

**CONSTRUCTIONS OF CHILDHOOD FOR AND  
BY CHILDREN IN TWO EARLY CHILDHOOD  
CENTRES IN THE PROVINCE OF KWAZULU-  
NATAL, SOUTH AFRICA:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY**

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## DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own work, and has not been submitted previously for any degree at any university.

HB Ebrahim.

HB EBRAHIM

NOVEMBER 2006

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the constructions of childhood by seven early childhood teachers and twenty young children (ten boys and ten girls) in two private early childhood centres catering for children below Grade R in urban KwaZulu-Natal. An ethnographic approach is used to present childhood as a complex socially constructed process. On the methodological front, this study argues for the practice of *responsive researching* to engage with moment by moment realities that are sensitive to the particularities of young children and their circumstances when they are positioned as participants in research. In the analysis of teachers' constructions of childhood *for* young children, the findings of this study suggest that the lack of public funding in early childhood education, for children below Grade R, sets the conditions for early childhood centres to operate as commercial enterprises trading commodities in a free market. Given this context, teachers position themselves in the dominant market discourse. The study suggests that the focus on the purchasing power of parents determines the type of childhood young children experience at the centres. Teachers access normalising images of young children as property and essentialised adults-in-the-making to support the processing of children as human capital for a fee. As such, the social project of early childhood, as space for democratic practices for public good, is weakened. The focus on the *doings* of childhood *by* young children (boys and girls) contrasts the normalising images presented by teachers. The findings of this study suggest that the complex struggles within the temporal zones of growing up and relations in race and gender, present young children as powerful social actors who actively construct their childhoods. The study illuminates how young children use the limiting discourses freely available to them to constitute themselves in familiar ways, and also how they find spaces to loosen the power of these discourses. In concentrating on the lived realities of childhood, this study enters some unfamiliar spaces that provide a base to ask more questions about early childhood centres, teachers, and young children in early childhood education.

## **DEDICATION**

To my loving husband, Mohamed Raffiq, and my children, Muhammed Javeed  
and Shehzaadi Adeela

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS**

ECD	Early Childhood Development
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
NEPI	National Education Policy Investigation
GNU	Government of National Unity
NPA	National Programme of Action
DAP	Developmentally Appropriate Practice
OBE	Outcomes-Based Education
ANC	African National Congress

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Starting off

(Childhood is) a period of growth, that is to say, the period in which the individual, in both the physical and moral sense, does not yet exist, the period in which he (sic) is made, develops and is formed... In everything *the child* is characterised by the very instability of his nature, which is the law of growth. The educationalist is presented not with a person wholly formed - not a complete work or a finished product but a *becoming*, an incipient being, a person in the process of formation (Durkheim 1979:150).

The quotation above presents the common sense understanding of childhood as a predetermined phase of development that draws its contents from the final destination of adulthood. In relational terms, childhood is viewed as a period of deficiency when compared to adulthood. This dominant narrative is sustained because childhood is associated with nature and biology, which universally positions children as *The Child* in the “law of growth”. Children take on the status of being deficient individuals that are located in an asocial stage of being. The notion of *becoming* legitimates adults working with “beings-in-waiting” whose childhood must be shaped for them. Children take on the status as projects, incomplete products rather than “complete works” that must be managed by adults.

This is a dominant storyline that underpins thinking and acting in early childhood education. Teachers, like other adults in the broader societal context, take the idea of childhood as a journey to completeness and children as “person(s) in the process of formation” to construct institutional provisioning for young children<sup>1</sup>. In particular, teachers draw on the “masonry of the mature” (official knowledge

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<sup>1</sup> The South African Constitution (1996) defines children as persons aged less than eighteen years. Throughout this study the term young children refers to children in between the baby and Reception Year (first year of formal schooling) stage.

by academic experts and policy makers) to construct centre-based early childhood (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers 1992:146). The couplet of development and socialisation aligns young children to *The Child*, which denies them ontology. This is especially the case with the youngest in our society. These children are the furthest from adulthood. Their physical size, irrationality, fluidity of character, and incoherent babble as features of deficient beings, naturally deny them a social status that foregrounds their lives as people who are active and competent members of society. Harzareesingh, Simms and Anderson (1989:18) show the danger of only concentrating on children as *becomings*:

The concept of *the child* as an “unfinished” adult shifts focus away from children’s own intentions, attachments, and strivings – which might in fact open up learning horizons for adults, on to an end-product notion of adulthood which is unwisely equated with “achieved knowledge”. It might be said that this represents a specifically western, “rationalist” approach to both childhood and learning...

When children are positioned as *becomings*, early childhood centres<sup>2</sup>, as places for nurturing young children, take on the character of neutral zones. We do not apply conscious, critical thought to the constructions of childhood and the micro realities of young children’s lives (Dahlberg & Moss 2005). We naturally accept the institutional space of early childhood centres as mapping the journey towards completeness by providing young children with supplements that are lacking for a full human status (Lee 2000). Programmes and routines are mapped to provide contents to the physical bodies of children to shape their qualifications for full human status. Universally, cultural values, and conventions as mental contents as well as models of mental processes are seen as structures that inform what is done to young children to begin getting themselves right for adulthood.

This study inserts itself into thinking that disrupts the dominant construction of early childhood centres as places naturally socialising young children as deficient

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<sup>2</sup> Early childhood centres refer to any building or premises maintained or used for the admission, protection, and temporary or partial care for more than six children away from their caregivers/parents. The centres include both establishments for-gain and not-for-gain (Department of Social Welfare 2005).

*becomings* for adulthood. The notion of childhood as an ever-present universal entity is challenged. This was possible through looking at childhood as a social construction embedded in discourses that are located within social time and spaces. This perspective renders salient childhood as historically and culturally situated. Childhood as a process that shifts with time and different priorities for children in particular contexts is what matters. This view makes one pay attention to childhood as a space where children actively make themselves as children in particular locations. The naturally developing child is transformed into a fully social being, capable of acting in the social world and of creating and sustaining his own culture (Waksler 1991). Childhood is thus presented as a dynamic concept, depending to a great extent upon the context in which it is defined and the philosophical premises upon which it is based.

The thinking above is creating a revolution in early childhood education. There is a rethink of dominant constructions of childhood through paying attention to the broader changes in society and asking: “What does the changing nature of society mean for early childhood education?” The thinking and rethinking of early childhood education emanate from asking how we can respond to a rapidly changing world in late modern/postmodern times that is characterised by complexity and diversity (Mallory & New 1994; Grieshaber & Cannella 2001; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence 1999). Oberhuemer and Colberg-Shrader (1999:250) elaborate:

Practitioners (teachers)<sup>3</sup> in today’s early childhood institutions are maybe facing some of the most demanding challenges in the history of their profession... Profound and interrelated change in our social, cultural, economic, political and technological environments, combined with a fundamental shift in the nature of work and employment patterns is impacting on the lives of children and families.

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<sup>3</sup> It is common practice to refer to early childhood teachers as practitioners in order to distinguish them from professional teachers in schooling. In this study, however, the term teachers is used as the participants in the study referred to themselves as teachers. Where the term teachers is used, it must be assumed that it refers to early childhood teachers.

Engagement with these contexts has created a crisis in conventional wisdom on how we understand young children in the “now” of their lives, and it has shaped practices for an unstable notion of adulthood. Goldschmied and Jackson (2004) argue that we should be talking about babies and toddlers (under threes) as *people* (my emphasis) that have rights, and as *people* who must be treated with dignity and respect. They also emphasise the importance of good quality care being based not just on knowledge, but also on the adults’ ability to empathise with young children and their experiences and feelings when they are separated from their parents. Within this changing view of young children in early childhood education internationally, teachers continue to support developmentalist notions of *the child* and traditional views of socialisation to inform their practice. There are, however, some that are exploring new ways to engage with ideas of young children as people in their contextual locations.

This study began in the tenth year of democracy in South Africa. The time is ripe to focus on the social construction of early childhood as a key to nation building. This crucial space is perceived to be a vehicle that uses democratic wisdom (children’s rights, non-racism, non-sexism, multilingualism) to shape a new citizenry for post-apartheid South Africa. Whilst a fair amount of literature on equity and social justice was emerging from the schooling sector, the voices of early childhood teachers and young children remained silent except in relation to the government’s concern with mapping out some policies. The vocality of teachers was harnessed mostly through how they were responding to unit standards proposed in an interim policy for early childhood education (Department of Education 2001 a). In describing various case studies of teaching and learning, it was evident that the developmental approach was viewed as the prerequisite for teaching young children.

This thesis problematises natural constructions of childhood in early childhood centres. It takes a critical stance by the insertion of the prepositions of *for* and *by* as they relate to the constructions of childhood. The *for* dimension foregrounds the voices of teachers. The *by* dimension highlights *doings* of young children. One of the key arguments is that the construction and reconstruction of childhood

*for* and *by* young children is a rich, complex process that defies common sense understandings in straightforward ways.

In the light of the above, the current study asked the crucial question of what it meant to be a young child – boy or girl - in early childhood centres catering for children below Grade R. This concern was pushed in directions to explore teachers' practices and young children's engagement with the temporal zones of growing up and with relations of race and gender. The construction of discourses and identities was key in this study. I show how certain norms and patterns of conduct help teachers and young children in the constructions of childhood. It was the lived realities of teachers and young children inside early childhood centres that formed the context for the analysis. Hence everyday happenings at the centres were used to form the backdrop for an understanding of who people perceived themselves to be and how they related to others.

The study explored how teachers and young children (boys and girls) made meaning, enabled choices, and brought differing versions of childhood. As the thesis unfolds, constructions of childhood are presented through an examination of complex experiences of teachers and young children. In problematising constructions of childhood, the key question was how young children (boys and girls) constituted themselves in the way they did, and what the teachers' relationship was with this "doing". It was through identifying the dominant discourses that were used to position young children in early childhood centres, and young children's engagement with them, that I was able to understand this process.

The institutional context of early childhood centres, and the positioning of teachers and young children were key concerns in this study. The presentation of young children's constructions of their subjective worlds was used to deepen an understanding of, and to contrast it with a type of world created by teachers *for* young children. In doing so, this study unlocked some unfamiliar spaces that would call for critical thinking about early childhood centres, teachers, and young children beyond the first decade of democracy.

What I chose to present in this study is intricately woven with who I am and what I see as the priorities for early childhood education in the South African context. It is for this reason that I introduce myself and share a personal dimension.

## **1.2 Me, the researcher**

The nature of this study is coloured by my experiences as a child, as a mother, a teacher, and a researcher into early childhood education. I was born in the mid sixties in South Africa. I grew up in a working class family together with two brothers and a sister. I share some memories of my childhood, which relate to dilemmas in constituting myself in two oppositional worlds, namely, Madressa an Islamic school, and western schooling.

As a Muslim girl the knowledge of Islam in my home, reinforced by the Madressa, contradicted the official knowledge of school. As a young child I did not attend preschool due to financial constraints. My parents could only afford to send my elder brother to a home nearby that was offering the service.

When I went to school I was labelled as “not yet ready” and placed in the “D” group (which I interpreted as the “dummies” group). My writing lessons were a disaster. At Madressa I learned to write from right to left. It took me quite some time to learn that this knowledge was invalid at school. I remember the smacks I got to get me to write from left to right, starting at the margin. Reading was another area of conflict for me. At Madressa I had to learn my surahs (verses from the Quraan) without having to understand and question what I was reading. My mother and father taught me that rote learning and recitation was an act of piety. In school, however, I had to do numerous comprehension exercises that made me engage with all sorts of questions. The engagement with man-made texts and constant quest for meaning making was something that I had to work hard at. Gender was another area of tension. In Madressa boys and girls were always separated, either in demarcated spaces or with a sheet separating the sexes. In school, however, I had to negotiate the free mixing of sexes. As a child I had to deal with the many complexities of rules and conditions of the various practices in the mostly opposite worlds in which I was socialised.



As a mother I learnt about childhood through mapping this crucial space for my children and watching my daughter's and son's childhoods unfold. In the main, I shaped their childhoods with the understanding that they are Muslim children that need to view their traditions and culture with pride. Both my children began preschool education together with Islamic education. My husband and I, as teachers, helped them work through the contradictory experiences of home and school.

My children were also good teachers of childhood. I could not always replicate my childhood through regressing to their psychic age. The generation gap and their agency to map small moments through their priorities were profound. Their insistence on finding out and challenging what they thought was right and wrong sometimes irritated me but presented good learning opportunities for me.

My career as a teacher is a crucial experience that continues to shape my knowledge of childhood and children. I received my preservice teacher training in Pre- and Junior Primary at the Springfield Teachers Training College for Indians during the period 1983 to 1985. This was my first direct encounter with any official knowledge of childhood and children through educational psychology. I was introduced to many discourses on the "correct" ways of knowing children and related methodologies for instruction in the three R's (reading, writing, and maths). I adopted these discourses as the holding "truths" about children and Junior Primary teaching. Assumptions that I brought to my work included using technical step-by-step procedures to ensure that the recipes I had been taught were relayed closest to my original learnings. My training in the "truths" of children, emanating from a psychological perspective of ages and stages, led to assumptions that children would all learn the required content as it was officially sanctioned to be developmentally appropriate. As a trained teacher for early schooling I assumed that I was appropriately skilled to understand and "scientifically" assess children's performance according to the developmental age and grade requirements.

During my work, however, and especially from the period of early desegregation of schools from the 1990s, I met children whose abilities and behaviour patterns

challenged my professional understandings of developmental theory, age-related competence, and methodologies in the three R's. Some children were articulating certain skills and limitations that did not match the scientific levels of knowledge and insights that children of their age and stage commonly possessed. I battled with these complexities and resorted to sifting and sorting procedures to accommodate children's abilities without questioning the validity of my so-called "scientific" understandings. It was only when I completed my honours degree in education that I felt the obligation to problematise my perceptions of "different" children.

This realisation, however, met with resistance from the custodians of best practice – Junior Primary inspectresses. In my literacy programme, known as Main Language at that time, I ventured into the story approach that seemed more appropriate for the children with whom I was working. There was no syllabus for English second language teaching. I integrated reading, writing, listening and speaking through popular stories, given the shortage of readers at the time. English second language learners responded well to the vibrant communicative approach. There were instances of codeswitching and role play to communicate meaning. Visits from the Junior Primary inspectress, however, slighted the approach for being inappropriate practice for Junior Primary children. I was strongly advised to go back to the sequence of phonic preparation and flashcard preparation before I introduced the basal reader. This institutional practice was at odds with my changing perceptions of children and how they get to know their educational world. I was discouraged from being a reflective teacher. I mostly adhered to the suggestions for the sake of getting a good evaluation.

My deep engagement with practices in early childhood teacher education began in 2002 when I was appointed as a lecturer at the University of Natal. At the time there were no offerings in early childhood in the preservice Bachelor of Education Degree. I was tasked with developing a qualification that spanned both the early years and early schooling (Grades R,1,2,3). A colleague and I conceptualised the programme of study based on the learning about child development theory, research, curriculum and teaching practice informed by child development knowledge.

It is during this time that crucial discussions took place on the hybridity of the learner population in early childhood centres and schools in post-apartheid South Africa. We decide that the taken-for-granted relationship between traditional child development knowledge and preparation of early childhood teachers had to be disrupted. As a consequence, we designed modules to help our students deal with the diversity they would encounter in classrooms. As a fundamental module we introduced “Critical Inquiry in Early Childhood Development (ECD)”. In this module students engage with their assumptions about childhood and children through examination of their personal experiences as children and with children. Students are also required to read relevant articles on childhood and children and extract the frames of reference that inform the construction of knowledge. There is also engagement with the values and interests framing classroom practice.

As a specialisation module we introduced “Understanding Child Development”. In this module students are introduced to a developmental knowledge base that describes children’s development in context from developmental and socio-cultural perspectives. Students work with scenarios of children in the South African context. Assignments include studying the images of children through visiting early childhood centres. Students have to make decisions on children’s context of development and learning and provide options for practice with them. The modules, although favourably received by the students, continue to be challenged by practising teachers (many of whom were trained in the apartheid era in a skills-based approach) who conceptualise learning to teach as a mastery of a particular set of knowledge and skills that is relevant to all contexts at any point in time. The universal essentialised child is favoured as the mainstream model to map practice.

My involvement in various activities in early childhood outside my university teaching has also led to critical engagement with notions of childhood and provisioning for young children. At an early childhood conference, held in February 2005, I facilitated the session on curriculum for birth to four. It was evident that there was an unproblematic adoption of the traditional developmental perspective to shape curriculum for this group. This thinking was

reproduced in a birth to four curriculum document designed by the Department of Education. I did a critical read on the document and called for a reconceptualisation through active participation of various stakeholders in the field of early childhood development, theoretical engagements, and research.

In the first half of 2006 I was appointed as a task team member to revise the ECD level four unit standards for the South African Qualifications Authority. Once again, it was evident that people in the group were working with many discourses that had roots in traditional developmental psychology and western ideas on preschool education. I considered both to have limited value for post-apartheid South Africa and the transformatory goals aimed at early socialisation. After many sessions of robust debate, influenced by my critical voice, the team began to recognise the changing nature of early childhood in South Africa in the wake of poverty, HIV/AIDS, diverse childrearing practices, multiple family configurations/structures, technology, globalisation, and market forces. A more socio-cultural response to child development began to emerge. There was also support for the move toward developing reflective early childhood teacher assistants in the field.

Let me end this section by saying that my experiences, as a teacher, researcher, mother, and being an aunt to nieces and nephews presently in the early years of childhood, continue to deepen understandings that young children are people who engage with their social world. I believe that any moves to construct and reconstruct childhood needs to respect children in their present child status. I firmly believe that each child has a unique set of experiences, beliefs, cultural values, and understandings that are complex and therefore defy essentialism and universalism. As adults it is through forming relationships with children and hearing them that we come to share a slice of their world.

In what follows I present the landscape of early childhood in South Africa from a historical perspective. I do so in order to provide a context for my study and to present differing constructions of childhood in various time shifts.

### 1.3 Constructions of (early) childhood in the South African context

In order to understand contemporary constructions of early childhood in South Africa, it is imperative to have a sense of its history. Bundy (1993:49) draws attention to the importance of looking at the past.

People make their own history, but not in a circumstance of their own choice; they act in an arena shaped by the past. Accordingly, to understand the present conjuncture in South Africa, it is essential to have a sense of its history, and to reflect on the constraints and the possibilities created by history.

The social construction of childhood in South Africa was influenced by the historical changes in the political, social, cultural, and economic orders that worked to create different types of childhoods through history. In the days of apartheid, the constructions of childhood were geared towards winning hearts and minds for a racially divided society. This resulted in creating mostly facilitative growth environments for White children and vulnerable childhoods for Black children. The political transition to a democratic system of governance in 1994 “liberated” Black South Africans<sup>4</sup> from extended colonialism and White South Africans from “outdated, sectional, and adulatory interpretations of this country’s tempestuous history” (Terreblanche 2002:3). In democratic South Africa, constructions of childhood attempt nation building and reconciliation through complex concepts like “The Rainbow Nation” and the more colloquial “Suminye – we are one”. The aim is to provide social justice through inclusive environments that cater for the diversity of all children and, especially, for those from marginalised groups.

In order to show the shifts in the constructions of early childhood, I present a historical overview of policies and happenings of what I consider as three

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<sup>4</sup> Racial classification remains a feature of contemporary South Africa. The apartheid categories, namely, Indian, Coloured, Africans, and Whites remain acutely evident in discussing education. The term Black South Africans or Black is used as a collective for Indians, Coloureds, and Africans. It is also used as a synonym for African. Current academic convention recognises the use of racial classifications for analytical purposes, acknowledging that such racial classifications were constructed under apartheid law as part of oppressive social practices.

important time shifts for the field. I present these shifts in three themes, namely, engineering separate and unequal (early) childhoods, attempts to reform early childhood, and transforming early childhood.

My aim is to provide a context for my study. Within the transformation theme I locate gaps in research and insert my study, within these concerns for knowledge production in early childhood education.

### **1.3.1 Engineering separate and unequal childhoods**

In the socially developing model of the child, which was attractive in the international political arena in the 1950's, socialisation traditionally started with a firmly grounded concept of society. Functionalist sociology strongly promoted the idea that the values and norms upheld by a society could be worked backwards into the consciousness of future adults. Within this mode of thinking children were viewed as sites for inculcation of dispositions necessary to reproduce society (James, Jenks & Prout 1998). The key concern of constructing the social order is not so much about what the child is, but what society demands of the child. (Early) childhood is a socialisation space that society uses to sustain itself through time. This dominant way of conceptualising childhood was useful to governments wanting to promote specific political, economic and social agendas.

In the South African context the socially developing model of the child was grounded in attempts to engineer a racially unequal society. The lives of young children were intimately linked to a broader ideological and political struggle (Department of Education 2001a). This struggle found (early) childhood as an ideal space for acceptance of separation according to racial and ethnic codes. The naturalisation of the latter was important to the apartheid project.

In what follows I focus on the policies that were deliberately used to engineer a society based on race to filter the consciousness of being White and Black in South Africa. As an integral part of the discussion, I weave snapshots of lives of children through adult memories of childhood (including my own) in the

apartheid era. This presentation is necessary, given the absence of texts on children's voices in an era that lacked investigations into childhoods across racial lines. Children's voices were mediated through adults due to perceptions of their ignorance and incompetence. It could be argued that since White childhoods were seen as the norm, it was also unnecessary to pay attention to experiences of children outside the norm. Only a few books have been written after 1994 to reflect experiences of Black people, especially children, during the apartheid era. These books are in the form of autobiographies and memoirs. I end this section by looking at centre-based early childhood provisioning during this period.

### **1.3.1.1 Apartheid as an organising principle for society**

The foundations of apartheid ideas, theories and practices can be traced to colonialist attitudes and actions in the days of economic exploitation of resources and British imperialism in the early 1900's (Hartshorne 1999). During this time, seeds of separateness were sown through stereotyping the character of indigenous people. The content of the category of being African was mapped in ways that suited the economic status quo.

It was the missionaries, in their ambiguous roles of civilising and educating the masses that posed the greatest challenge to the stereotypes. Some argued for the promotion of equality and raised the ceiling of education for African people. These moves, however, were somewhat countered by those that had a vested interest in promoting the inferiority of people of colour. Certain philosophical ideas of human nature were used to justify segregationist social policy (Terreblanche 2002). Nowhere was this more explicit than in the social engineering of the South African society based on apartheid.

In the 1940's, Black urbanisation, together with the rising levels of crime and growing political dissension, threatened White supremacy. The idea of apartheid offered the promise of discipline, regulation, and surveillance (Posel 2001). As a concept, apartheid was extensively used in the National Party election campaign in 1948 (Woods & Bostock 1986). The aim was to create widespread acceptance of ideas related to racial and ethnic separateness. The victory of the National

Party saw a host of social, economic, and political moves that were in favour of White South Africans, as opposed to Blacks.

As an ideology, apartheid was built on four basic premises (Fiske & Ladd 2004). Firstly, the concept of “nations” was used as a mark for separate development. The four ethnic groups were required to live and develop separately according to their own language, culture, and beliefs. The separation was legitimised by a religious text (Christianity) that promoted obedience to racial/ethnic purity. Secondly, White people were regarded as the civilising agents. They therefore had the task of leading the other three groups. Thirdly, in fulfilling their roles as agents of civilisation, White privileges were protected. Fourthly, whilst a fragmentary outlook of Black people as belonging to various nations was accepted, the British and Afrikaner were seen as one nation.

The principles, described above, by no means created a coherent apartheid ideology. The contradictions occurred in the need for inclusion of Blacks in the economic sphere and the exclusion of their participation in the social and political spheres. In all of these tensions, Posel (2001) argues that race was the fundamental organising principle for allocation of resources, opportunities, geographical settlements, planning and development, boundaries for social interactions, and the category through which the social and moral order was mediated.

It is by examining some of the racist policies that we can illuminate how children experienced separate and unequal childhoods. To this end I focus on The Population Registration Act, The Group Areas Act, and the Migrant Labour System.

#### **1.3.1.2 The Population Registration Act of 1950**

One of the key legislations in preserving racial purity and preventing racial mixing was achieved through the Population Registration Act of 1950. The Act required people to be identified and registered from birth as members of a particular racial group – Whites, Indians, Coloureds, and Africans (Terreblanche



2002). The racial classification became binding across all spheres of the person's experience (Posel 2001). Coloured people experienced the greatest ambiguities. Don Mattera (2005:131), a founding member of the Black Conscious Movement, recalls August 1955 when he underwent the classification process as a standard eight pupil.

We stood in a long queue inside a state-owned courtyard waiting for our turn to be classified or reclassified either as "pure" Coloureds or as "natives." As flowers and trees would be classified into certain species, so were the Coloured grouped and regrouped until they stopped believing they were just humans... In this country you are what they think you should be, what they want you to be, and all through the stroke of the pen.

The classifications were frequently made through humiliating procedures. Due to the salience of biological determinist notions of race, physical features (especially skin colour) played an important part in the classification process. One of the ways in which racial difference was read was through the textures of a person's hair by the notorious pencil test to determine the boundaries between Whites and Blacks (Posel 2001). Mattera elaborates:

One by one they move towards the huge gates, all of them touching their hair. I approach one of them. "Excuse me, big man, what's happening? Why are you pulling your hair like that?" Pointing over his shoulder with his thumb, he said, "Those...(people) are using matchsticks and pens to classify us!"

The Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and the Immorality Amendment Act (1950) complemented racial classification. Both these acts prevented marriages and extramarital relations between Black and White people. In cases where this occurred, families experienced extreme difficulty in negotiating the bi-racial identities of their children. Mattera recalls how the Gabriel brothers were split because of their skin colour. One was classified as "pure" Coloured and the other as "native" African. He noted that, according to the law, the boys could never be seen in the same township and the same home.

I also recall my mother expressing concern about the way in which our relatives lost their true Muslim name during population registration procedures. She related how the family name “Yunus” became “Ennos” because the White man doing the writing could not pronounce the name correctly. She expressed concern about tracing the family genealogy through the foreign name. Nelson Mandela, in the *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994), attributes the practice of Africans having Western and African names to Whites being either unable to pronounce African names, or viewing their names as uncivilised.

### **1.3.1.3 The Group Areas Act of 1950**

Another powerful legalisation that physically zoned the life spaces of Blacks was the Group Areas Act of 1950. The Act could be understood as a desire for White control for lucrative space and land (Fiske & Ladd 2004). The best residential areas were earmarked for Whites. The Act had three distinctive moves – forced removals, rigorous township development, and homeland development. Blacks that occupied the areas zoned for Whites were forced to move. Indians and Coloureds were most affected by the Group Areas Act. This was a time of great pain and anger as families felt the loss of physical space occupied by previous generations. Ellen Kuzwayo (2005:71), also known as the “Mother of Soweto”, notes in her autobiography how the farm that belonged to her family for generations was taken away from her because it was located within a White area.

A stroke of the pen made it illegal for Black people to own land in that area: White farmers were to take over. My maternal grandparents owned the farm in the 1880's; it was home to my parents and to us children. There had been close to 100 years of legitimate freehold ownership; it had been earned and maintained with hard work and toil of our elders for the benefit and welfare of their children and their families. Through iniquitous and inhumane legislation, my family was rendered homeless and wanderers in the land of our birth.

My family was also part of the painful process of forced removal. I was brought up in an extended family unit in Durban North. I lived in a huge house occupied

by grandparents, aunts, uncles, and their siblings. The enforcement of the Group Areas Act meant the dissipation of the unit. My grandparents, aunts and uncles each had to apply for separate housing in the Indian township of Chatsworth, Durban. The new housing scheme led to the nuclear family becoming more defined and the extended support less prominent. As a child, my greatest loss in the process of relocation was access to the area around the Umgeni River. I remember going for walks with my father along the river. The number of playmates I had was also reduced. On the upside, I became closer to my parents, my brothers and my newborn sister. Now, with democracy, my extended family qualifies for compensation of land loss during the apartheid era.

The Group Areas Act also resulted in greater development of Black locations as townships (Fiske & Ladd 2004). Those that were uprooted from land designated for Whites, and those coming from the rural areas for employment, were housed in the townships. For security purposes, major railway lines, rivers and roads separated townships.

There was a shortage of housing in the townships. Overcrowding, lack of facilities, and high crime rates characterised life in the townships. Young children bore the brunt of poor quality of life in the townships. Chimeloane (2005:36) notes how, within the zones of Soweto, there were also invisible borders that marked territory. He noted “short cuts” between zones as dangerous passages for children.

Ikaneng, where I went to school, was a stone’s throw away from Zone Three. I lived in Zone Four... The most dangerous spots in any of the zones were passages that made the journey shorter. Passages were dangerous for everyone, including us kids... There was one passage I used on my way to and from school. There were no alternate routes...bullies and territory mongers gave you the chase... The passage on this particular route brought painful memories of a series of accidents I experienced.

Africans were allowed to work in areas outside their designated land spaces, but they had to return to the townships at night. This absence of caregivers meant that young children were left for long hours without supervision or in the care of grandmothers and older siblings - a trend that continues today. There were also fears that parents may not return from their place of employment. This was partly due to the pass laws. On entering designated areas for Whites, identification documents (passes) had to be produced. There were also spot raids of passes in the townships where children witnessed their parents being humiliated by security police. In his memoirs of childhood, William Blake Modisane (2005:140), an actor and writer, recalls a pass raid that implicated his father.

There was a Pass raid and two White police constables with their African “police boys” were demanding to see the Passes of all adult African males. “Pass, jong...” demanded the police constable from Uncle George, a distant relation of my father. “Come on, we haven’t all day.” He would not address my father in that tone, I bragged, my father is older than he. “And you, why are you sitting on your...?” the constable bawled at my father. “Scratch out your Pass and tax.” I was diminished... My hero image (of my father) disintegrated, crumbling into an inch heap of ashes; I could not face it; could not understand it.

Many women from the townships were employed as domestic workers and child minders to White families. These women were the bridges to providing a glimpse of cross cultural/privileged childhoods to children in the townships. Sindiwe Mogona (2005:79) recalls this childhood experience in Guguletu.

...all the working women of my childhood were employed as nannies, housemaids, chars, and cooks. These women brought into the Black location droppings of white families they served. They returned with bags bulging with cold toast, stale bread... They came back with clothing... Those who worked for families with children also brought toys to their homes. Books and comics was another offering.

In some instances the cross-cultural experiences of children created questions about identity and privilege. Mariam Makeba (2005: 101), a renowned singer in South Africa, recalls how privileged childhood penetrated her consciousness as a little girl living in a Black location.

You would be blind not to see that everything that is better or even good goes to whites. You cannot help but think: I wish I was white so I might live well and not suffer the way I do. But if I am envious of white people as a little girl, I am only envious of the way they live.

White children mostly experienced privileged childhoods through infrastructure created by the apartheid regime. Most were shielded from the harsh realities experienced by children of colour. Antony Sher (2005:29), an actor by profession, recalls his ignorance of apartheid as a child:

I knew little about apartheid laws and all. I wasn't aware that Blacks were forced to carry passes, and to live separately, in townships... Even though I was eleven in 1960, when the Sharpeville massacre occurred, I have no recollection of it. It wasn't just that the government was ferociously efficient in censorship; ours was the most apolitical of households. The whole family voted for the Nationalists... Mishearing at first, I thought this was a real name for another uncle perhaps – Uncle Nat. Neither of my parents read books much... No word of criticism about apartheid was made... as far as I could see all of us – the masters and servants living there - were perfectly happy.

There were, however, some White children who were very aware of apartheid laws. Gillian Slovo, the daughter of Joe Slovo - the leader of the Communist Party and the murdered journalist Ruth First - related a troubled childhood. Due to the activism of her father, Gillian experienced numerous police raids at her home. In her recollections of childhood she refers to these acts as a “new normality” in childhood (Slovo 2005:214). She lived a life of constant surveillance. She also expressed her fear of being found out as a White child who sided with Black people.

The creation of Bantu homelands was also part of the Group Areas Act. Arguments relating to land and ancestry were used to motivate for citizenry to a homeland rather than the Republic of South Africa (Fiske & Ladd 2004). Those Africans that were not economically useful to the regime were sent to the homelands. Childhood in the homelands, although dogged by poverty and hardship, produced rich cultural textures of lives for children growing up in extended family units and learning their gender roles in their communities. Here is how Nelson Mandela, in the State of the World's Children in 2001, describes his childhood:

My earliest childhood memories are of the village of Qunu in the rolling hills and green valleys of the Transkei territory in the south-eastern part of South Africa. Qunu was where I spent the happiest years of my boyhood, surrounded by a family full of babies, children, aunts and uncles... There was where my father taught me, by the way he led his life, the sense of justice that I carried with me for many decades I have lived... It was in Qunu that my mother gave me stories that charged my imagination... From my boyhood friends I learned the dignity and the meaning of honour. From listening to and watching the meetings of tribal elders, I learned the importance of democracy and of giving everyone a chance to be heard. And I learned of my people, the Xhosa nation.

These ways of constituting childhood, however, were not valued. Within the capitalist working class mode of thinking, the cultural dimension was relegated to knowledge of lesser importance.

#### **1.3.1.4 The Migrant Labour System**

Another devastating policy that affected the lives of children was the migrant labour system. This system came into being in the late nineteenth century. African males left their villages to work on the minefields. They provided a cheap supply of labour to the mining industry. In 1952 a comprehensive system of migrant labour for White entrepreneurs with stricter influx control to urban areas was put in place (Terreblanche 2002). The wages paid to a migrant worker

were equivalent to his own personal needs. No provision was made for the family who was expected to survive on subsistence agriculture (Wolpe 1995). There were also no provisions made for the migrant workers' retirement or education.

Ngwane (2002), however, notes that the migrant system made it possible for males to control their domestic economies in the homelands. Men were able to convert their wages into cattle. This was a local form of value that was central in attracting women and gaining control over their labour and that of their children. In this way the migrant labour system contributed to the material and symbolic means of traditional manhood and lifestyles in rural South Africa.

Women and children bore the brunt of migrant labour, as they battled to keep households going. Sindi Magona (2005:85) recalls the effect of the migrant labour practice on her childhood:

Our home became a home from home for people from our village (called *homeboys* and *homegirls*) who had been excised from their own families by the combined exigencies of their need for employment and the government's influx control policy, a policy aimed at keeping Africans away from the urban areas in South Africa - policy that succeeded in wrecking African families in the villages.

The fragmented family structure and poor government support for African children as future labour supply were key elements in creating vulnerable early childhoods. This vulnerability was further entrenched through a lack of provisioning for early childhood centre-based care and education for Black children.

#### **1.3.1.5 Centre-based early childhood provisioning**

The continuing economic and concomitant social changes in South Africa created the need for alternate childcare arrangements for all race groups. Increasing employment of women, changing family structures, lifestyles of

White South Africans, and urbanisation were key factors in bringing early childhood care and education outside the home. Welfare organisations, communities, and faith-based organisations began to rally around the creation of early childhood centres for working women.

The engineering of separate and unequal childhoods was most visible in the state's provisioning of early childhood services. The broader discriminatory policies based on race found expression in supporting early childhood. The state mostly regarded early childhood as the domain of parents, but alluded to the fact that the poor (mostly Whites) were in need of centre-based nursery schools (Webber 1978). In 1940 the state recognised nursery schools as non-essential additions to the national system of education. Within this context, a polarisation between nursery schools and crèches emerged. Custodial care, the concern of the welfare institutions in day care centres (crèches), dealt more with caregivers keeping a watch over children whilst their parents worked. This occurred because parents could not pay the fees for the few qualified teachers that existed. As a result, crèches did not have the expertise to provide educationally stimulating programmes. This type of service largely characterised Black early childhood provisioning which served working mothers. Nursery education was seen as a facility for high income city children who were taught by middle class teachers (Short 1984). As supplementary to education in the home, it became an early start to a privileged education for White middle class children. Different cognitively appropriate programmes were designed for nursery centres, given the importance of creating a nurturing environment for the development of intelligence (Noel 1976). Webber (1978) notes that the content of nursery programmes was a source of tension for Whites. There were conflicts around the state's preoccupation with Christian Nationalism and the development of free thinking promoted by Froebelian and Montessorian ideas on early childhood education.

In the main, the access to crèches and nursery education relayed a rationale that was consistent in entrenching separatism and reproducing an unequal society. As future leaders, managers, and appropriate human resources for industrialisation, White children were being prepared for skilled labour. Black children were



being prepared for semi-skilled and unskilled labour. Government responses to early childhood educational provisioning reflected this broad plan in terms of resource allocation. Whilst welfare subsidies were available to all groups, African nursery schools were not eligible for funding (Department of Education 2001a). The general decrease of government involvement in early childhood for Black children meant that early childhood centres sustained themselves through parent fees (a trend that continues today). For Blacks, the little support for teacher training was steadily decreasing and was largely undertaken by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The Bernard Van Leer Foundation provided the funding to establish these organisations. In 1972 the Early Learning Centre was established in Athlone in Cape Town. In 1976 Entokesweni was established in Soweto and in 1977 The Early Learning Centre was established in Chatsworth, Durban (Webber 1978). Despite these moves, centre-based early childhood education for Blacks, was largely of an inferior quality due to the lack of political will.

Early childhood services for White children, however, were always supported. For example, during the period 1948 to 1969 there was rationalisation around early childhood education provisioning. Various legislations ensured that support for African children was eliminated and limited subsidies went to White children (Department of Education 2001a). The benefits of these subsidies were implicit within The National Policy Education Act (1967). This key legislation ensured the incorporation of nursery education into White provincial departments. This move made it possible for White nursery schools both privately owned and those affiliated to schools to be subsidised. Many training colleges were established to ensure nursery teachers were qualified. The government paid White teachers' salaries. Private White early childhood centres were able to sustain themselves because of the purchasing power of White parents. In addition, the South African Association of Early Childhood Education ensured that there was a cohort of experts who trained internationally to inform early childhood education, hold regular conferences, do research, and monitor standards.

In the absence of widespread centre-based facilities for Black children, a large number of working mothers used home-based day care arrangements. Short

(1977) notes that in a comprehensive survey conducted by Project BABS (Build a Better Society) in 1973 in Kew Town, a local housing estate for Coloureds in the Cape, revealed some trends on home-based day care at that time. In Kew Town many women were unemployed and lived within the extended family system. It was found that in 46% of families with children before school going age, the mother was the caretaker. In families where the mother worked 24% of the children were left with their grandmothers. Twenty four percent of parents used other childcare arrangements like childminders. Short defines a childminder as a woman caring for a small number of children in her home for a fee. Food was usually provided by the mother and very little was done in terms of early stimulation activities. Only 6% of the families used centre-based provisioning, mostly due to high fees.

During the “thick” apartheid era, the political will based on race reinforced centre-based early childhood education as a privileged middle class offering for Whites. In so doing, it entrenched Black disadvantage. In addition to the lives of children in an apartheid society, the institutional space of centre-based early childhood, available to only a small number of Black children, was also a crucial breeding ground for separate, unequal childhoods.

### **1.3.2 Reforming early childhood**

The crumbling of apartheid began to surface in the late 1970's and early 1980's (Fiske & Ladd 2004). Resistance movements, national, and international economic pressures led to the breakdown. The struggle movements undermined the political order of the day. Underground activities of the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC) continued to raise awareness of racial inequality. There were also mass anti-apartheid demonstrations. The Soweto Rights in 1976 demonstrated the protest against the introduction of Afrikaans (perceived as the language of the oppressor) in African schools. Faith-based organisations and Black educational institutions spread ideas that were oppositional to apartheid. In the main, these moves started greater consciousness about ethnic pride and injustice.

It is within these turbulent times that the national government began facing increased economic pressures. The growing sophistication of the South African economy created a greater need for skilled Black labour. The latter was necessary to compete in a capitalist global economy. Furthermore, the local business sector voiced its concern regarding the products of education for the world of work (Hartshorne 1999). The sector argued that apartheid education resulted in an inadequately prepared work force. The human resources were not compatible with the free enterprise system and the maintenance of economic growth.

These concerns were key to a façade of reform efforts through political restructuring in 1983 (Hartshorne 1999). The House of Representatives for Coloureds and the House of Delegates for Indians were established. Both these houses were subservient to the House of Assembly for Whites. Africans were excluded from this political arrangement. The restructuring was part of an effort to build a new Black middle class and to reduce resistance.

It is against this historical backdrop and the government's ambiguous policies, of taking action, yet not taking action, that I examine educational reform in early childhood.

### **1.3.2.1 Interventions in early childhood**

During the reform period, early childhood was seen as crucial social space to secure economic growth and future manpower needs at minimal cost. Between 1980 and 1981 the De Lange Commission was contracted by the national government to make recommendations for reforming basic education. Short (1984) notes that the Commission capitalised on views of early childhood that had roots in American compensatory education grounded in Project Headstart. Within this thinking, children from disadvantaged backgrounds needed to be compensated for the deficiencies in their environment through exposing them to preschool programmes to prepare them for primary school.

In its report, the Commission used compensatory thinking and recognised the importance of pre-primary education to curb the high failure rate amongst Black children in the Junior Primary Phase and early school leaving. The three year preschool education programme, already in place for White children, was deemed unsuitable for Blacks due to the high cost of implementation. It was recommended that a bridging programme of one or two years be instituted for school readiness. This recommendation could be read as giving a watered down pre-school programme for Blacks, thereby still promoting early childhood education as a White middle class privilege. The government's final response entrenched this view. It was agreed to finance school readiness/bridging programmes for children at risk in Black schools (Hartshorne 1999; National Education Policy Investigation - NEPI 1992). For birth to four years there was still minimal support as this phase continued to be perceived as a private domain of parents. Only small subsidies by the Departments of Health and Welfare were available for Black children.

In the absence of widespread government support for early childhood services for Blacks, a more vibrant NGO sector emerged. This sector shouldered the major responsibility for non-formal training in early childhood and the year before school (preschool). They mobilised programmes through the concept of educare, which created possibilities to bridge the divide between custodial care in crèches and education in nursery schools (Rickards 1991). NGOs accessed funding from the corporate sector and international donor agencies. The reforming efforts of NGOs were visible in their involvement in building preschools in disadvantaged communities in the rural areas and the homelands. This helped to provide educare for women in poor families seeking employment. The training of educare workers and preschool teachers/managers was a key contribution to providing quality care and education for preschool children.

In some instances, the work of NGOs was empowering to communities. Plaatjies (1991) maintains that people became more aware of the importance of early childhood development and learning through NGO interventions. The NGOs were not only involved in centre-based early childhood education provisioning, but also began to map programmes to support home-based educational

interventions especially for children under three. Parent education and home visiting programmes became more prominent (Short 1984). These interventions strengthened linkages between the needs of children, women, families, and the community. There was also skills development that helped uplift communities through income generation.

The reform efforts by the NGOs, however, were difficult to implement. The lack of political will, the context of poverty and lack of infrastructure created many difficulties. Many NGOs took an activist stance to promote awareness of apartheid educare in need of serious reform. The excerpt below outlines such a response.

In South Africa there is a severe lack of preschool facilities available for young children in the communities where poverty is most serious. Relatively few of these facilities are able to provide the kind of educational programme, which disadvantaged children, really need: centres are overcrowded; there are few trained teachers; the adult-child ratios are poor... Where babies are accommodated, there tends to be little or no awareness of their developmental needs, with the result that only custodial care is provided. Therefore infants, who are already at risk, spend most of their waking hours in unstimulating environments (Short 1984:7).

### **1.3.2.2 Problems in the reform period**

The small reform efforts in early childhood continued to be overshadowed by policies that distributed resources using race as a criteria. This was evident in the budgetary allocations, subsidy rates, and teacher education (NEPI 1992). Short (1984) notes that estimates of attendance at centre-based early childhood settings in the early 1980s showed that only 4% of Coloured, 0,6 % of African, and 3% of Indian children were in some kind of educare. Most children continued to be part of home-based day care with little support. The inequalities in centre-based provisioning continued to violate the rights of children. The high cost of pre-primary education for White children with tertiary trained teachers continued to

provide the best quality early childhood education. The watered down pre-primary classes for Indian and Coloured children and the Bridging Programme for the first year of school for African children were dogged by problems of quality and access.

There were also problems with educare provided by numerous private providers in preschool centres, crèches, and by childminders. These services were rendered for gain. Reilley and Hofmeyr (1983) raised concern about profit-making centres being more occupied with providing a service for convenience of parents in the interests of financial gain rather than promoting the development of children (a crucial concern in this study – see Chapters Four and Five for details). They further noted that overcrowding, inappropriate curriculum, and concerning adult-child ratios characterised these services. In Black townships the crèches were also in a similar situation. Pretorius (1987) noted that many crèches were staffed by too few staff members that were unqualified to work with young children. The lack of specialised training compromised early stimulation of children.

Overall, the training of teachers was problematic. Tertiary education opportunities for training specialist pre-primary teachers were reduced, as preparation for formal schooling became more of a focus (NEPI 1992). There was limited training by technical colleges for Black preschool assistants who had secondary schooling till standard seven. Due to limited access, the bulk of Black teachers were trained by NGO resource agencies. Since these organisations were not accredited and monitored on a regular basis, the quality of the training in some agencies was questionable.

There were also problems with recognition of qualifications of those coming through non-formal NGO training. Educare workers would do numerous courses but not receive recognition for a qualification. This portrayed early childhood work, as elsewhere in the world, as a low status and poorly paid job, especially amongst Blacks, given the lack of state support. A gendered reading highlighting sexist practices also came to the fore. In summary, early childhood was, and still is, undervalued in terms of women's work.

Another area of concern was the curriculum. The educational approaches used to develop curriculum differed among the education departments and NGOs (NEPI 1992). This was evident in the various philosophies and teaching methodologies expounded by the various institutions. In the school readiness programmes, especially in those emanating from White teacher training colleges, great emphasis was placed on perceptual training, concept development, and language use. Remedial education influences were strong in the school readiness programmes. The concern of boosting early school performance was in conflict with the developmental needs of young learners and life long learning. The formal approach by the education departments was in tension with the child-centred, process-oriented, play-based methods of learning favoured by the NGOs. There were some attempts to arrive at a locally relevant curriculum.

Educational approaches for curriculum were mainly informed by international borrowings – Montessori, Waldorf, High Scope, and Matal. The imported models and attempts to arrive at a locally relevant curriculum did not adequately problematise the assumptions of childhood and children. Western tenets, thought to be universal in education and the care of young children, were filtered through training materials adapted from western sources. The educational approach discounted an inclusive curriculum that paid attention to special needs and to cultural and linguistic diversity. The influence of race, gender, and class in the South African context was neutralised through focus on programmes perceived to be international best practice at the time. Notions of best practice were largely informed by White Eurocentric middle class contexts that were replicated in disadvantaged communities (Department of Education 2001a). In this way early childhood provisioning for Blacks worked from a cultural deficit approach. In the main, the imports of best practice were problematic for all children, as their lived realities were ignored in favour of universal benchmarks.

In summary, the National Policy Investigation, in the early 1990's in South Africa, revealed that the provision of early childhood services was inadequate, fragmented, uncoordinated, and with a lack of a solid educational thrust for Blacks. It was recommended that the rights of children be grounded in equity, access, and redress. The fragmentary responses from the Departments of

Health, Welfare, and Education needed to be united in a new educare policy. A comprehensive plan for reversing historical neglect had to be instituted.

### **1.3.3 Transforming early childhood**

The Constitution of South Africa 1996 (Act No. 108 of 1996) provided the basis for transforming of early childhood education since 1994. A strong political will emerged for early childhood through the broader changes in transforming South Africa to a democracy. On 24 May 1994, President Nelson Mandela committed the efforts of the Government of National Unity (GNU) to a reconstruction and development programme (Chisholm 2003). The key themes of creating a people-centred society, encouraging economic growth, and fostering reconciliation were emphasised. The aim was to “heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice, and fundamental human rights” (Constitution of South Africa 1996:33).

The reconstruction of early childhood began with numerous policy moves to shift early childhood from the periphery to the core of South African society. In particular, early socialisation was seen as important space for a constitutional duty to counter racial prejudice, sexist behaviour, and human rights abuse. The aim is to create respect for differences in a multicultural context and shape an inclusive environment to counter the apartheid discourse of the past (Department of Education 2001a). In order to meet these imperatives, due emphasis is placed on values such as developing critical capacities of socialising agents (early childhood teachers) to instil democratic values.

The democratic shift led to greater acknowledgement of the complexity of children’s development and the fundamental inequities in the developmental environment of the past. Policy frameworks began to acknowledge how the overall environment of the child and interrelated factors affecting growth and development were key elements to effective early childhood provisioning. There has been support for holistic development of the child and an integrated strategy for early childhood especially in bringing together health, education, and social welfare.



Within this multiple developmental framework, the concept of educare was viewed as inadequate. Educare focused largely on educational interventions, which were “only one component of caring for young children” (Department of Education 2001b:13). The target age cohort of zero to six years was also seen as problematic. International perspectives in early childhood development were beginning to acknowledge zero to nine years as more inclusive of learning patterns of development that were different from those of older children.

In summary, the concept of educare did not pay adequate attention to the complexity of children’s development and the interconnected factors that impact on development in early childhood. These concerns led to the adoption of the term early childhood development (ECD). ECD is defined as “an umbrella term, which applies to the processes by which children from birth to nine years grow and thrive, physically, mentally, emotionally, morally, and socially” (Department of Education 1995:33). This expanded definition of early childhood, together with the imperative to protect the rights of young children, became the foundation of early childhood development policies.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified in 1995, paved the way for making children’s needs a central concern of the government’s childhood development strategies. The premises of survival, development, protection, and participatory rights of children began to inform the transformatory landscape for (early) childhood. This was largely visible through the National Programme of Action (NPA) for children. Within the NPA, ECD is one of the priority areas that see to the realisation of children’s rights. In addition, the ratification of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of Children in 2000 created more actions relating to African cultural aspects in childhood.

The policy and legal frameworks for early childhood were further informed by two key projects undertaken in the field, namely the National ECD Pilot Project and the Nationwide Audit of ECD Provisioning. The National ECD Pilot Project launched in 1997, provided information on the most effective means of delivering Reception Year education, accreditation, subsidies, and teacher training (Department of Education 2001a). For the first time in democratic South

Africa, the National Audit of ECD Provisioning (2001) provided data on the nature and extent of ECD provisioning, services and resources.

Both these projects informed the development of White Paper Five on Early Childhood Education, which was passed in May 2001. This legislation prioritises the establishment of a national system of Grade R provisioning for children between the ages of five and six, to be phased in gradually. The aim is to have all children who enter Grade One to participate in an accredited Grade R programme by 2010. Children below Grade R (birth to four) are seen as part of the intersectoral collaboration in the National Programme of Action and this group therefore received little attention in White Paper Five.

For children below Grade R (birth to four) the government has prioritised ECD in many policies and programmes. Government programmes steadily increased access to housing, water, sanitation, and free maternal and child health care for children under six, and child support grants. During this study the Integrated Plan for ECD was unveiled. The vision is to create a framework to bring together learning, socialisation, care, and support. The plan addresses the rights of young children to ECD services (Department of Education 2004). The sub-programme *Tshwaragano Ka Bana* “Togetherness for Children” focuses on assistance to poor and vulnerable children and their families through integration of job creation, community development and early childhood development.

From the above it is evident that in the first years of democracy, massive attention was paid to the lives of young children through transformation policies. These policy moves, however, also created tensions. The tensions were most visible in the disparities between the nature of early childhood developmental needs and the economic workings of the state apparatus.

#### **1.3.3.1 Transformation trouble spots**

In part, the trouble spots for early childhood education occurred concurrently with a shift in the macro economic strategy of the government. The Reconstruction and Development Programme that began with the advent of

democracy was considered inappropriate for attracting foreign investments and making South Africa a global economic player. In other words, the world markets were taken to be the overriding force in developing South Africa's priorities. This assumption found its purist expression in GEAR (Growth, Employment, and Redistribution) in 1996 (Hart 2002; Hall, Muthkrishna and Ebrahim 2005). The advent of GEAR sat uneasily with the emancipatory promises of the liberation struggle.

In early childhood education, many of the problems related to the systemic inequalities of the past have continued into democratic South Africa. One of the key areas that are problematic relates to the issue of public funding for early childhood services. Although the importance of public funding has been recognised for redress of past discrimination against young children, funding for ECD projects continues to be absorbed by other expenditures in the different provinces. The lack of a ring-fenced budget continues to hamper ECD provisioning. ECD remains the most vulnerable sector in provincial budgets.

For children below Grade R the realisation of intersectoral programmes is proving to be difficult (Institute for Partnership between Education and Business 2005). The holistic approach to ECD requires "joined up thinking" and "joined up service delivery". Effective collaboration is difficult to achieve due to the varied approaches used by the different departments (education, health, social welfare). The different priorities, administrative procedures, and budgetary processes continue to undermine the partnership mindset. The ideal of providing one-stop centres for young children and their families to address a variety of ECD needs is proving to be costly. The partnership mindset, although valuable for the general wellbeing of young children, is also diluting the focus on early childhood education, as well as the training of teachers, and establishment of an effective curriculum for children below Grade R. Furthermore, the combination of adult basic education and early childhood within provincial structures is also skewing the focus on early childhood education.

Teacher training is another area of concern in early childhood education. The national audit revealed that the majority of teachers received their training from

NGOs. At the time of the audit, most of these organisations were not accredited. To this day, many teachers do not hold full qualifications and are therefore considered to be unqualified by the Department of Education. The national audit in ECD revealed that 43% of teachers in this phase had NGO training, 23% had no training, 15% were considered underqualified, 12% were adequately qualified, and 7% had non ECD qualifications.

Given the context described above, the lack of government support for all children below Grade R (birth to four) has resulted in private providers becoming prominent for this grouping. White Paper Five on Early Childhood Education (2001b:56) describes ECD as largely a “market driven” and a “community driven” activity. Early childhood centres are funded through parent fees, community fundraising and/or donations, with little or no financial support coming from the government. They thus operate as commercial enterprises or businesses for profit. These alternative forms of early childhood provisioning as significant providers for children of working women, formed the focus of this study.

Whilst Grade R had been the target of research in terms of provisioning, the private sites as significant providers for children below Grade R had not received any substantial research focus. Given this scenario, little was known about the constructions of childhood *for* and *by* children in these centre-based settings. It was this state of affairs that set the research agenda for this study.

### **1.3.3.2 Gaps in research**

The National Audit of ECD provisioning (2001) was one of the key reports informing the focus of this study. At the outset, it is acknowledged that a paucity of qualitative research in early childhood education (especially below Grade R) existed. The present Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor, in her address at an Early Childhood Conference in February 2005, indicated that it was critical that time and space be created for research into early childhood realities. She viewed research as one of the important aspects to improve services to very young and young children. This call, however, has been impeded by a lack of a

critical mass in the sub-field of early childhood education. Generally, there is reluctance amongst PhD students to research early childhood education, as it is perceived to be a dead-end career path in South Africa. This study aims at contributing towards qualitative research methodology and expertise for knowledge production in this particular field.

South African research into early childhood tends to be located in psychology and especially child development. The developmental approach to studying childhood and children relates mostly to documenting age-related experiences, either in a universal or a contextual way. For example, *Mandela's Children – Growing Up in Post-Apartheid South Africa* by Barbarin and Richter (2001) is a key publication that records the lives of children from a developmental, contextual perspective. The “Birth to Ten Project” provides invaluable perspectives on the macro context that shapes children’s lives in post-apartheid South Africa. However, no chapter in this report is devoted to children’s subjective experiences. Their voices and the hundreds of languages in which they tell us about their childhoods remain invisible in the mass of details on child development.

New international approaches in child research are exploring more sociological and contextually located dimensions to the constructions of childhood. This study departed from the dominant developmental approach to research in early childhood, and entered new discourse spaces of childhood and young children through marginalised paradigms. With regard to methodology, it sought to find possibilities for data production when young children were positioned as participants in research.

Another gap in research relates to the changing images of childhood and children brought about by the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The view of early childhood as a stage of life where adults work with passive young children positioned as adults-in-the-making is challenged. Young children, even babies, should be respected as people, citizens, able learners, powerful thinkers, and human beings (Nutbrown 1996). Perspectives on childhood and children are instrumental in creating systems of educating children. In early

childhood education there is a need to know teachers' perspectives that inform the constructions of childhood *for* children in centre-based settings. In respecting young children as social actors in their lives, there is a need to illuminate their power and agency in constructions of childhood. My study attempted to address this reality.

Given the urgency to promote an integrated society through the vehicle of early childhood, it is important to look at centre-based settings that are racially diverse. The National Audit of ECD Provisioning (2001a) has noted that the racial segregation of sites that was prevalent during the apartheid era is changing very slowly towards more racially integrated sites. At the time of the audit, only 10% of these sites reflected this change. The distribution of wealth and hence the class factor, has played an important part in the formation of racially integrated sites by private providers. Research is needed in order to provide greater understanding of the power and expectations of teachers in the constructions of early childhood in racially integrated sites. With regard to young children, as people constructing childhood, there is a need to explore notions of differences (age, abilities, race, gender, language). This move is important to gain an increased level of understanding on the negotiation of differences for equity work in early childhood education. In the light of this, this study paid attention to racially integrated sites by private providers with an emphasis on both teachers and children in constructing childhoods at early childhood centres catering for children below Grade R.

#### **1.4 Research questions**

Given the gaps in research, the research problem is formally expressed as follows:

How is early childhood constructed in centre-based provisioning *for* children and *by* children below Grade R?

Two early childhood centres managed by private providers were selected. Both the centres offered services for children below Grade R. Childhood is a variable

of social analysis. Prout and James (1997) argue that it can never be separated from other variables such as class, gender, and race. Bearing this in mind, I selected two opposite types of centres, in terms of social class composition. Both the centres housed children from at least three race groups. Seven teachers were involved in the study. The centres were specifically chosen with the mindset that they were key locations within which the constructions of childhood were defined and performed.

In addressing the research problem sub-questions were used. The voices of teachers were enabled through the category, “constructions of childhood *for* children”. The sub-questions are as follows:

- What are the dominant discourses informing the constructions of childhood *for* children at the centres?
- What images of children emerge from teachers’ constructions of childhood?

I examined teachers’ constructions of childhood with the view to arrive at a critical understanding of them as key interpreters in the process of making centre-based childhoods for young children.

The meaning making of young children was enabled through the category “constructions of childhood *by* children”. The questions are as follows:

What do the *doings* of young children tell us about constructions of childhood? This question is deepened by asking the following:

- How do young children construct their childhoods?
- How do boys and girls construct their childhoods?

As an entry point into this part of the study, the key verb to the constructions of childhood, namely, *doing* was central. This focal point made it possible for me to see young children as active people constructing childhoods within the

complexities of life. I explored young children's experiences through the lens of their personhood rather than in terms of the traditional developmental benchmarks of ages and stages.

Since the inclusion of young children themselves would be new in early childhood research in the South African context, I approached the research methodology chapter by engaging with the following question:

- How do we research early childhood when young children are positioned as social actors (participants) in research?

To address this question, a novel methodology in early childhood research had to be employed in order to illuminate ways of valid data production.

## **1.5 Chapter overview**

The introductory chapter sets the context for this study in three parts. In the first part I show the shifts in thinking about early childhood education and I argue for the location of this study within concerns that have been voiced for disrupting familiar ways of knowing early childhood and young children. In the second part I introduce myself. I argue that my experiences as a child, my role as a mother, and my experiences as a teacher and a researcher are directly related to the nature of this project. In the third part of this chapter I discuss constructions of childhood in the South African context through three themes that are indicative of important time shifts for early childhood. The themes of engineering separate and unequal (early) childhoods, attempts to reform early childhood, and transforming early childhood aim at deepening understanding of the social construction of early childhood in the South African context. This discussion helps to contextualise the gaps in research and the formulation of my research problem and related sub-questions.

Chapter Two aligns this study to reconceptualist thinking in early childhood education. I argue that the historical context of inequalities in South Africa have necessitated a critical stance towards conventional understandings of childhood



and children in order to seek new possibilities for the field. I begin my critical exploration through discussing the salience of western childhood histories. Essentialist and fixed notions of childhood and children are examined through dominant truths on human nature, child development, and socialisation. This is followed by a deliberate assemblage of marginalised theories as a reconceptualist theoretical toolkit. The aim is to use these tools to build a thesis that contests taken-for-granted assumptions in early childhood education. Theories from the social constructionist and poststructural approaches are favoured.

Chapter Three outlines the methodological framework for this study. My aim is to illuminate methodological moves when young children become active in research. Within this engagement I detail how I constructed evidence for this study. I locate this study within an ethnographic tradition informed by social constructionist and poststructural thinking. This is followed by discussions on the practical realities of the research process. I outline the context within which the research took place. I discuss the phases of creating visibility of young children's knowledge, participatory techniques, power relations, work with teachers, and situated ethics. In so doing, I provide possibilities for researching early childhood through the lens of young children as social actors (participants) in research.

Chapters Four to Seven consider the articulations of teachers and young children in the constructions of childhood through paying attention to talk, actions, and related literature. These chapters are arranged around the research questions. Two chapters foreground the power effects of dominant discourses in creating centre-based environments for early childhood education *for* young children. Chapter Four explores the discourse of market childhood. Chapter Five explores teachers' positioning in related normalising discourses of young children. Chapters Six and Seven are constructed to counter normalising views of young children. Chapter Six considers the power and agency of young children as people *doing* childhoods. Specifically, young children's struggle for meaning is explored through doing distance from baby stage and the creation of alignments to bigness as negotiations in the temporality of growing up. This is followed by a deepening of young children's power and agency in articulating the salience of

race in their lives. Chapter Seven gives impetus to boys and girls constructing gendered childhoods. I show how boys and girls invest in particular storylines and positions to articulate gendered childhoods.

Chapter Eight is the final chapter that draws conclusions about how early childhood is constructed in private, centre-based environments *for* children and *by* children below Grade R. This research suggests that the current constructions of centre-based early childhood *for* children is maintained and somewhat challenged through the logic of the markets that privileges parents as clients and makes salient normalising discourses of young children. A key finding is that the type of childhood experienced by young children will depend on the purchasing power of their parents. The social project of making early childhood as a space for democratic practice is weakened by the institutional discourses and related practices that concentrate on producing human capital for a fee. With regard to young children's constructions of childhood, this research suggests that they construct their childhoods as people and as boys and girls who struggle to make meaning of themselves in rational and non-contradictory ways of being as they engage with multiple messages in their context specificities. The children (re) produce familiar ways of being but they also attempt to loosen these ways of being in their present status as young children. In so doing, the children contest normalising views of them. This summary of the findings in this study is followed by possibilities for change and future research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### EXPLORING CONSTRUCTIONS OF CHILDHOOD AND CHILDREN THROUGH RECONCEPTUALIST THINKING

#### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I locate my study within reconceptualist thinking in early childhood. Researchers working from this perspective take a critical stance towards modernist assumptions of childhood and children. In particular, they use marginalised theories to create an epistemological crisis in the field of early childhood. The aim is to create a rethink of dominant ways of knowing early childhood and young children in order to invite new dialogue. In the main, the move is to transform childhood deficiency into childhood competency with voices of both adults and children.

My choice for a reconceptualist perspective was guided by the fact that it allowed for concentrated understanding of dominant ways of thinking in the field, critique, and possibilities for change. In addition, it allowed for the selection of a mix of theories. These theories helped me to build my thesis away from an authoritative definition of childhood and an essentialised unitary category of *The Child*.

As an introduction, I briefly look at childhood histories mainly through the work of Phillipe Aries, a childhood historian. My aim is to show how the social construction of childhood and children shifted through time. The discussion is also aimed at putting the nature and notions of universality of childhood under the spotlight. In so doing, I deconstruct any notion of a static childhood.

This is followed by an exploration of three framings that dominate constructions of young children in early childhood education. The frames highlight human nature, child development, and socialisation. In each frame I show how the essentialist and fixed notions of childhood and children serve as limiting interpretative frames of understandings.

This thrust sets the stage for my reconceptualist theoretical toolkit. I choose theories that are not traditionally used in early childhood education. I draw on the new sociology of childhood, discourse theory, poststructural feminism, performance theories, and the work of Bourdieu. In my discussion of the theories I present not only reconceptualist explanations, but I also make an attempt to show how I used the theoretical filters to build my thesis.

## **2.2 Reconceptualist thinking in early childhood**

Reconceptualists begin their task of knowledge production with critique. They are particularly concerned with the modernist quest for universal truth, general laws, and essentialism. They undertake analysis of existing situations and problematise them for their taken-for-granted assumptions and power effects. The aim is to examine power relations that foster injustice, oppression, and regulation. In so doing, they open doors for new possibilities of thinking and acting (Cannella 1997).

A growing number of scholars have shown dissatisfaction with dominant constructions of early childhood and children (Burman 1994; James & Prout 1997; Jenks 1996; Bloch 1992; Kessler 1991; Silin 1995; MacNaughton 2000; Viruru 2000; Brannen & Moss 2001). These reconceptualists argue that much of what is known in (early) childhood emanates from a scientific paradigm that ascribes to a positivist worldview. In particular, they challenge and disrupt the dominance of developmental psychology and biology as key players in shaping what we know about childhood and children. They critique accounts that lay claim to presenting the true nature of people and the way they make sense of their realities. In this way, reconceptualists in early childhood show the constraining effects of totalising/hegemonic versions of childhood and children.

In the process of offering critique, reconceptualists explore differing cultural and theoretical worldviews that are context-bound with multiple truths.

As opposed to the construction of objective reality as a world out there, the social construction of reality is emphasised. People make meaning and their life circumstances in society and culture are foregrounded. In this way,

reconceptualists move towards evolving discourse spaces and convey diversity of directions for the field of early childhood education. In particular, there is a move towards challenging officially sanctioned truths and expanding the discourses through which early childhood teachers can act *for* children and *with* them.

In this study I wanted to look at constructions of childhood from the angle of teachers and young children through lived experiences at centre-based settings. I did not want to merely describe the happenings at the centres. Given the history of South Africa and the inequalities in early childhood, I felt that it was necessary to take a critical stance. The reconceptualist perspective afforded me the opportunity to foreground centre-based early experiences though adopting theoretical lenses that are not traditionally used in early childhood education. These lenses helped me to build my thesis around the interpretative frames of references (discourses) that teachers were using to construct childhoods *for* children. With regard to young children, I was able to deepen my insight by positioning them as informants of childhood. In the main, I view the reconceptualist perspective as a basis for creating new conversations in early childhood education in the South African context.

In this chapter the reconceptualist perspective is mobilised in two parts. In the first part I review constructions of childhood and children with the aim of showing how present perceptions of children are linked to past constructions of them. My aim is also to show the limitations of these constructions. I begin with childhood histories to illuminate the fact that childhood is a social construction that is time and place bound. This is followed by an examination of three truth areas that give us understanding of childhood and children. I look at common sense constructions of human nature, the power of science, and truths of socialisation. In each of these truth areas, the organisation of statements around childhood and the power-knowledge relationships that emerge from the organisation, indicate how childhood is a social construction that produces the “othered” group. Children’s discourses are subjugated in preference of an adultist explanation of children as being different. The review into ways in which childhood has been socially constructed, is therefore helpful in understanding the

social position of children. The second part of this chapter is dedicated to the theories used to build my thesis.

### **2.3 Understanding childhood and children through childhood histories**

Throughout history the social position of children has been transformed many times, showing the changing perceptions and contexts around which childhood has been constructed (Danaher, Schirato & Webb 2000). The lives of children are determined by how adults at a particular time think of priorities for children and act *on/for* or *with* them. In Chapter One, I presented the South African scenario, which acknowledged the social construction of childhood and the lives of children through the intersections of socio-political realities at various points in history.

In this sub-section I discuss childhood histories to show that while children are present in all societies, their childhoods, when viewed spatially and temporally are perceived and practiced in different ways. This tells us that children's social position is linked to institutional constructions of childhood. I draw on the work of childhood historians, especially Aries, to present a relativising concept of Western childhoods. The latter served, and continues to serve, as a powerful frame for the production of globalised childhood and is therefore considered highly appropriate in this discussion.

Phillipe Aries had a major influence on the modern interpretations of childhood. In *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), Aries presented childhood as a historical subject. His thesis on childhood as a social construction was gleaned from an analysis of art and literature. The examination of inscriptions on statues/tombs, memoirs, diaries, toys, and dress codes was also included. Aries used this evidence to suggest that, childhood as a distinct separate phase of life, and the concept of *The Child* were only recent in European history. These ideas emerged around the Middle Ages.

This does not mean that there were no children or that they were not thought of as being "different." The ways in which children were perceived and treated

differed. Aries argued that after the infant stage, children were not depicted as children but as mini adults or scaled-down adults who were only different in terms of physical size. For example, in religious paintings the infant Jesus Christ was depicted as a small adult.

Aries claimed that in the Middle Ages the uncertainty of infant survival led to adults being indifferent to babies. Greater emotional energy was invested in children around the ages six and seven once their survival was secured. Children became part of society and participated in productive work. The difference between needs of children compared to those of adults was not recognised except in the very early stages of physical dependency. Childhood was seen as a stage of life rather than a preparation for adulthood (Jamrozik & Sweeney 1996).

The concept “child” was associated with a relationship and position in the family rather than with age. It was used to describe subservient positions such as servants and employees. Stone (1977) noted that whilst there was a distinction between infants and adults, there were no other distinctions of individuals between the two extremes. Children as a group were seen as playful beings. They were regarded as family pets that were not to be taken seriously (Aries 1962). Play activities was not limited to children. All ages participated in some form of play. Gendered and social roles were defined through adults’ constructions of childhood. Toys were scaled-down representations of the adult world (Barthes 1982).

In general, children were viewed as valuable to the institution of the family. They were active contributors to the family income. As such they were considered as part of the family property with few personal rights. The view of children as property is still relevant today. In Chapter Four I examine the way in which the view of children as property renders children’s experiences irrelevant through transactions mapped out for them by adults. From this perspective, children are perceived as “objects or possessions whose views don’t really matter” (Mason & Steadman 1996:2).

Aries work is valuable in creating starting points for understanding childhood as having versions that are enacted differently. It is, however, not without criticism. Archard (1993) for example, is critical of Aries view that the child in the Middle Ages did not have a particular social status and the idea that childhood did not exist. He argues that earlier societies did not share our modern concept of childhood. They had a different idea of what childhood entailed. In broader circles of childhood histories there has also been debates around presentation of evidence to secure certain theorisations, factual inaccuracies, and mispresentations (Pollock 1983; Wilson 1984).

My task, however, is not to present some finality of these debates or enter into any lengthy discussions. In presenting histories of childhood I have highlighted the fact that we have versions of childhood that were socially and historically shaped. Some of the historical ways of knowing childhood and children are still recognisable in our current theorisations. For example, we still see childhood as a separate state from adulthood. Children are still strongly seen as the property of adults/parents rather than people making sense of their experiences.

In the next three sections I look at the way in which certain versions of childhood and children have become dominant in our ways of thinking of and acting towards children in early childhood. Each of these versions attaches power to adults' ways of knowing children.

#### **2.4 Understanding childhood and children through common sense notions of human nature**

When childhood and children are theorised through common sense understandings of human nature, particular definitions of what is natural, appropriate, and morally good are made salient. Power emanates from claims to be natural, obvious, and therefore true. In other words, the focus on universal human nature/condition is used to guarantee a version of childhood and children that is right. The obviousness of what children naturally are enjoys great social acceptance and puts pressure on people to accept these versions.



I draw on the presociological models of childhood presented by James et al. (1998) and convert them into common expressions used to describe children. In order to show how common sense ideas have been built in our consciousness, I present the history of these ideas. I then link them to contemporary views and show their constraining effects for this thesis. Specifically, the versions detailed below offer decontextualised, fixed knowledge that essentialises children as the “other”. In so doing, adults’ ways of knowing are privileged and there is a failure to connect with the diverse and dynamic experiences of young children as people.

#### **2.4.1 Innocent cute angels**

The innocent cute angel expression emanates from a romantic and sentimentalised version of childhood where children are seen as naturally good. High emotional value is placed on children when this version is operative. It is powerful in shaping adult-child relationships.

The chief exponent of this version was Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He believed that infants are angelic and pure at birth (Rousseau 1955). As they are socialised into the world they learn evil and become corrupted by society. He therefore argued that children should be educated in natural surroundings where they could develop at their own rates away from the adult world. He saw the period of childhood as a time of innocence with happiness being the highest ideal. Furthermore, he argued that childhood is protected time when children should be given plenty of opportunities to enjoy their childhood before they face the responsibilities of adulthood (Montgomery 2003).

The social construction of childhood as romantic is powerful in conjuring adults’ feelings of having lost their childhoods. Adults try to retrieve the lost “language of enchantment” through remembering their childhoods and creating memorable moments (Bachelard 1982:130). There is yearning to return to the memory of innocence, wonderment, and imagination. Throughout history this is evident by poetry, narratives, paintings, and photographs that are used to reimagine childhood.

Parents also use the romantic constructions of childhood in mapping adult-child relations. They may attempt to deal with difficulties/anxieties they experienced as children by regressing to the psychic age of their own children (DeMause 1976). A concept of childhood is developed through this regression. Hence childhood has many representations from adults' perspectives of having been children.

In early childhood education, the work of Rousseau was influential in focusing on the particularity of children and childhood as a period that is worthy of full adult attention (James et al. 1998). Child-centred education, special provision in the form of preschools/nurseries and a host of childrearing strategies came to the fore. Play, as children's work, emanated from Rousseau's ideas, and was developed for early childhood education by Froebel. Play is still valued today as a crucial way in which young children learn to get to know the world.

In viewing childhood as a romantic period and children as innocent, adults have tried to achieve an understanding of self and a meaning of life. Children are seen as having qualities that are lost to adults. In the institutionalisation of childhood, children are thus considered differently and treated accordingly.

Fixed notions of childhood innocence and naturally good children guide many contemporary expectations in early childhood. Of importance to this thesis is the common sense way in which childhood innocence discounts children's ways of knowing the world. Cannella (1997) notes that in using the elements that constitute childhood innocence to argue for what young children naturally are, we often refer to their lack of knowledge or ignorance within an innocent/intelligence dichotomy. The latter emanates from the obviousness of the adult-child binary where children in comparison to adults are essentialised as unwise and socially incompetent.

Tobin (1997) highlights another limitation. He is critical of the way in which fixed notions of childhood innocence and naturally good children lead to the exclusion of knowledge regarded as part of the adult domain. He argues that since power is attached to childhood innocence, we rarely look at pleasure and

desire in early childhood education. In not paying attention to the children's experiences of childhood, we remain ignorant of early childhood sexuality. Kritzinger (1997: 161) argues that "in the name of innocence, adults repress children's own expressions of sexuality, ... (and) deny children control over their own bodies". The protectionist attitudes of adults can contribute to the vulnerability of children especially in relation to child abuse.

Additionally, protectionist programmes fail to connect with issues related to children of different cultures. Cross-cultural studies have shown contrasts to the totalising Western views of childhood innocence. James (1998) notes how the Inuit three year olds are able to deal with harsh realities of life. In Japan, children are made aware of everyday danger. In South Africa, young children live within the realities of poverty, crime, and HIV/AIDS. As such, they face responsibilities that are traditionally within the adult domain. These examples challenge the construction of children as innocent cute angels.

#### **2.4.2 Naughty little brats**

This expression is frequently used when children transgress disciplinary rules of adults or in references to children that pose challenging/delinquent behaviours. It emanates from a version of childhood as a time of evil and wildness that exists in contradiction to childhood innocence.

At the time that childhood was being constructed as a romantic period, the Church in Western Europe was turning to conservatism. By the middle of the seventeenth century, religious practices became very puritan and society became more affluent and complex. The image of the child as evil can be traced to the Original Sin in religious scriptures and thought (James et al. 1998). As a creature of will and a sinner at birth, infants were seen as vulnerable to the workings of demonic forces. Parents in nuclear families were regarded as units of social control where children as property were required to learn the difference between good and evil.

The work of the English philosopher, Hobbes (1588-1679), also furthered the view that children were innately evil (Montgomery 2003). In his quest for authoritarian rule and good conduct in society, Hobbes advanced the view that children were in need of constraints. Childhood was viewed as a time of evil and wildness. The dark side of the child had to be shaped by discipline and punishment. The aim was to bring about a stable social order with conforming children that emulated stable adults.

When this version of children is used, then the elements of wilfulness, disruption, and unruly behaviour form attributes of children. In early childhood education, this common sense version of children becomes visible in the way pedagogic practice is designed in care and education institutions. The young child's body becomes the first and foremost site of creating a childhood that privileges docile bodies. Control and surveillance of young children's bodies by adults is aimed at establishing good habits and preventing social deviancy. The work of Leavitt (1994) in infant and toddler care in early childhood centres, presented scenarios of how caregivers who drew on limiting versions of disciplining/controlling young children, managed children's bodies in time and space.

Of importance to this thesis is the way in which young children's intentionality is brushed aside when the version of wilful children and a civilising childhood functions as common sense. Adult's power and authority over children gets legitimated in a dependency relationship. This makes it difficult to think about children's attempts to get to know their world and their experiences of adult actions.

### **2.4.3 Ignorant children**

This expression is commonly used to make a case for young children lacking in adult ways of knowing the world. This state of being creates thinking around children having impressionable minds that are to be moulded by adults/teachers. The thinking emanates from a version of childhood as preparation for adulthood.

It is the work of John Locke (1632-1704) that highlights the fact that children arrive in the world as blank slates – *tabula rasa* (James et al. 1998, Montgomery 2003).

Unlike the versions described previously, Locke did not believe that children had intrinsic qualities. Children were seen as neither good nor bad, but rather as potential/latent reasoners. As blank slates, children were inadequately equipped for adulthood. He argued that with correct guidance, environment, and educational experiences, children could develop into reasonable beings. He recognised that children were not only in the process of *becoming* adults, but also had specific needs and interests that were peculiar to childhood. Childhood was thus a time of learning how to become more rational and self controlled.

This common sense version of young children excludes their active participation in their present child status, as they are regarded as not having worthwhile knowledge associated with adulthood. The prior knowledge and experiences that young children have and that are not always known to adults, is ignored in the belief that they are slates to be written on. Pascal (2003:18), in her analysis of models of education in English early childhood settings, noted that the “banking model” of education was instantly recognisable as key provisioning. In this model, the teacher is viewed as a “depositor, prescriber, and domesticator”. The child is required to memorise, record, and repeat knowledge but not understand knowledge presented. Young children are perceived to be ignorant and empty and the task of the teacher is to fill them up with knowledge.

Within the context of this thesis, the common sense version of children as blank slates and childhood as only valued for the *becoming* process, is narrow and limiting. Such a version prevents us from looking at the development of a critical consciousness in children. It further hampers thinking about the creative power young children have in getting to know the world from their social locations as preschoolers and as boys and girls in early childhood.

In all of the common sense theorisations of childhood and children presented thus far, I have shown how each version presents its truth through appealing to a

human condition. Each truth is productive in fixing what children essentially are and what childhood is all about. Power is attached to adults' ways of knowing children. As such, children's incompetence, vulnerability, and dependency are accentuated. When children are viewed in these terms, it makes it difficult to think of them as people who participate in their childhoods. In the next section, I continue to look at truth production of childhood and children through the seductions of science.

## **2.5 Understanding childhood and children through seductive science**

Science is a powerful shaper of our beliefs about childhood and children. By using the modernist discourses on reason, progress, and universal laws, it presents versions that are rational, objective, and therefore highly respected in the field of early childhood education. The truth value of scientific findings is enhanced by the fact that they have resulted from value-free, rational explorations.

Within the scientific perspective, the building blocks of childhood and the elements that constitute children at different ages and stages are clearly defined. Knowledge of these foundations provide certainty through scientific proofs. These certainties are mobilised in facts, essences, core beings, rules, explanations, and properties of young children in early childhood. The scientific securities are perceived to be timeless, decontextualised, and therefore take on a universal truth value.

In this sub-section I look at the scientific truths through the lens of biology and development psychology (evolutionary model, theorists, developmentally appropriate practice). I do so because they claim to offer systematic, objective, and scientific views/theories of childhood and children that are highly productive in making sense of early childhood education.

The exploration described in this sub-section should not be read as an easy dismissal of the biological and developmental perspectives on childhood. I do acknowledge that these perspectives are important to understand how children

navigate their way from childhood into adulthood. After all, personal changes and growth are interwoven features of the life course. My critique, however, is levelled at the natural categorisation of children into ages and stages and the taken-for-granted ways in which it is used. My intention is to provide clarity on how it constrains thinking for this study.

### **2.5.1 Biological truths**

In biological versions of childhood the immaturity of young children, as a biological fact, is read as a universal and natural feature of humans in early life (Prout & James 1997). Social life and communication are governed by physical, genetic, and hormonal factors that determine what is possible for children and what a desirable childhood should look like. The experiences of immaturity and the competencies of young children are determined from their immature bodies and internal programmes of being children in particular stages (babies, toddlers, nursery children, etc.).

Socio-biology promotes the perspective that the inner genetic programme predicts how children behave. Dawkins (1976), for example, argues that all life and explanations of life are about how genes replicate themselves. He explains the social in terms of cultural units known as “memes”. These units imitate the actions of the genes. So, if we know the composition of the genes, we will be able to predetermine how children will act and thereby create appropriate early childhood environments/interventions.

Neuroscience is another seductive resource in early childhood education. It promotes the view that “it’s all about how the brain works.” Theories related to brain development are strongly used to justify practice in early childhood education. Bruer (1999) notes that this justification occurs through three main assumptions. Firstly, it is strongly believed that brain connectivity equals greater learning. Secondly, it is assumed that critical periods exist after which it becomes difficult to make synaptic connections. Lastly, there is a belief that an enriched environment can promote faster and denser neural connections. These

assumptions are powerful in arguing for investments in early care and education as precursors to a healthy, productive adult population.

In terms of boys and girls, the biological difference of sex is used to explain maleness and femaleness (MacNaughton 2000; Stainton Rogers 2003). Sex is viewed as the biological building block on which a child's gender is built. In nature and nurture terms, it means that nature gives us the foundation of sex and nurture layers it with gender. Sex produces gender. The nature/nurture relationship is made to matter in significant ways.

Neuroscience has also been used to determine boys' and girls' competence. Browne (2004), in analysing the role of science which shapes our thinking about gender, looked at Myers and Sperry's work in the 1950's. The authors promoted a gender-based view of the brain structure and its activities. These ideas are still strong today. Browne notes how subsequent studies on male and female brains showed a clear sex difference in terms of the corpus callosum, which is considered to be responsible for the transfer of information between the two hemispheres of the brain. Gender-based difference in brain structure is used to explain knowledge acquisition, skills development, and communication amongst boys and girls.

In each of the biological truths shaping scientifically informed childhoods and natural children, there is a tendency to produce explanations that deny experience and context. Immature bodies, genes, and brains present truths on, firstly, who children essentially are and, secondly, on their differences as boys and girls. Biology becomes a destiny written by the genes, the corpus callosum, and the changes in the physical body. This truth value is unproblematically accepted in early childhood education because the results are from scientific enterprises.

James (1998), in constructing a new paradigm of childhood, argues that we cannot simply and unproblematically see childhood as a description of early biological development of the human child. We must look at the way in which a culture makes sense of biological immaturity. In so doing, the concept of childhood loses its universality and becomes childhoods in cultures. Postman



(1994:xi) concurs with this view. He argues that, “unlike infancy, childhood is a social artefact, not a biological category”. This points to infancy being a biological necessity and childhood a social category that varies across cultures. Jenks (1996) puts this in another way. He argues that the physical facts of infancy and childhood are but raw material upon which culture designs different versions of what it means to be a child. All authors, in the social paradigm of childhood, acknowledge that we cannot ignore the biological basis of childhood. It must be seen as another context of life where children learn and act. However, it cannot be a forceful determinant of children’s actions (James 1998), which is one of the key points in this thesis.

Penn (2005a) draws attention to the fact that in biological explanations we lose sight of complexities and variations in terms of how children experience their daily lives. Our assumptions about rates, sequences, sites, and constancy of development, mask what we see as young children’s competence. She is also sceptical about whether biological maturation processes in terms of what happens in the body can be used to explain and predict behaviour. Biological explanations are inadequate in understanding social relationships, emotions, identities, and embodied experiences in childhood.

As a powerfully connected partner to biology, developmental psychology is another source in understanding childhood and children.

### **2.5.2 Developmental truths**

The field of developmental psychology has had a considerable impact on early childhood education in South Africa. At present it is the dominant discourse within the field. In my deliberations with colleagues in the field, this discourse surfs through talk on practice that is considered to be developmentally appropriate. In my experience, early childhood policy makers and teacher trainers regard this frame of reference as unproblematic. In what follows I look at the power of developmental psychology in shaping our understanding of natural and normal children.

### 2.5.2.1 The evolutionary model

The evolutionary model of childhood as ages and stages, and children as having a social nature tied firmly to biological growth and development, is directly linked to early developmental psychology (Jenks 1982; Prout & James 1997). In this model, children start their development as simple biological organisms or blank slates. They then go through a series of sequentially related stages that are characterised by physical and intellectual development. As they navigate through childhood, children progress from simplicity to complexity of thought, from incompetence to competence, from irrational to rational behaviour. They gradually learn the cognitive skills that bring about reasoning, logic, causality, and morality, until they reach the fully social state of adulthood (Prout & James 1997).

This model is biologically determined and deemed natural. It therefore claims to be universal. All children are assumed to have essential, innate qualities and are presumed to be in an emergent state with fluid natures. When children are defined in terms of their physical and psychological development, they are placed in the unitary category of *The Child* (Prout & James 1997). *The Child* represents all children. The developmental stages and age milestones are regarded as signposts against which the “normality” of all children can be measured. Any variations from the norms are viewed as deviancy. *The Child* functions as a standard, hypothetical, and decontextualised construct.

The evolutionary model of childhood based on child development theories is highly influential in our present thinking. In our everyday lives, *The Child* is a common sense conceptualisation. In (early) childhood it is used by teachers, paediatricians, child rearing experts, and policy makers (Jenks 1996). Frequently, age is the marker of social status and competence. Waksler (1991) argues that we see the power of status and competence in the way in which we describe children – preverbal, precognitive, immature, and inexperienced. In the South African context, it is also common to refer to the grade below Reception Year as Grade Zero. These descriptions present the image of children in a negative category. They are defined as not being in a full human state. As such,

they are seen as being in a permanent state of transition (Hood-Williams 1990). We commonly see children as potential people that are at the margins of social life and more valued for their future potential as adults (Cockburn 1998). The evolutionary model is ingrained in our everyday understandings of children and we accept it as a natural fact (Prout & James 1997).

The criticisms against the developmental truths in the evolutionary model of childhood and children are numerous among reconceptualists. Hogan (2005) outlines several limitations of developmental truths. In being hegemonic in presenting the contents for the category of *The Child*, the territory of developmental psychology and child development theories have discounted embodied children. Firstly, the exclusive focus on natural development downplays the quality and meaning of children's present lives. Secondly, the natural biologically-based view of children, renders them passive. The focus on age-related competences, construct deficits rather than subjective experiences. Age-related competences cannot tell us what it means to be a child or what it means to be a boy or a girl in a particular socio-political context. In this way, the content and personal meanings of real children's lives are compromised. This leads to a detached and impoverished understanding of children's needs.

James (1998:62) concurs with Hogan (2005). She argues that chronological age may tell us very little about the socio-cultural behaviour of a child. She notes that a ten year old may be "a child soldier, factory worker, head of household, and dependent offspring". Competence as a range of life experiences, interactions, and historical influences is rendered irrelevant when developmental milestones and norms come into play. This is more especially if there is an exclusive focus on individual needs.

### **2.5.2.2 Influential theorists**

In order to illustrate how the evolutionary model works in child development theories, I present influential stage theorists in early childhood education, namely, Piaget and Freud. Piaget (1960) is credited for emphasising the child as an active learner and for showing deep respect for children. Piaget used the

backcloth of evolutionary theory to develop clearly defined stages with signposts to children's growth and development (Piaget & Inhelder 1969).

He suggested that, at birth, young children develop cognitively through sensory motor intelligence. Thereafter they progress through preconceptual and intuitive intelligence. They finally achieve abstract thought in formal operations. The stages of cognitive development are arranged from infancy to adulthood to depict the movement from primitive habits to rational logical thought. *The Child* is presented in this theory as cognitively deficient to the real state of a human being (adult). Piaget argued that internal cognitive structures, or ways in which we organise information according to a hierarchy based on age and stage, made us experience the world differently. He also implied that domains of development had to be addressed sequentially. Those who did not pass through these domains appropriately, would become "arrested" in their development. As such, they would require remedial education in order to become well adjusted adults.

Freud (1966) was another influential theorist using the evolutionary model of growth and development. Like Piaget, he argued that cognitive and psychological understandings were biologically determined and developed progressively as children grew. Freud looked at childhood as adults' past. He looked at elements of personality and stages of development to show how childhood serves as a space to shape the adult psyche. He concluded that we could explain problematic adult behaviour by examining childhood. Freud saw children as lower down on the evolutionary scale.

The developmental theories of childhood posited by the stage theorists have been criticised. Piaget's focus on cognitive development is problematic. The acquisition of human habits is not just about specifically determined reflexes. These habits are more closely aligned to finding solutions to situations that do not mimic the original situation where the solutions were learnt (O'Neill 1982). Additionally, Piaget's cognitive development theory isolates other domains of development. In this way, the multifaceted nature of human beings is undermined (Cleverly & Phillips 1987).

Freud's theory is also criticised for not having studied children directly. Hillman (1982) notes that we are not sure if Freud was referring to actual childhood or to something that he imaginatively constructed in his theories. The author further suggests that Freud presents the world of the unconscious as one that is equivalent to the world of the child. In this case, the term "child" is viewed as an adult's need to return to a simpler time as a child. Freud's work reinforces ideas of children needing protection. Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (2000) see this as problematic. They agree that adults and others are tasked to protect children but they are unclear as to exactly from whom or what children need protection.

Another area of concern is the way in which the universality of childhood is assumed. We picture every child as moving through predetermined stages on the journey to adulthood (Lee 2000). All human beings are presented as moving through ages and stages, regardless of the complexities brought about by race, gender, class, ability, and context. The transition to adulthood is not a simple matter of reaching a particular stage. Different societies attach different meanings to the terms "childhood" and "children" at different historical points (Prout & James 1997). This has consequence not only for what children learn but also for the way in which certain life experiences and learnings are viewed as unimportant or irrelevant (Browne 2004; MacNaughton 2000; Viruru 2000). Furthermore, in failing to take account of diverse experiences that contribute towards children's learning and development, differences between boys and girls and those that are culturally and linguistically diverse run the risk of being ignored.

#### **2.5.2.3 Developmentally Appropriate Practice**

Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) is located within the paradigm of developmental psychology. It is a dominant framework that uses scientific ideas of rationality, naturalness, and universality, largely based on Piaget, in shaping practice in early childhood education. Developmentally appropriate guidelines for teachers/care workers originated in the USA and were designed by the National Association for Education of Young Children. These guidelines have been used in a definitive way by major donor agencies in early childhood in

Third World countries (Penn 2002). In these countries, including South Africa, DAP presents imported notions of childhood and *The Child*. In South Africa, we also encounter DAP through concerns relating to best practice in early childhood education, what good early childhood teachers must do, and how they must do it.

The first DAP guidelines, which appeared in 1987, were criticised for presenting knowledge and practice as context free. Detailed and prescriptive advice was given. A developmental framework of ages and stages was used to spell out the needs of each age group of children. There were also details about how these needs were manifested in behaviour at each age and stage. The guidelines were helpful in demonstrating how the home and institutionally based childcare workers could recognise behavioural cues and provide care and appropriate activities to meet the needs of *The Child* at each stage of its development (Penn 2005a). The second edition of the guide in 1997 was revised to include the complexities involved in children's learning and development. These guidelines, however, still advocate an age and stage approach. In so doing, they continue to present the ideal child, ideal childhood, and ideal family setting of children (Penn 2005b).

DAP privileges an individual approach. The approach sets limits on the adult-child relations and peer relationships (Cannella 1997; Grieshaber & Cannella 2001). Additionally, the individual approach is sometimes coupled with more emphasis on cognitive development. In such practices teachers may aspire to provide environments for children to reach their full potential, as defined by the developmental domains/outcomes/pathways. Children are removed from their socio-cultural locations. They are not seen as part of a wider society and their communities, but merely as members of classrooms. The co-construction of experiences between teachers and children and peer learning in helping children to make sense of their socio-cultural worlds is downplayed. In addition, early years teachers and careworkers can impose practices and strategies in the understanding that all children will learn the same thing in the same way. This has clear implications for the constructions of childhood *for* children and *by* children.

In a plural context like South Africa, the range of understandings of what it means to be an Indian/White/African/Coloured child in different geographical regions is fragmentary. These differences lead to diverse developmental pathways. Failure to take this into account can lead to certain children being described negatively in terms of their development. This is especially so since the measuring of normal development through DAP in early childhood education, is based on how far or near children are from the norm. Rose (1989) sees the developmental norm as a device that enables those in control to define, classify, and administer treatment to those that do not fit in.

From the discussions thus far, it is evident that developmental truths embedded in claims of being scientific are not adequate for dealing with daily lived experiences, complexity, unpredictability, and irregularity that characterises childhood and the rich lives of children in their different contexts. I now turn to the way in which socialisation theories influence thinking about childhood and children.

## **2.6 Understanding childhood and children through socialisation**

The socialisation of children has also been influenced by developmental truths. In the 1950's ideas of child development were transferred to socialisation theories. There were scientific explanations of how children learned to participate in society (Prout & James 1997). The concept of socialisation is mobilised through our emphasis on childhood as the preparation for the future. Children are looked upon in a forward-looking way (Corsaro 1997). The process of socialisation is viewed as a host of practices through which the child internalises the values and norms of a social system. Conformity and the transformation of an asocial, uncivilised child into a social, civilised adult is the key concern. Shaping, guiding, and moulding are important actions of adults leading children from early childhood to adulthood. Children are raw material for socialisation. The category of *The Child* is built up from the cultural supplements that are necessary for a fully functionally adult in society. The determinant character of the socialisation process, especially in early childhood, tends to obscure important aspects of young children's lives.

Corsaro (1997) provides clarity on the deterministic model of socialisation, which is mobilised through limiting approaches. In the deterministic model the child is taken over by society. He is given intensive training to become a competent and a contributing member to a stable, ordered society. Determinism is evident in the functional approach through what society does to children and close surveillance of how children are adapting for their future roles as adults.

In the functional approach, developed by Talcott Parsons (1951), a totalitarian system of control was used to gradually mould children to internalise values and norms of society through socialising agents. Children were represented as passive objects to be moulded for future adulthood. Here is a vivid description of *The Child* in a deterministic model of socialisation:

The child is portrayed, like the laboratory rat, as being at the mercy of external stimuli: passive and conforming. Lost in a social maze, it is the adult who offers directions. The child, like the rat, responds accordingly and is finally rewarded by becoming social, by *becoming* adult... The socialising agents (teachers and parents) teach, serve as models and invite participation. Through their ability to offer gratification and deprivations they induce co-operation and learning and prevent disrupting deviance (Prout & James 1997:13).

The socialisation process produces images of children as future potentials and as threats of deviance if they resist. This is so because the focus is on outcomes rather than the agency of people and the historical and contingent nature of reproduction (Corsaro 1997). So the overriding concern is not about what children do or about adult-child interactions, but rather what adults do to children to make them right for society. There is little exploration of children's experiences of the institutions they find themselves in, e.g. day care, early childhood centres, preschools, schools, and families. The reproducing of the adult social order takes precedence over adult-child interactions that constitute the process (Prout & James 1997; Thorne 1993). Such practices render children invisible as they are expected to shadow adults.



In early childhood, heavy shadowing by adults is legitimated by rationalisations about young children's needs, protection, and dependency. These rationalisations assume a passive, weak, and malleable child who is ready to soak up adult reproductions of order. There are also further assumptions that the coherent set of behaviours and values set out for children to be socialised into, has universal applications. Jenks (1982) draws attention to this dominant guiding principle in socialisation. He argues that in highly deterministic theories of socialisation, society takes on the character of a well-oiled machine that is fed by conforming personalities, which consumes children to perpetuate it.

Thus far I have shown dominant versions of childhood and children that have framed and continue to frame our thinking and acting in early childhood education. In each of the framings I have been deliberate in illuminating the limitations of common sense theorisations on human nature, scientific and socialisation truths. In each instance natural, universal, fixed, and essential accounts of childhood and children make real complex experiences of childhood *for* children and *by* children irrelevant. There is a tendency to focus on adult's ways of knowing childhood and children. Children's knowledge as young people and as boys and girls has been compromised. In the main, the conceptual pair of development and socialisation portrays children as "natural, passive, incompetent, and incomplete" (Prout & James 1997:x). Another concern is the way in which the power relations produced in totalising views is masked through claims of being a true version of reality. This creates urgency for the presentation of theories that I use to build my thesis.

## **2.7 A reconceptualist theoretical toolkit**

In constructing a reconceptualist framework I use many theories, which are not all discussed in this sub-section. My aim is to use a loose framework to explain constructions of childhood. I chose theories from contemporary thinking that have constructs that are useful in exploring the constructions of childhood *for* children and *by* children at the centres. The theories are marginalised in early childhood education. I use them in this study to show what can be seen and accessed if we use alternate lenses that are not familiar in early childhood

education. Like other reconceptualists I see my task as broadening the theoretical landscape through adopting multiple lenses to problematise and make sense of early childhood education.

### **2.7.1 Social constructionist approaches**

It is the social constructionist approaches that made possible new thinking on childhood and children. They are a diverse family with a diverse heritage that straddle the interpretive and postmodern/poststructural paradigms. Since the concept of social constructionism is key to this study, I explain the constituting ideas within the interpretive paradigm.

Within society the ways in which we position ourselves and are positioned by others is dependent on how we are socially constructed. The social constructionists argue that the proper focus of our enquiry of social practice should be people and their interactions with one another. It is the interactive processes that take place routinely between people that give us explanations (Burr 1995). Hence the subjective experiences of people are important. In learning our roles and positions in society, we use language in our social interactions. The self emerges through the interactive use of language that helps us to define our position in society and gives meaning to our experiences (Berger & Luckmann 1966).

In growing up we increase the circle of people with whom we interact. The increasing social relations help us to fit in society and to learn the rules and behaviours that are expected of us (Wetherell & Maybin 1996). When we act in our environment, various forms of language (verbal, body actions, speech) provide us with information about how others see us (Gergen 1999). Situations and contextual factors help us to construct our concept of self in relation to others. In defining the self we accentuate qualities and characteristics that distinguish us as specific individuals in relation to others in the world. This distinction places us within particular social groups and defines our roles and positions within society. We become legitimate through this process. We reflect on the roles and rules of behaviour that are present in our social interactions

(Berger & Luckmann 1966). Our identity emerges through context and socialisation.

The emergence of both our identity and our socialisation is reliant on social relations. We need other people as referents to measure ourselves to build an identity. Furthermore, we learn how to act, what to say and how we are to think in relation to our referents (Wetherell & Maybin 1996). Other's sense of self and social positions are dependent on our roles, behaviours, and attitudes in relation to them. When our behaviours do not fit into the expectations of others, then the process of normalising and essentialising is under threat. Various maintenance strategies are used to reinforce the roles and rules that are normalised in a society (Berger & Luckmann 1966).

One's identity is never fixed. Context and experience make it multifaceted (Fine 1994). For young children, their social worlds make limited systems of meaning available by virtue of the fact that they are low down on the developmental continuum. As they grow, they are exposed to more information that they include in the construction of the self.

### **2.7.2 The new sociology of childhood**

The social construction of reality through the interactive involvement of people in situations and context was used to construct the new sociology of childhood. Specifically, the paradigm borrowed the ideas of children as agents as well as products of social processes and integrated them with postmodern ways of understanding the world (Prout & James 1997). In the new paradigm childhood is understood, not as preparatory or a marginal stage, but as a component of the structure of society (James & Prout 1990; Prout & James 1997; James et al. 1998; Jenks 1996; Mayall 2000; Qvortrup 2004). It is a social institution in its own right.

The concern with context saw the move towards recognising childhood as having a historical, social, and cultural base that makes it vary in different societies. Race, class, ability and gender are some of the conditions that bring about

differences in childhood. The concern with interactions in situations acknowledges that people (adults and children) are active beings in networks of relationships. This means that there is nothing natural about childhood. Meaning making in relationships and contextual realities construct and reconstruct childhood at specific historical points.

This thinking opened up new ways in which we understand children. Children are no longer viewed as passive beings (Prout & James 1997). Nor are they seen as empty vessels to be socialised for adulthood. They are seen as part of the family/school but as having their own knowledge, which may or may not concur with adult's knowledge. Children are the knowers of the same world as their parents, caregivers, and teachers. They offer us a novel perspective on the world with less prior knowledge (Lee 2000; MacNaughton 2003). This is in no way inferior but rather alternate ways of knowing.

Children are conceptualised as social actors who participate in constructing their lives. They contribute to ways of knowing the world as people. Like adults, they actively negotiate rules, roles, and personal relations. In this way, they are able to live in interdependence. If we look at children in this way, they appear rich and competent rather than deficient – which is the case when compared to how far or how near they are to the developmental norms. Jenks (1996) notes that the new sociology of childhood is key to transforming childhood deficiency to childhood competency.

Children will be highly dependent on adults, especially in early childhood, but this does not place doubt on the potential of young children in the “now” of their lives. Their competence is derived from what they know and can do in their present location as children and through active engagement with adult care and control.

In this new thinking, it is also acknowledged that children as people do not live in a tribal world of their own species. They share it with adults. In their responsibility for children, adults exercise tight controls. Adult expectations present limited choices for children. Hence there is structural shaping of

children's lives in which very real constraints exist. The *being* of children in the "now" of their lives and their *becoming* of adults through structural shaping are important in any consideration of the constructions of childhood.

Bearing the above in mind, Alanen (2001) argues that the central organising concept of the sociology of childhood is that of the generational order. Within this thinking we look at the patterns of social relationships in which children are positioned as a social group. Just like gender is a category of analysis, generation can be treated as a dimension to social differentiation. The notion of a generational order constitutes childhood as a process produced in a particular set of relations. Childhood and adulthood are produced at the same time in relation to each other. There is a generationing order in specific institutions. It is possible to think about children's engagement with the temporal zones of generationing (past, present, future) in order to construct their identities.

These new ways of looking at childhood and children are useful in this thesis. They point to fresh possibilities in exploring the constructions of childhood at the centres. The new child in sociological thinking has been transformed from a natural product to a person. This means I could see, not without tensions and challenges, young children as people rather than projects whose wrongs must be put right. I was able to give a new legitimacy to the experiences/processes of being children below Grade R and of being boys and girls within the circumstances shaping their lives. In these ways, I began viewing the space of early childhood as having meaning for itself within the dominant view of it being a preface to some more important life stages.

### **2.7.3 Poststructural approaches**

Poststructural approaches are derived from postmodern ways of understanding the world. Postmodernists see society as fundamentally incoherent and lacking in continuity. They are critical of any stage journey that functions as a meta narrative to provide definitive accounts of end points. Any talk about human progress and a linear ordered journey is viewed as simplistic and inaccurate.

Diversity, multiple perspectives, and contradictory knowledge are favoured as complexities of the world we live in at a given point in time.

Whilst postmodernism focuses on society, poststructuralism focuses on individuals in society (Grbich 2004). Poststructural approaches, like the other social constructionists from the interpretive paradigm, stress the importance of language and meaning making. They differ from interpretive approaches in terms of explanations of how we build understanding of ourselves. Instead of accentuating people as originators of thought and experiences, the poststructuralists show how understanding and experience are derived from discourses that exist at a social rather than an individual level (Terre Blanche & Durrheim 1999). Poststructuralists are also more vocal on the power/knowledge couplet in shaping people in society.

Childhood according to this view is a social institution that is difficult to define in a universal sense. It is a product of meaning making at a particular time and place. It shifts, changes, and assumes a fragmentary character. From this view the immaturity of children is “conceived and articulated in particular societies into culturally specific ideas and philosophies, attitudes, and practices which combine to define the nature of childhood” (Prout & James 1997:18). There is thus a lack of consensus and absolute certainty about what childhood is. At best we can achieve an increased level of understanding of childhood by looking at the processes that people (adults and children) are involved in to shape childhood.

The poststructural construction of children presents ideas that form a site of resistance to the biologically developing being that represents children as incompetent and unable to participate in the world. Children’s identities are never fixed but they are constantly produced. Power is attached to certain meanings. These meanings give a semblance of what is right. Meanings are struggled over and influence identity. Children’s identities are always formed through complex interactions with categories of difference in age, abilities, race, class, gender, and context.

This new lens drew attention to the fact that I was dealing with multiple truths that showed ambivalences. The category of *The Child* shifted from an undifferentiated collective to a fragmentary view of complex children constructed in and through relations of age, gender, race, and class power.

Furthermore, there was more clarity on adult-child relations. In particular, the relationship took on a culturally constructed character that was guided by a variety of meanings that were circulating at the centres (see Chapter Three 3.6 for more details). I was able to look at which ones had powerful institutional backing and the way in which they shaped teachers' discourses of childhood *for* children and discourses *by* young children.

In order to create a deeper understanding of the ideas above, I present poststructural theorising through discourse theory, feminist poststructuralism, and performance theories. I end my discussion with Bourdieu's ideas on social reproduction. In each of the theories I highlight the constructs that were useful in building this thesis.

### **2.7.3.1 Discourse theory**

Thinking about social reality in terms of discourses is accredited to the work of Foucault. His ideas on discourse, knowledge and power in relation to how it is that we know something and the processes by which it comes to be taken-for-granted are useful in this thesis. In the *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) Foucault uses discourse to refer to statements and groups of statements that are combined and regulated to form and define a distinct field of knowledge. In building this thesis, his conceptualising of discourse as a set of interconnected ideas that are held together by a particular view of the world is of paramount importance. It furthers my aim of an oppositional politics to common sense naturalised thinking about childhood and children.

All of the versions of childhood and children that I have presented earlier on are, in a Foucaultian sense, discourses. We have seen how they offer particular assumptions and explanations of how the world works and what our practice

should look like. For example, in the scientific discourses, providing developmental truths, we saw how knowledge of the world as universal, ordered, and predictable produced the discourse of childhood as a time of *becoming*. The age and stage approach gave us images of young children locked in linear stages of development. This was productive of a version of developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood education.

From the above, it is evident that discourses are not limited to talk.

Poststructuralists use it in a specialised way. Burr (1995:20) sees discourse as “a set of meaning, metaphors, representations, statements... that in some way together produce a particular version of events”. MacNaughton (2003) in trying to explain the theoretical lenses that shape an early childhood curriculum sees discourse as descriptive of ideas, feelings, words, images, practices, actions, and ways of looking. In our world there are a variety of discourses that help us make sense of ourselves, others, and what is seen as right and wrong. Each discourse will have a different way of representing a specific reality for individuals.

Discourses constitute us when we make sense of the world. They create organising frameworks to build our social world. They provide social templates that guide our thinking and acting in a particular domain in life. For example, in building a social world in which there are adults and children, we draw on socialisation discourses that use adulthood as a marker of full human status. Alternately, we may choose to draw on new sociological discourses on childhood competency that foreground children’s full human status from birth. What this says is that different discourses will bring different understandings into focus for us to pay attention to. Our experiences are not homogeneous. Subject positions will be made available within particular discourses. Each discourse will offer different ways of seeing and being. In other words, our understandings of these discourses will have different implications for how we behave.

Discourses are regulated by certain rules, which lead to the circulation of certain ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. These rules emanate from what is perceived to be true and false. For Foucault, each society, at a particular point in history, has its own regime of truth. This means that certain types of discourses



are accepted and made to function as if they were true. For example, the developmental discourses tell us about normal development, domains of developments, and the stages and causes of development. All this factual information acts as a regime of truth that influences normal and desirable ways to think, feel, and act in early childhood institutions (MacNaughton 2000).

The power of the regimes of truth becomes visible when we categorise and interpret experiences according to the discourses available to us. In so doing, we give the discourse a unity and a normality that is difficult to question. This constrains/limits what is “sayable” and “thinkable”. Only certain things can be said and done.

The truth of discourses receives legitimacy from the fact that they are objects of knowledge that are produced in an intelligible way. They conceal exclusions and oppositions. When a discourse is dominant, other forms of reasoning are looked upon as unintelligible. For those that see early childhood predominantly as a period of *becoming*, the focus on young children’s competency in the present is frequently shut down by the concern about “throwing the baby out with the developmental bath”. This is so because development is not viewed from multiple subject positions, which are inclusive of children’s participation.

Foucault argued that discourses regulate not only what can be said and under what social and cultural conditions but also who can speak, when, and where. This is related to a sense of being morally correct. So it follows that regimes of truth may also be accompanied by or be the same as the regimes of rules of right and truth. This reproduces power. Tamboukou (2003) sheds light on the network of power, right, and truth. He argues that truth is interwoven with power and this produces systems of morality or ethics of the self. This results in people establishing knowledge and truth by referring to that, which are morally correct.

Knowledge is power-laden and has the effect of producing a person. This person will follow the rules of regulation because of its reference to morals and the sense of it being right. Those who do not follow the systems of truth, given the

moral backing it has for the self, are excluded or marginalised. Thus we get a subject controlled by others and controlled by his/her self-knowledge.

We can get a greater understanding of discourse through the way in which Foucault conceptualises power. He is critical of the sovereign model of power. In this model power is viewed as something which a group of people or institutions possess. It is concerned with oppressing and constraining. This view of power was presented earlier on in the discussion on socialisation theories in terms of what adults do to children – a view of power as repression of the powerless by the powerful. This is a top-down negative view of power. Foucault (1978) argues that even the most constraining measures are in fact productive. They are instrumental in producing new forms of behaviour rather than just shutting down certain types of behaviour.

Hence he proposes a productive model of power. The bottom-up model of power moves away from seeing power as being possessed by someone. For Foucault, power is something that is performed and worked through in a strategy. As a verb, power is seen as something *doing* something rather than a possession. His micro-view of power is made clear in the following:

“Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or something which only functions in the form of a chain... Power is employed and exercised though a net like organisation... Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application” (Foucault 1980:98).

The reconceptualised view of power is important in several ways. Firstly, power is seen as operating in all systems of relations in a net-like way instead of just in situations of oppression. Secondly, people are not seen just as receiving power but they are the place where power is enacted and resisted. This gives us a new lens to look at relationships in early childhood education. There is a struggle for meaning. People play an active role in their relationships with other people and the institutions they find themselves in. It is the performance of local forms of power that is foregrounded in the new model.

In looking at how we build our social world, we have to look at how a range of relations will position people in different ways to make a system work. The early childhood centre serves as a good example of an institution that shapes the way in which young children experience their childhoods. Like school and the family, the institution operates on a system of hierarchy. People occupy positions within this hierarchy, e.g. teachers and children. Certain positions will have more authority and power over others. Teachers have more authority over the children. Young children will be positioned as having less authority by virtue of the fact that they are incompetent and physically smaller than the adult. Through particular practices teachers, as people in positions of power, will influence, impact on, and form children that are proper for their age and stage of development. The rules and regulations of the developmental discourse determine what is possible. Hence teachers and children are positioned in discourses that make the education system work. Shaping the bodies and minds of the children is part of a wider network of power relations between adults and children.

From what has been said thus far, we see that we cannot separate power from knowledge. Power incites the formation of particular forms of knowledges for legitimacy. Knowledge is not just liberatory but it is also a means of control and discipline. It is power-laden with the ability to define and exclude. In my discussion on theorising childhood, we have seen children being positioned as innocent, evil, and ignorant. This knowledge constitutes a range of possible responses, e.g. dependency, neglect, protection, playmate. How we react to children will depend on the positions we occupy in the networks of power. Teacher, student/learner, mother, father etc. stand in multiple positions in the power/knowledge grid. Various tactics and strategies will be used to circulate power. So how a subject will present himself in relation to the child will be the consequence of power relations.

If we look at the specific relations between power and knowledge, then we can illuminate what power produces. Power produces both the objects of knowledge and the subject to which a particular knowledge/object relates. For example, it produces the child as irrational and the child agent that makes meaning of

irrationality as it is held up to him in a socially sanctioned way at an early childhood centre. We get a double sense of a subject. Jones (1997) makes this clearer by noting that the subject is both subjected *to* something and is a subject *of* action. The individual is both socially produced and in multiple positions. We get the idea of people being neither determined nor free but being both simultaneously. Hence it is the exercise of power that brings about the objects of knowledge, bodies of transformation, and the possible subjects that constitute themselves and others around them.

This thinking defies the notion of a stable-centred subject (*The Child*) derived from humanist theorising of the subject. Foucault (1997) argues that subjects are not fixed with an essential nature. We oscillate between stability and instability, coherence and incoherence, centring and decentering through which each person actively takes up discourses. We position others and ourselves in discourses. In this way we speak/write the world into existence as if it were our own constructions (Davies 2003).

Discourse theory has been criticised for its deterministic stance – one that I am critical of. But discourses can shift and they overlap and give way to other possible discourses that are jostling to be foregrounded. There are gaps and contradictions that maintain the status quo or resist it to move towards social change. From a reconceptualist angle, this is promising. I found that discourse theory provided tools for a useful analogy between linguistic and social systems and possibilities for alternate discourses. Furthermore, it provided a powerful means to conduct analysis. This meant that I could look at the theorisations and actions of teachers through a lens of them being positioned in particular discourses they used in producing realities *for* young children at the centres. In identifying the dominant ones and the images it produced, I could problematise what is seen as true and right to regulate and control early childhood practice. This was key to opening up avenues for possibilities in professionalisation of early childhood teachers. In young children's constructions of childhood, I was able to explore the positions they took up, rejected, distorted, etc., and in so doing I was able to show the discourses that they had access to and the possibilities for ways of being children (boys and girls). In this way, the

suppositions from discourse theory helped to imagine the unimaginable and approach my study with a new lens.

### **2.7.3.2 Feminist poststructuralism**

A significant part of this study concerns itself with gender. It is for this reason I turn to the political work of feminist poststructuralism. Within this theoretical tradition women are seen as oppressed by virtue of their sex and also along other axes of social difference such as age, ability, race, class, religion etc. (Weedon 1997). These concerns show parallels to how children are seen in society and the mapping of their childhood based on oppressive ideas. I was particularly interested in the way in which constructs drawn from poststructural theories were used by feminist poststructuralists to subvert power relations and generate new possibilities for understanding gender. In what follows I detail some of the tools of feminist poststructuralism.

Language, linguistic forms for feminist poststructuralist serves as a means to find out how meaning is acquired, how meanings can be changed, and how some meanings serve as norms whilst others are marginalised, silenced or pathologised (Ryan 2001). It is the work of Davies (2003) in preschool children's gender development that is most explicit in the way in which language is used to make young children (boys and girls) in early childhood education.

When children are born, they come into a world of pre-existing meanings. To be recognisable and socially acceptable they must learn to think and act in terms of linguistic forms that are socially sanctioned. Davies argues that this is not merely acquiring the skill of communication. They come to learn the means by which they constitute themselves as people in relation to others in the world, e.g. adult and child, boy and girl. Children must learn to read and interpret the social world. When they learn the language, they learn to make themselves and others as unitary beings. In other words, they make themselves as children or gendered beings that are in relationships with other people. In this way language acts as both a resource that enables thinking, but also as a restriction at the same time. For example, it makes the social and personal being possible – such as a

preschool child or a boy child. However, it also creates limits to the ways of being a preschool child and a boy child. So language tells us what is possible, what the limits are. In so doing, it constitutes our subjectivity.

Weedon (1997) provides clarity of the terms subject and subjectivity. These concepts are used to reconceptualise humanist views of the individuals (*The Child*) as unitary, rational, and asocial. Weedon contends that the term subjectivity refers to the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of individuals, their sense of self, and ways of understanding their relationship to the world. Our subjectivity is about the different ways in which we give meaning to others and ourselves in the world. It is produced from discursive networks, which organise and systematise social and cultural practice (Davies & Banks 1995).

Subjectivity is always in process, one that is contradictory and precarious. Our subjectivity is constituted and reconstituted in discourse each time we think and speak. When this perspective is applied to teachers' and young children's constructions of childhoods, we are not dealing with unitary static subjects at their core, but rather with women, boys, and girls who make themselves through multiple, dynamic, and continuously produced subjectivities in the course of social relations that are fluid and contradictory.

To understand this better, we can look at the way in which feminist poststructuralists hone into the Foucaultian concept of positioning within discourse. They do so to replace the static concept of roles in socialisation. In the work of Davies (1989), attention is drawn to how the everyday world rests on the assumption that the physiological differences (sex) between boys and girls can be used to explain how the social selves (gender) are constituted. She makes explicit that children learn to take up their maleness and femaleness by learning the discursive practices where all people are *positioned* as either male or female. Children *position* themselves in the dominant gender discourse. She argues that when we as adult/teachers/parents/older siblings interact with young children, we work from the assumption that some unitary and binary sense of male or female exists. So we teach children the discursive practices, which are a body of anonymous, historical rules and conditions of operations for a gendered world. It

is through these practices that they constitute themselves in a particular way – mostly by positioning themselves in the possibilities that adults provide for them. This way of thinking and acting is mobilised through the sex role socialisation model. The agentic potential of children is lost when they are pressed into the maintenance of particular roles. The active child who is implicated in the construction and the maintenance of the social world is ignored. So, instead of looking at roles related to the sexes of children, we should be looking at positioning as a discursive process whereby children are located in conversations and other discursive practices as recognisable participants in a narrative. In so doing, our focus shifts away from the individual identity to relations of power and multiple subjectivities that are available to any one person within the discursive practice of institutions like early childhood centres.

Another tool used by feminist poststructuralists in the analysis of difference is deconstruction. They draw on deconstruction to show how meaning is made through implicit and explicit oppositions or contrasts (Ryan 2001). For example, the concepts adult/child and boy /girl are presented as opposites to each other. “Adult” and “boy” are the positive definitions and they gain their power through repressing or negating “child” and “girl”. In their deconstruction of concepts, feminist poststructuralists show how oppositions are constructed rather than being natural. They create fluid borders and try to raise the negative terms of, for example, “child” and “girl” to the status of the positive term.

In summary, the tools of language, subjectivity, positioning, and deconstruction as used by feminist poststructuralism were helpful. Firstly, I was able to look at the way in which power operates at early childhood centres and how teachers normalised young children. Secondly, I was able to look at young children’s subjective experiences of adult and gendered power. Neither of these moves would have been possible within the scientific framework of *The Child*.

### **2.7.3.3 Performance theory**

The key concern of these theories is the normalisation of discourses. The work of Butler (1990) draws attention to gender as a performance in normalising our

social world. Her ideas are highly contested but important for my political intent of denaturalising childhood and children. She draws attention to the immature and gendered body of the child as part of a regulated system of performance. So, when we look at gender and childhood, we need to look at what is perceived to be a correctly coordinated set of acts and gestures. The latter links the subject to what is considered to be normal and socially sanctioned. Parameters for performance are created. Butler (1990:136) articulates gender performance in this way:

...acts, gestures, enactments, generally constructed, are *performative* (my emphasis) in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative, suggests that it has not ontological status apart from various acts, which constitute its reality. This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body. The gender border control that differentiates inner from outer institutes the integrity of the subject.

This is a radical way of relating subjectivity to performance. But it is helpful in showing the power of normality in early childhood. A normal child in a situation has to perform and represent himself in a way that is recognisable in social circles. This signals that he is close to being around the acceptable poles of being a child or a gendered being. Hence we can talk about proper children that are better at being *The Child* created by the norms (Prout & James 1997). What counts here is the correct performance. Children must work hard to achieve the version of normality that is socially sanctioned. From this perspective biological immaturity and sex are used for policing and disciplining children on the basis of their natural state of being.

What this tells us is that the distribution of labour, power, and meanings are all built around the normalisation of a compulsory way of being a child or a boy or



girl. Behaviour of children and boys and girls is judged according to clearly defined categories. These categories function as true and natural. In growing up, children need to repeat the logic by acting out the representation/images presented by socially accepted categories. They come to believe that the way they walk, talk etc. is natural, regardless of social needs and pressures.

For children there are always concerns about performing their childhoods in the right way. There are endlessly repeated and reinforced messages from the media, early childhood centres, family, the medical fraternity, etc. about the correct way of being a child or a boy and a girl. This makes the correct repetition of behaviours possible. But children do resist the norms. They subvert them to give us snapshots of ways of being that challenge dominant ways of thinking about them.

The idea of performance to achieve versions of the self, provided me with another lens to look at children's childhoods closer to the lived realities at the centres. It also assisted in taking a closer look at normalising discourses and the social pressures that are put on children to be proper children and to get their childhood/gender right.

#### **2.7.4 Bourdieu**

In contrast to the poststructural theorists, Bourdieu uses a structural approach to theorising social behaviour/practice. His theory on the interaction of habitus, field, and capital that generates the logic of practice, is useful in understanding the material conditions in this study.

Bourdieu (1977), like the other theorists we met thus far, deals with the issue of structure and agency. He works away from the Foucaultian idea of discourse to explain social practice. He is concerned with understanding social behaviour and how it seems to be fixed and regulated to someone observing a culture. For Bourdieu, our social practice does not result in simple conformity to the rules of social behaviour. The complexities and paradoxical nature of socially and

culturally located behaviour come from strategic options that are available through dispositions or habitus in particular fields.

Bourdieu is interested in how human action is constituted through the dialectical relationship between an individual's thought and activity and the objective world. He argues that habit is a social inheritance and as such it comprises of all the social and cultural experiences that shape us as people. Habitus implies habit or unthinkingness in actions and dispositions.

The notion of habitus... is relational in that it designates mediation between objective structures and practice. First and foremost, habitus has the function of overcoming the alternative between consciousness and unconsciousness... Social reality exists, so to speak, twice in things and in minds, in fields, and in habitus outside and inside agents. And when habitus encounters a social world of which it is a product, it finds itself "as a fish in water", it does not feel the weight of the water and takes the world for granted (Bourdieu 1989:43).

Habitus gives us the range of outcomes from which we can choose. The outcomes are shaped by rules emanating from particular worldviews that are dominant at a particular point in history. We are not fully aware that our choices are guided by the historical rules and principles. We take it for granted and do not see our experiences as cultural, ideological or religious. The latter is masked through the sense of being practical. Our strategies that make us appear regulated and conforming result from a history of possible behaviours – "systems of durable, transposable dispositions" (Bourdieu 1977:72). Habitus then points to a set of possible practices and ways of looking at those practices in particular situations made up of material situations and relationships.

So, according to Bourdieu, if we want to know about the material and economic conditions of a given society like class structures, then we should look at the habitus. The latter serves as the enactment of material and economic conditions. The way in which a person will behave can be attributed to the collective history of his class. He argues that each class enacts a set of dispositions and practices

that gives an indication of its own particular habitus. People will differentiate themselves according to significant knowledges, tastes, and inclinations. The separations that result from accruing a particular habitus, lead to hierarchies. Distinctions between groups of people are most visible in the kinds of capital that people accrue. The notion of capital helps people to validate themselves as people of a particular social class.

The concept of a field is related to habitus. The constituent effect of habitus through human practice is actualised in an objectively defined field. In other words, habitus focuses on the subjective aspects and the field focuses on the objective aspect.

I define field as a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of distribution of species of power (capital) whose possession command access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relations to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.) (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 72-73).

In this excerpt, field is presented as a structured system of social relations at a micro and macro level. Individuals, institutions, and groupings are all structurally related. These relations both determine and reproduce social activity. Education is a field. As such, it is made up of specific relations. It is governed by principles that are articulated by those in authority and accepted and recognised by teachers inside the field as well as by those outside the field.

Bourdieu (Robbins 1998:16) sees the relationship between field and habitus as an “ontological complicity”. Ontology refers to the nature of being or the essence of things. He maintains that the relation between field and habitus operates in two ways. On the one side, it is relation of conditioning. The field structures the habitus. On the other side, it is a relation of knowledge or cognitive construction. Habitus makes the field a world endowed with a sense of value,

which is worth investing. The field of education and the related habitus are seen as mutually constituting.

Many of the rules and principles of the field take place in a way where people are not conscious of them. It is symbolic capital that manifests itself within the forces of supply and demand in a field. The terms of capital, supply and demand makes social activity a market. In a market, people competing for its products control social activity. The personal resources determine the purchasing power. The products and actions within a field therefore have value. This value enables the purchasing of other products of the field. In so doing, it is capital that has power.

In working with the concept of capital, Bourdieu (1986) is specifically interested in socially unequal outcomes. In articulating the power relationship between the economic and the cultural fields, he shows how each form of capital is a product of investment. The forms are listed as economic, cultural, social, linguistic, and more generally symbolic. Each form is put in place to secure a return on an investment. Economic capital is literally money wealth. It can be cashed in any part of society.

Cultural capital is the product of education. It provides clarity on how a return on an investment is secured. There are various states that help to make sense of how institutions like early childhood centres and schools will reproduce cultural capital. Institutions will work on the embodied state, which refers to dispositions of the mind and body that are considered to be long lasting. This is complemented by the objectified state, which comes in the form of cultural goods like pictures, books, toys, etc. They present theories in action. The institutionalised state is a form of objectification. Educational qualifications serve as an example.

People do not enter a field with equal amounts of capital. Some have inherited wealth, cultural distinctions from upbringing and family connections. Children from these families already have the relevant capital, which makes them better players in a particular field. Some will be disadvantaged. In Bourdieu's terms,

early childhood centres for children from middle class backgrounds, for example, will confer original properties on the cultural capital, which it is said to guarantee. In this form the centres may act as agents to give children a headstart for school success. Early socialisation is used to develop a distinctive habitus that can equip a child with embodied attributes needed for the future. It is the parents that put pressure on the form of cultural capital to be appropriated to their children. Middle class parents want their style, taste, manners and know-how to be appropriated by institutions that educate their children. They demand continuity between the home and school to give distinction to their children as children of a particular class.

Social capital is closely related to cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). It exists as a network of social relations. The individual or individual group's sphere of contact is important. To take our example further, in developing school readiness at a middle class centre, children will have to learn the appropriate forms of sociability. A series of exchanges will be designed to affirm and reaffirm this. Relationships and membership in a group are important. Names and instituting acts may confer distinction on groups. In these messages of sociability, the child becomes used to the idea that this is how we say and do things at our (middle class) centre.

With regard to linguistic capital, Bourdieu (1991) argues that language is never just about words. It is not merely a medium to express ideas. The processes of social activity result in language as a product. Language will be differently valued depending on the field of social activity. For example, whilst mother tongue is valued in the home, it is devalued at school when English is the norm. Language is thus value-laden and culturally expressive according to what is perceived as legitimate. Of importance here, is the concept of a linguistic market. Linguistic products have value in the field of education and in the business world in the same way as market products have value. The most prestigious language takes on the status of the norm and it possesses the greatest linguistic capital. Those that speak from authority use the dominant style of language and thus create hierarchies and exclusions.

The work of Bourdieu, although criticised for being materialistic and deterministic, provided important filters in analysing discourses like market childhood and class-based habitus of the centres. In general, this theoretical filter was valuable in the overall project of problematising the taken-for-granted truths in early childhood education.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have travelled a long road to show that my thesis is being set up to move the constructions of childhood *for* children and *by* children from natural explanations to complex, lived realities. In positioning myself within reconceptualist thinking, I have critiqued the dominant ways of knowing childhood and children. I have also detailed the theories that best explain the complexities of early childhood as experienced by teachers and young children at the centres. My theoretical leanings are towards marginalised and highly contested ways of understanding early childhood. This is a deliberate move to invite new theoretical discourse spaces in the field.

The theorising in this thesis comes from how teachers talk about their work and how children articulate their ways of being and ways of knowing their world. It is used to ask questions about how we understand childhood, the provisioning of institutional early childhood, and how young children experience their childhoods. In this way, reconceptualist thinking is used to illuminate limiting discourses and to search for possibilities to invite new dialogue about early childhood education.

In the next chapter I put reconceptualist lenses to work. I detail my travels in researching early childhood through positioning young children as social actors.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCHING EARLY CHILDHOOD THROUGH THE LENS OF YOUNG CHILDREN AS SOCIAL ACTORS

#### 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I outline the methodological moves I made in order to produce data for the constructions of childhood *for* and *by* children in centre-based settings. I refrain from providing a mere descriptive account that traditionally characterises methodology chapters. The major part of this chapter aims to engage with the research question, “How do we research early childhood when young children are positioned as social actors (participants) in research?”

I consider the question to be important for finding possibilities for research within the context of young children’s participatory rights in South Africa. The ratification of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, serves as the official endorsement of children as players in their own lives (UNICEF 1989). As such, the convention presents unprecedented value for children as social actors in their subjective worlds. Article 12 recognises the right of children to express their views on matters of concern to them. The views of children are given due weight in accordance with age and maturity (an aspect contested in this chapter). Article 13 provides children with the right to freedom of expression. South African research with active participation of school-age children is becoming familiar and is informing methodologies (see, for example, Griesel, Swart-Kruger & Chawla 2004; Nelson Mandela Children’s Foundation 2005; Van der Riet, Hough & Killian 2005).

In early childhood (below Grade R), however, the new images of children as agents participating and co-creating knowledge of life in context, is still not a familiar lens in research. This is due to the complex nature of working with young children, inadequate understanding of how they present their knowledge, power issues, and the challenges of using participatory techniques. Given the paucity of research in early childhood from a sociological perspective, I engage

with methodological issues to fill gaps in knowledge. I end this chapter by presenting a possibility for researching early childhood when young children become participants in research.

### **3.2 Ethnography**

This study uses ethnography as a research approach. Ethnography has its roots in cultural anthropology. Ethnography is a qualitative study that requires direct observation of behaviour and immersion in a particular field situation (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995). Ethnography is not just about constructing, reporting, and evaluating field observations. Here is a definition of ethnography that foregrounds a cultural perspective.

Ethnography is the work of describing culture. The essential core of this activity aims to understand another way of life from the native point of view... Fieldwork, then involves the disciplined study of what the world is like to people who have learned to see, hear, speak, think, and act in ways that are different. Rather than studying people, ethnography means learning from people (Spradley 1979:3).

What attracted me to this perspective of ethnography, in the early stages of my study, was the fact that there were opportunities to become immersed in the day to day happenings in early childhood centres. I could also have access to a number of children and their teachers in two bounded settings for data production. This perspective also afforded me the opportunity to position myself as a learner. I considered all of the above to be promising starting points for my study.

#### **3.2.1 Ethnography and the study of childhood and children**

The main attraction to ethnography, however, was the fact that it was favoured as a research methodology in the study of childhood and children. Ethnography has enabled the development of the social studies of childhood. James (2001) explains that the perspectival shift brought about by the UN Convention on the



Rights of the Child made it necessary to recognise that although children are members of an age category to which particular expectations/values are attached, they participate and share the cultural space of childhood which is time and culture bound. Children, through their participation in a generational order, occupy particular positions in the life course, which constitutes childhood in forms dictated by culture and history. In order to illuminate happenings in childhood, James argues that ethnography is a powerful research methodology that enables one to understand the processes of how children constitute themselves.

The strength of ethnography lies in the way in which close attention is paid to the everyday and familiar ways in which the social world is created and sustained. Ethnography is the key to ending the mutedness of children's voices (James 2001). Children's views, perspectives, and knowledge of the life world they inhabit are enabled and made accessible through ethnography.

In the search for evidence for this study, ethnography made it possible to engage with the lived realities in the constructions of childhood from the perspectives of teachers and young children. With regard to teachers' provisioning for young children, ethnography enabled the examination of discourses of young children and centre-based early childhood experiences. With regard to young children, I was able to gather evidence of how they re (produced) discourses in the constructions of childhood within their context specificities. Furthermore, I was able to explore how young children (boys and girls) constructed meaning and identity in ways that influenced the form of the meaning and identity. The children's knowledge was made accessible by ethnography informed by social constructionist and poststructural approaches.

### **3.2.2 Adopting social constructionist and poststructural approaches to ethnography**

The social constructionist and poststructuralist approaches argue that what we know is socially constructed (see Chapter Two for full discussion). Social constructionists assert that humans build a sense of self from interactions with

others. Our subjective experience of the world around us (which comes from within us) is shaped by the objective social world around us (that which appears outside) (Berger & Luckmann 1966). Language is a performative act containing meaning and action. We build understanding of ourselves not through discourses but through social comparison between others and ourselves. Poststructural approaches differ from social constructionism in that they emphasise the role of discourses in the construction of a self-view. A discourse like science gives characteristics to *The Child* and normalises and essentialises real children. Our thoughts, feelings, and experiences as adults and children are products of systems of meaning that exist at a social level rather than at an individual level (Terre Blance & Durrheim 1999).

Ethnography, which is shaped by the approaches above, focuses on meaning and use of language. They accentuate the complexity of life through paying attention to plural realities, multiple views, and multifaceted identities. They challenge what Van Maanen (1995:1) describes as traditional “travel ethnography” that emanates from the cultural perspective (detailed in 3.2.1) which seeks to describe a culture. Van Maanen argues that cultural ethnography reads as a neat storytelling institution. The ethnographer hangs around with a group for a while. He writes down the sayings and doings of the people he studies. Having “been there”, the ethnographer goes home and writes a pleasant, peaceful cultural tale.

Lather (2001:476) argues that traditional ethnography described above is under duress from a “reflexive turn”. The objective accounts that have been presented as realist tales of specific cultures require researchers to write themselves into the text and show their assumptions and bias. The gaze of the ethnographer and the multiple subjectivities adopted in fieldwork are inserted in the text. Coffey (1999) argues that ethnographers invest a great deal of themselves in situations they find themselves in. It is therefore necessary for personal, emotional, and identity work to form part of ethnography. Power relations when working with participants must also form part of the telling.

My ethnographic work was shaped by the “reflexive turn”. Throughout the study I chose different points to insert my experiences. Perhaps the most dominant way

of insertion in the presentation of this thesis is the use of the word “I” instead of the detached use of “the researcher”. Issues of power and contested meanings form part of this ethnography.

Another crucial aspect advocated by those that disrupt traditional ethnography is the idea of working with uncertainty. Ethnography is seen as a productive site of doubt. Researchers work with the praxis of not being sure (Lather 1998). The prescribed intelligibility is challenged by *in situ* happenings at the research site. Researchers confront “stuck places after stuck places” (Ellsworth 1997:xi). They keep on moving and learn from the challenges that are posed. This way of thinking was valuable in this study. In particular, I worked with the moment by moment realities as I confronted them and as I was redirected to learn from actions that were not successful. These moves made me think more in terms of *producing* data rather than *collecting* data (Lather 1998).

Given the time constraints of the study and the fact that I could not work on a day to day basis as an assistant at the centres, this study was more aligned to an *ethnographic approach*. When this approach is favoured multi-method strategies are used to produce data to render a *partial account* of lived experiences in a cultural setting (Mason 2002; Blatchford & Blatchford 2001). My partial account of constructions of childhood at the centres was made possible through semi-structured interviews with teachers, observations of young children and teachers, field notes, and participatory techniques as I engaged with young children.

The idea of rendering a partial account concerned me at the beginning of my study. I worried about not telling the full story on the constructions of childhood. Green and Hill (2005) argue that when research involves young children (and adults), it is important to accept that their worlds will always in part be inaccessible to researchers. I was working in a theoretical framework that highlighted the fact that there was no single version of truth but dominant and subjugated ones. My theoretical filters helped me accept the fact that I was working with a slice of life characterised by fluid situations with multiple truths. So the evidence that I produce, in this thesis, is not *the truth* of what is in young

children's (boys and girls) heads or in their teachers' heads. At best, I aim at providing increased levels of understanding - partial understanding of constructions of childhood at early childhood centres through my subjective lens.

### **3.3 Positioning young children in research**

In the previous chapter we have come to understand that most of what we know in early childhood education emanates from the field of developmental psychology (child development). I showed how the field is concerned with the changes that occur with age and psychological functions of individuals. Until recently most research efforts were aimed at finding evidence of children's age-related competencies in order to predict those factors that show positive threads for adulthood. Specifically, there is a quest to understand how individuals' psychological functions change with age.

In efforts to advance a science of human behaviour, most early childhood research was and continues to be embedded within positivism. The defining assumption of this paradigm is that there is an objective reality that can be measured. For the purpose of research, young children are constructed as *The Child* (Hogan 2005). They are assumed to be universally the same, predictable for their stage of development, and passive beings (See Chapter Two par. 2.5.2.1 for more details). As such they are positioned as objects of research. Research is done by adults *on* children to understand essential properties of *The Child* in controlled settings. Sometimes statistical methods are favoured.

Christensen and Prout (2002) note that the view of children as adults-in-the-making can exclude children (especially young children) from research on the basis that they are unable to deal with information and make judgements. It is assumed that information about young children's lives is best interpreted through the voices of their adult caregivers. Typical responses to young children in research are documented as *too small, over literal, ignorant, and egocentric* (Powney & Watts 1987; Breakwell 1995).

I found the scientific approach to early childhood research to be of little value for the intellectual puzzle with which I was working. I was interested in young children's knowledge of their subjective worlds and teachers' provisioning for them. As a broader concern, I wanted to fill the gaps in knowledge about early childhood research that position young children as participants. Adopting an approach modelling the natural sciences would have been fruitless. Although I did require some statistics about children and teachers, statistical methods could not produce data on the richness of young children's lives. I did not want to compare young children's experiences to how they were shaping up to age-related norms. Neither was I interested in preparing a checklist of behaviours to be ticked in laboratory settings. I wanted to privilege young children's ways of knowing through observing them in their real world and through forming relationships with them.

I also wanted to share my story of the research process. Woodhead and Faulkner (2000:12) argue that although a developmental researcher using the scientific approach is warm, considerate, and human when conducting research *on* children, the scientific discourse demands that they transform human beings into objects, variables, and then produce a condensing of human behaviour into general laws. There is a disappearance of the processes of researching early childhood. This was clearly not the route I wanted to take. The least the scientific approach could afford me was structured interviews with teachers *on* young children's lives with no engagement with children.

The move away from a scientific approach was also informed by two critical incidents that occurred prior to the official commencement of this study. Firstly, in my original proposal I intended to work with children from birth to four years. On appraising my research proposal, some members of the Higher Degrees Committee were concerned about the challenges of working with children who were very young. There was even a light-hearted moment on data production with babies and toddlers. Secondly, an application for funding was also informative. In the proposal I outlined observations, conversations, and the participatory techniques I would use to access young children's experiences of

their childhoods. The Evaluation Committee's response to my proposal was as follows:

Early childhood studies is a weak field, therefore there is a need to get more people advanced in the field. Methodological issues are questioned for this study. The *appropriateness of age* is also concerning (my emphasis). Older age groups should be considered for *meaningful participation* (my emphasis). There are concerns with *language abilities* (my emphasis).

Both the views were valid within the dominant developmental construction of early childhood as a vulnerable stage of life and young children as unreliable witnesses in their own lives. The excerpt is strong in its assumption that young children are not sufficiently competent to report their experiences. With regard to language abilities, Donaldson (1978) argues that we confuse language abilities with young children's general intellectual abilities. She maintains that if we make attempts to make ourselves understood, then we find young children more competent than we expect. With regard to age, Lansdowne (2004) argues that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child extends participatory rights to all children capable of expressing a view (verbally or bodily). There is no age restriction. She notes that meaningful participation with young children is rather a matter of attitudes and practices in the environments where young children spend most of their time. I would argue that it is also a case of how a researcher is able to adjust her mode of inquiry for young children.

The support from literature enabled me to work with the comments I received as a research area in this chapter. I knew that I had to pay special attention to the salience of age, participation, relationships, and ethics. Bearing this in mind, I take special care to show deep engagement of issues to make a contribution towards strengthening knowledge production of early childhood – from comments earlier on, perceived to be a “weak field” of study in South Africa.

My theoretical approaches afforded me ways of thinking away from the dominant category of *The Child*. Specifically, it allowed me to see young

children as social actors constructing childhood in their present child status rather than study *The Child* in order to push the boundaries of understanding in human psychology. I could learn about children from children by viewing them as people who act intentionally and agentially in their own lives.

Taking this dimension into consideration, there were two ways in which I could have positioned children in research. The first option was to position them as subjects through a child-centred perspective. Robinson and Kellet (2004) note that from this perspective although there is acknowledgement of involving young children in research it is informed by judgements on maturity and cognitive ability. Much exclusion can occur based on age and what is perceived as competence. For example, young children that are telegraphic in their speech may be excluded if talking in sentences is perceived to be a prerequisite for language competence. If English is the norm, then linguistically different children can be excluded. Given that this study did not make automatic assumptions about children's competence based on age and cognitive maturity, the view of children as subjects had little appeal.

The view of children as social actors enabled me to position them as participants in my study. This perspective promotes the idea that early childhood researchers should not make any automatic assumptions about the difference between working with adults and children in research. This research was initiated, designed, analysed, and put into the form of a PhD by myself. Bearing this in mind, one could ask how were children then seen as participants in this study. I would argue that both the way in which children interpreted my research moves (detailed in other sections in this chapter) and achieved social understanding of the relationship I forged with them, attest to them being participants in this study. They acted, took part, and contested some aspects of the research process.

### **3.4 The research sites and samples**

In order to increase the level of understanding of constructions of centre-based early childhood in urban KwaZulu-Natal, I purposively selected centres that catered for children below Grade R. The groundwork for the study began

towards the latter part of 2003 and continued for a year in 2004. Initially, I selected four centres for the study. Two centres were community-based and two were private sites. Both the community-based sites were located in historically Black (African) areas with no racial diversity at the centres. My attempts to secure participation of teachers in these sites were unsuccessful. The principal at one site was unconvinced of the value of the study because it did not include funding for the centre. At the other site, whilst the teachers were enthusiastic about the study, the principal indicated that she was uncomfortable with university people hanging around the centre.

I concentrated on two centres that were configured as private providers with children from at least three race groups. The centres relied solely on fees paid by parents. Race, gender, and class were taken into consideration. Both the centres showed racial integration and accommodation of both boys and girls below Grade R. The centres were also easily accessible. All of these features made the centres ideal for an in-depth, small-scale study. I refer to the centres in anonymous terms, namely, Centre One and Centre Two.

### **3.4.1 Centre One**

Centre One is located in Pinetown in a former White suburb. It operates in a middle class context. Since the dismantling of apartheid a large number of middle class Indian, Coloured, and African families have moved into the area. Houses are privately built and well maintained. House prices are high. Most residents are economically strong. This is evident from the size of homes, facilities, and clustering of semi-private schools, private schools and private early childhood centres in the area.

At the beginning of the study Centre One was located in a cul-de-sac in a residential home with a swimming pool. The centre relocated due to increased intake of children. The new premise was favourably located near a primary school. The centre had an open-plan set up. It catered for half day, full day and after care. Transport was available for the children. The school fee for half day



(till 14:00) was R440 per month. The fee for full day (till 17:30) was R570. These fees did not include extra-curricular activities. All meals were included.

There were five teachers and two teacher assistants. Four teachers agreed to participate in this study. They are referred to in anonymous terms.

Table A. Sample of teachers at Centre One

Names	Race	Position/s	Qualification	Teaching experience	Training institution
Mrs A	White	Owner Principal Teacher	Diploma in Preschool Education	Seven years (Baby care, crèche and preschool)	Private higher education institution
Mrs B	White	Teacher	Certificate in Preschool Education	Eight years (Baby care, crèche and preschool)	NGO
Mrs C	White	Teacher	Certificate in Early Childhood Development	Nine years (Baby care and crèche)	NGO
Mrs D	Indian	Teacher	Certificate in Educare	Eight years (crèche and preschool)	NGO

At the time of the study eighty children were enrolled at the centre. There were thirty nine children below Grade R. The efforts to include babies in the study were abandoned after concerns raised by the principal about the emotional effects of strangers on very young children. The return of the consent forms from parents and sensitivity to race and gender informed the number of children included in the sample. Ten children formed the sample. The names of all children have been changed.

Table B. Sample of children at Centre One

Name	Race	Gender	Age Range	Mother's Occupation	Father's Occupation
Denise	White	Female	2-3	Travel Agent assistant	Owner of a travel agency
Sindisiwe	African	Female	3-4	Teacher	Business - self employed
Janice	Coloured	Female	3-4	Saleslady	Artisan
Kajal	Indian	Female	3-4	Manager	-
Anna-Marie	White	Female	3-4	Secretary	Mechanic
Varshen	Indian	Male	3-4	Manageress at a clothing store	Financial Manager
Brett	Coloured	Male	3-4	Supervisor	Telephone Technician
Thabo	African	Male	3-4	Teacher	Businessman
Ashley	White	Male	3-4	Secretary	Policeman
Crain	White	Male	2-3	Secretary	Electrician

### 3.4.2 Centre Two

Centre Two is located in a former Indian suburb in Chatsworth. There are various sections in Chatsworth that house middle class and working class families.

Centre Two is in a working class area. There are many semi-detached homes (previously provided by the Indian Housing Scheme). Mrs X described the area as having many children from divorced homes.

At the time of the study, the earning power of parents was low and unemployment was on the increase. There was also evidence of some increase in economic capital. Council homes were extended and a few outbuildings existed in the area. The price of homes in the area dropped due to the development of an informal squatter settlement nearby. At the time of the study, shacks were being replaced by low cost housing built by the government. Mostly poor African families and a few poor Indian families occupied these houses. Mrs X explained as follows:

People buy plots and build homes and then contractors offer a package deal. Water connection is free. People still live in shacks until they can

afford to build their homes. Some people live in the shacks and sell their plots.

Centre Two was located in a residential home. A semi-detached house with a long driveway was converted into an early childhood centre. A room in the house was converted into a baby room. The driveway was converted into a large classroom. The centre catered for half day, full day, and after care. Since the centre serviced children that lived within walking distance, there was no need for transport. The school fee for half day (till 14:00) was R275 per month. The fee for full day (till 17:30) was R375. All meals were included.

There were three teachers at the centre. All three teachers agreed to participate in this study. They are referred to in anonymous terms.

Table C. Sample of teachers at Centre Two

Names	Race	Position/s	Qualification	Teaching experience	Training institution
Mrs X	Indian	Owner Principal Teacher	Certificate in Preschool Education	Ten years (Baby care, crèche and preschool)	NGO
Miss Y	African	Teacher	Certificate in Preschool Education	Eight years (Baby care, crèche and preschool)	NGO
Miss Z	African	Teacher/ Caregiver	1 week short course on baby care	Six years (Baby and toddler care)	NGO

At the time of the study, forty two children were enrolled at the centre. Nineteen children were below Grade R. The return of the consent forms from parents and sensitivity to race and gender informed the number of children included in the sample. Ten children formed the sample. The names of all the children are changed.

Table D. Sample of children at Centre Two

Name	Race	Gender	Age Range	Mother's Occupation	Father's Occupation
Trish	Indian	Female	3-4	Nurse	Mechanic
Seeta	Indian	Female	2-3	Housewife	Unemployed
Evashna	Indian	Female	18 – 30 mths	Saleslady	Salesman
Dreshnie	Indian	Female	3-4	Teacher	Technician
Thabisile	African	Female	3-4	Domestic worker	-
Kumar	Indian	Male	3-4	Housewife	Salesman
Ranjeet	Indian	Male	3-4	Housewife	Mechanic
Kevin	Coloured	Male	3-4	Housewife	Businessman
Jabulani	African	Male	3-4	Domestic worker	Painter
Gopal	Indian	Male	2-3	Secretary	-

It is important to remember that what I chose as my sample does not represent teachers and young children in early childhood in KwaZulu-Natal. I did not perceive this as a problem. I was not aiming at generalisation of findings. My concerns were around seeking in-depth local understanding of teachers and young children's constructions of childhood at the centres.

### 3.5 Gaining Access

Gaining access to the centres meant dealing with multiple gatekeepers. Neuman (2000: 52) defines a gatekeeper as "someone with formal or informal authority to control access to a site". Every visit was characterised by seeking permission and providing information to different levels of authority – principals at initial entry, teachers at specific venues, and young children in their working spaces. The bargaining for access took place with teachers and children at the different subsites – office area, classroom/group spaces in the case of Centre Two, and play areas.

Obtaining access and permission from principals to conduct the research did not pose a problem. Parents were informed of the research by the centres. Both the centres were happy to accommodate someone that was interested in young children's lives (see section 3.10 for more details). My first bargaining encounter

with principals challenged my assumption of “tell it all on the first day”. I took my cue from ethnographic texts that highlighted the importance of explaining the entire research to participants from the outset. The reactions of principals and the busy atmosphere at the centres shortened my response. Information about the nature of my activities was best negotiated and renegotiated in a “check in” type procedure at each visit.

Teachers initially controlled my access to spaces in the classrooms. At Centre One the teachers positioned me as a teacher trainee who had a theoretical understanding of early childhood education and was in need of the practical know-how of early years teaching. At Centre Two the teachers positioned me as a very important person (VIP) wanting to learn. When I arrived at the centres I was given a chair in the corner of the classroom. This positioned me as a learner in a defined space. I used the opportunity to become familiar with the happenings and meanings in a busy market place of activities. As the study progressed I abandoned the prescribed space and moved around the classroom to interact with the children. I carefully plotted my route to be out of the way of teachers. I tried not to disturb their practice. I was sometimes invited by teachers to have a look at samples of children’s work and to share opinions on some issues. I used the opportunities to probe teachers’ understandings of their practice.

When young children are positioned as social actors, they also take on the role of gatekeepers. Corsaro (1997) in his study of peer cultures, notes how preschool children protect their interactive space. Gatekeeping became evident when children refused to admit other children into their workspaces. Adopting the lens of young children as social actors, meant that I viewed them as keepers of knowledge and insights that I wanted to learn about. Gaining access to their workspaces was crucial. I tried to maintain a balance of distance and involvement in a way that respected the children’s right to protect their spaces. This meant being responsive to the situations children were involved in and engaging in moments of negotiation and reflection.

There were some days where I would just squat in the corner or sit away from the children and wait to be invited to participate. I used this opportunity to observe the children. I joined the children in their activities through conversations and inserting myself in non-obtrusive ways into the actions they were involved in. The sections that follow will show a deepening of the dynamics of constructing relationships with young children for data production.

### **3.6 Creating visibility of young children's knowledge**

When (early childhood) researchers abandon predetermined meanings of who people are, ready-made observation schedules, and laboratory settings, then the research process becomes a complicated manoeuvre (Usher 2000). I would argue that the complexities of not knowing young children and their teachers in advance, call for researchers being responsive to local and specific circumstances in which the research is conducted. I used two phases to this end.

#### **3.6.1 The “soak-in” phase**

As a novice researcher with a vague understanding of the new issues in childhood studies/research, I used the “soak in” phase as an osmosis type blending exercise, thinking that it would assist in securing relevant data. Although the exercise was helpful in building relationships and trust, I found it time consuming, frustrating, and exhausting. Mason (2002:90) cautions researchers about hanging around a setting with a view that one can simply “soak up” what one needs to know. She argues that research must be guided by selectivity and perspective around the intellectual puzzle being investigated.

My immersion in literature on childhood research helped me to become more focused in the “soak in” phase. I adopted a strong observer role with a guiding question. The question was framed keeping in mind that the dominant discourses on early childhood provisioning and young children formed a crucial part of this study. I formulated the question, “What is the institutional logic that guides practice at the centres?”

A close examination of the practices of both the centres revealed that the children's meaning making and bodily experiences were being shaped by a school-like age-based ethos. The children worked in thematic skills-based programmes organised around a developmentally appropriate framework for school readiness. Although there was some flexibility in the programme for children below the three and four year age group, there was a stronger adherence to timetable routines for children between three and four years. Observations of interactions of teachers and children shaped my understanding of discourses informing the constructions of childhood at the centres. It is within these circumstances that young children were shaping their lives at the centres. This foundational understanding informed the next phase in the study.

### **3.6.2 The “thick involvement” phase**

The “thick involvement” phase was designed with two aims in mind, namely, observing how young children as active social beings performed in spaces that implicated them, and interacting with the children through a semi-participant observer role which continued throughout the study. The observation of children revealed flashlight meaning making. There were quick shifts of episodic moments that were difficult to capture. The use of the guiding question, “What does it mean to be a child in situations?” and the recording of a sequence of events for five minutes, helped to produce thick descriptions. The description of the sequence below at Centre One, serves to illustrate how I recorded a boy showing agency, interfering with a girl, and rebelling against the norms of sleep time. It is incidents like the one below that helped me gain understanding of young children's subjective worlds within circumstances shaping their lives.

It is sleep time for the two and three year olds. The mattresses are brought out. The children jump on the mattress. The teacher claps her hands and announces, “It's sleeping time.” The children continue to jump on the mattress. The teacher walks among the children and repeats, “It's sleeping time. You must lie down and have a rest.” The children settle down. A boy refuses to sleep. He interferes with a girl. He gets up, “I'm not going to sleep. I go stand by the wall.”

At the beginning of the study I met some children, especially Evashna at Centre Two that were telegraphic in their speech. I had to find ways to report efforts in meaning making. Samuelsson (2004) states that meaning making by toddlers becomes visible when one focuses on how they communicate with their bodies and produce actions. They take the world for granted and do not need words to communicate. The embodied messages should be regarded as being just as authentic as the verbal. The focus on body-use-in-action together with the one word sentences/telegraphic phrases was helpful in understanding young children's communicative abilities. Here is an example of how I captured Evashna's intentional meaning making at Centre Two.

Evashna goes to the toy box and pulls out a doll. She hands the doll to Miss Y. After a little while she fetches the doll from Miss Y. She calls out, "Baba, baba." She holds the doll under her arm and walks around Miss Y who is teaching a group of children. She throws the doll at Miss Y's feet. She does not get a reaction from Miss Y. She takes the doll and hands it to the baby in a walking ring.

During the interacting part of the "thick involvement phase", there were certain researcher skills that needed to be worked through in order to become sensitive to the *doings* of young children. The skill of listening was important in data production. Clark (2004) argues that when young children are seen as social actors, listening is not about making preformed ideas visible but more about hearing, interpreting, and making *in situ* meaning. The example below illustrates my attempts to be open-ended and active in listening.

I sit with three children at Centre One. We have a discussion on big children.

Me: Tell me about big children.

Anna-Marie: They write nicely.

Me: So big children write nicely. What can you tell me about small children?

Anna-Marie: Yah... scribble.

Me: So small children scribble.



Anna-Marie: It's ugly.

In order to show children my interest in learning from them I frequently began my conversations by asking them to tell me about an aspect that I was trying to understand. When they gave a response I repeated their responses before probing with a question. I found this a valuable way to show the children that I was hearing them and wanted more information. It is frequently argued that we should avoid asking young children questions that begin with “why” as it requires intellectually contrived answers rather than ones connected to children's experiences (Geldard & Geldard 1997). In my study, however, I found some children quite capable of producing thematic knowledge to “why” questions.

In communicating with the children it was sometimes difficult to understand some of the “children words”– “pissy pot” (navel), “noonoos” (ants), “sweetchie-swatches” (sponges). Since I could only speak English, responses in IsiZulu, “woza lapha” (come here), “angazi” (I don't know/understand) and Tamil “Aya” (grandmother), “karow” (hot), “moola bone” (bone with marrow) were challenging to me. The language limitations were partially resolved by directly requesting children to explain meanings and/or enlisting the help of older children. Teachers also assisted in this respect. However, I had to be sensitive to discourses teachers were using to help me in the interpretations. Some teachers dismissed children's meaning making attempts as indications of incompetence.

### **3.7 Participatory techniques as windows to young children's knowledge**

Once there is acknowledgement of young children as social actors, then there needs to be techniques that can access their knowledge (Nieuwenhuys 2004). Researchers have selected a variety of creative techniques, as constructivist tools, to enable children to express their knowledge about aspects that affect their lives (O' Kane 2000; Mayall 2000). The selection of the techniques, however, has been subjected to debate. Those that work with older children as social actors argue that there is no need for special techniques with children as compared to adults (Christensen & James 2000).

To enable social participation with children below Grade R, however, I would argue that participatory techniques have to be sensitive to levels of understanding, interests, ways of communicating and hence *doings* of young children in their particular locations. With regard to age, we need to be sensitive to not only the numerical competence value, but also an experience value (James et al. 1998). In other words, universal competence, which is age-based, must not be taken-for-granted. With young children, Samuelsson (2004:16) argues that extra effort must be directed to “see the meaning the child is creating”.

Although the observations of children yielded rich data on their *doings* of childhood, I saw the need for participatory techniques to deepen understandings on specific aspects. The participatory techniques were selected by careful observations of the way in which the children presented their knowledge. There was lots of talking, playing, running, acting, sitting, listening, and responding. These strengths led to the use of stories with and without toys, child-led tours, and conversations relating to photographs to produce data.

### **3.7.1 Stories**

Davies (2003) argues that stories are important tools to help us constitute others and ourselves as beings with specificity. It is through narratives that young children learn to weave details of their existence. Treacher (2006) notes that narratives are social in two critical ways. Firstly, they encompass the practice of reaching out and connecting with others. Secondly, narratives are made within and through the social context. Story telling was a spontaneous way in which the children related their experiences to other children, teachers and myself. As a planned technique, the aim of story telling was to elicit meanings. A flexible approach was used to listen to and co-create meaning from stories. The story telling was facilitated sometimes individually, in pairs, and in small groups either in the classroom or in the play area.

Stories without toys created a variety of understanding on children’s likes and dislikes. These stories included views and opinions about babies, relationships with others, and knowledge about big school.

Stories with toys provided valuable insight into gendered childhoods - how children were making meaning of themselves as boys and girls. I provided the children with Spiderman, boy dolls, and Barbies. Sometimes they brought their own toys from the toy box to tell me stories. Here are examples from Centre Two and Centre One that show children's gendered meaning making.

Trish: Aunty Hasina Ma'am this is Barbie.

Me: I see Barbie on your lap.

Trish: Yah, Barbie. She's my best.

Ashley: I got my motorbike (shows me a toy motorbike).

Me: Tell me about your motorbike.

Ashley: My motorbike...its its hurt me. I was driving fast. And then fire, fire.

Here is how I interpreted stories with toys. Trish's short story on Barbie suggests that she has an understanding of the *best way* to be feminine. The doll is a powerful visual of a slim figure, blue eyes, and blond long hair. Ashley's story on getting hurt, driving fast, and references to fire suggest risk, speed, and power. These qualities are associated with being a *real* boy.

In enabling children to share their stories on babyhood as a stage of development and babies as people, I showed the children baby items– baby bottles, napkins and baby dolls wrapped in blankets. I also used a puppet called "Sammy The Small" to stimulate stories on being small. These props were given to children for a touch and feel exploration before their story telling began.

In order to elicit children's knowledge on race, I used persona dolls – a dark skinned doll and a fair skinned doll. I told the children stories about friends of different races. The stories served as good starters for children to explore racial categorisation.

The use of story translators proved to be a valuable resource in understanding story telling by children who were IsiZulu speaking. Older children who were proficient in IsiZulu and English served as translators.

Butsi: Ngiyabhala.

Me: Sindisiwe, what is Butsi saying?

Sindisiwe: She say write.

Butsi: Isikole sami ngiyayithanda (Jumps around, claps and sings).

Sindisiwe: She says this is hers school, and she like it.

Using stories as a participatory technique can be challenging especially if there is a fixed idea of narrative structure. The children's stories did not display story structure of older children and adults. There was no beginning, middle, and end of stories, as we traditionally know it. In making sense of the children's stories, the focus fell on reporting events in a question and answer format, personal experiences sometimes in two or three words, and actions associated with the telling. This required the development of a keen sense of listening and responding to quick moments of story telling.

Moving stories also proved valuable in eliciting children's knowledge. Child-led tours were organised to facilitate these stories.

### **3.7.2 Child-led tours – Follow the leader**

The children at the centres displayed high levels of energy. There was lots of jumping, walking, running on the playground and in the classrooms. This strength informed the technique called "follow the leader". It was similar to the child-led tours in the Mosaic Approach (Clark 2004). The aim of the tours was to allow children as leaders to point out places of significance and talk about them. The children were paired in order to allow for cross conversations and sometimes translations. The tours began at the entry points and sometimes continued around the buildings. On some occasions the tours were undertaken only around the centres. On other occasions children guided the tours to different

rooms. Children told moving stories that illuminated their knowledge of people and place.

The child-led tours, although insightful, can be quite challenging. Keeping up with the agenda of the children requires both physical and mental responsiveness from researchers. There has to be “quick thinking on the feet” to capture the nuances of meaning young children present.

### **3.7.3 The photographic talking wall**

In order to reconstruct experiences of time and events, I photographed children’s activities and created a photographic talking wall. The aim of this technique was to help me understand children’s interpretations of activities at the centres and to serve as a discussion starter. The routines such as lining up for toilet time, snack time, and play time were photographed. Teacher-directed activities such as making masks, and discussion time were also photographed. Wall space within the classroom was located in order to paste photographs illustrating a particular sequence, for example, the prayer before snack time, the distribution of snacks, and eating of snacks. Display of photographs in the classroom corner created a flexible environment where children could be free to leave or join in, as they desired. The children were invited to talk about what they saw with or without friends.

One of the challenges of using this technique relates to the space used to create conversations about happenings in the photographs. The classroom is a noisy environment. It was difficult to capture some of the children’s momentary responses.

## **3.8 Altering power in relationships with young children**

Alderson (1995) contends that research relationships that involve children must pay attention to the broader cultural notions of power imbalances that exist between adults and children. In both the centres, as expected, observations revealed that the balance of power was heavily skewed toward teachers.

Embedded in many responses from teachers to children were notions of control and restrictions. It is within these grids of power that I had to negotiate various roles. I wanted to forge relationships in a way that was sensitive and acceptable to the children and the teachers at the centres.

The dilemma of “Do you have to be a child to research one?” tended to be a nagging concern at the beginning of the study. In research with children there are some researchers who respond to power relations by refusing to take an authoritative stance. Mandell (1991), for example, refused to be an adult with the children she researched. She joined the children in all their activities and attempted to participate as an equal. The prior knowledge and physical size of an adult, however, defy such researcher participation. Mayall (in James 2001) argues that adults can never be children. They have to accept the differences between themselves and children. I adopted the stance of an “acceptable incompetent” (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995:99) - a non-threatening person who asks ignorant questions. The following examples illustrate this move.

I join three children in the sand pit area at Centre One. Denise brings a packet of sand to me. Is this for me? She nods her head. I take the packet and place it carefully on my lap.

The children at Centre Two are doing an art activity. I approach Gopal. I don't know how to make dots on a page. Would you be like Miss Y and teach me?

In order to alter power relations, it was helpful to recognise and capitalise on situations in which young children placed value on the adult status. During the study, the children required my intervention to settle disputes, confirm understanding of situations, and give direction to activities. These instances, however, were not without complexities. The example from Centre One illustrates children positioning me as a knowing person.

Ashley comes to me with an empty yoghurt container.

Ashley: What must I do with this?

Me: You must put it in the bin.

Thabo watches the interaction and comes to me.

Thabo: I want to throw my roll.

Me: No, Thabo. You must put it in your lunch box.

Thabo takes his roll and puts it in his lunch box. He is about to go to his place.

Teacher: Thabo, go to your place.

The children see me as another teacher who can give them answers to their questions and directions to their concerns. In responding to the children, I become didactic and provide sensible answers. The children invoke a power relation and I respond in a role consistent with adults at the centre. The instruction by the official teacher, however, shows the complexities that can arise when this happens. There is a double authority and ultimately the class teacher has the most authority. This example shows the tensions that can arise in forging relationships with children in the context of a centre with a particular ethos.

Following the cues from studies by Corsaro (1985, 1997), the role of a friend seemed like an appropriate way to alter power relations. However, the reactions of teachers pointed to problems associated with my role as a friend. Some children used the friendly presence to test boundaries. This was especially evident in their attempts to transgress routines, for example, getting snacks during rest time, remaining in the play area with me after most children had gone to the washroom, and attempting to tell me stories during nap time. Whilst this was viewed from my lens as an expression of agency, the reaction of teachers alerted me to the danger of being a permissive adult in a care and education setting.

There were also tense moments with some children in the study. In a few instances, children directly expressed negative feelings about outsider presence.

Varshen: Why every time you coming to school?

Me: I want to learn about you. Do you like me to come to school?

Varshen: No!

Me: Why is that?

Varshen: You know because my mummy didn't come.

In the example above I am positioned as an intruder. The agency of Varshen is evident in the way he questions me. He is knowledgeable about who should be at the centre. His reference to the exclusion of his mum and my physical presence, provided insights into his feelings.

In altering power relations I also had to be sensitive to gender. I found that the boys tended to dominate at times. Their stories were characterised by lots of actions and greater use of space than the girls. They also jostled for interactive spaces. After a few chaotic sessions, I began to use my voice more effectively and introduced a talking object to hear individual responses. Only those that held the talking object could speak. This approach was sometimes helpful. Girls tended to sit closer to me. During research activities they enjoyed holding my hands and placing their heads on my lap. They also showed curiosity about the colour of my lipstick and the type of shoes I wore. I had to provide brief explanations before I could begin with planned activities.

There were also many enjoyable moments during the course of attempting to be acceptable in relationships with the children. These arose mostly when the children used me as a resource. My mothering instinct and caregiving skills came to the fore when children needed to be comforted before sleep time, and attended to in the absence of teachers. In these instances, they referred to me as *mummy* and *nanny*. They called upon my language skills to label objects, request for information, and extend understandings. In these instances, children referred to me as *Hasina ma'am* and sometimes as *Aunty Hasina ma'am* (mostly at Centre Two). These momentary relationships helped me to feel more at ease with the children.

Playing the role of the researcher, mother, teacher, caregiver, assistant, and friend helped create understanding of multiple ways of responding and connecting with young children as people in an institutional setting. In these intersecting roles, I



engaged with the practical realities of attempting to alter power relations between the children and myself.

### **3.9 Working with teachers**

From the details outlining my work with the children, it is evident that I was responsive to human interactions for knowledge production. I also placed emphasis on the social situatedness of data production. With teachers, therefore, I chose semi-structured interviews that included the question and answer format and “conversation(s) with a purpose” (Burgess 1984:102). The latter is explained as a fluid, informal style of interactional exchange. The busy atmosphere of the centres made it necessary to interview teachers in small blocks of time on their own and to have snatching conversations/discussions whilst they were with the children.

The semi-structured interviews were guided by themes such as background of the children and teachers, the history of the centres, institutional enrolments/arrangements, parent involvement, beliefs about early childhood and young children, curriculum, diversity (gender, language, race). These themes were devised from my own reference points to produce data for my study and also from observations of teachers during my visits. The thematic focus was flexible enough to allow for follow-on questions to deepen specific understandings.

During interviews in blocks of time away from the children, I was allocated spaces very close to the classrooms. Principals felt that this arrangement was best suited for easy access to teachers should they be needed. The interviews at Centre One took place outdoors while teacher assistants took care of the children. I had to compete with the noise from nearby traffic, disruptions to answer telephone calls, and crying children. In Centre Two, due to the absence of teacher assistants, the interviews were conducted in the corner of the classroom after the half day children had been dismissed.

The semi-structured interviews also included a story approach to deepen understanding of the institutional arrangements at the centres. The story starter “A day in the life of ...” allowed teachers sufficient freedom to speak about their experiences with the children. These responses deepened understanding of the discourses informing the constructions of childhood *for* children. The use of the story starter, although valuable, did lead to lengthy descriptions that called for redirection of focus.

The semi-structured interviews also helped to provide more information on the children. For example, in a story telling session at Centre Two, Kevin made frequent references to two mummies – “a gone mummy” and “a now mummy”. A discussion with Mrs X revealed that the child had been removed from an abusive home and fostered in a new home. The clarification helped to contextualise Kevin’s stories. In another example, Brett from Centre One was often observed as invading “girl spaces” in the classroom and the play area. His conversations with me revealed his mum as a point of reference for his actions. When I consulted the teacher, she revealed that Brett’s mum wanted an anti-bias gender approach to his socialisation at the centre. The mother suggested that Brett be allowed to play with not only boy things, but girl things as well.

I sometimes found semi-structured interviewing to be a challenging move. My location as an Indian woman researching other women had a bearing on my positioning as a researcher. I tended to be more at ease with Mrs X at Centre Two because she was Indian. There were lots of common spaces to draw on conversations that were not necessarily related to my study. For example, she understood that during the period of Ramadaan I would be abstaining from food. She showed concern about my high energy activities during this time. With the White teachers, although accommodating, I always felt a little uneasy. I worried about whether I was fitting into the frame of happenings at the centre, fearing that I would be imposing too much. I was always very cautious about my choice of words and the personal demeanour I adopted.

I had some difficulty in conversing with African teachers. Although they spoke English, I found that I was using words that were not traditionally in their

vocabulary and perhaps carrying in too much of what Holliday (2002:158) calls a “technologised discourse” of a researcher doing interviews. The following example serves as an illustration. At Centre Two my interview with Miss Y was heading in the direction of her training as an early years teacher.

Me: Do you want to tell me more about the *training* you received as a teacher?

Miss Y: What’s that training?

Me: Did you go to any place to learn to teach young children?

Miss Y: Oh, now I see... *learn to teach*... Yah, Mrs X send me to the course...

In general, semi-structured interviewing called for a high degree of intellectual skills to keep up with listening, interpreting, and tuning into body language. Since I was working with broad themes I had to think quickly about the relevance of each part of the interaction to my research focus. I had to make on-the-spot connections between the relevant issues.

The semi-structured interviews, however, were valuable in creating a picture of early childhood in bounded settings. I agree with Langston, Abbot, Lewis, and Kellet (2004). When working with young children one cannot subscribe to a tribalised view of children. This means that young children do not shape their worlds only with other children. Rather, they share their world with adults who shape their childhood (James et al. 1998). It is through semi-structured interviews that I came to better understand how teachers were setting the conditions for centre-based early childhood education. Specifically, it proved to be a useful technique in producing data on the discourses teachers were using to construct childhoods *for* children.

### **3.10 Adopting a situated ethics approach**

The complex nature of researching young children as social actors and enabling voices of adults that cared for them called for a situated ethics approach. Simons and Usher (2000) describe this approach as focusing on how ethical issues are

handled in practice. My theoretical framework that challenged notions of universality, scientific objectivity, and value neutrality supported this approach to ethics. An ethically situated researcher has to show how the general ethical principles are mediated not only at the beginning of the research, but also throughout the research process (Morrow & Richards 1996). In detailing the research process thus far, I have already illustrated my attempts to work ethically in situations.

Miller and Bell (2002) argue that gaining informed consent is problematic. This is especially the case when it is not clear what the participant is consenting to and where the participation begins and ends. Working through a situated ethics approach somewhat alleviated this problem. At the beginning of the study I presented the principals/owners with a letter introducing myself, outlining the purpose of the study, reasons for choice of centres, duration of study, and steps to be taken in the study. For interviews with teachers individual consent forms were signed. All participation was voluntary and identities of the teachers and names of centres were protected. Ethical approval for the study had been obtained from the university's ethics committee. As I have indicated in 3.5, the ethical issues were not forgotten after the initial stages of this study. Consent was ongoing and negotiated by the participants and myself throughout the research process in various situations.

With regard to children, consent was sought from parents through introducing myself, detailing the study, and outlining children's participation in the study. Adopting a situated ethics approach meant that I had to pay special attention to children's assent. Cocks (2006) defines assent as a sensitising concept in obtaining children's agreement. In my relationship with the children (see 3.8 in this chapter), I detailed my move to play the role of an "acceptable incompetent" to alter power relations and negotiate my presence. This negotiation, however, was not a simple matter of empathising with the children. Seeking assent meant that I had to remain alert to the responses of the children at all times. Young (1997) argues that there has to be a concerted effort to create dialogue that allows for shared understanding between the researcher and the children. This

heightened awareness made me foreground my lack of knowledge of what it is to be a child at this point in time, and to request information from the children.

You know it is a long time since I was a child. I would like to learn how a child ...Do you want to teach me?

However, taking on the role of a learner and positioning the children as teachers resulted in contradictory responses. Whilst some children saw the offer to become a teacher as an opportunity to share their stories, others waited for me to take the lead. These responses could have emanated from the dominant relationship of adults as teachers and children as learners at the centres. In other words, my strategy resulted in a role reversal that was not a familiar practice at the centres. This highlights the importance of early childhood researchers working closely with the situated messy realities in which the lives of young children are embedded.

There was an awareness that children might agree to participate because of existing power relations between adults and children. The message of Langston et al. (2004) provided direction. Young children give us bodily signs of consent if we look, listen, and take heed of the signals sent to us. This meant paying special attention to responses and signs of discomfort. Various signs of dissent were noted such as children creating distance from me, displaying uneasiness when required to engage with toys, walking away, and making gestures to withdraw participation. All child participation was voluntary and flexible modes of working were used to allow children the freedom to become involved.

Throughout the study, working ethically in situations called for high reflexivity and negotiation. At different points of the study, I found the tensions between my own views of young children and the normalising discourses of them to be challenging. Some of the research activities that encouraged active participation of the children had to be abandoned because of notions of young children's incompetence amongst some teachers. One such example refers to involving children in drawing their experiences. The centres used worksheets with outlines that children were required to colour in. Some teachers felt that giving the

children an open-ended drawing activity would merely result in scribbling and therefore would not be of much value. Scribbling was viewed as an incompetent stage in the development of handwriting. Whilst respected as an insider decision, this incident highlights ethical dilemmas when conflicting lenses are used to inform young children's participation in research.

### **3.11 Discourse analysis**

The theoretical framework in this study favoured the use of discourse analysis to make sense of the data. Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999:154) define discourse analysis as "the act of showing how certain discourses are deployed to achieve particular effects in specific contexts". The authors argue that it is important to understand that for discourse analysts' systems of statement rather than speeches and conversations, are important. In what follows I show how I adapted two analytical stages as proposed by Alldred and Burman (2005).

#### **3.11.1 Generating the text**

Parker (1992,1994) maintains that the first stage in analysis is to transform the research material into a text. The semi-structured interviews, children's interactions in the participatory techniques, and free conversations were tape-recorded and transcribed. Some field notes were also transcribed. Once this process had been completed, I looked at the discourses in terms of how they played out in the teachers' and children's interactions. This became possible through several readings of my data. I looked particularly at the statements that made up particular conversations and interactions. This reading helped me to understand how the text was doing things and making a case for a particular way of knowing something. For example, when I read through teachers' texts and came across references to parents' purchasing power, I looked at recurrent phrases to understand the discourse that had been framing the teachers' talk. I also thought about the institutional effect and the related images associated with particular discourses that teachers accessed. In the same way, I engaged with the text of data produced with the children. I looked at the discourses they had access to and how they had been acting within the discursive frames. In thinking

through the processes described above, I was able to generate a text that brought into focus “notations that normally twinkle on the margins of our consciousness” (Parker 1994:96) for arguments on the constructions of childhood.

### **3.11.2 Making connections: elaborating the discourse**

Once the text is produced, Parker suggests free association with the text. This means deliberating on the meanings, associations, and connotations. Being a novice researcher, I found this stage best facilitated by Sondergaard’s (2002) suggestion of a storyline. She notes that when doing data analysis, we should look at events and actions that create identities through inclusive and exclusive discursive movements. In other words, we can pick out a storyline that enables us to look at the processes of something. I used the idea of a storyline to elaborate the discourses that teachers were using to frame their practice and discourses that the children were using to constitute themselves.

In order to build a thesis on the constructions of childhood *for* young children, I identified the relevant discourses that teachers were using to create early childhood centres. I looked at how particular realities were created through narratives that were organised to produce natural ways of understanding and doing things at the centres. In reading for the effect of the discourses, I was concerned with connecting phrases, metaphors and terms to understand how the dominant discourses were preserving themselves, privileging parents, creating power for teachers, and normalising children. I layered this understanding with context specificities of the centres. In this way, I was able to produce Chapters Four and Five.

In tracing children’s struggles to negotiate a normal route of development as illuminated in Chapter Six, I was able to make associations of young children *doing* distance from baby stage and positioning themselves as big. In examining children’s *doing* of bigness, I looked at the physical spaces and related artefacts to understand how discursive actions are rooted in context. I engaged with the power relations and images of social life that children were exposed to. From this point I elaborated on children’s operationalisation of the discourse on baby

stage being the most incompetent stage of life and the push toward being constructed as big. I was also able to look at the influence of gender and social class as I made connections that elaborated children's *doing* of bigness at the centres. In children's constructions of race, I continued to look at discourse, effect, and context to construct a storyline on power and agency of young children as people *doing* childhoods.

In Chapter Seven I outline a gendered storyline. I was able to do this through looking at the dominant way of being a boy and how boys in the study struggled to fashion their masculinities. I examined boys' relationships within patterns of conduct associated with hegemonic masculinity and illuminated objects and subjects in relationships between boys and between boys and girls. In the feminised storyline, I was able to reveal multiple subject positions of girls and the cultural meanings associated with girls' narratives.

In general, discourse analysis helped me to identify subject positions and to highlight the importance of what was said and its function in relation to a storyline for my thesis. Since discourses are contradictory, I was also able to look at alternatives that coexisted within the dominant storylines. In some instances I also inserted my experiences to lend credence to the arguments in the storyline. All of the above was related to the context specificities that shaped the circumstances of teachers' and young children's lives at the centres.

Once the storylines had been completed, I was faced with decisions regarding the representation of the analysis chapters. I initially wanted to present narrative accounts of all teachers through the voices of one teacher for Centre One and one for Centre Two. I wanted to do likewise for the children (girls and boys). My attempts, however, were unsuccessful. I found my thesis best facilitated through thematic storylines in four different chapters filtered by my fragmentary gaze as an Indian female researcher of the Muslim faith. Hence, I cannot talk of validity and reliability in the traditional sense. My gaze in this thesis is coloured by lenses of my gender, my faith, my language and through my positioning as a lecturer in early childhood teacher education. The (re) presentation of my data is



one of many possible ways of telling constructions of childhood *for* and *by* young children.

### 3.12 Conclusion

In this chapter I sought to find possibilities to address my research question, “How do we research early childhood when young children are positioned as social actors (participants) in research?” Throughout the chapter I detailed how I worked with the situational realities that shaped the lives of people (teachers and young children) at the centres. I also showed the particularities of young children actively shaping their circumstances. At the outset, I explained the use of social constructionist and poststructural approaches which afforded me lenses that foregrounded multiple realities and multifaceted identities. Ethnography from these perspectives meant dealing with partial understandings, researcher reflexivity, and uncertainty within the lived realities of the centres.

I argued that the mainstream model of research embedded in the edifice of *The Child* was inadequate for researching the constructions of childhood. In order to learn about children from children, the social actor perspective afforded me the opportunity to position young children as participants in research. The use of thick descriptions, development of my researcher skills, implementing appropriate participatory techniques, multiple role playing, altering power in relationships with children, and situational mediation of ethics all attest to my being contextually responsive. The semi-structured interviews added voices of teachers and prevented a tribalised view of children.

I would argue that the responsiveness to the lived realities detailed in this chapter, is necessary when working with a social actor lens in research and when rejecting predetermined meanings of age and cognitive maturity. It might be helpful to think of this type of practice as *responsive research*. The latter makes it necessary to adopt multiple sense making moves to engage with the messy moment by moment realities when young children and their teachers are positioned as participants in research. In so doing, the practice of *responsive research*, through the challenges of ethnography, has the potential to fill the gap

in knowledge about the processes of early childhood development and young children as social actors in their present state as children.

In the next chapter I focus on teachers' constructions of childhood *for* children. In particular, I explore teacher talk that illuminates the discourses that shaped happenings at the centres.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### TEACHERS CONSTRUCTING CHILDHOOD *FOR* YOUNG CHILDREN THROUGH THE MARKET DISCOURSE

#### 4.1 Introduction

I examine the discourses in the constructions of childhood *for* children through teacher talk in two chapters. The articulations of teachers are important in view of the fact that some children spend long hours with them at the centres. One teacher indicated that the children saw them more than they saw their parents during the week. Another teacher positioned herself as a “mother away from home”. It is for this reason that I view teachers as people who are in key positions to open possibilities for new dialogue in early childhood education. In highlighting the discourses, I show practices and images of young children that shaped thinking and acting at the centres. In so doing, I illuminate the type of world that is produced *for* young children in early childhood centre-based provisioning and the conditions through which this happens.

The main argument in both chapters is that the dominant market discourse and related normalising discourses of young children (in the next chapter) together weaken the social project of early childhood education as a crucial space to instil democratic practices. In this chapter I focus on the market discourse and how it works to present early childhood centres as places that produce private goods to be traded on the market. As producers selling services, the centres aim at satisfying parents’ expectations as clients. Practices relate to working with parents as consumers and applying technologies for efficient processing of early childhood outcomes. The market discourse leads to narrow practices that limit young children’s opportunities for constructing childhoods. Mostly the property view of young children is made salient. This view positions them as products to be placed in care. Since discourses are contradictory, I also show some alternative discourses as contesting moves to the dominant ways of constructing centre-based early childhood education.

From my reconceptualist theoretical framework I drew on discourse theory and Bourdieu's ideas on social reproduction and capitals. This framework helped me to view the centres as complex arenas that participated in similar and different ways in constructing centre-based early childhood education.

## **4.2 Understanding the context of the centres**

Before I begin my discussion on teachers' constructions of centre-based early childhood education, it is necessary to set the context that made the centres operate as private providers of early childhood education. The South African government has adopted a poverty-targeted approach to public funding in early childhood (Department of Education 2001b). The major funding is directed towards Grade R. In order to reduce poverty and its attendant ills, subsidies for early learning are directed to five and six year olds from poor rural and urban families, HIV/AIDS positive/infected children, and children with special needs. Within an integrated plan for early childhood services, there is government commitment to allocate resources to vulnerable children from birth to four years.

The majority of early childhood centre-based services in education for children below Grade R are commercial undertakings that are reliant on parent fees (in part, this includes community-based sites). Given the lack of comprehensive government funding, a free market is adopted. Cronje, Du Toit, Marais and Motlatla (2004) describe a free market economy as a system in which most services demanded by the community are supplied by private organisations seeking profit. In other words, the free market economy, within the context of the macro economic policy of GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution), leads to a marketised civil society in which competing providers increasingly offer services to individual consumers.

This economic set-up makes early childhood centres places that "sell" services (early care and education) to "clients" (working parents) that can afford them. Given this context, early childhood centres are exposed to market disciplines that foreground economic values embedded in entrepreneurship. Epstein (1993:24) in relation to schooling refers to such entrepreneurship practices as "Kentucky

Fried Schooling”. She notes that the concern is more about satisfying customers’ needs. Pedagogic work is influenced by certain understandings of education and children in order to deliver goods by staff in a disciplined environment under the supervision of strong management.

In such a business environment the government keeps its interference to a minimum. Within the South African early childhood education context, the government merely maintains the system of private and community childcare through focus on structural aspects. Given the lack of a comprehensive infrastructure for children below Grade R in centre-based early childhood education, Centre One and Centre Two were not regulated by externally imposed standards and quality of care by the government except in the initial registration of the centres and intermittent visits by social workers. Social workers tend to be overworked and do not necessarily receive training on the principles and importance of early childhood education.

In the case of Centre Two, it was operating as an unregistered site. At the time of the study an application for registration had been sent to the Department of Social Development. Both the centres were at liberty to map out programmes that were responsive to the increased participation of women in the workforce, conditions of maternity leave, changing family compositions, and lifestyles in urban KwaZulu-Natal.

As private business enterprises the centres were configured as “for-profit” organisations. Doherty, Friendly and Forer (2002) draw attention to the difference between “not-for-profit” and “for-profit” organisations. In the former, the profits are returned to the organisation or service. This type of service is largely community-based. The “for-profit” organisations return their profits to their shareholders. A great effort is put into maximising shareholder value. In the case of Centre One, the shareholders were Mrs A and members of her family. At Centre Two, the shareholders were Mrs X and her husband.

Bearing the context in mind, I show how teachers’ positioning in the market discourse focuses on parents as clients and displaces the focus on young children

as people who experience the transactions that adults map out for them. The logic of the market foregrounds the language of pragmatism that is concerned with providing places to take care of young children. The dominance of thinking along market lines downplays the need for democratic practices. In order to illuminate this aspect, I focus on competitive business practices, the making of classed subjects, narrow professionalism, and tensions with parents and teachers that choose to operate within and outside the economic rationalist frame of the market discourse.

#### **4.2.1 Enabling the logic of the markets**

Both Centre One and Centre Two were operating in competitive early childhood education market environments. This practice can be understood if we consider the fact that in South Africa there is no overall planning for early childhood education below Grade R within and across geographical areas. It is possible to have service providers within close proximity to one another. In the locality of Centre One, there was a considerable number of early childhood centres offering half day care, long day care for babies, toddlers, nursery children, and Grade R. The dismissal of children in half day care made space available for after care of primary school children. These centres operated from specialist preschools to residential homes converted fully into formal early childhood centres. The mushrooming of these centres can be understood in the light of working mothers, but also with reference to the lifestyles of middle class mothers. Mrs B noted that some parents bring their children thrice a week so that they can have some time for other activities (sports, beauty care, shopping) besides childcare. These children are referred to as part timers at Centre One. In the example below we see how Mrs A positioned parents as clients in the light of competing with early childhood business houses in her locality.

Mrs A: We bought over from another school. They had sixty kids. It was very run down... Parents look around when they bring their child. You know, they look at how clean the place is... We put in everything new. We got so many kids now. Looking at the other schools in the area and the standard of cleanliness, our standards are number one. This

definitely helped in getting in more kids... You know, in our fees we are quite cheap. For half day it is R440 till 2pm. For full day R570 and that's till half past five. All include breakfast and lunch. We got to be competitive with other schools in the area. There is a R20 to R30 difference in our fees...

Mrs A shows us that she is knowledgeable about trading private commodities of early childhood to individual consumer parents. The example draws attention to two key arenas where parents are positioned as purchasers of centre-based early childhood education in a competitive environment. In particular, articulations on business image and market pricing provide insight into how Mrs A reads parents. Both aspects contribute to ideas on inputs and outputs in a business. In her opening lines it is evident that Mrs A is aware that parent choice is dependent on the image presented by a business. In order to gain a competitive edge she turns around a “run down” centre into an attractive place for young children. She taps into the key concern of parents (health and safety) to “get in more kids”. This move has paid off. On another occasion Mrs A indicated that she had fifty children on her waiting list. Her articulations on the fee structure suggest that she is aware of the practice of price taking in the light of a competitive market structure. Perloff (2004) explains this practice as being crucial when a business produces a small share of the total market. He argues that successful businesses are strategic when price taking to attract customers. In order to prevent parents from going to other early childhood centres, Mrs A uses a calculable rationality and keeps her fees slightly below the fees of other centres in the locality.

In the case of Centre Two, Mrs X operated in a locality where she had the advantage of providing for children from birth to after care for primary school children. Her decision to do so was informed by the needs of working mothers in the area. In her locality most service providers tended to concentrate on children from three years to Grade R. These providers use their outbuildings and community centres/churches as places for early childhood education. According to Mrs X, this trend occurred because babies and toddlers mostly tended to reside with grandparents, domestic workers, and childminders. Mrs X indicated that Indian parents preferred to keep young children with grandparents because of the

close emotional bonds and the teaching of cultural values to children from a young age. I could identify with this practice. Neither of my children attended institutional early childhood until they were four years of age. I preferred my children being raised by their grandmother in order to strengthen family bonds and early socialisation into Islam. In the example below, Mrs X positioned parents as clients within the context of competition, family structure, and socio-economic conditions that shaped the service she offered.

Mrs X: With some parents you will find that they like to compare premises in an indirect way. The parents ask many questions like what programme are the children learning, what does it include, what are the fees, and the type of meals given to the children. They are looking for upmarket premises... They want to keep up with the Joneses... But we also have to carry parents. You know, the single mother comes here. They are going through a divorce. She has no place to leave her children. She doesn't have money. I say okay, put the child in and we will take care of the child. I say when they sort themselves out in a month or two they can sort us out... If you look at the single parent unless they have a good job they cannot pay. We wait but we charge the normal rate.

Mrs X is challenged in selling a favourable business image and keeping a competitive fee structure. She has converted her driveway and the bottom half of her semi-detached home into an early childhood centre. Whilst she is one of the few providers offering a full range of services from babies to after care for primary school children, the structural image of her centre does not resemble a formal centre. Her competitors are "upmarket premises". Mrs X positions parents as private consumers who demand information on the performance of her institution as one that does not put their children at risk. As such, parents benchmark quality through comparison with "upmarket premises." Mrs X reads this move as "keeping up with the Joneses" – using middle class norms as indicators of quality.

Mrs X also provides insight into how changes in family structure caused by marital breakdown and single parents with low paying jobs affect her business.



Whilst there is sensitivity to the plight of parents, she devises a plan for delayed payment of “normal cost”. There is talk about “taking care of” children whilst parents work. In positioning parents as clients, Mrs X shows us how the context complexities affect the business orientation to centre-based provisioning in the absence of government funding. We get a picture of Mrs X battling to keep an image of a successful competitor in the early childhood market.

From the teacher talk above, it is evident that market rationality makes early childhood provisioning an arena that is subjected to the logic of competition, consumerism, and calculation. Within the notions of capital, as outlined by Bourdieu (1986), Mrs A and Mrs X show us that economic capital has power. They use an approach that emphasises economic values and promotes the property view of young children. Goodfellow (2005) argues that the concept of property has connotations of being impersonal and leads to commodification. Goodfellow defines commodification as a process where things that may take place through exchange in family relationships are replaced by the market in a formal way for a fee. In a study on grandparents’ views on centre-based provisioning for young children, Goodfellow and Lavery (2003) draw attention to the dangers of commodification of young children in centre-based early childhood through concerns raised by grandparents. As representatives of home care, grandparents indicated that the market perspective promoted the view that young children might be *deposited* in early childhood centres (whilst parents worked) and *minded* (taken care of) rather than *being cared for* in relationships. In viewing young children as products, their experience of the transactions mapped by adults is downplayed. This occurs because the property view of children shifts the focus from the humanistic orientation of caring for children in relationships to providing places that concern themselves with technical practices of meeting specified outcomes.

Furthermore, the drive to remain competitive within the market makes it difficult to think of early childhood centres as places of public good that operate through networking. Oelkers (in Ball 2006) notes that the insertion of competition and fostering of entrepreneurial behaviour, generate tension and difficulty in relationships between institutions. When early childhood centres position

themselves as enterprises producing tradable commodities, there is a reluctance to share ideas and network with competitors, as this practice affects recruitment of children and profit margins. The self-interest and individualism make it difficult to view early childhood centres as collaborative institutions for public good that assume responsibility for democratic practices which pay attention to the social, cultural, and political context of children's lives.

In mobilising the view of parents as clients and children as products to be placed in early childhood centres, teacher talk also revealed the powerful influence of social class on constructing childhoods *for* young children. Centre One operated in a middle class context of high economic capital. Mrs A's description of the products she offered was indicative of a business creating a sense of comfort for middle class parents.

Mrs A: Parents want their child to come to a school. They just don't want a play centre where the children play the whole day. In this place they come to school. Parents are very interested in the theme programme. We are teaching. The kids are not sitting around the whole day and playing. They getting taught stuff... The parents can't believe the work the children are doing. We send the work home so that they can see what we are doing...

Mrs A creates openings where parents feel that they are making investments in the appropriate kinds of capital for the earliest stage of their children's education. In the first instance, she calls her early childhood centre a "school". Schools are formal institutions for normalising children. Mrs A raises the status of her centre to a school and legitimates a strong academic programme. In the example we see how Mrs A uses the concern of middle class parents (clients) to build cultural capital for an academic headstart as the main driver for the curriculum offered at Centre One. Based on parents' expectation for school readiness, Mrs A offers a structured theme programme that is teacher-centred and closely aligned to school. Given the needs of her parents, Mrs A attaches little value to a play-based approach used by play centres. However, research has shown that the play approach is important in allowing young children to rehearse their verbal

exchanges and develop behaviours that are used in real life (Wood 2004). The entrepreneurial professionalism of Mrs A, however, undermines an approach that has potential for valuing children as informants of their childhoods. In the closing lines of Mrs A's articulations, we see how success is measured by parents' reactions to children's work. Children's engagement with experiences and adults' acceptance of evaluation as a meaning making process inclusive of children's views become irrelevant in the context of efficient processing of children as products.

In outlining the extra-curricular activities, we see other ways in which Mrs A tunes into parents' needs. Ball, Bowe and Gerwitz (1995) note that middle class parents make school choices not only by looking at general characteristics of the school, but also by matching specific needs of children to specific qualities of programmes of schools. The same can hold true for choices regarding early childhood centres. Middle class parents frequently look for specialist offerings over and above the basic programme. Each of the specialist offerings has an additional fee attached to the basic package. In the example below we see how Mrs A responded to parents' needs for product variety.

We are all for extra-activities. A lot of parents like that. They like their kids to do computers. Swimming is our number one. We also have action ball, speech and drama, kiddienastics, arts and crafts. On Sports Day we link up with Eldin Primary (ex Model C – semi-private). The parents compete against each other and with their children. We end with cheese and wine... During the year we have Easter, Mothers' Day, Fathers' Day, Halloween, Christmas concert... For Mothers' Day mums come and kids sing to them. Dads cheer in. They all get presents. We make them stuff... Parents mingle and get to know each other.

Numerous extra-curricular activities are on offer because parents have the power to purchase not only a basic package, but also optional offerings. In parental involvement activities we see attention being paid to the development of social capital of parents as consumers in two ways. Firstly, parents are provided with opportunities for sociability that entails reciprocal obligations – meeting of

parents and children within the context of activities of the centre. Secondly, there is participation and networking of a group of people who have particular cultural ways of responding to centre-based early childhood education. There is a link between the early childhood centre and a semi-private (ex Model C) school. This practice helps parents to see the centre as a preparatory institution related to the primary school circuit. In all of the above, we get a sense of Mrs A allowing middle class parents to assert themselves as clients to shape their children's future as classed subjects through their purchasing power in centre-based early childhood education.

Within the working class context of Centre Two, the economic capital of parents was low. Mrs X was aware that the pressures of family life and the long working hours of mothers made certain possibilities obvious and others very difficult. Bourdieu (1984) notes that working class ways of life tend to be organised around a practical order of getting through situations. He argues that parents are concerned about the practicalities of getting by rather than some grand strategic social agenda of distinctive goods for the future. Early childhood centres have to fit into a set of constraints and exceptions related to work roles, family roles, the sexual division of labour, and the demands of the household organisation.

Given the scenario of single parents, female-headed households and unemployment Mrs X concentrated on a total approach. Cronje et al. (2004) describe this approach as a uniform approach where producers work from the assumption that people want more or less standard packages. This standard package includes a basic Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) Programme for children of different ages and stages with no extra-curricular activities. Mrs X indicated that although she would like to offer computer education on a large scale, she was unable to do so because of the lack of parent demand, financial viability, and structural limitations. In her parent involvement activities, Mrs X indicated that she spoke to most of her parents when they came to leave their children in the mornings and on Friday afternoons. Given the work commitments of parents, the lack of interest by some parents, and their financial background, she indicated that it was difficult to hold regular parent meetings and activities. Parents were, however, involved in the year end Debs Ball for

fundraising. It is reasonable to assume that the low purchasing power and related social behaviour of parents would provide limited opportunities that would create dispositions of less value for children at Centre Two when compared to children from middle class backgrounds.

A class reading of Mrs A's and Mr X's responses suggests that early childhood education is an active arena of class reproduction. In paying attention to parents as clients and their economic capital, both the centres map out opportunities and choices for young children to constitute themselves as products of a particular class. Ball, Vincent, Kemp and Pietikainen (2004) argue that this practice has continuity in schooling. They maintain that the combination of cost and choice ensures that classes are separated from one another in "different, well-bounded circuits of care, which are more or less tightly related to circuits of primary schooling" (Ball et al. 2004:491). In my conversations with Mrs A she indicated that most of the children from her centre would attend ex Model C schools (semi-private and public schools with high fees) and private schools. Mrs X indicated that most of her children would attend the neighbourhood schools (public schools).

Within the South African context, it could be argued that the lack of full government involvement in educational provisioning for children below Grade R and the domination of the capitalist approach ensuring profitability and accountability to investors, skew the move towards equal opportunities. Chisholm (2004:11), in her analysis of education and social change in the first decade in post-apartheid South Africa, notes how the conditions of market capitalism have created an education system that has resulted in an "imperfectly realised democratic project". She notes that the policies and political will in schooling have unintentionally privileged a deracialised middle class.

In the context of early childhood, Porteus (2004) argues that whilst the rights-based commitment has opened up numerous possibilities for young children, the inequities inherited from the past serve to entrench differing access to opportunities for constructions of centre-based early childhood education. She notes that we have the practice of stimulating care (characteristic of middle class

provisioning) and warehousing. The latter, she argues, results from poor purchasing power of parents, untrained overburdened teachers, and structural limitations for quality early care and education. Community-based sites receive subsidies as low as R9.00 per child per day. Since parents are poor, this amount is rarely topped up by fees to meet the demands of teachers' salaries, equipment, and food (South African Congress for ECD and Early Learning Resource Unit 2006). In the case of the centres in the study, the historical geographical locations, socio-economic security, and the absence of public funding, privilege middle class parents and the type of childhood purchased. These circumstances continue to make centre-based early childhood education a privileged middle class provisioning with limited deracialisation being the only significant change since apartheid.

The scenario described thus far also contributes towards social closure that affects racial integration. In desegregated schooling in post-apartheid South Africa, Murray (2002) and Soudien (2004) note that there has been accelerated movement of well-off Indian, Coloured, and African children into former White schools. The authors note that, given the history of racial resourcing of services, White schools are perceived as being of better quality. Whilst Coloured and Indian children whose parents were less well-off remained in schools designated for their race group in the apartheid era, African children migrated to former Indian and Coloured schools. Both the centres were also affected by this trend. Centre One recruited mostly White children with few children of colour. Centre Two recruited mostly Indian children with a few African children and one Coloured child at the time of the study. In the examples below, we see how the play of the markets influenced the racial integration and promoted exclusion.

Mrs A: My school is mostly White. Most Black (African) kids come in when they are four. Money wise they can't afford it. They stay with their nannies and grannies. Those that can afford it come early.

Mrs X: I got a lot of Indian children. I take in Black (African) children. I can't take too many. You know, the Indian parent will start taking their children away.

Mrs A retains a “mostly White” centre by setting a ceiling on school fees. Murray (2002) notes that fees in schooling are used by former White schools and to a lesser extent Indian and Coloured schools to maintain advantage. The historical disparities in the purchasing power of Black (African) parents, drives them towards home-based care and excludes them from accessing centre-based early childhood education. Those that can afford it (the rising Black (African) elite) bring their children early. So social class, through the earning powers of parents, played an important part in the racial integration at Centre One.

In the case of Centre Two, although Mrs X made the decision to admit African children she was restricted by the reaction of the majority of her clients – “the Indian parent”. There was a degree of racial integration but not too much. Indian parents influenced the degree of racial integration to which their children were exposed.

In both the examples the boundaries between the economic and the social became blurred as social behaviour was reconfigured along economic lines. Bourdieu (1976) argues that social activity becomes a market when we start talking about capital, supply, and demand. For both the early childhood centres social activity as a market is embedded within the configuration of the centres as purveyors of services to private consumers. Parents’ purchasing powers dictate how socially inclusive the centres should be. This practice undermines the moral rationalities related to educational and social justice values to drive social relations and networks for young child to do multicultural centre-based childhoods. Furthermore, it makes it difficult to implement racial integration or other democratic practices that are viewed as key to building a multicultural society. In order to be organisations for democratic practices, early childhood centres must configure themselves as social and cultural institutions.

The adoption of the market discourse also showed evidence of teachers engaging in narrow professionalism. Cribb (1998) explains this type of professionalism as one that is concerned with bureaucratic practices of tight control for the interest of clients. The talk of Mrs A and Mrs X revealed a common practice to curriculum planning. As owners and managers of their centres, both took sole

ownership for designing curricular experiences for the different age groups. In the case of Centre Two, Mrs X also took control of writing the reports for children below Grade R. In the main, teachers were required to deliver thematic lesson plans in developmentally appropriate sequences.

Mrs A: I do all the planning of the lessons. I got a theme plan for the children. I do all the theme planning for teachers. Teachers teach according to theme plans. I set their themes every two weeks and get all their work done.

Miss Y: Mrs X tells me the theme. I teach the children the theme.

The centralised curriculum planning and controlled delivery suggest that the centres are places where teachers play the role of technicians delivering lessons with predetermined outcomes. This move is supportive of a business concern for efficiency that is impressive to parents (clients) and the property view of the child. Later on we will see how schools are also implicated in demanding controlled delivery from early childhood centres. Within such a set-up, Dahlberg and Moss (2005) argue that we need to look critically at the conditions created for the constructions of childhood. They argue that an early childhood institution is a meeting place for adults and young children. As such, there are minor engagements that open up an arena for politics. This means that there are many situations where issues and decisions are contested amongst adults and between adults and children. The centralised control of planning and accountability to predetermined outcomes assumes that practice with young children is uncontestable. According to Barbour (1986), this occurs because the technical teacher sees the instructional act as her primary responsibility. Decisions are made in a narrow framework that calls for adherence to programmatic guidelines. Concerns relate to efficient processing of young children through applying behaviourist technologies by teachers as technicians. Goodfellow (2001) notes that this practice denies the real character of professionalism that calls for knowledgeable and reflective teachers to make informed and intuitive judgements as they go about their work with young children.



The view of parents as clients sits uneasily with the view of them as people who hold different social constructions of childhood, images of children, and assumptions of early childhood education. Within the market discourse, parents are required to act in continuity with official ways or commercialised parenting promoted by early childhood centres. The private space of family life is expected to conform to the logic of consumerism and contractual obligations. Incompetence and weakness on the part of parents are viewed as downplaying the goals of the centres as producers of quality outcomes. In the examples below, we see how Mrs A and Mrs X responded to the mismatch of parenting practice to practices at the centres.

Mrs A: During the weekends the children are out of routine. The parents are constantly out. They don't have time to sleep. They eat the wrong foods... It's amazing how they play out their parents. Like some of them are totally different here than they are at home. Some are angels here and the other way around at home.

Mrs X: In the weekends the children have their own ways. At home they could have a tantrum for what they want... They have junk food. They don't have proper meals. Obviously parents could not bear it the minute they have a tantrum... It's so amazing that they adjust to the routines here. At home they forget. It's not that they forget. Here they can't really get their own ways... It's the power play. The parents feel the moment that a child cries we must give in to them... It's the time factor. The parents come home they have to cook and clean. They get busy. If a child wants chips then they take it and give it to them so that they can get on with the chores.

Both Mrs A and Mrs X lament the fact that the routines of the centre are not upheld at home. Mrs A's descriptions of parent activities suggest that they are not meeting the expectations of being risk managers. They are expected to be responsible subjects that are on the look out for signs that put the family at risk. Such family managers use a calculative rationality to exercise order and control. In the examples, however, parents as family managers are failing in this duty. For

Mrs A children are “play(ing) out their parents”. This suggests a lack of parental control and hence children are “angels” at the centre and the “other way around at home”. Mrs X also views the home as a space where children “forget the routines” through poor parenting practices. Lack of parental control leads to “tantrums”, “power plays,” and children having their “own ways”. She is, however, sensitive to how the time constraints of working parents put pressure on parenting.

Parenting through routines and tight controls is favoured as best parenting practice for the contractual relations at the centres. We see the market rationality extending to a private sphere of life. Such a perspective discounts care in terms of negotiating in reciprocal relations that takes place in families. Finch and Mason (1993) argue that we need to look closely at how parents care for their children and especially how they privilege the material and emotional welfare of their children. Parents’ knowledge of their children is not scientific, but rather anecdotal, subjective, ad hoc, and applies only to their individual children.

Rather than enforcement of universal fixed rules and prescribed moral norms of obligations, the parent-child relationship is based more on developing commitments. Finch and Mason further argue that for children, even very young children, the focus is on interpreting and acting upon parents’ guidelines and demands. Responsibilities come through relational interactions over time and are context specific. The authors note that we should be looking at care responsibilities as a product of human agency and, I would add, linked to cultural notions of childhood and child rearing.

Furthermore, the adherence to idealised parenting has the potential to downplay the third space. Gonzalez-Mena (2001) maintains that in cross-cultural work in early childhood education, this space is characterised by strategies to negotiate cultural diversity in constructions of childhood. The third space is viewed as large enough to encompass multiple truths (local and experiential knowledge of childhood) and the validity of each truth in taking responsibility for young children in early education institutions. Such practice is crucial for equal

opportunities for children that grow up in diverse family structures within the South African context.

In examining teacher talk there was also evidence of tensions between parents as buyers of early childhood services and teachers as sellers of educational outcomes. This was especially articulated at Centre Two. The example below provides insight into the conflict Mrs X experienced with some parents.

Mrs X: Some children don't know simple things that we take for granted. You know, like putting a long sleeve shirt on. You try to make them independent... This leads to conflict with the parents. The parents are not thinking that my child is learning now. They'll say they are paying me to change their child and why am I making the child change on his own. It's like I'm not doing my job. I'm being paid. It is normally the ones working in the office that will ask silly questions... Sometimes you know that the grandparents will react... They will ask why did my grandchild put his shoe on himself.

Mrs X attempts to teach children independence. Within the context of a person being paid to do a job, some parents view her moves as offering a watered down service. She names grandparents and office workers as groups of people that assert themselves as consumers and challenge her practice. In this exchange relationship the parent/grandparents demand particular returns on an investment through workforce participation in particular ways. Goodfellow (2005) argues that quality in this set-up is valued more in terms of economic returns. This thinking makes it difficult to map early childhood education in terms of a moral framework of how a society values its children. She maintains we should aim at setting up a framework of shared values. The child/society relationship has to be underpinned by children's multiple social, cultural, and developmental experiences. Family focused practices and role of caregivers as facilitators, as opposed to technicians of children's needs, must be more prominent in building a local democracy. Within this framework, parents act from an informed perspective. They are enabled to negotiate/co-construct values for their children

with the services they access instead of focusing merely on effective governance of their children.

#### **4.2.2 Disabling the logic of the markets**

Foucault (1978) reminds us that although dominant discourses transmit and produce power, they are contradictory. There are always other systems of meaning that have restricted circulation. Alternate discourses can undermine dominant discourses and render them fragile. It was refreshing to note that teachers were able to position themselves in alternate discourses that weakened the logic of the market in constructing centre-based early childhood education. Some teachers accentuated non-market values. At Centre One Mrs C positioned herself in the generationing discourse to show how historical changes affected the nature of childhood and the provisioning for young children.

Mrs C: I think people are more for kids today. It isn't like when we were younger. The world seems to revolve around the young generation no matter how small they are. Even here we have got to put them in the centre. The world's a scary place for our kids. I'm very protective of the little ones... There's a lot of abuse. That's why people are protective and overprotective about their kids now.

Mrs C views childhood as socially constructed in different generations. In comparison to children in her generation “people are more for kids today”. Given this present practice, she maintains that children at her centre have to be the central focus. Her articulations on abuse suggest her positioning in the protectionist discourse. Given the prevalence of child abuse in the South African context, Mrs C uses the images of the vulnerable child and living in a risk society, “a scary place for kids”, to support strong responses from adults caring for young children. The protectionist discourse has been criticised for revering romantic images of childhood innocence and promoting adult-child relations that rely on child passivity (see Kitzinger 1997 for more details). Despite the criticism, Mrs C's responses on historical changes on how we view childhood,

children and their basic safety, do create alternatives to the logic of the markets to construct early childhood *for* children.

Mrs X was aware of the impact of social problems on the children that attended her centre. In addition to the market discourse, she also positioned herself in the discourse of care.

On a Friday afternoon, when parents finish work early, I take time to chat with them. I like to help them understand the effect of divorce on young children. I say that if they need to sort out things with their ex husbands, they must do so in an amicable manner. They must keep lines of communication open. I tell them you must do it in a way that makes it an easy experience for the child. Don't ask a thousand questions when your child returns from your ex. You will make the child's life like a tug of war.

Mrs X takes on the role of a counsellor that is involved in particular acts of caring in the context of a centre that services children from divorced homes. In her conversations with me, she related the violent nature of separation which young children witness. In order to counter gender violence, she promotes open communication and attentiveness to children's experiences in situations of divorce. There is a call for love and empathy. By positioning herself in a care discourse, Mrs X is able to work away from ideas of individuals as self-interested, calculating, and exchange-oriented in a market sense. She foregrounds the importance of the self as a moral agent that is in a relationship with other people. This stance contests the blurring of the social relationships by economic rationalities.

At Centre Two Miss Y disabled the logic of the markets by foregrounding her personal responsibility as an ethical actor in a relationship with others in her community. In her interview Miss Y described the hard life she led in Umbumbulu in the South Coast of KwaZulu-Natal. Growing up in the apartheid era and being a female created a restricted childhood for her. In the example she explained how she would like to create changes in young children's lives.

Miss Y: I like all the children like my nation to come and learn.  
Especially the children from the shacks down. I want to help them to  
learn. This is important for me. Never mind they haven't got the money.  
I just like to help them.

Miss Y shows an ethic of care through the way in which she relates to the needs of children, especially those from her "nation". The latter could be read as identification with a marginalised group. Within this group she would like to offer her services to children living in shacks nearby. In being socially responsive and creating access, she is prepared to forego the concerns about fees and affordability associated with a business culture. Miss Y's positioning in a communitarian discourse, points to alternatives of teaching and learning as sites of obligations where teachers act ethically rather than technically.

It could be argued that within the South African context Miss Y's articulations make it possible to think about the constructions of childhood *for* children based on *ubuntu*. The "Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy" (James 2001) describes *ubuntu* as African values associated with group identity and solidarity. The values of *ubuntu* and the connotations of communitarianism flow from the practice of compassion, kindness, and respect for human dignity. Given the history of our country, the Afrocentric morality of *ubuntu* and relational ethics present possibilities for responding to the constructions of childhood *for* children more in terms of children being cared for in relationships.

Mrs A was also able to position herself in a discourse of communitarianism. This came through in the way in which she was able to encourage children and parents in her centre to rally around mothers and children at Westville Prison. There was a huge collection of toys and money for the children at the prison. Towards the end of the study Mrs X was planning to create networks for early education by holding some sessions with mothers and young children at the prison.

### 4.3 Conclusion

In this chapter I set out to examine teachers' constructions of childhood *for* children at Centre One and Centre Two. I argued that the dominant market discourse promotes economic values that position parents as clients and promotes images of children as property to be placed in care. This frame of reference results in early childhood centres becoming services that trade goods on a market. The type of childhoods that young children will experience at the centres depend on the purchasing power of their parents.

Managerial practices and the technologies for efficient processing of child outcomes are narrow and limiting. The market discourse discounts critical engagement with democratic practices that have the potential to make early childhood centres vehicles for transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. In embarking on this analysis, I have strengthened the fact that discourses influence what we see, focus on, and value in constructing childhood *for* children within the context of private centre-based educational provisioning.

Since discourses are contradictory, I have also shown some discourses that circulate in a marginalised way. The discourses of generationing, care, and communitarianism transgress the dominant discourse of the markets. They contest the idea that early childhood centres are places for technical practices aimed at parents as consumers of early childhood services. They foreground relationships and rationalities within a moral framework aimed at public good. In so doing, they show possibilities for new dialogue in configuring centre-based provisioning for young children.

In the next chapter I show the salience of normalising discourses that were supportive of the centres as business sites for early childhood education.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### TEACHERS NORMALISING YOUNG CHILDREN

#### 5.1 Introduction

A market discourse needs knowledge of children that complements the workings of its own logic. This knowledge has to provide a foundation for control and performance. Scientific knowledge is favoured in institutions as we think that it helps us to get what we expect. This knowledge is taken-for-granted to produce various truths about who young children are and ways of working with them.

In this chapter I look at normalising discourses, which produce common sense propositions of young children. I draw on discourse theory, the new sociology of childhood, and tools from feminist poststructuralism. I argue that the normalising discourses of biology, development, and early socialisation for school readiness, whether intended by teachers or not, draw attention to early childhood as a deficient predetermined period. This view promotes images of young children as essential beings who are adults-in-the-making. In so doing, normalising discourses weaken the social project of early childhood as a crucial space to instil democratic practices especially with young children as people informing their childhoods.

Within the normalising discourses I show the images of young children through teacher talk on the category of *the normal child*. Teachers use this category to arrive at a standard, administrable model of a child that fulfils the need for efficient processing of children at the centres. The governing and maintaining of control through the model attach power to teachers and render children as projects for adulthood. The power of the model lies in the fact that it presents an abstract child that teachers can act on and hold as professionally true. Since the abstract child functions as a standard, decontextualised signpost for normality, it is unproblematically brought into play in different situations. As such, it jeopardises both the celebration of experiences of young children and the differences that exist amongst them.



The contents of the category of *the normal child* help teachers to act in technical ways to achieve child outcomes that are sold by the centres. In the main, the normalising discourses are used to reproduce children's identities in familiar ways. These discourses further shape early childhood centres as sites that are politically free.

I approach my argument through discussions on determining *the normal child*, dealing with the child outside the norm, and recognition of young children's competence. The latter presents some alternate images of young children.

## **5.2 Determining *the normal child***

The biological discourse is one of the taken-for-granted ways in which we determine *the normal child*. The physical size, internal programmes, and immaturity of children are used to explain attributes of *the normal child* who in relational terms is the opposite of an adult. In the examples, teachers positioned themselves in biological discourses that created images of naturally determined children.

Mrs D: They are tiny and don't know anything.

Miss Y: Learning is a bit of a problem because they are small... Small children are like that.

Mrs C: Each child is the limit of their abilities. With the little ones their abilities are limited to start off with.

Mrs X: You can't just tell a child don't do something. Kids are not equipped to think that way.

Teachers appeal to the truths embedded in physical size to determine and essentialise young children. Children are referred to as "tiny," "small" and "little ones". Each of these physical descriptions is then linked to attributes of young children. Mrs D positions young children as blank sheets. Miss Y positions young children as having problems with learning because they are small. Mrs C positions children as having "limits" in their abilities. The location of children in early childhood is used to draw boundaries in their abilities. Mrs X positions

children as irrational based on a lack of rational mental equipment. The danger of working with naturalised assumptions of biological discourses lies in the fact that we can easily slip into saying “that’s the way children are”. Weedon (1997:75) notes that we use expressions such as “it is well known that” and “everybody knows” as fixed truths to emphasise obviousness and put social pressure on people to accept them. When these expressions are used, social behaviour of young children is not viewed as social but as inborn and therefore seems inevitable and inconvertible.

The power of the common sense appeal of young children as simple beings, blank slates, and irrational is supportive of teachers’ work of governing young children’s progress and development in a business sense. This normality has institutional backing that sets up a hierarchy, which renders young children’s experience of immaturity as irrelevant. Furthermore, it excludes young children from attaining people status.

Another key way in which teachers determined *the normal child* was through the discourse of development. Coupled with biological understandings, this foundational knowledge is frequently unproblematically used by early childhood teachers to determine whether young children are ready for particular content and experiences and whether they are mature enough to deal with this exposure. In the examples below we see teachers from both centres articulating the official knowledge appropriate for understanding the life world of *the normal child*.

Mrs X: These are small children you know... They are in stages. It is like building blocks. You start at the bottom. They learn the basics in order to continue on.

Mrs C: Here we teach the basics as building blocks before they move to the next level.

In the examples teachers use the building block metaphor from the evolutionary model to understand young children as developing progressively in competencies for adulthood. This way of knowing allows them to think about early childhood

as a predetermined stage of development and creates images of children as incomplete *becomings* who only have value for their future potential. Mrs X uses the concept of “small children” and the notion of stages to locate developmentally the children she teaches and her practice with them. Her children are at the “bottom” and as such they are learning the basics to move towards a state that is more advanced. Mrs C uses the notion of levels to promote the same idea.

Cannella (1997:51) draws attention to how this scientific way of thinking about childhood implies an ordered sequence of states that predetermines individuals and sets standards for “normalcy”. The taken-for-granted standards are used to determine if something is wrong or abnormal. Children’s ways of being that are coloured by the historical, political, social, cultural, and economic context that bring multiple constructions of child development, run the risk of being categorised as abnormal if they challenge the norms. In this way, the dominant interpretive framework of child development can undermine the complex socially constructed nature of how young children develop and learn.

Furthermore, Thorne (1993) argues that the normalcy of child development moves the concept of socialisation in one direction - adults socialising children, teachers socialising children, and the more powerful socialising the less powerful. She is, however, quick to point out that children may be less powerful than adults but they are by no means passive without agency. They do resist and rework adults’ constructions of them.

I would argue that resistance is risky for young children. They run the risk of being identified as abnormal and subjected to actions of normalisation. Official child development knowledge steers teachers towards what is perceived as desired behaviour for particular levels and stages. This way of thinking and acting makes it difficult to look at the social circumstances in which children find themselves and the fluid ways in which they construct their identities.

In determining *the normal child* it was also evident that teachers relied heavily on age as a marker to make sense of children’s competence. In the examples

below we see how age provided notions of a prototypical child with normative behaviour patterns.

Mrs B: Adrian and Shaun are the same age. You know, Adrian talks better than Shaun. Shaun is only starting now to name everything. The main thing is that each child is so different. They develop at different rates.

Mrs C: You know Sheria will only be two next month. If you compare her to the rest, she can do more. If you look at her and Butsi there is a one month age gap.

Mrs X: She will be four soon. If you look at other children within her age group, she is more advanced. Even when they play games she feels it is too babyish. She is more like a lady.

Teachers use age-related norms to compare children and tell us how normal children should be. These norms are used as an apparatus of measurement and teachers work from the assumption that the pre-given substance of age is universally valid. Mrs B uses age to compare children's linguistic competence. She recognises that the children are different but attributes this to rates of development. Mrs C uses age to make judgements about the capabilities of two children. Age-related norms help Mrs X to identify a "more advanced" child that is showing capabilities closer to those of a "lady."

When age-related norms are used in mapping centre-based childhood *for* children, we must probe the source of the norms. Penn (2005b) argues that the developmental knowledge base used in early childhood education, stems from research conducted largely on homogenous (White middle class) student populations in Europe and North America. Little attention was given to how culture or class influenced patterns of growth. She also notes that the typical behaviours outlined are "simplified and cherry-picked experiences, perceptions, and habits" of a particular group of children that are compared to different groups of children to make universal statements (Penn 2005b:47).

When teachers access universal age-related knowledge about young children, they work from the assumption that the generalisations are sufficiently reliable as a guide for who children are and how to intervene in their lives. The socially constructed nature of children's identity as non-linear, multifaceted, complex, contradictory, unstable, and their social membership as something that varies in culture, history, and relationships are ignored or undermined. It becomes difficult to confer young children with the status of being informants of age-related experiences in their daily realities.

Once the discourse of biology and development is invoked as a sufficiently reliable base to understand young children, then early socialisation takes on the character of shaping children's conduct in ways conducive to their collective group. At both the centres all children in the same age group were subjected to the same routines. The teacher talk below sheds light on totalising practices.

Mrs B: They all do the same thing. They all sing the same song. They not going to say that it is too easy for me. You see they don't choose... At this age (two and older) I don't think for them there is much of a difference. So they don't mind what you are actually doing with them as long as you are doing something. You can do some colour stimulation and that's fine.

In my discussion with Miss Y on planning for children from different cultural backgrounds she had the following to say:

They all do the same work. They actually cope quite well at this level.

Both teachers show us the power effects of thinking and acting from knowledge of the normal developing child. The normalities of a particular age and the social location of young children in the early stages of development, help Mrs C to see young children as lacking in agency. Statements like, "they don't choose," "they not going to say..." and "they don't mind" suggest that young children are viewed as people with unprotesting minds who passively accept actions of adults. Miss Y is also complicit in this image of young children through articulating the

practice of “same work” at a particular level. Both Mrs C and Miss Y homogenise children through their understanding of *the normal child*. Both the teachers frame their work developmentally and in a common sense way for what is considered to be appropriate for all children at a particular age. This practice is tied up with the notion of being good early childhood teachers who know the necessary truths to govern and regulate normal children.

Weedon (1997) notes that our experiences are far from homogeneous. What an event means to a child depends on the ways of interpreting the world and the discourse available at a particular moment. Predetermined meanings of who children are and their capabilities, silence alternative truths about young children and the diversity with which they construct their childhoods (MacNaughton 2005). Within the South African context, multiple family structures, varying socio-economic standing of families (as was the case in Centre Two), media, and the markets are some of the factors shaping the experiences of young children in different ways. This understanding defies treating young children as a homogeneous group and expecting them to all respond in normative ways.

Since the developmental discourse privileges thinking around the natural child who is developmentally normalised, it discounts paying attention to young children as boys and girls. From the teacher talk thus far it is evident that young children were constructed as biological and passive at the centres. This view results in the gendered child being excluded from the category of *the normal child*. At both the centres, there was close monitoring of children’s progress towards developmental pedagogic goals. In making early childhood *for* children, the monitoring reinforced gender as “not a thing” associated with young children.

Mrs A: They don’t realise so much at this age... For the other young ones gender doesn’t bother them. I mean you see them in the toddler groups especially. I don’t think they actually realise it. It’s the same with them. Like race it doesn’t bother them. Even in this big age, even in the readiness class, it’s not a thing. I think that they see everyone as one...

Mrs C: They all play together nicely whether they are boy or girl. See Patsy and Crain... She runs after Crain all the time and calls him. They sitting together now. She calls him to come and sit next to her. It doesn't really matter. Girls just don't play with girls and boys just don't play with boys. They intermingle culturally as well. Yah, so it (gender) doesn't matter at this age.

Miss Y: In my age group (two to four years) boys and girls are the same. The boys worry the girls. The girls worry the boys.

Mrs A, Mrs C, and Miss Y's positioning in the developmental discourse silences gender. Their references to age as an indicator of what young children naturally are, mask gender as part of social practice. Mrs A is strong in her developmental truth of "gender doesn't bother them" and "it's not a thing". Race and gender as categories of difference are silenced. Mrs C uses play as a naturalised activity for young children to bring together relationships between boys and girls into the category of *the normal child*. Miss Y uses the sameness among children of like ages to adopt a gender-neutral approach.

MacNaughton (1995) argues that the invisibility of gender in early childhood education can be attributed to the way the child development domains are used. The teachers at both the centres used the physical, social, cognitive, and emotional domains of development as key to their assessment of the children. Within this frame of reference, gender is not an organisational category. It is viewed as part of social development rather than something that constitutes children. In teachers' observations, children's learning is scrutinised more for its developmental truths than for the construction of gendered power relations between children. As such teachers become concerned with the individual child and not the gendered child. Such practices make it difficult to challenge sexist power relations among the children and between teachers and children. MacNaughton (1995) argues that unless teachers reconstruct their pedagogic gaze in and via feminist discourses, they will remain ignorant of gender, especially in relation to what is taken-for-granted as good and appropriate practice.

In normalising boys and girls, teachers accessed categorisations that worked through binary gender divisions. The essentialising nature of the binaries rendered different ways of being boys and girls invisible. The examples below illustrate how the teachers at both the centres used the categories to uphold the dominant gender discourse.

Mrs C: I find that girls can basically amuse themselves a lot easier. Sometimes boys are a lot more aggressive than girls, you know. They tend to fight and you know, a lot more than the girls... Girls do have a better way.

Mrs D: The girls you know will listen. The boys like to fidget and won't sit still.

Mrs X: You notice if the children go to buy something it is always the parents that choose. The child says what he likes. Then the mummy says that's not for a boy. It's for a girl.

Mrs C and Mrs D view boys as aggressive and action-oriented. Girls are viewed as having a contained demeanour. Mrs X distances herself from essentialising boys and girls. She recognises children as people that can make choices. In her view parents as socialising agents, reinforce the dominant gender divisions by channelling children's choices in gendered directions.

In the examples above gender categories are viewed as mutually exclusive and polarised. When this happens it becomes natural to stimulate gender learning through modelling and reinforcing behaviours that are viewed as sex appropriate. Thinking and acting within this limiting frame of reference, works against gender equity in the early years in the South African context. Multiple femininities and masculinities are not taken into account. Furthermore, Connell (1995) notes that the dominant form of being boy could be naturalised and violence could be seen as part of boy culture.



*The normal child* becomes significant for early childhood teachers not only for the early socialisation in the present practice, but also for progressive efficiency that links to the primary school. Teachers in early childhood centres are put under tremendous pressure by parents and primary school teachers to get children ready for school. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) argue that the idea of “readiness to learn” implies that children do not learn before they come to school or they do not learn in the way prescribed by the school. Early childhood teachers are expected to buckle to developmentally appropriate practices as demanded by compulsory schooling without questioning these demands. Within their competitive business environments, the centres were pressurised to configure themselves as places for school readiness. The teacher talk below revealed that the focus on readiness programmes pushed down from schools to schoolify the centres.

Mrs A: In Grade R we do readiness. Theme work is not done there at all. It's all based on the readiness programme like mathematical skills. We concentrate on getting them ready for phonics. It is very important for Grade One... We try to get the theme work up to scratch here then Miss P don't have to do that there. In theme work they are learning all the basics... This brings them close to this side (Grade R)... Everything is moving them on to what they are going to be doing in the next class. We don't want their progression to be hard when they move to the next class... If they got a problem we rather keep them back now. So when they go to school it is not such a big issue.

Mrs X: I made my programme for the children from the OBE. They (the children) move up the programme. Did you see my business card? (Brings the card and shows it to me). You see, I have the Grade R OBE programme for five year olds from the department. Then for the four year olds I have the OBE school readiness programme. For the three year olds there is the OBE nursery school programme. And the two year olds have the stepping stones OBE programme. We're very flexible with the one year olds. I run the OBE stimulation programme. We work like that in sort of steps till school.

In the teachers' responses above we get a sense of *the normal child* being put through a stepladder programme as a technology for school readiness. Mrs X uses a theme programme for children below Grade R to develop basic skills that inform the readiness programme for mathematics and literacy (phonics). Children that are not performing according to the norms are kept back or "redshirted." Graue, Kroeger and Brown (2002:338) refer to "academic redshirting" as the practice of delaying preschool children who are age eligible to start school. The retention of the child in preschool requires repeating an age level programme after a year of unsatisfactory progress. Graue et al. (2002) argue that the practice of redshirting arises from teachers' understanding about domains of development. Perceptions of cognitive, social, and emotional development abate in decisions about who should be kept back. Redshirted children experience the ambiguity of failure at a particular level and success of growth in the second year. Mrs A's moves could be understood in the context of a middle class early childhood centre building relevant cultural capital for school success through a highly structured and controlled process.

Mrs X uses Outcomes-Based Education as a key organiser for her school readiness programme. Each age group is given a buzzword, which is traditionally associated with the technology of developmentally appropriate practice. At present, in South Africa there is no official OBE curriculum for children from birth to four years. OBE is the foundation for the curriculum in schooling. Mrs X has strategically combined age appropriate offerings with an OBE slant to show connections with school. It is significant that the product bundle appears on a business card. Mrs X's narrative is also class driven. Pascal (2003:18) notes how in working class early childhood settings the thrust for action is not so much about getting ahead of the pack but rather "catching up" with the best markers with the hope of a "rich, intensified start to educational careers". Given the poor purchasing power of parents and the lower fees at primary school, there is less concern with the practice of redshirting.

From the teacher talk above we have seen how the pressure from schools make it necessary to focus on *the normal child* in stepladder programmes. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) argue that to change preschools without changing schools is an

uphill battle. We will continue to see early childhood centres as sites for the production of predetermined outcomes that are technical and regulatory for school readiness. The unequal partnership between school and early childhood centres limits the possibility for early childhood teachers to think of their work within the context of spaces for children. The authors argue that the metaphor is about a forum or a meeting place for young children and teachers to come together and think and act beside each other in complex rather than step-ladder ways. This reconceptualist notion of early childhood centres is driven by an ethical and aesthetic rationality, rather than an instrumental one, that makes teachers technicians who schoolify early childhood centres. Whilst some predetermined outcomes are necessary for teachers to work with, there must also be other outcomes initiated by teachers *for* children and *by* children themselves.

Blatchford (2004) presents a different angle to the schoolifying of early childhood. She argues that since we wear the lens of *the normal child* in early childhood as one that is incompetent, we do not associate the learning of academic content areas (early literacy and early numeracy) with early childhood education. If we remove the notions of childhood innocence, that portrays young children as ignorant about the real world, and strict adherence to developmental checklists, we can see competent children. Teachers can work more around young children's negotiation of academic realities by foregrounding their meaning making and facilitating learning through play, instead of aligning them with children sitting behind desks doing worksheets.

### **5.3 Dealing with young children outside the norm**

The discourse of normalisation favours those children that display appropriate behaviours that are sanctioned by the institutions they attend. In this study it was evident that the universal codes of normality emanating from biological, developmental understandings and school readiness codes made it possible for teachers to engage in categorical distinctions between normal and "abnormal" children, irrespective of context or circumstances. "Abnormal" children were regarded as deficient because their competencies and behaviours varied from the norms. Within this frame of reference diversity is conceptualised as an individual

characteristic rather than a set of social, cultural, historical, and political conditions.

The children that posed the greatest challenge to teachers at the centres were those that could not speak English. Both Centre One and Centre Two used English as the language of learning and teaching. The examples below show how teachers dealt with “abnormal” children.

Mrs A: There are more Black (African) kids coming in just because they need to learn. A lot of them are in our readiness class and that’s when we have problems. I try to say to them (the parents) bring them in this class because they don’t talk English. You have got to teach them. It takes three to four months to get them to learn English and by then they are behind with their work. Miss P has a mission trying to get them there. She can’t wait because she is with other kids. They are learning with them. They can’t get through the programme because the programme is intense...

Mrs A positions “Black kids” as children outside the norm. They are a problem because they are linguistically different from other children at the centre. Mrs A privileges the programme as a technology that sets the outcomes for normal performance. According to her standards, “Black kids” are falling behind. These children are assimilated into the mainstream language environment through subtracting their mother tongue. We can understand this move through Mrs A’s concerns about being an efficient middle class provider. In a business sense, linguistically different children are slowing the production process, holding back mainstream children, and rendering the programme as suspect. In a middle class context these children have the potential of bringing down the image of the centre and lowering standards. Both these outcomes are damaging for business. It could be argued that these children run the risk of being redshirted.

At Centre Two Miss Y positioned IsiZulu mother tongue speakers as children outside the norm. Below we see how Miss Y used IsiZulu as her first language to make connections with the children.

Miss Y: You know my nation, that one Mpumi, the first day she did not talk at all. You know in my group, she looks at the children or looks at something... For the Black (African) children first I teach them in Zulu because she understands what I said. Most of them I teach it in English. Then I talk it in Zulu. They don't know what I said. They look at my face and me. Then I tell it in Zulu and change it to English. Now it's okay. Not like the first time.

Miss Y begins by alluding to Mpumi as someone belonging to her "nation" and then positions her as a child outside the norm. This is her starting point to create relationships with linguistically different children. Miss Y adopts a more inclusive language environment for these children. She begins by teaching them in IsiZulu. She works through different combinations of code switching between the two languages in order to find a strategy that works with the children. On another occasion Miss Y indicated that IsiZulu speaking parents brought their children to the centre so that they could learn English early.

Both Mrs A's and Miss Y's strategies to deal with children outside the norm of English can be understood within the growing crisis of language in education in South Africa. Heugh (2001) argues that multilingual policy is affirming to children as it allows them to meaningfully engage with the school curriculum in their mother tongue. She argues that the policy has been ignored owing to the force of habit for English, lack of teachers' competence, lack of capacity to sustain teaching in the mother tongue, and pressure from African parents for a "straight for English" approach.

Schools also demand the acquisition of English informally at early childhood centres as part of school readiness. De Klerk (2002b) in a study on language in education in Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape, notes that school principals have been reporting improved levels of English competence. Principals attribute this

to parents acting on their advice and sending their children to English-medium play schools and preschools. This angle presents the power of the school and parents as clients to pressurise early childhood teachers to privilege English as the language of learning. In a business sense, early immersion in English for African parents becomes a product that is sought after. Within this framework of thinking, children outside the norm are seen as abnormal products that need to be corrected through early immersion in English.

As a middle class centre, Centre One worked on several strategies to create synergy between the language environments at home and at school. Parents who had children outside the norm of English were targeted in specific ways to support their children. Assimilationist practices were evident.

Mrs A: We don't allow them to speak Zulu here. We encourage them to speak English. We write letters to the parents to tell them that they must watch English TV at home. They must read English stories... Parents are sending the children to an English centre. Some of them are even changing their languages at home for their kids... Parents are lovely. They make a big effort to try and help their children.

Mrs A schoolifies the home. She introduces parental practices that are aimed at assimilating parent and child into English. Specific literacy practices such as watching English TV and reading English stories are suggested as effective practices for children to socialise themselves into English middle class literacy practices. In the statement, "Parents are sending the children to an English centre", there is an expectation of parents to change and not the practices at the centre. Mrs A's strategies are powerful. Parents are changing their home language for their children.

In the quest to bring children into the norm of English, we see how some children's lives are altered in order to elevate what is valued in a totalising system of practice. In the example, the English culture appears to be a natural proxy for quality, merit, and advantage. Such practices undermine the linguistic, academic, and social advantages of mother tongue education in early childhood.

Mda (2004:186-187) presents a chilling picture of ignoring children's mother tongue. She argues that in South Africa, African children in multicultural schools speak English to one another and with their parents. She notes that they adopt English and forget or prefer not to remember their own languages in favour of English. In so doing, they reject African languages and their "Africanness". Identity development is put at risk in the quest for a totalising system. Ndimande (2004) concurs with this view. He notes that in post-apartheid South Africa, classroom practice in desegregated suburban schools acculturate African children into dominant White upper class values in the name of "standards". He uses the example of his nephew Thuto, reading a letter written in English and IsiZulu, to show how mother tongue has been underdeveloped at schools. Rather than a subtractive approach, he argues for cultural inclusion. He quotes a study by Swadener and Goduka (1998) to argue for the drawing on indigenous perspectives to shape a culturally relevant curriculum.

There are no easy answers to language issues. Early childhood education is the ideal space to look at the complexities of language development in mother tongue with the choice of *equal access to English* (my emphasis), which in reality exists as the language of power. Given the history of this country, African parents do not want further marginalisation of their children by mother tongue instruction only (See De Klerk 2002a for more details on Xhosa speaking parents' views on language issues in schools).

From what has been presented thus far, it is evident that teachers positioning in normalising discourses, pathologises children that are different from the norms. Butler (1990) notes that we can identify a regulated system of performance if we examine what is perceived to be a correctly co-ordinated set of acts or gestures. The example from Centre One provides clarity on how early stimulation as developmentally appropriate practice for young children was categorically used to promote racialised readings of young children's performance.

Mrs B: The African children aren't as... Some of them are very clever. They hold the crayons properly. Others have no stimulation. You can see the background of the parents is not stimulating enough. Like Devdas

his mother is a teacher. He holds the crayon like this (does a demonstration). He has got that... Parents that stimulate their children are going to be a bit more intelligent than those that don't get stimulation at home... With the African children the stimulation isn't always there. Even the White kids some of them aren't stimulated. More African than Indian and White kids aren't stimulated. When you go to the next age level you see that it is not one race. The White kids don't know their colours just as much as the African kids.

Mrs B positions herself in the school readiness discourse and adopts a natural way of speaking about early stimulation. The practice of a particular brand of early stimulation is offered as a normative truth. Mrs B uses this truth as a power relation to privilege certain ways of looking at parental involvement and the acts of young children's learning. She uses the technical concerns (holding of crayons and knowing of colours) to make judgements on parents' interventions and children's intelligence. She then categorises children into different race groups in order to measure their performance according to her norm. In so doing, she positions "more African" children as those outside the norm. At the next age level, however, both White and African "kids" are categorised as having deficit performances.

Mrs B's assumptions on early stimulation, as a normative truth, will function as a mechanism for rendering lives of young children amenable to certain kinds of actions. These actions position young children from diverse backgrounds as the "other". In the quest for transmission of scientific knowledge, the contestability brought about by children's varying experiences of their childhoods is rendered invisible. Furthermore, children's intelligence is valued only in cognitive terms.

It follows then that thinking about children outside the norm makes teachers work with classifications and categorisations that give them the power to speak with authority and revere certain practices. Below we see how Mrs X's positioning in the normalising discourses created a tunnel vision of how young children live their lives in South Africa.



Mrs X: Their (Black parents') responsibility for their children is minimal. They are so used to leaving their children alone. It starts from the rural areas where their children are left to play. They leave their children and go out to work. But we (Indians) we will think of babysitter, day care, and the rest. You don't blame these children when they go to Grade One. They are grappling. They can't get into routines. They can't get the swing of things. An Indian parent, no matter how poor, they will make sure that the child is in day care.

Mrs X mobilises dualistic thinking by setting up oppositional categories. The Black (African) parent, especially in the rural areas, is viewed as engaging with undesirable practices that puts their children at risk both in the care environment and at school. According to Mrs X, the Indian parent is engaging in desirable practices by placing their children in care settings or making care arrangements even in cases of poor purchasing power. Mrs X gains her understandings from the assumptions inherent in developmentally appropriate practice. For example, she assumes that all parents prioritise day care. In showing the continuity between early childhood and schooling performance, assumptions are made about nature and nurture dualisms. In this way, the normalising discourses are used as a regime of truth to look at some practices as placing young children inside the norm and other practices for young children as dubious and impractical. In the quest for homogeneous practices, the context of young children's lives is marginalised.

#### **5.4 Recognising young children's competence**

Although teachers positioned themselves mostly within normalising discourses that created adult-child hierarchies and associated notions of authority, there was evidence of recognising young children's competence outside dominant norms. This recognition was revealed in teachers' attempts at role reversal. In the examples below teachers positioned themselves in a social discourse of lifelong learning where they took up the position of being learners and accepted young children as teachers.

Mrs A: You learn from the little ones, I mean everyday I'm still learning from them.

Mrs C: They love to sing in the car. A lot of them are African children. When I take them home they teach me how to speak Zulu. So, you know, I'm trying to get knowledge of how they speak their language. They teach me different things. I always ask them a question or the work I don't know and they teach me. You see they got to know that I am interested in their language as well.

Mrs A acknowledges that an adult can learn from "little ones". In so doing, she raises the status of young children and challenges the notion of early childhood incapacity. Mrs C is also learning from African children. Whilst transporting the children she learns their language by asking questions and getting information on aspects that she does not know. Her move to show children that she is "interested in their language" suggests that she invests in making connections with the children. Both the examples show teachers respecting the "otherness" of children by forming relationships with them and listening to them. These ethical ways of acting open up possibilities through intersubjective spaces for teachers to co-construct childhoods *with* children.

Another way in which teachers recognised children's competence was through acknowledging that young children are capable of having their own views. The teacher talk below portrays young children as people who participate in their childhoods.

Miss Z: They love the jungle gym. If you leave them the whole day in the jungle gym then they are okay. If I say go inside they say why must I go inside. I say go inside because time is up. Some get cross. They say I don't want to.

Miss C: They learn things very quickly. They have different interpretation of things. Sometimes they tell this to you.

Miss Z presents an image of children as people who do not passively accept adult decisions. They show agency by questioning the activities planned for them. They resist and express their views about things that affect their lives. Whilst I have presented these actions as risky for young children in a socialisation context, they can be empowering for teachers and children if they are used to create opportunities for inclusive and respectful dialogue with children. Miss C recognises that young children's ways of knowing is different from adults and that they sometimes communicate this. Both the examples show that teachers recognise young children as people in their own right. Lansdown (2004) argues that this recognition creates many possibilities for information sharing, dialogue, and power sharing between adults and young children. Clark (2004) notes that young children can contribute to simple decisions like which areas to play in, spaces to display their work, and routes to take to the play area. These inclusive moves help teachers to hear and see what young children are saying and doing without subjecting them to the filters provided by normalising discourses that minimise their contributions because they are too small.

One of the groups of children most marginalised by the biological and developmental discourses, in terms of competence, are babies. As compared to older children and adults, they are frequently referred to as knowing nothing. Mrs A's positioning in a social discourse, however, allowed her to see babies as people who make meaning of their lives.

Mrs A: I think that young children are very clever. With the babies, sometimes you don't actually realise what some babies do, how they do it, the things they do. From a young age they get to know how to manipulate things. They know who they can trust.

Mrs A positions young children as being "clever". This word suggests that young children are knowledgeable about the world they live in. As an adult Mrs A indicates that we "don't actually realise" the potential of babies. This reference suggests that Mrs A is aware of the power of dominant developmental thinking that positions babies as incompetent. She raises the status of babies by presenting them as people who know how to "manipulate things" and people

who know “who they can trust”. This view of young children is promising to create new images of babies as people who have a rudimentary sense of self. We can think of babies as informing early childhood education through their current status. This view challenges the dominant image of a poor, needy, and weak child in need of protection.

## 5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has drawn attention to the discourses that are dominant as teachers’ frames of reference for understanding young children and practices with them. I foregrounded the normalising discourses of biology, development, and early socialisation for school readiness to show how teachers shape early childhood as a time of deficiency. I have argued that teachers work the politically free construct of *the normal child* in different ways to support the task of control and management of young children’s identities in familiar ways. Attention to gender, except in essentialised ways, is discounted. Teachers’ concerns with the decontextualised essential child, renders children as projects for school readiness, which is complexly interwoven with the primary school.

The mainstream model of *the normal child* with its homogenising tendencies, makes it difficult to accept young children as people living in diverse, complex situations. I have argued that the positioning of young children as outside the norm and as deficient makes salient the use of strategies such as schoolifying the home, categorical thinking with a racialised slant, and dualistic thinking. These strategies work to make early childhood centres politically free arenas. They promote images of young children as naturally determined, fixed essentialised beings that are projects for school/adulthood.

Alternative images of young children, however, were also circulating at the centres. Teacher talk showed evidence of alternate discourses that foregrounded young children’s competencies. Views of young children as people who adults can learn from, people who are agentic, and babies as people with a rudimentary self, challenge images of young children as essentialised adults-in-the making.

Teachers gave us a glimpse of active children who influence their childhoods through relationships that are formed.

Teachers' positioning in normalising discourses and alternate discourses shows contradictions and multiple subject positions as an ordinary everyday life occurrence. This understanding calls for reflective work so that teachers get to understand the multiple images of young children with whom they work. There is a need for recognition of images that have more potential to respect young children as people who inform their childhoods.

In the next chapter I explore the constructions of childhood *by* children. In order to contrast images of children as property and the model of *the normal child*, I foreground the power and agency of young children through the verb of *doing* childhood.

## CHAPTER SIX

### YOUNG CHILDREN *DOING* CHILDHOODS

#### 6.1 Introduction

In this chapter the spotlight is on early childhood as young children's subject space. I explore the constructions of childhood *by* children. Impetus is given to young children as powerful people who inform their childhoods. I am particularly concerned with the *doing* of early childhood. West and Zimmerman (1987) note that the concept of *doing* draws attention to the interactional relationships and micropolitical activities that are embedded in everyday life.

I found the thrust of the verb *doing* to be a valuable contributor to my thesis. Young children cannot be understood as biologically essentialised and psychologically determined individuals operating in a social vacuum. When the *doing* stance in early childhood education is made salient, it is possible to engage with multiple versions of becoming children. Attention is paid to the complex processes involved in taking on available knowledge of becoming a child.

The aim of this chapter is to explore how young children construct their childhoods in the middle preschool stage – (not babies and not Grade R children). The main argument in this chapter is that the centres are significant places where young children are participating as members of the social world they inhabit. In order to illuminate this aspect, I foreground ways in which young children (re) produce and loosen dominant ways of becoming a child.

In particular, I focus on the struggles young children undergo in order to be correctly positioned. I view these struggles not as objects to be overcome, but as personal experiences that are formative of young children's identities. The idea of a struggle gives a sense of action that links to the concept of *doing*. My attempts in this chapter are intended to move thinking beyond the normalising discourses of young children presented in the previous two chapters.

The social constructionist ideas on interactions and relationships, together with ideas of children's agency from the new sociology of childhood (James & Prout 1990; Prout & James 1997; James et al. 1998; Qvortrup 2004) is used to illuminate the *doings* of children. In order to foreground experiences of children in the construction of fluid identities, I draw on poststructural thinking, especially the work of Davies (2003). These filters allow me to see childhood as a complex process where young children become constituted as children. I use an ensemble of data sources (observations, conversations, participatory sources – stories, tours, persona doll talks). My personal experiences are also interwoven as part of the narrative in this chapter.

The exploration of young children's childhoods is organised in two chapters. In this chapter I highlight the children's struggles in the time zones of growing up through their attempts to distance themselves from baby stage and to create alignments to bigness. I also foreground the salience of race as a category of difference in young children's constructions of childhood. I do so because of the paucity of research in this area and the historical links of race in children's lives in South Africa. Although I address intersections of gender in this chapter, I believe that no account of young children's childhoods is complete without paying full attention to their gendered lives. Chapter Seven adds a gendered analysis to constructions of childhood *by* children.

## **6.2 Doing bigness – *He's big but he drinks nana bottle***

A crucial point for the construction of identity for children (and adults) is the complex relationship to time. Like adults, children look backwards and forwards in order to locate themselves and make sense of their identities in the present (James et al. 1998; Treacher 2006). In this theme I look at the way in which young children engage with the past, present, and future to position themselves as people that are normal for their social location.

In comparison to babies, the children at both the centres alluded to themselves as "big boys" and "big girls". Children also referred to themselves as "small" and "not so big" sometimes through using handspans to help me to get a sense of

their concept of bigness. This was especially in relation to school going children, older siblings, and parents. The children at Centre Two referred to me as “being more bigger” because I was from “big people’s place”. At Centre One a child thought that I ate too much food and therefore was bigger in size.

Cahill (1987), in his study of gender in preschool, argues that languages of social identification articulated by young children and towards them are mostly related to the creation of a sense of maturity. The children’s references to “big” could be understood as a claim to a state of maturity and avoidance to alignments with the lower baby stage of development. At both the centres the term “acting like a baby” was perceived as an inferior and derogatory way of being. It was evident that the children in the study were using common sense biological and developmental filters to socially construct bigness. In what follows I illuminate how young children struggle to present themselves as rational, coherent beings that are subjects of common sense normalising discourses.

In order to understand the above it is necessary to explain the context in which the children were operating to make meaning of themselves as people divorced from the past experience of baby stage. As in the broader societal context, the power to define young children as babies, toddlers, nursery children or as a collective of children below Grade R, resided with adults/teachers. The children quickly came to understand that in their present group location they were different from other groups.

One of the significant ways in which the differences were reinforced was through physical spaces. The open preschool plan at Centre One allowed for different age cohorts to have their own classrooms and demarcated spaces for play. Sometimes the younger children and Grade R’s played together. At Centre Two there were two space demarcations. Babies and one year olds were kept in separate rooms in the main building – a semi-detached house. All the other children were placed in a driveway converted into a large classroom. Each age cohort had its own demarcated area. Babies and one year olds were sometimes brought into the room for older children. During play time there was mixing of children from different age ranges.



Each of the physical spaces had their age appropriate furniture, toys, and thematic displays. McGregor (2004), in her exploration of spatiality and materiality in schools, argues that the physical form of a site (school) with its related artefacts is not simply a physical construction but also an indication of certain power relations. It is within the physical spaces that people are given images of social life. These images allow people to take up positions within sense making frameworks in order to make intelligible the signs that they encounter. Walkerdine (1988) notes that children come to read a variety of arbitrary signifiers such as words, gestures, objects with which they are surrounded in a way in which the arbitrariness is dissolved and meanings, truths and conventions are established. In the South African context, Karlsson (2004) noted how the school was used as a site that provided conditions and signage for racialised identification and discriminatory hierarchies during the apartheid era.

Bearing the above in mind, the centres in this study acted as power sites where struggles over meaning occurred. The physical spaces and material aspects were part of a framework that allowed the children to define, negotiate, and contest their childhoods. Children were encountering discourses that relayed messages of young children's culture, positions available to them, and hierarchies in their relationships. In Weedon's (1997) terms, the children were activating the institutional life of the centres through acting out different ways of being.

In making sense of their present location as people away from baby stage, the children operationalised the dominant developmental discourse of babies. They mostly saw babies as lacking in maturity, powerless, incompetent, and most dependent in comparison to being older. In my conversations with the children, babies were mostly referred to as "babas", people that were small who cried a lot, people who made "pissy and poo in their pants", and people who bit and ate their toys. There was also contradictory evidence of babies as people that were "nice to play with" and "clever people". The children in the study worked hard to achieve a higher status than babies by positioning themselves in an opposite category (not babies). They embarked on this move to signal the obviousness of them being in a more mature stage of development. The examples show narratives of children from both the centres pushing away from baby identity.

I observe some children in the play area at Centre One. Kajal approaches Varshen to join her in play. “Wanna be my baby?” Varshen gets angry. “I’m not your baby.” Cindy who is close by overhears the shouting and chips in. “He’s my baby.” Varshen pulls a face and shouts, “No!” He runs away.

I seat myself with Thabo and Varshen near a window that overlooks the demarcated area for babies. There are two babies outside. One is seated in a baby seat and the other on the caregiver’s lap.

Thabo: We are not babies. We play with puzzles and blocks. Babies will put it in the mouth... and they can’t build. I can’t eat the puzzle.

At Centre Two Jabulani and Dreshnie share their stories on babies with me.

Jabulani: You know, I’m not baby.

Me: You’re not a baby. Why are you not a baby?

Jabulani: Cos I’m eating all food now.

Dreshnie: I’m not a baby. I don’t drink bottle. I drink in the cup. I drink in my Cinderella cup... I sleep in my own room and wake up... I dress myself. I’m a big girl.

Varshen came from a middle class home. In my telephonic conversations with his father, around the choice of Grade R, it was evident that there were strong expectations of him showing maturity of an advanced child. In the example Varshen shows us his knowledge of how to belong to the category “not baby” by refusing to be subjected to the girls’ attribution of power. Thabo was part of the new deracialised middle class culture. He was the only son. He frequently shared his stories on eating out, watching English movies, and visiting his grandma who lived far away. He spoke fluent English. He showed emerging cultural capital that enabled him to affirm his social status as “not baby”. In the example he makes references to activities that require complex performance. In so doing, he positions himself as part of a group that displays greater competence than babies. Jabulani was one of three boys who lived with his mum in a low cost house. He spoke about his elder brothers worrying him and him having to call

his mum to intervene. He came from a background where IsiZulu mother tongue was very strong. During the study he was learning key words in English. In the example Jabulani makes himself recognisable in the category “not baby” by referring to an action associated with older children, namely, eating independently. Mrs X referred to Dreshnie as “a little madam”. She frequently spoke about things that she did with her elder brother. In the example she presents a narrative that suggests that she can categorise “not baby”. The indicators for exceeding the capabilities of babies, in terms of independent actions, help her confirm her identity as “a big girl.”

In each of the examples, the children (re) produced the dominant developmental discourse of themselves being more competent than babies. The children in natural ways presupposed a societal structure based on small people (babies) and big people (not babies). They used relational ways of being as a constitutive force to make meaning of themselves and their shared status. In this way, the children constituted themselves as legitimate people that were not babies. Davies (2003) calls this category maintenance work. She notes that when children use this idea to construct their identities they ensure that the category that they are making sense of is maintained as meaningful categories in their own actions and those of others. Davies points out that young children are quick to distance themselves from activities and associations that disrupt the obviousness of the category they are maintaining. In constructing their childhoods, the children in the study engaged in this practice to signal that they knew their “real” ways of being and that they were normal for their stage of development.

What is perceived as normal is coloured by class. Skeggs (2004) argues that we need to see the self not just as a subject position but also as part of a whole system of exchange in which the classed personhood is produced. In the case of the middle class boys, Varshen and Thabo, the normal development will include what they are showing in mind and body in terms of middle class habitus. Bourdieu (1986) notes that the embodied dispositions are important to stake a claim to social status and understand the notion of place in middle class. In the context of Centre One and the boys’ home backgrounds, it is reasonable to assume that they will work and rework their sense making frameworks to assert

themselves in a prime class location by inscribing their bodies with certain characteristics that have class value. The practices they engage in will signal social position. In the case of working class, Skeggs argues that this location could mean that one is chained to deficit places. In the case of Jabulani, the low economic capital and a weak English background suggest diminished cultural capital that weakens his position as a player in the field of early education. Dreshnie, however, shows emerging linguistic and cultural capital that makes her a better player in this field.

In order to attain correct membership in the social order, it is important that one should be able to read situations in a way that is obvious to everyone else and yourself (Davies 2003). Members must know not only the category they belong to, but also the elements of the opposite in the binary pair. In the examples below, we see how children struggled to achieve versions of themselves by using the category of importance and its binary opposite in a gendered arena.

It is snack time at Centre One. Janice and Linda are playing a game. Ashley watches them. They stretch their hands in front of them and let them rest on the table. Ashley asks, “ You’re not a baby, uh?” Janice affirms this by nodding her head. Ashley slaps her on her right arm. Janice screams and cries. The teacher scolds Ashley for making Janice cry. Ashley mutters, “Baby, baby.”

It is free play for the children at Centre Two. Seeta is crying. Kevin spots her. “You’re so big but you cry like a cry baby.” Seeta stops crying. She goes and sits on the grass. She looks at Kevin and moves towards him. He pushes her. “Ma’am, Kevin is pushing me.” Kevin snaps back, “And you’re a baby.”

The category of baby is used to create and sustain elements of the social structure in which people who are not babies are expected to have high levels of endurance. Ashley frequently displayed aggressive behaviour and was sometimes sent to the time-out corner. Janice was a quiet girl who had a thumb-sucking habit. In the example we see how Ashley uses the category “not baby” to

engage in the discursive practice that constitutes Janice as “not baby”. He pre-empted the discovery of a particular sort of child. Janice’s reactions suggest to Ashley that she has moved out of the position of “not baby” into the weak position of “baby” which is lower down the hierarchy of development.

Both Seeta and Kevin were children adjusting to new social relationships. Seeta’s parents had been recently divorced. She was living with her grandmother. Miss Y indicated that she frequently daydreamed and cried. At the time of the study Kevin was adjusting to his new adopted family. Mrs X indicated that his robust boy antics were probably part of his adjustment to his new environment. In the example we see how crying as an expressive emotional practice is viewed as an indicator to exclude Seeta in the formation of “not baby” identity. Kevin sees crying as incompatible with the emotional competence associated with children older than babies.

The pushing, slapping and crying suggest that positioning oneself as a child distinct from baby stage is not just a conceptual process for young children. The boys, from the perspective of being boys, expect a physical endurance. They read the bodies of both Janice and Seeta as not taking up the knowledge of having a higher level of physical and emotional endurance than babies. The girls’ crying and their need for interventions by teachers are viewed by the boys as signs of being weak and less powerful. Hence the girls are positioned as babies – powerless people lacking in social status.

What the struggles above point to is the pressure that young children undergo in order to demonstrate that they are following the normal route of development. They are forging their identities through using the social repertoires that allow them to position themselves and others in ways that promote hierarchies to show that they are not backtracking in their development. The way in which the body and the social messages of constructing childhoods work, attests to the need to look at how bodies matter in the construction of normal childhoods by young children. James et al. (1998) argue that a social constructionist reading of the body and childhood overemphasises the body and the child as an effect of social relations. What is discounted in this analysis, is children’s bodies as physical

and corporeal entities. In the examples presented it is the physical body in size, shape, and gender that make embodiment a crucial process through which young children construct their identities.

The children's constructions of childhoods presented thus far also point in the direction of hurried childhoods. Elkind (2001) argues that when this concept is operational, children are pushed from one situation to another to move them to higher levels of performance. From my own experience as a mother, I remember concerns about my children leaving nappies by the age of two and a half and turning baby babble into proper speech "as soon as possible". These actions stem from the position of childhood being valued more for its future than its present status.

In making their childhoods, children will engage with the widely held societal beliefs of what is the proper way of being a child in relation to adulthood. It is within this context that hurried childhood becomes visible. There is pressure on children to grow up fast. In both centres in the study, the children were given an early start to schoolwork through the formalities of an academic curriculum informed by school readiness. At Centre One parents also expected children to participate in numerous activities – swimming, action ball, kiddienastics, horse riding, computer literacy, arts and crafts, speech and drama. These activities were specifically designed to help support a middle class habitus. In these instances, hurried childhood relates to the pressure young children undergo to construct their childhoods in the context of a competitive schooling culture that is class driven.

Whilst in some early childhood contexts the concept of hurried childhood concurs with Elkind's definition, in others it gives way to blurring the divide between adulthood and childhood. Newman (2002) uses the story of Patiswa, a three year old, to shed light on this construction. The story emerged from the Family and Community Motivator Programme in the Eastern Cape.

Patiswa constructed her childhood in circumstances of poverty. She was underweight and relied on emergency food available at a nearby clinic. She lived

in an extended family network and performed the role of a caregiver to her 10 month old brother. She recently lost her six year old sister. Patiswa was an integral part of the burial rituals. She was subjected to the indigenous practice of *ukunqiniwsa* (protection). Small incisions were made on various parts of the body and the wounds were treated with a herbal remedy. The family motivator noted that at three years of age, Patiswa was already a busy girl. She got up early in the morning and accompanied an older “sister” to fetch water from the dam. She then fetched firewood for the morning tea. Sometimes she insisted on doing household chores with her baby brother tied on her back.

The story of Patiswa points to the way in which some children in South Africa constitute themselves as children in the context of poverty and cultural practices. It could be argued that the context specificities create hurried childhoods by making some children take on responsibilities traditionally within the adult domain. Young children engage with the pressures of day to day realities in their socio-cultural worlds. So, unlike the children at the centres, children like Patiswa inhabit the adult domain through a body of a child.

At the centres the children were engaging in fluid ways with knowledge of how to get their childhood right. They were coming to understand the rules and conditions for being a child. They used this knowledge to make effective claims of identity. The children’s reactions to two cultural artefacts associated with babies were quite telling in this regard.

I show a group of children a disposable napkin at Centre One. The children laugh.

Brett: We not babies anymore.

Kajal: Let Ashley wear it. He likes to whine.

The boys and girls laugh.

Ashley. No! I’m not a baby. When I was a baby my mummy let me wear it. Now I count the numbers on the nappy.

The following resulted from my discussion about a baby bottle at Centre Two.

Ranjeet: He's a baby. (Points to a younger child)

Jabulani: Ma'am. He's big and he's drink nana bottle.

The boys laugh loudly.

Kevin and Ranjeet: We don't drink nana bottle.

Brett's mum described him as a "boy with a mind of his own". She also indicated that she could not think of having another child until Brett settled down. During my observations, Brett frequently challenged the teacher's authority by walking around, interfering with other children, and making the girls cry. Kajal was one of the girls who referred to herself as a "lady". In my observations she distanced herself from boisterous play and frequently came to have chats with me. She loved hugging and touching me.

In the first example Brett makes an announcement about the groups' social status. Babies are seen as a way of being that is associated with the past. Kajal uses the napkin as a symbol of the past to test Ashley's reaction. In so doing, she positions herself as an older child who is proper for her stage of development. Ashley provides a justification for being an older child. He is able to "count the numbers on the nappy". He subverts the normal use of the napkin through his prowess in counting to reinstate his superior position over babies.

Ranjeet frequently took on the role of a joker. In the example Ranjeet points out a younger child who is deviating from what is perceived to be the norm. The child drinking "nana bottle" (milk formula for babies in a bottle) becomes a target of ridicule because he has not demonstrated the pattern of being normal. Kevin and Ranjeet construct the young child as inferior and as being subordinate to them.

In doing normal membership it is significant that children use words that show context influences. At Centre One there was strict control over baby talk for older children. "Whining" was often used to describe behaviour of babies or someone acting like one. At Centre Two, whilst Mrs X was strict about proper



use of terminology, Miss Y and Miss Z were less vigilant. I was regarded as someone who the children could talk to freely. Children felt at ease with using their own terminologies with me – hence the use of “nana bottle” in interactions with me. It could be argued that these linguistic happenings are interwoven with linguistic genteelness of middle class and the less sophisticated habits of those otherwise.

Pointing to transgressions help young children to clarify that they have got themselves right for their stage of development. In the examples, laughter is used as a strategy to show deviancy, indicate inferiority, and show the reality of not getting yourself right. Both laughter and mockery serve as powerful strategies to create isolation and bring deviant members back into line of normal membership. Buckingham (2000) states that such practices occur because of children being acutely aware of what constitutes adulthood and childhood. He notes that children will frequently be complicit in upholding the differences. Children will routinely put other children in their place by mocking or condemning them for their babyish tastes or behaviour and they often try to distance themselves from such accusations.

Laws and Davies (2000) see the above as real-life work with real-life consequences if children do not get childhood right. Young children must learn legitimate ways of being by conforming to what is considered to be the right behavioural norms. This does not mean that children are locked in only prescribed ways of being. They do resist and exercise choices within the context of discourses and practices that are available to them.

In the children’s struggles to generate identities away from baby stage, they articulated knowledge about the spaces where they could act out scripts in relation to babies. At both the centres these versions surfaced mostly in the play area and flashlight moments of play between transitions from one routine to the next. It was during these times that there was the greatest freedom from adult gazes.

I squat near the sand pit at Centre One. Varshen is seated opposite Elley. He is scooping sand and pouring it in between Elley legs. I move closer to Varshen. "Would you like to tell me what you are doing?" He nods his head and replies, "We're making nappies and and... Elley is my baby. I make nappies for Elley."

At Centre Two I observe Dreshnie and Thabisile playing with a doll. Dreshnie looks at me and smiles. "We're playing baby baby game." Thabisile takes the doll and places it in the basket. Dreshnie watches her. "Don't cover her face." Thabisile checks the doll's nappy. "Change she." Dreshnie takes the doll. "Mummy gonna change your clothes."

In both the examples the children show us that they are part of a discourse community in which meanings, intentions, and activities are communicated. Varshen acts out the script of a nappy maker by transforming sand into nappies. He affirms his dominant gender position by using Elley (a girl) as his baby. In his imaginary world he accesses the metaphor of a nappy maker, a gendered pattern of power over Elley, and the desire to create nappies out of sand. Some of the ways of being in this situation concur and conflict with the current discursive practices he is part of. The doll play between Dreshnie and Thabisile also alludes to the play context as not simply part of children's world. The girls show us complexities of the social and cultural worlds they inhabit. The "baby baby game" gives us insight into knowledge-in-use in a community of practice with imaginary elements and symbolic exchanges. Gender and generational relationships are foregrounded. In both the examples the children use their play knowledge to show complex constructions of childhood in a shared context.

The examples above confirm substantial evidence on the value of learning through play. Powerful minds are at work to shape understandings of the social world. Treacher (2006) maintains that children's play and narratives are fiction. We can understand this if we consider that the children's intention is not to represent reality but to play or tell a story without obligations. In their opportunities to play, young children explore and reshape some of the discourses that are available in the context in which they live their lives. Contrary to adults,

these children have not yet learned that their accounts of themselves are expected to be free of contradictions. Guss (2005), in reconceptualising play, adds to our understanding of this view. She argues that whilst adults concentrate on verbal exchange of thought, children go into the play arena, converse and reflect with dramatic forms of language to make meaning of themselves. In so doing, they momentarily take on the perspective of the “other”. This move helps them to problematise and construct temporary identities. In each of their dramatic enactments, young children are involved in a reflective process of *becoming* children. Bearing this in mind, Wood (2004) argues that in looking at *learning* through play, we need to match the power of children as social actors by *teaching* through play. She maintains that this focus would move beyond paying attention to young children’s competence to quantifiable, predetermined outcomes.

The children in the study frequently used narratives shot with fantasies as spaces to engage with aspects of childhood that were of concern to them as children. Within moments of fantasy narratives they emerged as power thinkers. They used their understandings to elaborate their own sense of self. The boys’ narratives showed more incorporation of aggression. They turned their food into items of combat, used threats by positioning themselves as superheroes, and coupled action with adventure storylines. Girls’ stories tended to be more centred on toy characters that they liked to nurture and imaginary trips to far away places. They also spoke about being like Nemo (a popular culture character) and swimming in the deep sea. The examples below present some power narratives where children acted out their knowledge.

It is book reading time at Centre One. I join the children at Brett’s table. Brett pulls the books from the other children. “I’m a builder man.” He stacks the books one on top of the other. Another boy joins him. Together they announce, “We are painting puffer train.” They lick their index fingers and smear saliva across the book.

Trish: Aunty Usha came to my home and she makes a bad dream for me.  
Me: Tell me about this dream.

Trish: She sent boogie man for me.

Me: And then...

Trish: He bit my finger. I got a stick for boogie man. I'm gonna hit him with my leg. I gonna kill him with my leg.

Brett and his partner transform books into something extraordinary. Brett uses the books to position himself as a builder and then as a painter. In the shifting moments of fantasy play, Brett fragments the connections one can make with a book. In his experiments to use books in extraordinary ways he challenges the position of being a normal reader of books. Trish's narrative suggests that a character commonly used by adults to discipline young children affects her. Whilst "boogie man" succeeds in biting her finger, she finds resources to overpower him. In the examples the children take the fantasy and the real to produce a spider web of imagining and perceiving that helps them construct themselves as powerful thinkers. Their narratives serve as powerful means to learn the potential and the constraints of social repertoires they encounter to construct their childhoods. This knowledge helps children to reproduce and contest familiar meanings.

In comparing childhood to adulthood, rational behaviour is one of the powerful indicators to adults/teachers that young children are reaching milestones of cognitive maturity. Young children's ways of knowing are frequently perceived as inferior unless they show a sense of maturity that is closer to adult rationality. In *doing* bigness the children in the study showed the practice of "velcroed thinking" in their peer interactions. I use the term to refer to children's attachments to people with greater rationality in order to make themselves more authentic.

It is snack time at Centre One. Ashley and Danie are sitting opposite each other. Ashley is having his juice. "It's a Fanta. Daddy bought." Danie is not convinced. "It's not a Fanta." He pulls the bottle out of Ashley's mouth. Ashley is angry. "My daddy is not stupid okay."

Anna-Marie takes a bite of her orange. Dinesh puts his hand underneath Anna-Marie's chin in order to prevent the juice from falling on the floor. Some juice falls on the floor. "That's why... Mrs C said must eat outside."

It is teacher-directed activity time at Centre Two. The children are given shapes to make a bus. After a demonstration by the teacher the children work independently. Seeta and Bhavani attempt to make a bus. Seeta looks at Bhavani's work. " Ayah, so no good. Got no wheels your bus."

Dreshnie and I have a conversation about being helpful at home. "You know Aunty Hasina my daddy and my mummy... even my big sister she helps me. They know everything."

In the first example Ashley positions himself as a knowing subject by naming what he is drinking. Danie destabilises his knowledge. Ashley reinforces himself as a knowing subject by making reference to his dad who is "not stupid". In the second example Dinesh uses a binary way of thinking to position himself as reasonable and Anne-Marie as unreasonable. He does this in two ways, namely, through putting his hand underneath Anne-Marie's chin and repeating the teacher's advice. In the third example Seeta takes on the position of the teacher who is the pinnacle of rationality, to assess Bhavani's work. As an assessor she reproduces the reality of a bus. Dreshnie is aware that knowledgeable people are older than her.

The examples illustrate the discourse of valid rationality residing with adults and those higher up the developmental ladder. Davies (1991) sees this type of rationality as a humanistic one. Within this view, rational people make coherent choices and give coherent answers. People who do not make choices based on rational behaviour are faulty or lacking in some essential aspect of their humanness. The children are aware of this dominant discourse. They raise their status by invoking references to people who have valid rationality. These moves can be understood if we consider the heavy investment of the centres in moving

young children from simple rationalities to dispositions that are supportive of the immediate goal of school readiness.

In *doing* bigness it was evident that the children in the study brought in versions of themselves as people who were waiting for more access and control. Treacher (2006) argues that children's engagement in the present and the anticipation of adulthood influence their fantasies and feelings about the future. At Centre One the children used their vision of being older to talk about getting marbles and playing freely on jumping castles. At Centre Two there was talk around learning timetables and fixing cars. Children were anticipating competence in higher stages of their development in ways that contributed to forming their childhoods in the here and now. The examples from Centre One and Centre Two respectively serve to illustrate this.

Anne-Marie: I'm going to big school.

Me: When are you going to big school?

Anne-Marie: When I'm this much (holds up all her fingers).

Me: Oh! this much (I show her all my fingers).

Anne-Marie: (stands on the chair) When I'm this big and then I'm going big school. (She lifts up both her hands to give her height).

Me: What are you going to do in big school?

Anne-Marie: Draw and colour... Gonna do our honeworks (homework) when we get big.

Trish shares her story with me. In the night my mummy said my Aka (sister) is a good girl. My Aka washed and washed her plate herself.

Because everyday the water is hot. I scream. Aka said that. Tommorow I'm gonna grow big... I can have lots of powers. I can wash the dishes.

In *doing* bigness both the children show us that they are accessing the discourse of the "waiting child" to make sense of their present lives. At Centre One the children did worksheets that required them to colour teacher-made outlines. Anne-Marie was one of the children that battled to keep her colouring inside the line. She was frequently assessed as a scribbler. In the example she anticipates

the space of “big school” as one where she will be able to “draw and colour”. She also has an expectation of a larger responsibility in the form of “homeworks”.

At Centre Two Trish frequently outshone the other children in her performances. She was able to complete her tasks in a shorter time span than her peers. The teacher frequently called upon her to guide other children and pass out snacks during snack time. In the example, however, Trish provides insight into contradictory experiences. At home she is positioned as incompetent in relation to her older sister within the discourse of “good girl”. The link between “good” and “girl” performs the function of a desirable force for future competence. She is waiting for “tomorrow” when she can have “lots of powers”.

Qvortrup (2004: 403) notes that it is the fate of children to be waiting. They are waiting to “become adults; to mature; to become competent; to get capabilities; to acquire rights; to become useful; to have a say in societal matters; to share resources”. He argues that whilst this is the case, the significance of what children do and say in early childhood should never be lost in a forward-looking perspective. Fabian (1983) sheds light on the latter through the notion of coevality. He argues that adults are coeval with children. This means that they live and share the same historical moment with children. At the same time impetus is given to the fact that childhood is a phase of development and preparation for the future – *other-time-worldliness*. The latter makes the present disappear. So the value of childhood is read in relation to a future in terms of a past. Such thinking has the potential to render meaning making by young children in the “now” of their childhood as something insignificant. From the examples we see that young children are aware of this and therefore use strategies to make their future matter in their present lives.

In struggles to construct themselves as big children, there were flashlight moments where children created soft borders with the future adult world. The children’s constructions of sexuality showed that they were engaging with unnatural knowledge for early childhood. My observations at Centre Two showed greater evidence of this. Unlike Centre One, this centre did not have teacher assistants. In cases of disruptions, teachers at Centre One had more adult

presence to shut down deviations from the norms and police slippages within the classroom. Centre Two created more spaces for the children to make meaning outside the teacher's sense of order, decorum, and control. In the examples below we see how the children engaged with sexuality as a "no go area" of early childhood.

I leave a boy doll and a Barbie doll on the table after a discussion on gender. Dreshnie picks up both the dolls. She makes the boy doll kiss Barbie and then separates them. "Don't kiss me. I got a lipstick."

On another occasion I leave dolls on the table to observe the children's reactions. Kevin shouts, "Saxy."

Me: You said saxy. What's that?

Kevin: Saxy boys.

Kevin hides behind Kumar. "I'm gone." He goes in front of Kumar. He grabs his chest. "I like your nana (breast)." Kevin kisses his fingers.

Dreshnie's doll play shows us that she is aware of boy/girl relationships. Her talk reveals that she is knowledgeable of the cross-gender sexual meanings. Her references to "kissing" and "lipstick" suggest that she has an understanding of what Thorne (1993:71) refers to as a "ritualised form of provocation". Kevin relates the visual image of dolls with the word "saxy". In so doing, he invokes a sexual meaning to the body. Kevin's actions in the third example, furthers the contradiction to the way in which the children were taught about their bodies. There were structured and unstructured lessons on body image, care, and safety of the body at Centre Two. Children frequently sang the body awareness song.

Teddy bear turn around  
Teddy bear touch your nose  
Teddy bear touch your toes  
Teddy bear touch your back  
Teddy bear touch your lap  
Teddy bear my body loves you



This knowledge, embedded within children's culture, presented the children with unproblematic truths about bodies. Kevin's actions, however, suggest that he has entered a problematic area. As a boy he is able to read a sexual meaning with reference to "nanas". Jones Diaz and Robinson (2000) argue that in early childhood we become blind to these sexual nuances because we are positioned in the discourse of childhood as biologically determined with a natural adult-child binary. We cannot see children as engaging with sexual meanings because the binary promotes adults as sexual, worldly, and capable. Children are seen as unworldly, incapable, and innocent (Jackson 1982; Tobin 1997; Cahill & Theilhemmer 1999). When children show sexualised meanings, they are shut down by the perceptions that there is a sense of abnormality. Although children will centralise the unnatural knowledge of sexuality, they will be constantly decentred by adult expectations of normal children in early childhood and moral panics.

In the next theme I deepen understanding of young children as people with power and agency within the racial arena.

### **6.3 Doing race – *Black means someone's got to stole you***

In the previous chapter I showed how the business logic of the centres masked engagement with democratic values in early childhood education. Specifically, the normalising discourses attached power to the category of *the normal child* that functioned as a standard representation of real children in different situations. This representation silences and leaves unquestioned children's engagement with race as a category of difference.

Both the centres in the study favoured a colour-blind approach to race in early childhood education. Like multiracial schools in South Africa, these centres displayed the hegemonic practice of assimilationism. Soudien (2004:104) argues that when the latter guides racial integration of children in schools, then the incoming children from different race groups are subjected to erasure of their ways of being or given some opportunities to perform their "native guises" for special occasions. The latter was more visible at Centre Two. Soudien maintains

that in both instances the children operate within the protection of the dominant group.

Within the confines of a colour-blind approach at the centres, the children in the study were negotiating different ways of being children. The historical geographical locations, the engagement with children from different race groups, the children's language and home experiences provided social repertoires to construct race. Children's interactions showed multiple identifications with race. In what follows I show how the children's *doing* of race was made in ways that reinscribe racism and also loosen it to dismantle its power. In so doing, I reinforce the idea of young children as powerful people who actively engage in struggles to construct their childhoods.

In efforts to make sense of difference, the children were taking up positions within the discourse of Black and White. In the everyday lives of the children, skin colour and physical attributes were some of the signs pointing to the fact that they were not a homogenous group of people. The examples below show engagement with the categories Black and White.

During our discussion on persona dolls at Centre One Ashley and Brett put their hands together.

Ashley: Black and White.

Me: You said Black and White. What about Thabo and Varshen?

Ashley: Black. Black. (He turns around and points to himself and another White boy). White. White.

At Centre Two I show Dreshnie and Thabisile two persona dolls of colour. I ask them for their preferences.

Dreshnie: I like this one (dark skinned doll)

I ask Thabisile. She keeps quiet.

Dreshnie: She must like the Black one. She's Black.

The children show us that they are able to work the dominant racial categories around the axes of gender to make sense of themselves and others in their

context. Ashley, as a White boy, is able to distinguish himself from Brett who is a Coloured boy. He correctly categorises himself by making reference to another White boy. Dreshnie identifies with the Black doll. She exercises power over Thabisile and labels her as Black. Skin colour and appearance play an important part in the children's categorisations. Katz (1976) and Glover (1991) maintain that racial categorising and the use of racial cues provide important information for young children (from three years or younger) to construct racial attitudes. The bias comes to the fore when young children develop feelings about what they are observing.

In making judgements about what they see and evaluating differences as good and bad, the children will use relationships with significant others, curriculum resources, and the wider social milieu as reference points. With regard to the latter, a survey conducted by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation on racial reasonings amongst South African citizens was quite telling (Gibson & MacDonald 2001). It was found that many of the respondents used racial separateness to make lifestyle choices and judgements of others. The survey concluded that the ideas of racial difference and distance of one group from another remained strong and was evident among the greater population in post-apartheid South Africa. It is reasonable to assume that in constructing childhoods, young children will purchase ideas of racial and other differences from the powerful social forces they encounter.

One of the strategies frequently used to construct views of racial groups is stereotyping. In my engagement with the children in the study, it was evident that they used stereotyping as a way to mobilise their prior knowledge. At Centre Two the children were able to use the scarf on my head as an indicator of me being Muslim. In a playful banter at Centre One, a child used my skin colour to classify me as being just like her - White. In the example below we see how a personal experience of a child from Centre One was put into a racial discourse to mobilise a negative image.

I have a Black doll in my hand. Let's look at Kidi's face. Kidi's a Black girl.

Ashley: Black means someone's got to stole you.

Me: Someone's gonna...

Ashley: The Black stole my mum's phone... Blacks gonna steal.

In constructing his childhood, Ashley portrays the image of a member of society engaging with the realities of living in a province with a high crime rate. He debunks the myth of childhood innocence by showing us that he is wise about his lifeworld. Ashley uses the incident of his mum's cell phone being stolen as an experience to (re) construct the discourse of Black people. "Black means someone's got to stole you," offers Ashley an interpretive package to organise his ideas around Black people. The experience that Ashley's mum had with one Black person creates negative images of Black people as a group. Within the South African context, it could be argued that Ashley's discourse has roots in the apartheid racial project of Black danger (*swart gevaar*). The latter promoted the idea that the dark Other is one to be feared. Ashley's socially organised framework of meaning shows common features of stereotyping. In his sense making he is able to categorise/generalise, work through images of good and bad, and misrepresent a group based on a single incident.

Ehrlich (1973) maintains that with very young children the family and school authenticate and legitimise the stereotypes. I would argue that this socialisation occurs through the intersection of the past and the present. So in constructing their childhoods, the children will be engaging with "then-in-now" realities. Whilst apartheid has crumbled, the racial stereotyping will continue through adults' habits of thoughts and experiences communicated to young children during early socialisation. Wolfensberger (1992) argues that in order to counter stereotypes, young children need to be consistently provided with positive experiences to change the stereotype. He notes that if this is not forthcoming, then children may project the negative stereotype when they meet people from the stereotyped group. Children's negative, crude representations run into the danger of entrenching generalisations typical of the category.

The stories with persona dolls and play with Barbie showed some evidence of children engaging with the discourse of whiteness as desirable. At Centre Two

Trish's play with a Barbie doll brought responses like "She's my best, she's fair" (implying light complexion). During the persona doll stories at Centre One, Kajal identified the dark skinned doll as a "girl". She accorded the fair skinned doll the higher status of a "lady". When Varshen was asked if he would like to be a friend to a White doll, he replied, "Yes, because she's White".

I could also identify with the children's desire for whiteness in childhood. Firstly, as a child in the apartheid era I was in no doubt that white meant being privileged. I specifically recalled my excitement of going to West Street in Durban to do shopping. This public domain meant that I could go outside an Indian area and see pretty White ladies with high heeled shoes and handbags. I could also peep into White people's restaurants, especially the one at the bottom of the store OK Bazaars. These experiences created a yearning to be White. My second identification with whiteness in childhood related to the way in which my fair skin colour and light eyes made me more acceptable with the adults in my extended family. As opposed to my cousins, my looks frequently won me the privilege of being a bridesmaid at family weddings.

So, in *doing* childhood it is not uncommon for non-White children to be picking up on messages on the norms/privileges of whiteness. Fiske (1996) argues that whiteness is not just about skin colour. It is an essential category or a fixed point. This point provides people with a space of positions and privileged location from which to view and to keep others at distance. The privileged space allows one to constitute oneself and others in relation to the norms of whiteness. *Doing* childhood, as we have seen from the experiences presented, creates possibilities for some children to take up whiteness as an organising principle for superiority.

In the previous theme we saw how children's ways of understanding their relation to their world, made visible teasing and mocking. These strategies were frequently used to test peer reactions in the classroom and on the playground. Racial undertones were not excluded from the children's strategic moves to make meaning of the practices they encountered. In the example we see how the concept black became at terrain of struggle.

The children at Centre Two are colouring a picture. Miss Y walks around to check the children's work. She stops at Kumar.

Miss Y: Kumar likes to colour everything black.

Kevin: You (pointing to Kumar) look like this black here in my picture.

Kumar: (looks at Dreshnie) You Black girl. How you Black girl?

Kevin: You said Black girl. Not me.

Kumar is positioned by the teacher as incompetent in colouring a picture through his sole use of the colour black. Kevin uses the discourse of "looking Black" to position Kumar as inferior. Kumar raises his status by subordinating Dreshnie through the use of the "insult" "Black girl". Kevin recognises the "insult" and absolves himself from blame. Gender and race interact to create ideas around superiority and inferiority. Dreshnie experiences the double axes of disadvantage of race and gender – "Black girl". What the axes point to is that in constructing their racial meanings, young children will not display their ways of knowing in any straightforward way. They will use a number of interactive, interlocking, contradictory, and mutually reinforcing ways to position themselves and others.

In the example below we see how racial meanings with the intersections of age and gender at Centre One were interrupted, challenged, and reconstructed.

Thabo joins some older children during play time. The older children are seated in the veranda. They are waiting for their snacks. Thabo joins Bongani and Muzi. The boys begin a game and sing, "I'm Black". They place their hands on top of each other as they sing. Tobeka is seated opposite the boys. She is playing with a doll. She wants to join the boys in the game. The boys reject her participation. Thabo shouts at her, "Not Black." Tobeka pushes her hand through. "I'm Black." Bongani shares Thabo's views. "You're not Black." A girl shouts out, "You're not Black." She looks at her sweater and says, "I'm blue". The boys start looking at their shirts. Muzi calls out, "I'm yellow". Bongani follows, "I'm green".

Thabo's age is blurred through the racial positioning of "I'm Black". This move allows him to consolidate himself as one of the boys. Although Thobeka is Black, she is not a boy and therefore excluded from the game. The girl who shouts out, weakens the boy's power over Thobeka. She confirms that Thobeka is "not Black". She uses her sweater as an interpretive framework for colour. By positioning herself as "blue", she wields power over the boys. The boys are subordinated by the new reference. They start using alternate colours to black in order to (re) position themselves.

In their *doings* of childhood, these children show that they are engaging with shifting identities in complicated relationships. They show us what Gillborn (1996) characterises as racist practice in the form of plasticity, enclosed in categories and yet also becoming fluid through active engagement. The fluidity creates possibilities for change. This suggests that in constructing their childhoods, the children will learn the prevailing social attitudes to race and they will also learn about alternatives that can classify people in other ways. As adults/teachers the possibilities to increase a narrow frame of reference always exist. The question is which ones are privileged and why.

In making sense of race, there was evidence that children were engaging with spatially specific racial identities. The participatory technique of *follow the leader* yielded evidence that young children were able to relate people to places. At Centre Two the children were able to make references to the African children attending the centres as "living there... by that side". Below we see how Varshen from Centre Two showed knowledge of race and place in a story with persona dolls.

Me: Nandi stays in Umlazi.

Varshen: That's a Zulu place.

Varshen lived in Kloof. This area was and still is a middle/upper class White area with wealthy Indians and a few African families moving in. Varshen shows knowledge of spatial separations based on ethnic lines. Seekings and Natrass (2002) argue that even though we are a decade away from apartheid legislation,

the process of residential integration is low. In the present day Umlazi is still an African township. Varshen is able to classify Umlazi as a place associated with a particular ethnic group. This knowledge tells us that in making his childhood, he is able to (re) produce the discourse of race and segregated places. But at the same time he is constructing his childhood within a greater degree of pluralism away from race. In living in Kloof he is part of a deracialised geographical space that is organised around middle class living. According to Posel (2001), this trend emerged from the broader democratic policies and the growth of the Black elite in South Africa. The class scenario at present creates possibilities for new identities by loosening the apartheid-defined world of experiences. Lifestyles and tastes as class distinctions form new sense-producing frameworks to construct identities.

The way in which the children in the study clustered around language and race also pointed to the work of active subjects in the constructions of childhood. At Centre One the children sometimes clustered according to home language. Those who were IsiZulu speaking mostly tended to play together. This can be understood with regard to the centre's subtractive approach to home language. The racial clustering afforded subject positionings resulting from the children's new-found skills in communication, "broken English", and IsiZulu. At Centre Two there were few IsiZulu speaking children. Miss Y was a valuable resource to the children. During my observations I noticed that some children tended to go to other IsiZulu speaking children for help when completing tasks. During this time the children spoke to each other in IsiZulu. Sometimes they tended to work quietly on their own. In constructing their childhoods, these children were knowledgeable of support structures for home language at the centres. The clustering of children according to home language in playgrounds is also a feature in South African schools where English is the language of learning and teaching (see Soudien 1996 and Tihani 2003). My findings suggest that the centres are important sites to provide the children with early experiences of how to categorise and cluster around aspects that make them different from mainstream groups.



Religious discourses are powerful in disabling images of people along racial and ethnic lines. During my Haj pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia I experienced the power of religion to bring people of all races to worship one God. The congregation mobilised through the collective concept of “The Ummah”. The latter refers to the followers of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

In the study the children positioned themselves in religious discourses through their home experiences. At both the centres the children began their snack time with a prayer. At Centre Two this practice was more regulated than at Centre One. Some children at Centre Two also wore symbols such as the cross. Evashna and Dreshnie frequently wore black dots on their foreheads. Mrs X indicated that the dots prevented *evil eyes* from affecting the children. In my role as a mother I could identify with this protectionist practice. I frequently applied black eye cream called *kajal* to prevent the negative effects of *nazaar* (bad eyes). I believe that the evil eye could make young children very sick. Some Hindu children also wore red strings around their wrists. Mrs X explained that the parents tied the string after the Luxmi Prayer. In Hinduism, Luxmi is the goddess of knowledge, wealth, and prosperity. According to Mrs X it is believed that the child and the rest of the family would prosper if the string was worn. I asked a child why she wore the string. “I’m making nonsense,” was the reply. So whilst the artefact was perceived by adults as having religious value, the child related to it in terms of a disciplinary practice. What the above points to is the fact that young children were exposed to social repertoire of meanings that weakened racial relations. In the example below we see how a religious discourse operated through blurring the boundaries of race.

Dreshnie takes three chairs to the corner of the room in front of the pigeonholes. She fetches a blanket. She takes off her shoe and lays the blanket on the floor. She faces a pigeonhole, puts her hands together and says, “Om Shanti”. Kevin and Thabisile laugh at her. “Ah you laughing at God.” Kevin and Thabisile stop laughing. They put their hands in the pigeonholes, touch the wall at the back and complete the ritual by touching their foreheads. Dreshnie touches the wall and puts the dots on

their foreheads. Kumar wants to join in. Dreshnie shouts, “Take your shoes off. We making Om Shanti.”

Dreshnie comes from a strong Hindu background. In one of her chats with me she spoke about going to the temple to make “pooja” (prayer) and how she liked to watch her mum light the lamp. In this example we see how she uses her childhood experiences of religion to gather a group around prayer. The laughter by Kevin and Thabisile is viewed as a sign of disrespect. Dreshnie aligns the children to her discourse by changing the reference from “Om Shanti” to God. Both Kevin and Thabisile identify with the familiar term for a higher being that requires respect. In carrying out the rituals they move into Dreshnie’s discourse.

The example adds to the evidence in this chapter around struggles over meaning. In the constructions of childhood, meanings are perpetually contested and confirmed by the manner in which children and significant others in their lives do and say things. In this case the power of grouping according to race is disabled by an organising framework of religion, which creates new possibilities for meaning making.

Within the broader context of childhood, children’s interactions with symbolic resources of consumer culture also weaken the power of race. There was evidence that the children at the centres were actively appropriating meaning through a global commercial culture aimed at early childhood. The children frequently spoke about their toys, going to movies with their parents (Nemo was popular at the time of the study), television characters (Moshee in Takalani Sesame, Pokemon, Ninja Turtles, Spiderman, and Teletubbies). At Centre One middle class lifestyles and affluence of the children created conversations around eating at MacDonald’s and Kentucky. Some children spoke about getting “chicky toys” and really “sceddy ones” during their outings to Kentucky. There were competitions around the eating of Oreo biscuits as demonstrated in the television advertisements. At Centre Two the children’s constitution of themselves as consumers came through their conversations around what their parents bought for them (sweeties, clothes, fishies, trucks and DVDs).

The version of childhood that these children were constructing can never be divorced from global consumer capitalism. The latter is a system that produces social and economic relations that make consumer childhood (also known as global childhood) as something that normatively shrinks the world of childhood. Levin and Rosenquest (2001) argue that when this happens, toys and games given to children by global capital do not just serve as something that children can act on, but rather as objects of interpretation where children make their meanings. They use the artefacts of a global childhood to put together their projects of self. The market penetrates the everyday lifeworld of childhood by making children consumers of “kids’ stuff” through their parents’ purchasing powers. It is within this consumerist logic that children will experience possibilities for the decentring of race as an organising principle for social life. They will also experience possibilities for the creation of identities using systems of meaning from the global world of childhood.

#### **6.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter I presented snapshots of young children *doing* childhood in multiple ways. The concept of *doing* allowed me to see the centres as key sites where young children performed their lives as people informing their childhoods. I argued that young children construct childhoods through (re) producing but also dismantling familiar ways of being a child. I showed how young children construct their identities through powerful and agentic moves as struggles to make sense of the time zones of the past, present, and future. I extended the idea of children as powerful people within the context of race. I argued that the children (re) inscribe racism and loosen its power through creative engagement with religious discourses and popular culture.

The complexities with which young children do their childhoods, contest the portrayal of them as incomplete blank sheets promoted by normalising discourses. Like adults, young children struggle to make sense of multiple realities they encounter in their everyday lives to construct their identities. The children in this study made and remade their identities in interaction with people similarly and differently positioned in age, ability, race, gender, and class. They

worked hard to appropriate, produce, and reproduce discourses of childhood in complex ways. In so doing, they showed us that they had knowledge of many aspects of everyday life. Their perspectives of life come through if we accept childhood as a space where young children constitute themselves as people in society rather than just considering them as adults-in-the-making who are in a phase of development. In early childhood education, this view opens up possibilities to contest limiting images of young children traditionally used to map out practice.

In the chapter that follows I elaborate on gendered readings that I have touched on here. I continue to show the power and agency of boys and girls. In particular, the chapter describes gender in terms of how boys and girls in the study fashioned their masculinities and femininities at the centres.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### YOUNG BOYS AND GIRLS *DOING* GENDERED CHILDHOODS

#### 7.1 Introduction

In this chapter I continue to foreground young children as having power and agency in their own right. The focus on boys and girls *doing* gendered childhoods is two fold. In the first instance I take up the challenge posed by Montgomery (2005:481). She argues that any probe into the constructions of childhood *by* children must get rid of the “strange, ungended isolate” and provide a vision of a child that is both a young person and a gendered one. Young children are not only people that actively construct their childhoods, but they are boys and girls that make meaning of the gendered nature of society through ideas on how to be masculine and feminine. I continue to contest normalising discourses of young children by highlighting how they negotiate ways of being boys and girls.

My second aim in this chapter is to contribute to the gaps in knowledge on gender in early childhood (below Grade R) in the South African context. In the light of instilling democratic practices, early childhood education is seen as a key area for addressing inequalities on the basis of gender (Chisholm & September 2005). It is acknowledged that gender is something that intimately affects young children. As such there is a call for gender reform through paying attention to how young boys and girls are socialised in different contexts.

In Chapter Five I showed how Centre One and Centre Two adopted gender-neutral approaches through discourses of the naturally developing child and sex role socialisation. The homogenising tendencies of the normalising discourses paid attention to young children in age-related ways as opposed to them being boys and girls. Teachers were mostly using the exclusive polarised notions of male and female to arrive at homogeneous categories of boy and girl. These practices are key areas for reform.

Browne (2004) argues that any gender reform process in early childhood education must start by making the connection of “equity” instead of “equality” in relation to gender. This approach helps us to think about the importance of treating children fairly by considering differences. Within this approach it is possible to focus on children’s life experiences, their desires, pressures, and struggles to conform to certain ways of being boys and girls given their context specificities. There is acknowledgment of difference in order to challenge the inequitable status quo through emphasising fairness in both process and outcome. Browne articulates an approach that moves away from the equal opportunity approach where the assumption is made that we can challenge negative gender stereotypes in early childhood education by reinforcing behaviours we see as positive.

In mapping this chapter, I endorse Browne’s view of gender equity by presenting the multiple ways in which boys and girls at the centres were constructing gendered childhoods. This is especially important if we consider the fact that when young boys and girls enter early childhood centres, their understandings of femininities and masculinities are fluid and in process (Macoby & Jacklin 1983; Leaper & Gleason 1996). In constructing different ways of being, young children’s meanings evolve to learn rational and non-contradictory ways of being boys and girls. The stabilities occur through power and tradition. Davies (2003) notes that young children are subjected to intense repetition and distribution to correctly identify not only themselves as boys and girls, but also others as being in the relevant categories. As a result, they make investments of themselves in particular storylines, positions and articulations of the gendered world. I found the ideas above to be valuable to my thesis that young children actively construct their childhoods through discourses, engagements with social structures, and practices in their institutional locations.

Poststructural filters, especially feminist poststructuralism, performance theory, and Bourdieu’s ideas on capital, afforded me the tools needed to explore boys’ and girls’ evolving meanings of practicing gender. I look at hegemonic masculinity as a tool to illuminate how boys struggle to display particular patterns of conduct in the production of gender relations. I also explore the

relational concept of emphasised femininity. Both these ways of foregrounding gender, help me to continue my argument that young children (boys and girls) appropriate, produce, and reproduce familiar ways of being gendered, but that they also present alternate forms of being.

I shed light on the ways in which boys and girls understand and give meaning to themselves and others mostly in same sex groupings. In listening to the children and observing them in activities, it became obvious that most of them tended to seek same sex friendships. My analysis of these relations highlights the discourses the children in the study had access to and show constructions of different versions of being boy and girl.

## **7.2 Doing boy – *When I grow up I wanna be a man***

In the practice of boy, it was evident that in encountering the pre-existing meanings related to gender, boys were engaging with masculine and feminine identities as distinct. Through their experiences with their peers, adults and the media, the boys in their specific contexts were picking up on the privileged form of masculinity in relation to femininities and other types of masculinities.

Hegemonic masculinity is a culturally accepted way of being a boy (Connell 1995). This pattern of being a boy encourages the demonstration of aggression, daring behaviour, superiority, competition, domination, and authority (Connolly 1995; Mac an Ghaill 1994). Hegemonic masculinity is attractive as it is power-laden. Those that take up this pattern of being boy are more respected for being *real* boys. Those that do not adopt the patterns of conduct associated with *real* boy, experience tension and conflict. At the centres the boys struggled to position themselves and others as particular kinds of boys.

Superhero play was one of the key ways in which some boys at the centres explored the patterns of conduct related to hegemonic masculinity. At both the centres superhero play was not part of the curriculum. Boys spoke about superheroes in fantasy narratives. At Centre Two boys sometimes narrated superhero experiences in structured small group discussions in a slot called “daily news”. Due to the affluence of parents at Centre One, more boys wore

clothing with superhero imprints. On one occasion one boy wore a Spiderman outfit. At this centre there was also an incident of a boy putting a tattoo of Spiderman on his arm. The boys used transition time and in between spaces in particular routines to make sense of themselves as particular boys in relation to superhero play. Below we see how the boys at both the centres used superhero play to radiate power and celebrate the ideal of hegemonic masculinity.

Thabo shouts, “I’m Batman, Superman”. He runs around the table. “I’m Batman, Superman.” He stands on the chair. “I’m a Spiderman. I’m a *real* Spiderman.” He lifts both his hands. The other boys attempt to join him. “Me too, me too.” Miss D spots the boys. “Uh, Uh. No! stop it.”

I watch the boys after a discussion on Spiderman at Centre Two. The boys run around and jump like Spiderman.

Kevin: Let’s fly. One, two, three... let’s fly. The boys run and slide on the floor. They make a whoosh sound and spray webs on each other and on me.

Thabo had a good command of English – one that is commonly referred to as “English with a twang.” In the example he combines his linguistic competence from the perspective of being an African boy, with physical agility (running, standing, lifting) to position himself as a “real Spiderman”. He elevates himself from the rest of his peers by standing on the chair and lifting his hands. In this way he raises his child status. He is successful in creating a scene of superiority, power, and domination. These attributes attract the other boys who attempt to disperse Thabo’s authority by creating a shared status of power. The boys are, however, cut short by the teacher. In the second example Kevin takes the lead in changing the random actions of running and jumping like Spiderman to a more structured response. He creates order and authority through commanding the other boys and counting down to action. The spraying of webs on me suggests that as an adult, Kevin and his team have succeeded in subordinating me. So in constructing gendered childhoods these boys use dramatic poses of hegemonic masculinity to explore who they are, how they would like others to see them, and position them. This is important to the boys, especially if we consider that the



gendered body of the child is part of a regulated system of performance (Butler 1990).

Recently, there has been a positive move towards encouraging superhero play for boys in early childhood education, especially in the United Kingdom. The unbanning of weapons and superhero play in early childhood centres is viewed as the answer to boys' underachievement. Holland (2003) maintains that weapons and superhero play are not so much about violent and aggressive behaviour but rather about creating emotional satisfaction for boys. With sensitive adult guidance, weapons and superhero play can better serve boys' development. Jones (2002) concurs with this view and argues that the acting out stances in superhero and weapon play build self-confidence as boys take risks and judge danger in imaginary situations.

Given the need to meet the goal of gender equity in South Africa and the close tie of hegemonic masculinity with superhero play, it is crucial to ask if boys will grow out of this way of making sense of themselves. Jordan and Cowan (2001) argue that most boys move away from this type of superhero narrative, as they grow older. They maintain that the imaginative/dramatic narrative is replaced with a different form of masculinity – one that is nevertheless imbued with power and status that marks men in our society. So, whilst boys will experience a discontinuity with superhero play, the power relations have the potential to be perpetuated in other forms unless alternate discourses are provided.

In probing boys' future perspectives of themselves, it was evident that they were perceiving life possibilities in terms of what is appropriate for men from the current perspective of being young boys. The examples below shed light on this type of understanding.

Me: What do you want to be when you grow up?

Varshen: A policeman.

Thabo: I want to be a fireman. It goes everywhere where there's fires.

Me: Why do you want to be a policeman?

Varshen: Cause I wanna shoot the baddies.

Thabo: Baddies are bad.

Me: So baddies are bad.

Thabo: I'm gonna shoot them for real. Cause I got big guns. I got a big gun but it broke. I got a water gun...

Me: So do you like guns?

Varshen and Thabo: So you can shoot the bad people.

Thabo: When the people are gone also they gonna steal so they have to keep it in the house.

Me: Kevin, tell me about what you would like to be when you grow up.

Kevin: When I grow big I'll be a man... When I grow up I wanna be a man and fight with Ranjeet.

Me: What do you want to be when you grow up?

Jabulani: I wanna be a dad.

Me: You want to be a dad. What are you going to do when you are a dad?

Jabulani: I shoot somebody.

In both the examples the boys have correctly identified themselves in the dominant gender discourse. In the first example Varshen sees himself as a policeman and Thabo as a fireman. Both have the words "man" attached to them. Both jobs are traditionally male. The power and action associated with these jobs appeal to the boys' need to be brave in dominant/heroic positions. Kevin and Jabulani allude to the adult terms associated with themselves, namely "man" and "dad." Actions of fighting and shooting are also revered in visions of their future selves. In seeing future possibilities, these boys show us that they are aware of the invariance of gender. In tracing themselves to the adult male world, the boys show us that they are knowledgeable of classifying people and the fact that one's gender attribution stays the same. They make connections between the boy individual now and the future. In mapping gender equity in early childhood, it is important to gain an understanding of the social representations of masculinity that boys are exploring and aligning themselves to. It is equally important to note the emotional feedback provided by the representations.

In practicing gender, boys use and present their bodies to perform a particular form of masculinity. The male physique is part of the *macho* discourse that normalises power through physical prowess. Butler (1990) notes that behaviour of boys and girls is judged by how they are performing according to the gender categories. Children need to repeat the logic of these categories by acting out images that are socially sanctioned. The examples below show boys working hard to inscribe their bodies as being masculine.

We have a discussion around Sammy The Small at Centre One. The boys tell me all the things they can do as compared to Sammy.

Me: So Sammy is still a baby.

Thabo: But we big.

Me: What are some of the things big boys can do?

Varshen: We can do handstands.

Me: What else?

Thabo: When we eat vegetables we can be strong.

The boys flex their muscles. They hop and jump about... They stretch their hands and swing punches.

Kevin: See muscles.

Me: What are muscles?

The boys roll up their sleeves and show me their muscles.

Kumar makes an L shape with his arm. See here, see here, I'm Batman.

Me: (I point to Kumar) He is Batman. Kumar has muscles.

Kevin: No!

Me: Why?

A boy and Kevin shout out, "Girl".

Thabo draws attention to developmental stage and size in order to position himself with "big boys". The talk around handstands and the strong poses of flexing muscles, hopping, jumping, and swinging punches are used to show me that the boys know the signifiers of a particular way of being a boy. In the second example Kevin combines his show of muscles with positioning himself as Batman – a superhero who is strong, brave, and uses violence to complete his

missions. Kevin is quick to recognise someone who does not fit into his form of masculinity. The absence of muscles, as an indicator of being masculine, incites Kevin to position Kumar in the negative category of “girl”. Kevin’s behaviour suggests that he is knowledgeable on how to create a male hierarchy, validate his masculinity, and subordinate a male by reference to an effeminate way of being. The boys come to understand what their bodies should do and look like in order for them to be positioned as masculine. The attention to masculine bodily markers renders their race insignificant as the consolidation of being boys matters more than racial relations.

Paechter (2006) argues that children are embodied being. Gender is not written on a blank body. It is constructed from our embodiment or in opposition to it. In constructing their boyhood, these boys show us that bodies matter through the operation of the societal norms of gender. They also matter in terms of the gender norms that operated at the centres. At Centre One the children were sometimes separated by gender for toilet time. At Centre Two older boys sometimes took responsibility for passing out snacks. At both the centres the children’s behaviour was evaluated according to sex appropriate criteria (“naughty boys”, “good boy”, “girls do not sit like that”). These were some ways in which the boys were learning that bodies limit the gender identities they performed. Paechter maintains that in order to capture the salience of the body in the construction of gender, new research must focus on how boys and girls use their bodies to construct, express, and demonstrate gendered identities. The focus on embodiment prevents the domestication of the body being lost to a purely sociological account of gender socialisation (Arnot 2002). The physical body as a corporeal entity must be taken into account in analysing gendered childhoods. Within the context of understanding masculinities and addressing unequal power relations for gender equity, I would argue that such a move is crucial.

The playing of sport is one way in which boys develop bodily forms that allow them to construct and enact hegemonic masculinity. The developing of the body through sport begins at an early age (Paechter 2006). For boys like Thabo and Varshen, who are part of a deracialised middle class boyhood, the body is a form

of physical capital. In conversations with boys at Centre One it was evident that parents were channelling boys into specific sports that were offered as extra-curricular activities. Cricket, action ball, and swimming featured strongly in the choices for boys.

Bourdieu (1978) draws attention to the role of the (sporting) body in the acquisition of other resources. He alerts us to the fact that the production of physical capital through the development of bodies will convert into value in the different social fields we enter. The physical capital is usually converted into economic capital (money, goods, services), cultural capital (educational qualifications), and social capital (interpersonal networks). Bourdieu argues that physical capital can then be seen as a key to reproducing social inequalities. Although Bourdieu's arguments have been criticised for being overly reproductionist, they are helpful to create understanding of how sporting choices in early childhood education are part of a physical capital code. The code relates to shaping middle class masculinities with the aim of (re) producing prestige and power. It is the social and material conditions together with the wider structures of inequality that will impact on the boys as they grow up.

One of the common sense ways in which boys show that they are getting their boyhood right is through controlling emotions traditionally associated with girls. The association of crying with boys is risky as it questions valid masculinity. During my observations of parents leaving boys in the morning at Centre One, I noticed the pressure that boys were under in order to stage a brave parting from their parents. In my conversations with one of the teachers at Centre One it was indicated that more boys than girls tended to be clingy and cried when they parted from their parents. These boys run the risk of being labelled as "mummy's boys". The examples below show boys trying to demonstrate patterns of conduct that made them appear brave.

Ashley: I'll show you my eina (sore).

Varshen: Mine wasn't sore... I didn't cry.

Me: You didn't cry.

Ashley: I did cry when it was very very sore.

Brett: I got cut in my bladder place.

Thabo: I got a sore but I never cry.

Miss X tells me about how a monkey entered the classroom at Centre Two. Ranjeet shouts out “ See I go near the monkey. I don’t cry. I’m not a sceddy cat.”

In constructing their gendered identities the boys show courage in the face of adverse conditions. These boys take an emotionally distant stance in order to toughen themselves. For these boys crying has a double meaning. Firstly, it is associated with the incompetent baby stage. The boys frequently referred to themselves as “big”. Secondly, crying is one of the patterns of exclusion in the construction of hegemonic masculinity. It has feminised meanings that boys want to keep away from. When the boys distance themselves from crying, they retain their power within the dominant way of being boy. This behaviour can be understood in terms of their friendships with other boys as being fragile. If they break this rule then they are subjected to abuse and condemnation.

One of the crucial ways in which hegemonic masculinity works is through establishing hierarchies. Those boys that resource themselves through the attributes of *real* boy wield power over those that display other ways of being masculine. In the examples below we see how some boys used hierarchies to elevate themselves as powerful.

Crain has an Oreo biscuit in his hand. He separates the biscuit and sucks the icing. Thabo grabs it from his hand and places it on the table. He pounds it with his fist. Crain gets annoyed and calls the teacher. “See Thabo is bashing my Oreo.”

At Centre Two Miss Y uses lego blocks to teach the children a construction skill. A boy who recently joined the centre is part of the group. IsiZulu is his first language. The boy attempts to build a tower. He makes a tower. He points to the tower and says “ikhaya”. He taps

Kumar, “Buka ikhaya.” Kumar shouts, “No! You must say house”. The boy looks at him and then at the tower and says, “house...ssee house.”

In the first example Crain displays a form of masculinity that transgresses the force and aggression of being a *real* boy. The grabbing and pounding actions of Thabo, suggest that he is positioned in a discourse of power and privilege. Thabo is the only son and is doted upon. Judging from the way in which he interacted with his peers, he was quite used to having his own way. In the example he subordinates Crain in two ways. Firstly, by invading Crain’s space and taking control of an item that does not belong to him. Secondly, by getting Crain to enlist the help of an adult to intervene on his behalf. Crain’s display of power is weak compared to Thabo.

In the second example a boy hierarchy is created through language. Kumar’s competence in English as his home language allows him the opportunity to adopt a style of masculinity in which he positions himself as having power over the IsiZulu speaking boy. The social context of Centre Two privileged English as the language of learning and teaching. Bourdieu (1991) reminds us that language can be viewed in the same way as products that are valued in the market. Those that have the competence in the most prestigious language speak from authority and create hierarchies and exclusions. Teachers at the centres, in various ways, assigned value to English as a linguistic product of value. Kumar’s use of English avails him a form of power that is part of the social institution. The power, value, and sense of particular linguistic expressions are very much a product of an unequal relationship. A hierarchy is evident through who has linguistic worth. This is a quieter form of hegemonic masculinity. The verbal exchanges as opposed to robust actions also lead to domination as a pattern of conduct associated with hegemonic masculinity.

In both the examples we learn about the co-existence of hegemonic masculinity with other styles of masculinity. Connell (1995) notes that although this may be the case, hegemonic masculinity overpowers these styles by claiming to be the true version of being a boy. This true version is linked to how the context in which the boys operate, attaches value to particular ways of being a boy.

MacNaughton (2004) notes that it is through the process of normalisation and regulation that we come to learn certain ways of thinking and acting as natural, normal, and preferred. In evolving meanings of being boys, the intense distribution and repetition means that boys will look for signifiers/competence of being in the right category as well as being in the real form of masculinity. Therefore in gender equity work it is necessary to scrutinise the discourses boys have access to and how they use them as sense making frameworks.

From what has been said thus far it is evident that boys that do not live up to the ideal of being *real* boys are subordinated. During the study I encountered some boys who displayed a quiet demeanour. At Centre One I observed a boy who enjoyed chatting to girls instead of running around like the other boys during play time. He attempted to spell his name for me. He also told me about his mum who was “jobbing” (working). During worksheet time, he worked hard to keep his colouring inside the teacher-made outlines. This form of masculinity runs counter to hegemonic masculinity.

In shifting moments of meaning making boys experimented in transgressing the boundaries of hegemonic masculinity. The example from Centre Two provides insight into the fluidity of power.

Kevin: What you goed that side for?

Ranjeet: I was talking to the girls.

Kevin: What you was saying?

Ranjeet: I let them play with dolls.

Kevin: Why they never let you stay?

Ranjeet: I fight with the girls. You fight with girls... (looks at me) Kev acts like an old uncle.

Kevin: Shut up! (Jumps and hops about) Liar, liar pants on fire.

Kevin upholds the gender divide by referring to girls' spaces as “that side”. Within the context of Centre Two he experiences gender separation through turn taking, routine toilet time, and spaces for activities. In the example Ranjeet enters a dangerous space – a girl zone. Talking to girls is the opposite of fighting



with girls. Kevin's questioning suggests a need for information to categorise Ranjeet within a form of masculinity. There is surveillance for acceptable standards of being a *real* boy. Ranjeet proves his boyhood by showing that he could control what the girls could play with but the girls wielded power over him by chasing him away. Ranjeet's references to the fact that he is in partnership with Kevin in fighting with the girls, suggest the boys' investments in signifiers of patriarchal power. The boys' insults and strong language show contempt for sensitivity.

Whilst there may be some attempts to assert other forms of masculinity, the policing of boundaries by other children and adults reinforce hegemonic masculinity. Thorne (1993) and Davies (2003) note that those that move away from the norm face taunts and isolation. When seeking to promote gender equity in early childhood education, we cannot just expect boys to start doing the things that girls do. Browne (2004) argues that the heavy emotional investment in a particular way of being a boy means that the boys have to give up a powerful place in the gender order to participate in an arena for girls. Reversing the gendered activities becomes traumatic for boys. Any empowerment project for boys must take cognisance of emotional investments made in particular positions.

During the study it was evident that some boys were accessing power through positioning themselves in the "bad boy" discourse. The discourse is traditionally associated with boys' constructions of popular masculinities that are grounded outside the education context. The non-education identities are perceived as deviant masculinities (see Archer and Yamashita 2003). The examples below shed light on naughty behaviour that was outlawed at the centres.

At Centre One Brett and I look at the photographic talking wall. He points to Vee. "I don't like Vee. He's naughty." I smile at him. "I see you and Vee playing all the time." Brett looks at the photographs again. "Only Ashley and Steven is my friends... Vee likes to say bad words." I probe. "What does Vee say?" Brett hesitates a little. "You know, that *B* one."

I watch Ranjeet at Centre Two during transition from a teacher-directed activity to snack time. He gets up and sings, “Touch your bum. Touch your bum’. He looks at me and then at the teacher.

Brett chooses his friends from a same sex grouping. Vee is excluded as a friend because he says “bad words”. Brett is aware that “bad words” are against the ideals of communicating at the centres. He positions himself as good by isolating a peer who does not display normative behaviour. In the second example Ranjeet positions himself in the “bad boy” discourse through subverting the approved songs for singing time at Centre Two. The words he chooses are provocative and revolt against the law of touch and respectability that was frequently taught to the children. He displays what Noble (2000:151) calls “slackness”. The latter represents rude culture traditionally associated with working class and the poor that compete for recognition and value with official discourses. The way in which Ranjeet looks at me and in the direction of the teacher suggests that he is aware that he is working against adult expectations. Within a “bad boy” masculine ideal, the politics of subversion guide behaviour that resists norms. The fluidity in the construction of identities means that some boys will experiment with combinations that heighten the power of hegemonic masculinity.

Superiority over girls was another way in which boys displayed patterns of conduct related to hegemonic masculinity. The examples below illustrate boys making sense of themselves through the subordination of girls.

At Centre One the children move around freely after snack time. They seat themselves mostly next to their friends. A girl sits in Varshen’s place.

Varshen: Want my chair. (Pushes the girl)

Girl: You hurting me.

Varshen: I was sitting here first.

Varshen grabs the girl and pushes her off the chair. She lands on the floor.

Dreshnie watches Kumar and Ranjeet playing a game with a basket at Centre Two. She attempts to join in. The boys push her out of their way. Evashna runs towards the boys. Dreshnie pulls her. “Let them play. Boys game that.”

In both the examples the boys claim territory in order to wield power over the girls. The pushing of the girls by the boys as acts of violence suggests the abuse of power in an unequal relationship. The boys are performing their masculinities through gendered notions of strength and physicality. This elevates them in their status of being boys. This is an early start to the familiar storyline of take control by force and fear (Kenway & Fitzclarence 1997). Girls (women) are the opposite sex who are positioned as weaker and have less status than boys (men). This is a concern in the context of gender-based violence within the South African context (Bhana 2002; Bhana 2005; Chisholm & September 2005).

In observing gender relations, it was evident that some girls reinforced hegemonic masculinity. The girls acknowledged the stereotypical qualities associated with boys. The examples below show the contracting of boy power by girls.

Kajal is at the sand pit. She is making a cake. She leaves it and runs to call a boy. “Smash my cake.” The boy looks around and spots a spade. He gives the “cake” a hard blow with his fist. Kajal is dissatisfied. “No man... little harder.” The boy gives it another blow. She smiles and claps her hand.

It is after snack time at Centre Two. Ranjeet runs to wash his cup. He gives it to Trish. “You fill water for me.” Ranjeet does as he is told. After a few minutes Trish runs to the tap and shouts for Ranjeet. “Open the tap for me.”

In the first example Kajal is positioned in the discourse “boys are the stronger sex”. She contracts a boy to do the manual aggressive work of smashing the “cake” but takes the lead in giving instructions. Whilst mental power resides with

her, physical power is contracted from a boy to accomplish a task. In the second example Trish's actions could be read as a typical feminine pose – Ranjeet giving her water and opening the tap for her. This creates a scene of a man waiting on a lady. Both examples illustrate young children's efforts to get gender right in terms of what is appropriate for boys and girls.

In this sub-section I have presented the multiple ways in which boys attempt to fashion their masculinity. The patterns of conduct associated with hegemonic masculinity appealed to the boys. There were other forms of masculinity that attempted survival at the centres. The positioning of boys in different discourses attest to struggles to create themselves as normal for their development. In the next section I focus on the multiple ways in which girls shape their femininity.

### **7.3 Doing Girl – *I look like a lady***

Since hegemonic masculinity is relational, it is complemented by “emphasised femininity” (Connell 1987:187-188). This way of being feminine denotes “compliance, nurturance, and empathy”. These attributes do not come through in any simple way. In practising gender, girls (in complex ways) brought in versions of themselves as “mummy girls” displaying an ethic of care.

Sindisiwe is in the play area on her own. She spots a boy (younger than her) battling to open his juice bottle. Sindisiwe assists him.  
“Ngizokuvulela”. She opens the bottle and feeds the boy.

Dreshnie takes Ranjeet's jacket. “You must put the jacket on and stop shaking.” Ranjeet slips the jacket on. Dreshnie reminds him to put his collar nicely. She then buttons his shirt. Ranjeet attempts to move. Dreshnie scolds him. “Don't shake.” Dreshnie takes him to the storage corner. “Come now, I'm putting lotion for you.” Ranjeet follows her. She passes him some cones and an empty container. “Take your gel and lotion.” Ranjeet refuses. Dreshnie applies lotion and attempts to spike his hair.

Sindisiwe models the role of adults (females) at Centre One. She is an older African girl who attends to a younger African boy. Her ability to relate to a male in a nurturing way is typical of female characteristics. It is also typical of adults to care for young children. The same race connections could be understood in terms of Sindisiwe being in the minority and finding space to be with other children whose home language is IsiZulu. In the case of Sindisiwe, we see age, race, and gender intersecting in a way that positions her in the discourse of care as women's work. In the second example Dreshnie uses the contextual opportunity of play at Centre Two to illuminate her understanding of the natural calling of a girl to act out the role of a mother. She uses the common way of being a girl through a set of acts. The acts of dressing Ranjeet up and applying lotion and gel suggest that she is able to stylise a boy child's body for an acceptable appearance. Dreshnie's gestures are typical of a mother getting her (boy) child ready for a public appearance. She draws on her lived experiences to reproduce a traditional form of femininity. Both the girls use the contextual opportunities available to them to show us a form of femininity prominent in their lives. They construct physical actions and emotional work of caregiving traditionally associated with girls (women).

It could be argued that the girls' ways of being feminine illuminate contradictory places from which they are making meaning. Hughes (2002:108) argues that on the one hand, females waiting on males are viewed as an "entrapment of subservience from which women (girls) must escape". On the other hand, the ethics of care discourse provide an interpretive framework where nurturance and care are celebrated as high order traits based on the relationality of womanhood (girlhood). As young girls, the ambiguities are part of the obviousness of a social world that they are not fully aware of.

One of the ways in which the girls affirmed their identity as girls was through indicating that they could read and interpret the feminine landscape of the social world through their mums. In the examples that follow the girls at both the centres showed me how they were able to use a doll as a cultural artefact of young girlie culture to make connections to adult ways of being.

Me: Is this a girl or a boy?

Anne-Marie: Girl.

Me: How do you know?

Anne-Marie: She has a pony.

Janice: My mum's a girl.

Trish: I see Barbie girl.

Me: How do you know she is a girl?

Trish: She got long hair. My mummy's hair is like that too.

In both the examples the girls are able to use the length of hair to identify a girl doll. They are further able to relate this feature to adult women – their mothers. Janice shows us that she is able to make correct gendered alignments, namely, mum and girl. The girls' ability to make connections of dolls, length of hair, and relationship to mothers suggests that they are able to relate an artefact from their present location as girls to their future storyline of being mothers.

Mothers also featured strongly in the girls' marking of their status as girls. This was evident in the way in which the girls spoke of their mothers introducing them to the aesthetics of being "girlie".

Kajal: Mummy puts lipstick in my mouth. I look like a lady.

Janice: My mummy puts brown lipstick.

Kajal: When I wear it I look like Cinderella.

Janice: I look like a lady.

Dreshnie: I'm a girl. See my earrings. My powa (aunt) bought me earrings. My mummy bought me new bangles and new jeans...

Mummy puts lipstick for me. Mummy put this one lipstick for me.

(Shows me her toenails with "kweetix" - nail polish). Mummy making me nice.

In the first example we see how the girls interpret the wearing of lipstick with a transformation in status. Lipstick as an ingredient for a feminine look positions

both the girls as ladies. Kajal positions herself as Cinderella – an ordinary girl transformed into a princess. The word “lady” is traditionally associated with middle class ways of being feminine. Kajal as an Indian girl and Janice as a Coloured girl relax the racial boundaries to make sense of themselves in moments of middle refinement of being ladies. In the second example attention is drawn to all the signifiers that adults (women) adorn a girl child with in order to work the gender category of girl. The lipstick, earrings, bangles, nail polish, and clothing are powerful in entrenching gender as an invariant. In both examples lipstick serves as a common denominator to blur the world of adult women and young girls. The girls’ references to “mummy” suggest the pressure exerted upon the children to conform to adult sanctioned discourses on how to be a girl. The status of traditional femininity is maintained through expert knowledge about the right way to be a girl.

At an early stage in their lives, these girls are learning how to present their gendered bodies through the pursuit of social and cultural norms that govern women’s (girls) behaviour and appearances as encompassed within a discourse of beauty and cosmetics. Russel and Taylor (2002) see this way of being feminine as a mechanism of control of women’s (girls’) behaviour through appearance. The aesthetic standard of ideal femininity has the potential for a reappraisal of pleasures of femininity and also shutting down of femininities that do not live up to the ideal.

The evidence above also points to the influence of popular culture as a key reference to the girls’ constructions of femininity. The parents (mothers) were influential in the construction of “fashioned bodies”. At Centre One girls wore lots of girlie items especially Barbie artefacts (takkies, T-shirts, shorts, hairgrips). On one occasion a girl showed me her Barbie bra. On another occasion Anne-Marie looked at Janice’s dress label to name her as a girl. At Centre Two during talks around photographs, Trish spoke about her white gypsy top and Evashna’s chunya choli (top and long skirt). These practices draw attention to the role of fashion and the consumption of images in the construction of ways of being a girl. Boden (2006) notes that in this point in our history children’s clothing market has changed from traditional children’s styles to more adult-like styling.

The displays and advertisements of these items are aimed at creating idealised versions of the self and then creating the self through material consumption. In the case of young children, they engage in pester power in order to get parents to purchase items for them. In growing up, girls and boys will be engaging with the aesthetics of commodified brands of femininities and masculinities through unisex products, products distinctly for boys and girls, and products that blur the adult-child boundaries.

Matching girls and boys to colours is one of the key ways in which we are subjected to gender differentiation from birth. Pink and blue commonly have gendered connotations. The examples below indicate the use of colour as an organising framework to construct ways of being a girl.

Kajal: My mummy's got a pink dress for the dolly and a red lipstick and purple belt and yellow shoes and... brown hair and blue pony.

I place two dolls on the table.

Dreshnie: I like the pink one.

Me: So you like the pink one. Why?

Dreshnie: Cause I like pink and is pretty.

Trish: Evie got my favourite colour.

Me: Oh! she's got your favourite colour.

Trish: Blue is my colour.

Kajal's reference to her mum shows the power of adults to provide a legitimate way of being a girl. Her mum provides her with common sense gender appropriate messages. The doll, red lipstick, and pink dress provide strong messages of the socially accepted way of being a girl. The colourful descriptions that follow also tell us that Kajal has an understanding of the female body as a crucial receptacle of discursive regulation. The second example shows us contested meanings around colour. Whilst Dreshnie prefers pink, Trish shows a preference for the colour blue. In the girls' evolving meanings to get to know themselves and their place in the world, they will be given context specific messages around these colours. The signifying systems in circulation and the



practices associated with these signs will influence the connections the girls make between colours and ways of being girls.

There was also evidence of border crossing girls – girls positioning themselves in non-stereotypical ways of being feminine (Thorne 1993). Instead of talking about girly things and engaging in traditional female behaviour, these girls were seeking access to attributes associated with boys. In the examples below we get a glimpse of girls debunking the traditional images of girliness.

I observe the children at play time at Centre One. Anne-Marie comes running to me.

Anne-Marie: We gonna get them.

Me: Who are you going to get?

Anne-Marie: The boys, you know, boys.

Me: Why do you want to get the boys?

Anne-Marie: They touch me.

She demonstrates how she is going to hit the boys. She couples her action with war cries – heya, heya.

Mrs X relates an incident where a monkey entered the classroom. Trish joins us.

Trish: I kill the monkey with my powers.

Mrs Y: Where's your power?

Trish clenches a fist and makes an L shape with her elbow.

Trish: Got it inside here. (Points to her upper arm).

In both the examples the girls present themselves as active, assertive, and daring children. Anne-Marie tells me about her chase for the boys. In so doing, she affirms the boundaries between herself and the boys. As a girl she is aware that the balance of power is more entrenched in the hands of the boys. The words “you know”, signal that as a female I ought to be complicit in knowing girls chase boys when they are interfered with. Based on the messages Anna-Marie receives at Centre One around touching, she is able to read the act as a provocation that calls for action. Her demonstrations and war cries in my

presence, suggest that she performs border crossing within the safe zone of an adult female presence. There is a clear message of overpowering the boys by using patterns of conduct associated with boys. In the second example Trish subverts the patriarchal discourse of the female body as weak. The reference to killing and the drawing of attention to bodily signs of power suggest that she invests in a performative identity that is traditionally associated with boys.

In both the examples we see girls testing the possibilities of being girls. They appear to resist the limiting behaviour of traditional ways of being a girl. Within their context specificities the girls will receive mixed messages around their border crossing. In the first instance they run the risk of being labelled as tomboys. Thorne (1993) notes that this discourse serves as cultural criticism for not being a proper girl. Furthermore, the concept encourages sexist overtones by implying that girls who engage in physically robust activities are abnormal. In other situations the girls may be lauded for relaxing the gender boundaries and displaying courage and strength. For gender equity work it means that some girls can pursue traditionally male behaviours without having to relinquish their identity as girls in order to do so. Reay (2001) argues that whilst this move may be possible for girls to dominate over boys, identities like tomboy are rarely successful in challenging the dominant versions of masculinity. She argues that by girls showing attributes of boys and preferences for masculine things, masculinity is made more powerful. She concludes that in this way tomboy identity as a transgressive femininity could work against gender equity.

In the study it was evident that a hierarchy of femininities were playing out at the centres. Traditionally, one does not think of hierarchies in terms of being feminine. Unlike the call of hegemonic masculinity for subordination and negation of other forms of masculinities, girls are not under pressure to negate or subordinate other forms of femininity (Connell 1987). But since this study focused on multiple femininities, it was possible to identify the way the girls at the centres created a hierarchy of femininities.

Kajal and a boy are making chocolate in the sand pit area. Sindisiwe joins them in chocolate making by putting “sugar” into the bucket. Kajal

watches her for a little while. “You spoil it. You put too much sugar.” Kajal grabs her hand and stops her from dropping sand into the bucket. Sindisiwe screams.

It is snack time. Dreshnie is combing her hair while seated. Evashna (smaller and younger than Dreshnie) sits next to her. Dreshnie pushes her. “Don’t want you here.” Thabisile watches the girls. Dreshnie takes Thabisile’s hand. “Let’s go somewhere else.” Thabisile resists. Dreshnie gets angry. “I’m not talking to you.” Thabisile joins her. They take their chairs and sit against the wall. Dreshnie looks at Evashna. “You can’t come here... Thabs tell her she can’t come.” Thabisile keeps quiet.

Sindisiwe is an African girl with limited English. In the example Kajal positions herself as the bossy girl. She controls the chocolate making process. She uses her physical strength and her linguistic competence to subordinate Sindisiwe. Linguistic competence is used to raise the status of Kajal over Sindisiwe. In the second example Dreshnie positions herself as a bossy girl in different ways. She claims territory by chasing away Evashna who is a younger girl. Dreshnie relaxes the boundaries of race to form a partnership with Thabisile who is older than Evashna. Dreshnie’s reaction to Thabisile’s resistance and her ability to force Thabisile to do something against her will, suggest a dominating relationship. Dreshnie subordinates Thabisile and requires complicity in excluding Evashna from their play. Dreshnie knows the category of bossy girl and knows how other girls attach meaning to this category.

In both the examples the bossy girls know how to use their power and privilege to adopt a style of femininity that makes them more powerful than other girls. Just like boys who learn the patterns of conduct to achieve high status ways of being, these girls have learned pathways to raising their status. Davies (2003) argues that children who have learned to get certain forms of femininity right, deflect attention from themselves by virtue of the fact that they have got things right. This means that the high status ways of being are not subjected to critical

reflection. In relation to gender equity work, this protection means that oppressive gender relations escape critical scrutiny.

Cross gender relationships were also a feature of how the girls made sense of themselves within the boundaries between males and females. Whilst there were instances where girls and boys upheld the gender regimes in their play, there was also evidence of girls and boys blurring the gender divide to become children. In such situations the accomplishment of tasks was foregrounded. The examples below show boys and girls as children in social relationships.

Denise finishes her worksheet. She joins a boy behind the curtain. Both cover their faces with the curtains. "Let's make boo... make Shaun scared." They stretch their hands and run forward. The teacher shouts out, "Hey, don't play with the curtain."

Trish takes the water bottle and sprays water on everyone's lap. She puts a little extra on Thabisile's lap. She instructs the boys. "Don't tell Thabisile's mummy right." A boy goes to the teacher. "No, Miss Y I don't drop water." Another boy gives a quick response. "Thabs dropped it, isn't Trish?"

Denise forges a partnership with the boy behind the curtain to accomplish a mission. Both the children position themselves as powerful beings that can scare others. The teacher shortens the experimentation as a violation of order. In the second example we get a more complex picture of cross gender relations. Trish's actions towards Thabisile and her instructions to the boys suggest power over other children. In her relationship with the boys, she has an expectation of complicity with her version of the water spraying incident. She is successful in having her story validated through one boy absolving himself from blame and another boy blaming a subordinated girl. In this example relationships are constituted and reconstituted around an incident that involves children as a group and children who practise their gender – some with oppressive dynamics. These examples add to our understanding of the complex nature of cross gender relationships. Boys do work with girls and vice versa, depending on the task to

be accomplished. The notions of being children afford new networks to make meaning of themselves and others.

#### **7.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have shown that young boys and girls build gendered childhoods through participating as people who construct identities through multiple messages they receive from their social world. In their efforts to crack codes of being normal, they engage in fluid ways with discourses that reinforce and contradict dominant ways of being boys and girls. Centre One and Centre Two are sites where boys and girls learn that whilst they can actively construct meaning through reading and interpreting their experiences, they are not absolutely free to choose any ways of being boys and girls.

In showing patterns of conduct associated with hegemonic masculinity and other forms of masculinities and femininities, I have foregrounded limited alternatives available to boys and girls at the centres. In presenting child-child interactions and adult-child interactions, I have also shown that there is nothing natural about gender socialisation in early childhood education. The boys and girls in this study made and remade their gendered identities in interaction with people similarly and differently positioned in age, abilities, race, and class.

Contrary to teachers' positioning in normalising discourses, gender does matter in a substantial way in young children's lives. Any moves towards gender equity in early childhood education in the South African context must recognise the participation of young children in constructing gendered childhoods. The evidence in this chapter defies a mere working in non-sexist ways with young children as passive recipients in early socialisation. Modelling and encouragement of behaviours believed to be sex appropriate assume a simple cause effect relationship. The complexities with which young boys and girls construct gendered childhoods negate the implementation of such an approach. Instead, we must pay attention to ways of being gendered that do not regulate young children but present possibilities. The possibilities will come to the fore if we accept that young children make gendered childhoods by forming

relationships, reading multiple messages from their social world, and constantly negotiating meanings. Paying attention to discourses through which we learn about young children as well as the emotional investment boys and girls make in particular ways of being, has the potential to move us closer to possibilities that are empowering for young children.

The final chapter draws conclusions about the constructions of childhood *for* and *by* children in centre-based educational provisioning for children below Grade R.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### CONCLUSION

#### 8.1 Introduction

In this final chapter I provide a conclusion to the thesis by reflecting on the preceding analysis and drawing together key aspects for broader reflection. I begin by outlining the main arguments in the constructions of childhood *for* and *by* young children in centre-based provisioning for children below Grade R.

The key features of childhood as a complex process are presented with the view to open spaces for fresh thinking in early childhood education. In order to disable the notion of a universal childhood and the related construct of a static, essentialised child, I show how I used the notion of context in this study. I then present theoretical, methodological, and policy departures in this study as moves to disrupt common sense thinking about the constructions of childhood. In so doing, I show how this study fills the gaps in literature about early childhood education. Finally, I suggest possibilities for changes and directions for future research.

#### 8.2 Detailing the study

In this ethnographic study of early childhood involving teachers' and young children's lived realities, I have sought to map a sense of interactions, relationships, processes and activities to present childhood as socially constructed. I argue that young children, as well as adults that care for them, take an active stance in constructing centre-based early childhood education.

In concentrating on discourses as systems of meaning that provide rules and conditions for the constructions of childhood *for* young children, I argue that teachers use narrow and limiting frames of references. The study reveals how the institutional market discourse of early childhood education and related normalising discourses of young children configure early childhood centres as

businesses trading commodities on the market. As such, parents are positioned as clients whose purchasing power largely shapes the type of childhoods young children experience at the centres. Images of young children as property and as essentialised incomplete adults-in-the-making, serve the purpose of early childhood centres as processors who shape young children's lives as human capital for a fee. I argue that these "politically free" constructions of childhood and young children make it difficult to think of democratic practices that are aimed at public good in early childhood education.

In order to counter narrow images of young children, I explored the subject of young children and childhood without the normalising limitations embedded in the couplet of development and early socialisation. This move enabled me to pay attention to the *doings* of childhood by young children in their present status as people that influence and are influenced by wider social forces. I foregrounded young children's complex struggles in negotiating time zones in growing up and relation of race and gender in order to counter the image of young children as age-related beings who are raw materials in socialisation for adulthood. In so doing, I was able to show how these powerful young thinkers use available social repertoires to construct themselves in familiar ways of being as well as how they find spaces to disrupt these ways of beings.

In order to push for fresh thinking in early childhood education, I adopted an approach that assisted me in analysing childhood as a complex process. One of the ways in which this became possible was through paying attention to context influences to disrupt notions of a universal childhood. This study approached the notion of context in different ways to promote the idea that everything is part of everything else within a particular location. It is therefore impossible to think of *a childhood* and *The Child*. Constructions of childhood are never simply about adults/teachers and children working in straight forward ways. The organisation and meanings of childhood and children vary from one social context to another.

In the first instance I introduced myself and acknowledged my assumptions and bias in order to provide a *context for researcher influence* for this study. I explained that the nature of this study had been shaped by my experiences. I also



inserted myself into different parts of the study. This was followed by an analysis of childhood in the South African context. In this section I outlined the broader *historical context* on lives of children and the development of early childhood centres. I paid attention to how childhood was constructed in three temporal shifts informed by changing political, social, and economic climates. This contextualisation helped to place this study within the perspective of concerns for early childhood education in post-apartheid South Africa. It also assisted me in thinking about continuities and discontinuities in early childhood education at present. My approach gave impetus to the fact that the “post” (as an after event) cannot be comprehensively understood without engaging with the original phenomena in question.

The next level of contextualisation related to the present policy climate in which early childhood centres are operating. Specifically, I noted the *macro context* in which the macro economic policy of South Africa creates the conditions for centre-based early childhood *for* children below Grade R. In using a poverty-targeted approach to Grade R, I argued that the government has deflected attention from the provisioning for children below this group. The study has drawn attention to the fact that the government devolves its responsibility for children below Grade R to commercial enterprises. Private providers, as institutions for early childhood education, are perceived as the government’s solution to supporting working parents. It is through a calculable rationality of cost that positions parents as consumers in a competitive childcare market that these providers make their mark in a free market economy.

My walk into two early childhood centres helped pay attention to *local contexts* where private providers in early childhood education were setting the conditions *for* the constructions of childhood. This sketch was important for understanding the connected circuit of micro politics that characterise happenings at early childhood centres in particular locations. I paid attention to where teachers and young children were located and who they were. This contextual location provided engagement with the type of world created for young children through discourses, social structure, and early childhood practices. My study suggests that teachers and young children perform their lives as political actors rather than

as political objects within their context specificities. In this way the study provides a localised cultural project of early childhood education.

The constructions of childhood in centre-based provisioning for early childhood education *for* children below Grade R have not been investigated by South African researchers in any significant way. In filling a gap in early childhood education literature with concerns of promoting new possibilities for understanding young children and institutional provisioning for them, this study entered new theoretical spaces. Specifically, I located this study within reconceptualist thinking in early childhood education. In seeking new images to transform childhood deficiency to childhood competency this thesis presents some truth regimes that guide our images of young children and practise with them. In order to move away from the fixed essentialising notions of childhood and young children, I considered myself as a “theoretical maverick” who assembled marginalised theories that are not traditionally used in early childhood education in the South African context.

From the social constructionist approaches it was possible to think of interactions and relationships as ways in which people constitute themselves. The new sociology of childhood foregrounds the idea of children as agents as well as products of social processes. Theories from poststructural thinking pay attention to meaning making through the influence of discourses and power in shaping identities. The work of Bourdieu (1984, 1986) draws attention to the material and social conditions in a particular context. It is through the idea of discourses that I was able to think about teachers and young children in terms of positioning in systems of meaning instead of them as individual subjects. Furthermore, an anti-essentialist view of individuals created thinking about teachers and young children as having multiple versions of themselves constructed by the positions they take up in discourses in particular moments and contexts.

In this way, the theoretical lenses made it possible to present early childhood centres as a social construction. This study shows that we can make early childhood centres objects of critical thinking. Poststructural tools made visible the dominant discourses accessed by teachers and young children. It also

promoted an analysis of effects of discourses, and drew attention to departures through alternative discourses in the context of the centres. The deconstruction of discourses was possible by asking, “What is going on here?” It is through poststructural filters and work of Bourdieu that I argued that teachers’ positioning in the market discourse of early childhood and normalising discourses of young children were ineffective in making early childhood education a vehicle for democratic practice.

It is within the circumstances of discourses made available by teachers and the social messages from the wider social milieu of childhood, that I was able to examine young children’s ways of being. I showed how they struggled to negotiate the complex time zones of their past, present, and future to construct their identities. In order to further knowledge of ways of becoming a child, I showed their engagements with race. This was followed by an analysis of gendered childhoods where I illuminated the exertions of power by boys and girls as they brought in versions of masculinity and femininity. Within the context of generation, race, and gender as well as intersecting influences of language and class, I argued that young children reproduce familiar ways of being, but they also loosen these ways of being. It was real children who laughed, cried, pushed, slapped, kicked, talked, listened and fantasised as they maintained and challenged familiar ways of being. This presentation of childhood *by* young children defies common constructions of them as innocent and ignorant. The children showed us that childhood is constructed in relationships where they battle to be correctly positioned in a struggle to present themselves as rational, coherent beings. This perspective of childhood fills the gap in literature on young children as people who actively inform childhood.

The complexity that characterises the way in which young children constitute themselves as children makes it difficult to accept the normalised view of early childhood as a phase of deficiency and young children as essentialised, unprotesting blank sheets. Age is not the only way in which young children constitute themselves. I argued that abilities, context, race, gender, and class are some of the social repertoires for varied experiences of childhood. This understanding of young children’s subjective worlds, demands that we

problematise common sense understandings of them. There is also a need to engage with practices within the binaries of adult-child and teacher-learner relations and child development knowledge. The perspective of young children as power thinkers with agentic potential was made possible by the tools provided by theories not normally connected with early childhood education.

The methodological focus in this thesis was designed to show how childhood was socially constructed in early childhood centres catering for children below Grade R. It was the lived realities of childhood that I was concerned with. My investigation of these processes was qualitative. I was entering an area with little information on how to proceed methodologically with young children in the context of their participatory rights and my concerns for hearing their voices on childhood. I posed the question, “How do we research early childhood when young children are positioned as social actors (participants) in research?”

In order to get beyond fixed and static assumptions of childhood and young children, I adopted a micro ethnographic approach. This approach enabled understandings of teachers and young children in the context in which they functioned. With regard to young children, it was the ideal approach to examine ways of being a child through the use of a multi-method strategy. In using a qualitative approach I showed how I engaged with the messy situational realities in which the lives of teachers and young children were embedded. I detailed my responsiveness to young children’s knowledge through the adoption of stages to illuminate circumstances shaping their lives. I showed how I made visible their understandings. It is through processes of active listening/hearing, participatory techniques, situated ethics, and multiple positioning to alter power and connect with the children that I was able to produce data on children’s constructions of childhood. In order to prevent a tribalised view of childhood, I used multiple forms of semi-structured interviews to probe teachers’ understandings of young children and their practice.

In researching early childhood with young children positioned as participants in research, I entered specific contact zones that called for critical reflexivity. These zones demanded responses and subject positions that spoke to the context

in which teachers' and young children's lives were embedded. Bearing this in mind, this study argues for the practice of *responsive researching* which adopts multiple sense making moves to engage with messy realities embedded in the processes of making childhood. In so doing, it makes a contribution to early childhood research where researchers abandon automatic assumptions of young children's competence based on common sense understanding of age and maturity, and enters the sites where childhoods are made and remade.

This study is a departure from dominant psychological approaches in early childhood research that normally informs policy in South Africa. When political issues regarding young children and care for them are transformed into policy solutions, then political closures become evident. This means that we become subjected to the rationale of "what works?" As such, outcomes and targets form technical discourses and managerialist approaches that masquerade as neutral. This study has shown that it is positioning within power relations and in particular regimes of truth in context specificities that governs "what works" in early childhood education. I have shown that the social is not inscribed in a centralised government policy but in a set of constructed markets in early childhood services.

The idealised versions of young children and early childhood normally portrayed in policy, contradict the lived realities on the ground. This study has engaged with the complexities of childhood through showing the power of normative interpretive frameworks, patterns of conduct, and context realities that acted out in a variety of ways. When this scenario is considered then it makes it difficult to just remain within a detached level of early childhood policy. My entry into the centres as force fields for the production of childhood attests to becoming involved in the practicalities of sites where understandings are made. The efforts to make the familiar strange and the self-evident problematic, created possibilities to provide fresh thinking on centre-based early childhood education and young children. What this points to is the need to subject provisioning, practice, and policy in early childhood education to democratic debate. At present, this practice is non-existent. An early childhood forum can be used to

stimulate critical thinking to lay bear assumptions, understandings, and discourses concerning young children and educational practice for them.

### **8.3 Possibilities for change**

So how can we begin the work of reconstructing early childhood education for young children and shape thinking of them as people who inform their childhoods within their context specificities. Change in early childhood education, like in any other field, is a difficult process. Each attempt to create discontinuities with familiar ways of knowing is buttressed by relations of power and knowledge claims that are pervasively normal. Given this scenario, early childhood practice converges into single models of domination such as early childhood centres as places for trading commodities like school readiness to parents. In such a configuration webs of discourses implicating early childhood teachers, parents, young children, and the primary school become knotted together. From an institutional perspective I have argued that the obsession with school readiness in early childhood centres results from the domination of primary school requirements. Domination rather than continuity between early childhood education and primary school education exists.

So to disrupt common sense constructions of early childhood and young children, it is not a simple matter of replacing one discourse with another. We cannot, for example, take away the fact that parents as consumers will have expectations for certain outcomes that colour what teachers provide and how young children's participation is harnessed, given the cultural takes on the issue. To think of possibilities for change it is perhaps best to talk about how much space we allow for marginalised aspects relating to democratic practices to shape early childhood education. In this study we saw that although structure is powerful, agency makes things possible. Bringing about transformation is both possible and difficult at the same time.

Teachers are people in key positions to open dialogue for new possibilities. In this study teachers showed us possibilities for new thinking through articulating some subjugated discourses circulating at the centres. In positioning themselves

in discourses of generationing, ethics of care, and communitarianism, teachers showed alternate ways in which they could weaken the power of the market logic to construct centre-based early childhood education. As a counter move to normalising discourses, teachers showed engagement with social discourses that recognised young children (even babies) as competent people that make meaning of their lives at the centres. This move enables forming relationships with young children and focusing on their enactments outside familiar ways of thinking about them. These are promising moves. Teachers stand to benefit by being reflective on their work and young children's knowledge and understandings stand to be valued. So whilst early childhood centres are complicit in regulating young children's lives in familiar ways, they are also places where questions can be asked to push the boundaries of narrow thinking.

The above points to bringing changes to teacher education in early childhood. At present this is a difficult task. Teacher training for children below Grade R is fragmentary. Zero to four years does not form part of the first stage of the education system. At present there is a draft policy on a new teacher education framework, which promises to include early childhood teachers. Most teacher training for children below Grade R exists with NGOs, some Further Education and Training Colleges, and a few Higher Education Institutions. Most teachers in this field are unqualified, poorly qualified, and continue to operate as unregistered providers. At present, to talk about preparing critically reflective teachers is perceived by most as too sophisticated and unrealistic, given the realities of teacher training in the field. Furthermore, from my experience, the traditional developmentalist teachers and teacher trainers who use developmental approaches and traditional child development theories, close down any moves to include other theoretical perspectives to inform practice in early childhood education.

But since we are talking about possibilities, it is important to foreground some promising practices in teacher education for early childhood that emanate from postmodern perspectives. Ryan and Grieshaber (2005) outline the key practices in reconceptualising a child development knowledge base in teacher training institutions. They argue for the use of a range of theoretical perspectives to

create new foundations for practice. They propose the use of new pedagogies that assist early childhood students in understanding teaching as an enactment of power relations. In particular, they detail the use of situated knowledges, multiple readings, and engaging with images of young children and practice *for/with* them. They use this approach to assist early childhood students to view practices from different perspectives and to provide alternatives to seeing, acting, and understanding in the same situation. The shifting images disrupt essentialised understandings of young children and practice *with* and *for* them.

The authors argue that although this approach addresses diversity and equity, it is still marginalised due to the pervasive influence of psychology as the wisdom for practice in early childhood education. The lack of scholarship written for and by teachers is another stumbling block that keeps postmodern perspectives outside daily classroom practice. Despite the challenges, the authors are *hopeful* (my emphasis) that these perspectives will generate new knowledges and visions for what it means to teach young children in a globalised world.

Given the pluralistic nature of child development in South Africa and the goal of equity, I would argue that postmodern perspectives do merit space in early childhood education courses. In my own teaching, this perspective is becoming increasingly important due to the roll out of a new teaching practice vision at my institution. Traditionally, most early childhood students chose historically advantaged, well resourced schools for their practicum. These schools are concentrated mostly in the former White areas. This practice creates a skewed vision of teaching young children. The new policy aims to ensure that teachers display their competencies in both historically advantaged and disadvantaged contexts in KwaZulu-Natal. This makes necessary engagement with multiple realities in early childhood courses. Postmodern perspectives are valuable in assisting early childhood students in adjusting their lenses of young children and practice *for/with* them in different contextual locations.

In presenting the new sociology of childhood, theories from poststructural thinking, and the work of Bourdieu I have included a range of ideas from disciplinary backgrounds outside psychology and biology. This border crossing



moves early childhood into new discourse spaces. The provocation of different perspectives makes possible thinking about young children not only in early childhood centres, but also work with them in other fields. When the field of early childhood is looked upon from different perspectives, then it is possible to think about the young child and society.

South African approaches to research in early childhood (especially for children below Grade R) have mostly not border crossed. Earlier research approaches used the traditional developmental perspective to focus on behaviourism and prosocial behaviour. More recently, a few studies have been exploring a relationship perspective. This perspective of child development is largely apolitical. The phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches do not go into critique. They avoid Foucault and the postmodern undoing of meaning. Childhood runs the risk of being unproblematically investigated as a context for socialisation. This study contradicts this view. I have shown how childhood is a powerful frame in which children become constituted as children. However, within the narrow confines of developmental approaches to child research this view is rendered invisible.

This does not mean abandoning a developmental approach to researching young children. Instead, it calls for a reconstruction of the developmental approach to study young children's subjective experiences of the world. Hogan (2005) maintains that a reconstructed developmental approach would ask in what ways, and through what processes, do people change with age. She further notes that there is lots of scope for research with children within the discipline and across other disciplines. The following changes are suggested to reconstruct a developmental approach to child research.

- Assumptions of biological determinism and universal invariant stages of change can be replaced by a view of child development as a number of processes which implicate children in their contextual locations in different time shifts.
- Adequate attention must be paid to the "now" of children's lives within material, relational, and temporal contexts.

- The dominant practice of measuring children's competencies should give way to children's meaning making, activities, and relationships that inform their experiences as children.
- The view of gaining understanding of the processes of change in individual functions does not sit easily with the view of children as social actors in their lives. Chronological age is one of the factors that help children constitute themselves as children. Biological forces can also be taken into account as a factor and not a determinant to understand children's experiences.

This reconstructed developmental approach holds promise for South African research that pays attention to young children's lived experiences with reference to their development. However, there needs to be a concerted effort in the direction of asking questions about young children's experiences, and to develop relevant methodological tools to answer these questions. My study has created openings in this regard. There should also be energies directed towards crossing borders in order to map complexities of young children's lives through more interdisciplinary research.

#### **8.4 Future research**

The first place where we all meet the pre-existing cultural images and cultural meanings of our society is within the family. Within this space, young children enter relationships with adults and other children. They learn ways of constituting themselves as people and as boys and girls. Children are presented with norms and patterns of conduct to enact their childhoods. In this study there are many references to parents. Future research can be directed towards the constructions of childhood in families. Within the South African context, the concept family has multiple meanings. For example, a child-headed household could be viewed as a family. A support group for HIV/AIDS infected people could also be seen as a family. There is a need to investigate how families configure themselves and construct childhoods. This is especially important if we consider that centre-based early childhood programmes are not the only

alternatives for services to young children. The majority of our young children are in some type of home-based care system.

In some quarters in South Africa there are communities that use particular philosophical understandings to rally around children. For example, there is a Zulu saying *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which means, “a person is only a person through other people”. We have already encountered the concept of *ubuntu*. Future research needs to be conducted in order to understand the intersubjective ways of making early childhoods. There is also a need to investigate different levels of community participation that come together to make indigenous childhoods.

This study is limited to commercial enterprises as significant service providers for early childhood education in urban settings. Future research can be directed towards constructions of centre-based early childhood education in community-based sites in both urban and rural settings. Given the way in which poverty and HIV/AIDS are undermining the gains of South Africa’s new democracy, we can investigate how these happenings put pressure on ECD sites to respond to the desperate needs in communities and families. This aspect can be explored within the relationship between families and centre-based early childhood education.

Furthermore, interdisciplinary research needs to be directed towards multiprofessionals working within the context of early childhood development. This is especially salient within the government’s roll out of the birth to four integrated plan for ECD. It would be interesting to gain perspectives on how professionals deal with conflicting understandings of young children and childhoods.

I have drawn attention to how the primary school expectations put pressure on early childhood centres to configure themselves around certain practices. The notions of learning at both the institutions are an area ripe for research. We need to look at the entire cohort of birth to nine years, particularly how the divisions occur, and the implications of these divisions on children’s learning.

This study shows early childhood education as women's work. The inclusion of men in early childhood education has not been researched in South Africa. From my experience the men in early childhood tend to take a typical masculine stance of being managers of women in the field. Research is needed in order to explore the history of male involvement in early childhood and male perceptions of working as early childhood teachers in the South African context. We need to get a better understanding of how the staffing profile of early childhood centres reflects the gendered nature of power relations in wider society. This is especially important with regard to issues such as status and pay.

This study has presented a glimpse of how young children construct meanings within globalised childhood. I used young children's engagement with the media, eating houses, toys, and fashion in order to show the power of a commodified world on early childhood. There needs to be research on how young children construct meanings in the light of commodification of entertainment, fashion, and lifestyles. We could also look at shifting possibilities of young children's learning associated with marketplace offers. It would be interesting to look at the content and processes of learning in terms of market place offers in the context of geographical location (urban/rural) and class (poor, working, middle, upper).

### **8.5 A new beginning**

A critical stance must be at the heart of a political endeavour to begin a project of making early childhood education a vehicle for transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. As a society, it is important that we level every effort towards developing a children's culture in which they have a fair share of resources and are not just dependent on their parents' abilities to pay for the type of childhoods they will experience. Any system of transformation in services to young children cannot leave early childhood education to the free play of market forces. There needs to be a concerted effort to recognise that services are social and cultural institutions, not mere purveyors of services to private consumers. A society that pays attention to young children's culture, listens, and hears little voices on services for them in hundreds of languages peculiar to them, would change the contours of childhood. Both the now and the future of young children's lives

become zones of possibilities to think about a new citizenry for post-apartheid South Africa. Let us not miss opportunities to establish a national framework for the development of a range of services, inclusive of a *strong* early childhood education component, appropriate for the needs of young children and their families in the beginning of the second decade of democracy. I end with voices of hope.

Joining our voices with the voices of children  
From Nelson Mandela and Graca Machel

To our only children,

We write to you as a mother and a father, as grandparents and as great grandparents, as politicians and as activists. You are the focus of our outrage, just as you are the focus of our hope. You are our only children, our only link to the future. Each one of you is your own person, endowed with rights, worthy of respect and dignity. Each one of you deserves to have the best possible start in life, to complete a basic education of highest quality, to be allowed to develop your full potential and provided the opportunities for meaningful participation in your communities. And until every one of you, no matter who you are, enjoys your rights, I, Nelson, and I, Graca, will not rest. This is our promise.

Please hold us to it.

UNICEF State of the World's Children  
(2001)

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**RESEARCH PROJECT AT \_\_\_\_\_  
CONSENT FORM FOR TEACHERS**

Dear Participant

I am a doctoral student at the University of (KwaZulu) Natal (Pietermaritzburg). I am researching the constructions of childhood in early childhood centres. The purpose of this research is to understand the thinking and practice in early childhood centres. Your centre was chosen because it has a multi-ethnic learner and staff population. I will be at the centre for a period of a year at negotiated times.

In order to get information for the study I will be conducting semi-structured interviews. This means that I will be asking you questions in a flexible manner. The questions will relate to the history of the centre and background (head teachers only), personal information, beliefs about young children and early childhood, curriculum, parental involvement, diversity (language, gender, race, class) and a typical day in your life. I will also be conducting observations. This means I will be observing classroom practices and interactions. In both instances I will be audio taping and writing down field notes where necessary.

Your participation is voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time and for any reason. This will not result in any form of disadvantage. All information will be treated in a confidential manner. Your identity will be protected. This means that your name and place of work will be changed in written materials.

Yours sincerely  
Researcher  
Mrs HB Ebrahim  
University of (KwaZulu) Natal  
Edgewood Campus  
Ashwood  
Tel No. 2603483  
Fax. 2603423

Supervisor  
Professor A. Muthkrishna  
University of (KwaZulu) Natal  
Pietermaritzburg Campus  
Tel No. (033) 2606045  
Fax. (033) 2605080

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DETACH AND RETURN

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (full name)  
have read the above and fully understand the contents.

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to participate in the interviews and observations

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not agree to participate in the interviews and observations

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



**RESEARCH PROJECT AT****CONSENT FORM FOR CHILDREN**

Dear Parent

I am a doctoral student at the University of (KwaZulu) Natal. I am studying childhood at early childhood centres. I am interested in how children experience their childhood at the centre. The participation for the study is voluntary. Children can withdraw at any time. All children's responses and information related to their backgrounds will be treated in a confidential manner. The names of the children and the name of the centre will be changed to protect their identity. In order to obtain information in a child-friendly manner, I may be using conversations, stories and photographs. Child-friendly techniques will help me to understand how children make meaning in their everyday lives. I request permission to include your child in the project.

Yours sincerely

Researcher  
Mrs HB Ebrahim  
University of (KwaZulu) Natal  
Edgewood Campus  
Tel No: 2603483  
Fax: 2603423

Supervisor  
Professor A. Muthukrishna  
University of (KwaZulu) Natal  
Pietermaritzburg Campus  
Tel No. 033 2606045  
Fax No. 033 2605080

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**DETACH AND RETURN**

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (your name),

The parent of \_\_\_\_\_ (your child's/ward's name) fully understand the above.

**PLEASE TICK**

\_\_\_\_\_ I give permission for my child/ward to participate.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not give permission for my child/ward to participate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Thank you for taking the time to fill this form.