bathroom door to see if the door would block the sun. I ask him, 'why are you doing that?' And he's like, 'well, I just wanted to see, if the wood, the door was gonna stop the rainbow.' And I said 'that's a really good question. I'm wondering the same thing.' Then they created the little group and they're like 'we're gonna see if we can recreate a rainbow. What do you need to do that?' So they got on the computer. They started researching. And they were like, do you have a cup? I give them a cup, but it's a plastic cup, and they realize that you need glass. And they start looking. Where can we find a glass cup? The marble jar is made out of glass. So, they empty the marbles. Then they tried it [again].

Ms. Bailey explained later that the group tried many ways to make rainbows over the following few weeks. She explained,

They brought a flashlight from home and the glass and they managed to make a rainbow but that only had two colors (laughs). It was yellow and orange but they did it. And they documented everything.

First, the boys were excited about seeing a rainbow and marveled at it publically. Recognizing this as a potential research project, Ms. Bailey did not ask the boys to sit down or get to their seats. Instead she watched what happened. Jose joined the scene and began trying to figure out what was creating the rainbow and how light was physically involved by moving the door back and forth. Ms. Bailey asked him to explain what he was trying out. Jose responded by saying "Well, I just wanted to see if the wood, the door was gonna stop the rainbow." This explanation was validated by Ms. Bailey's saying that she was "wondering the same thing." Soon the group of boys formed a group and used project and free time (after

work is completed) to roam the classroom looking for light and materials that might recreate the rainbow seen that morning.

How agency can be communal.

Jose could have acted alone to figure out the door blocking the light. The students could have noted to themselves the rainbow. The teacher could have asked them to wait and do a project on rainbows in the future, at a more convenient time. The teachers could have noted their interest and created a fun, hands-on lesson about light, prisms and rainbows. Instead the scene unfolded in a way that was “natural” to the space. The boys knew that they had at least a few minutes right then to follow their curiosity and develop an inquiry project together as a group. And although they anticipated that they would have many whole group lessons where they were required to pay attention and listen quietly to the teacher, they also assumed that later in the day they would have time to pursue the topic further with little restriction. In many U.S. elementary classrooms this would not have been possible because of behavior or classroom management concerns (see Ladson-Billings, 2009). The teacher would have had to get students onto the assigned lesson (see Berliner, 2000). And teachers and students would not anticipate on a regular basis the time to pursue interesting topics without teacher instruction.

Elsa, Linda, Gwen, Jose and their classmates responded to a significant increase in being able to use their agency by working, acting, experimenting, discussing and problem solving in groups. Just like the girls who tried out their ideas stemming from new knowledge, Jose and his friends assumed they could try out their ideas about rainbows. Students consistently using their agency in groups as well as the teacher’s support for such social uses of agency made agency communal, rather than individual.

Expanding Social Capabilities through Communal Agency.

This communal use of agency made it possible for the students in the class to develop a range of social capabilities. We believe this is because students had multiple and consistent

learning experiences that necessitated the ongoing development of social capabilities. Two social capabilities we saw often in Ms. Bailey's class were observation and conversation. We use the example of Jose and his classmates initiating and trying out their ideas about light and rainbows to think about the types of social capabilities being developed in such learning environments.

Social Capability #1: Observation.

The ability to observe spontaneous (or even not so spontaneous) curiosities in everyday life was a consistent part of classroom life. The boys first observed the rainbow when they walked into the room. They saw the light coming through the fish tank onto the floor. They noticed the window. Jose watched the boys' excitement and followed the light through the fish tank onto the floor. Then he went to the door to experiment. This experimentation was a result of observing the rainbow, the window, the door, the fish tank and the floor. Perhaps more importantly, Jose was observing how his classmates responded and the reaction of his teacher who observed them. He noted that rather than scolding them for not going straight to their seats, the teacher asked questions and wondered along with them. The boys observed Jose's attempts to block the light with the door. Instead of getting angry or jealous at the idea, the boys started generating questions and ideas together as a group. This group was formed through a joint observational experience as well as a common interest in figuring out how rainbows work.

The boys' observation of the rainbow was coupled with Ms. Bailey observing the boys' interest and conversation around the wonder and cause of the rainbow. She observed their experimentation instead of controlling or saving it for a later, more convenient time. She watched their entry into the project as well as their attempts to figure out experiments that would create a rainbow. Her observational notes such as "And then I see Jose trying to move the bathroom door to see if the door would block the sun" and her observing their multiple kinds of attempts using the computer, different kinds of cups – plastic and glass – and even using marbles are part of her observing rather than controlling the experimentation.

Observation (as opposed to control or intervention) as a social capability was especially meaningful to Ms. Bailey. Before the year began, she worried that she would not be able to

“let go” and “not be so controlling.” It was recalling experiences like the boys and the rainbow that helped her *observe herself observing*. Ms. Bailey learned through observation what the boys were interested in and what kinds of scientific logic they used (and knowledge they had/gained) throughout the process. She also learned about how they handled disputes, shared ideas and negotiated different, conflicting explanations for what makes a rainbow.

Rogoff and her colleagues as part of the Intent Community Participation project explain that observation is a key form of learning in many indigenous communities. Observation and pitching in is how many children learn content as well as how to be a helpful, good, meaningful member of the community. This kind of observation requires time and space to watch how others do something or respond in a myriad of situations. Hayashi & Tobin (2011) in their extension work on the Preschool in Three Cultures (P3C) studies argue that children observing from the periphery are participating. In the most famous scene in the (P3C) film, children in the Japanese preschool fight without much intervention from the teacher. For years, the authors say that they focused their analysis on those directly involved until a Japanese teacher pointed out the children observing.

In our focus on the children directly involved in the fights (the children doing the pushing, hitting, pinching, crying, tattle-telling, admonishing, and comforting) we had failed to notice the presence of the children on the periphery of these scenes, children who watched the fights without (at least from our perspective) being actively involved. These are the children Kumagai-sensei referred to as a “gallery.” In the course of shooting and editing the videos and using them as interviewing cues we had watched these fighting scenes literally hundreds of times without noticing the presence of the galleries that formed around the fighters and mediators and without considering what these peripherally participating children might be experiencing, learning, or contributing (p. 140).

Children, insisted the Japanese teachers, learn from observing and participating from the periphery. Likewise, young children in both classrooms responded to increased opportunities to use agency or influence how and what they learned by observing one another. The children were not told to observe. Observing one another was one of their responses to a greater, shared sense of agency. They observed other’s project designs, drawings, models, brainstorming practices, problem-solving techniques and the questions and arguments of their classmates. Jose observed his friends getting excited. Children often observed how their

classmate handled disputes and borrowed strategies, ideas and designs from one another, as well. And students were able to talk about what they observed in ongoing and spontaneous conversation without reprimand.

Social Capability #2: Conversation.

As soon as the boys were interested in rainbows and how they might be recreated, they were able to talk about it together. Students in both classrooms had multiple opportunities each day to “chat” or talk with one another. They could become interested in something and then talk about it with their friends. As groups formed around topic areas such as the rainbow group or the volcano group, they were able to talk about ideas, plans or what they needed for their projects. Students were not told to work together, yet they sought information from their classmates. For example, in the later part of the school year two girls started talking about President Obama. They had seen a book in the library about his family. They wondered about what the President’s daughters were like. Diana turned to Paloma “President has two daughters, right? Paloma answered, “I wonder what their names are?” They got the book out and Diana mentioned “Oh, that’s Michelle Obama. Her hair looks so pretty.” Ms. Bailey recalls,

And they started wanting to research it. And then they got a poster board, and . . . they started printing pictures and finding out some cool facts. And they also have things in their learning logs; facts about the little girls (and things) they’re really interested in.

The girls’ interest in the First Family was sparked by seeing the book and being able to talk about it with friends. This conversation was shaped by communal agency because like the rainbow group, the girls had space and time to use their agency to talk about something that interested them. And their conversations were shaped by their assumption that they would be able to do research on President Obama’s family. At first their conversation was casual, just sharing facts they knew and questions they wondered about. And after two days of having conversations about the first family, as if the conversation had supplied enough interesting knowledge to pursue, the girls approached Ms. Bailey to get poster board and begin accumulating facts and pictures of the family. Conversation at many points in the day

translated within the classroom space to an ability to talk through interests and initial ideas in casual conversation. These conversations led to many project development ideas, just like the real world.

Conversation was something that, as researchers, made Ms. Bailey's classroom different from most first grade and kindergarten classrooms we had visited across the U.S. In such a space, Ms. Bailey also helped the children develop the social capability of conversation in small and large groups. "I want everyone to be with it, to participate in every conversation that we have as a group. . . ." She asked rich questions that elicited questions and ongoing conversation with her class.

Conversation was a social capability that led to greater freedom and greater agency as students (along with their teacher) used conversation to pursue and talk over ideas, topics and questions. In Engel's (2011) work in curiosity, she argues that young children seek explanation through having conversations. For young children, she writes "having conversation as a way to pursue knowledge is common" (p. 632). Yet in her studies of conversation, she found that children at school were rarely able to ask questions and teachers did not often model curiosity by pursuing knowledge through conversation, question asking or general wondering.

Communal Agency and the Development of Social Capabilities.

The children who eventually formed volcano, rainbow and first family project groups shared a communal sense of agency. This sense of being able to influence how and what they learned was not just as individual children but as a group. Because they acted as a group and use their agency together, they could expand a range of social capabilities. Conversation and observation were only one of several social capabilities that came from children being able to initiate and try out ideas publically. In the following table, there are multiple other social capabilities that were demonstrated over the course of the year specifically from children initiating and trying out their ideas publically

Table 1. *Communal Form of Agency and Social Capabilities Developed*

Communal Form of Agency	Social Capabilities
Initiating and trying out ideas publically	Observation
	Conversation
	Building on others' ideas
	Responding to critique, disapproval
	Responding to praise
	Responding to indifference, disinterest
	Responding to failure in front of peers
	Responding to a situation with sympathy
	Solving problems/situations

In addition to observation and conversation, the communal form of agency – initiating and trying out ideas publically – led to other social capabilities. Children had regular opportunities to experience responding to their peers' responses. Sometimes children had to respond to people thinking their idea would never work or challenging the logic behind a certain experiment. For example, a group of students got interested in how ice forms and the point at which water becomes a solid (they had been studying states of matter as a class). The girl who initiated the project was furious that many challenged her idea that rocks would help ice freeze faster. Her response was to get rocks and ice and put them in ice cube trays in the freezer during a break in the class instruction. When they went back to the ice later in the day, it had frozen. Some kids argued that the rock was not frozen just the water and so it didn't count.

These ongoing responsive events to Diana's public initiating and trying out of an idea led to multiple ice investigations and projects. Diana, who later in the year was part of the first family group, used a range of responses (yelling, ignoring, writing down all of the guesses, asking follow up questions about why people didn't agree with her idea, looking up information in books and online) as if trying out multiple ones to find one that worked. The agency or influence over how and what is learned made the social capabilities possible.

Of course, all classrooms, nations and communities may not be interested in or prioritize the same set of capabilities. Determining what capabilities we desire for young children to develop is a cultural pursuit. Should the capabilities pursued in school be merely academic?

Does this make sense for some groups and not others? What kinds of social capabilities make sense, are appropriate? Sen's work is rooted in international development efforts in India, his home country, that are too often dictated by powers around the world. He argues that not only is it important to think about what kinds of capabilities are valuable, "but also who should decide these questions, how they should do so, and who should act to effect change" (Crocker, 2008, p. 4).

Final Thoughts

Sen's concept of agency as a means to expand capabilities is not for individuals alone but for groups and nations. If individuals do not have agency, they cannot develop a broad range of capabilities and cannot develop their full potential. Likewise, if peoples do not have a shared sense of agency or a shared set of capabilities, the nation or group cannot develop to its full potential. The children in Ms. Bailey's classroom responded to a greater sense of influence and decision-making by using their agency in groups and together as a community. This communal agency created opportunities for children and Ms. Bailey to expand their social capabilities and ultimately increase their potential as individuals and as a classroom community. As a field of early childhood education concerned with equity and cultural diversity, we need more understanding of how communal agency affects social development (or the expansion of social capabilities) in multiple settings, contexts and communities. Moving past a strictly individualistic, psychological version of agency and connecting agency to capability expansion offers insight into ways to notice, document and value social development alongside academic learning in early childhood classrooms.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Joseph Tobin and Hong-Ju Jun for early input and guidance in the writing of this article. The Agency in Young Children Project is generously funded by the Foundation for Child Development's Young Scholars Program with a focus on New American Children.

References

- Adair, J. K. (2011). Confirming *chanclas*: What early childhood teacher educators can learn from immigrant preschool teachers and their critique of language “modeling” techniques. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education* 32(1), 55-71.
- Adair, J. K. (forthcoming). Agency as expanding capabilities: What it could mean for young children in the early grades. *Harvard Educational Review*.
- Arzubiaga, A., & Adair, J. (2009). Misrepresentations of language and culture, language and culture as proxies for marginalization: Debunking the arguments. In E. Murillo (Ed.) *Handbook of Latinos and Education*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 1–26.
- Baraldi, C. (2008). Promoting self-expression in classroom interactions. *Childhood*, 15 (2), 239-257.
- Berliner, D.C. (2000). Learning about and learning from expert teachers. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 35(2001), 463-482.
- Blair, C., & Razza, R. (2007). Relating effortful control, executive function, and false belief understanding to emerging math and literacy ability in kindergarten. *Child Development*, 78(2), 647-663.
- Bodrova, E., & Leong, D. J. (2008). Developing self-regulation in kindergarten: Can we keep all the crickets in the basket?. *YC: Young Children*, 63(2), 56-58.
- Boushey, G., & Moser, J. (2006). *The daily five: Fostering literacy independence in the elementary grades*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Corsaro, W. A. (2011). *The sociology of childhood*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Correa-Chávez, M., & Rogoff, B. (2009). Children’s attention to interactions directed to others: Guatemalan mayan and european american patterns. *Developmental Psychology*, 45(3), 630-641.
- Crocker, D. A. (2008). *Ethics of Global Development: Agency, Capability and Deliberative Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Crosnoe, R. (2005). Double disadvantage or signs of resilience? The elementary school contexts of children from Mexican immigrant families. *American Educational Research*

- Journal*, 42(2), 269-303.
- Eccles, J. S, & Wigfield, A. (2002). Motivational beliefs, values, and goals. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53, 109-132.
- Engel, S. (2011). Children's need to know: Curiosity in schools. *Harvard Educational Review*, 81(4), 625-645.
- Fortuny, K., Hernandez, D. J., & Chaudry, A. (2010). Young children of immigrants: The leading edge of America's future. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Fuller, B. (2007). *Standardized childhood: The political and cultural struggle over early education*. Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press.
- Gándara, P., & Contreras, F. (2009). The Latino educational crisis: The consequences of failed policies. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.
- Garcia, E., & Gonzales, D. (2006). PreK and Latinos: The foundation for America's future. Washington D.C.: PreK Now.
- Hayashi, A., & Tobin, J. (2011). The Japanese preschool's pedagogy of peripheral participation. *Ethos*, 39(2), 139-164.
- Hyson, M. (2008). *Enthusiastic and Engaged Learners*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Kamii, C. (1984). Autonomy: The aim of education envisioned by Piaget. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 65(5), 410-415.
- Katz, L. G., & Chard, S. C. (1989). *Engaging children's minds: The project approach*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Katz, L. G., & Chard, S. C. (2000). *Engaging children's minds: The project approach*. Stamford, CT: Ablex.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). *The dream keepers: Successful teachers of africanamerican children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Liew, J., McTigue, E., Barrois, L., & Hughes, J. (2008). Adaptive and effortful control and academic self-efficacy beliefs on achievement: A longitudinal study of 1st through 3rd graders. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 23(4), 515-526.
- Paradise, R., & Rogoff, B. (2009). Side by side: Learning through observing and pitching in. *Ethos*, 37, 102-138.
- Reeve, J. (2009). Why teachers adopt a controlling motivating style toward students and how they can become more autonomy supportive. *Educational Psychologist*, 44(3), 159-175.

- Rogoff, B. (2003). *The cultural nature of human development*. NY: Oxford University Press.
- Rogoff, B., Paradise, R., Mejía Arauz, R., Correa-Chávez, M., & Angelillo, C. (2003). Firsthand learning through intent participation. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 54, 175-203.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom*. New York: Alfred Knopf.
- Sen, A. (2003). Development as Capability Expansion. In *Readings in Human Development*, S. Fukuda-Parr et al., eds. New Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Takanishi, R. (2004). Leveling the playing field: Supporting immigrant children from birth to eight. *Future of Children*, 14(2), 61-79.
- Tobin, J., Hsueh, Y., & Karasawa, M. (2009). *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tobin, J. J., Wu, D. Y. H., & Davidson, D. H. (1989). *Preschool in three cultures: Japan, China, and the United States*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Tobin, J., Arzubiaga, A. E., & Adair, J. K. (2013). *Children crossing borders*. NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Todorova, I. G., Suárez-Orozco, C., & Suárez-Orozco, M. (2008). Changing stories: the evolving narratives of immigrant children. *Cognition, Creier, Comportament/Cognition, Brain, Behavior*, 12(4), 345-367.
- United Nations Development Programme (1990). *Human development report 1990*. New York: Oxford University Press. Retrieved at http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/219/hdr_1990_en_complete_nostats.pdf.
- Walker, M., & Unterhalter, E. (2007). *Amartya Sen's capability approach and social justice in education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Yoon, B. (2008). Uninvited guests: The influence of teachers' roles and pedagogies on the positioning of English language learners in the regular classroom. *American Educational Research Journal*, 45 (2), 495-522.