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GRADE R TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AND HOW THESE IMPACT ON CLASSROOM PRACTICE

Lorayne Anne Excell

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities,

University of the Witwatersrand

in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

Johannesburg, March 2011

DECLARATION

I declare that this work is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy to the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted to any other university, nor has it been prepared under the aegis or with the assistance of any other body or organisation or person outside of the University of the Witwatersrand.

_____

Lorayne Anne Excell

_____ day of March, 2011

ABSTRACT

In this qualitative research study I explored Grade R teachers' perceptions of early childhood development and how these impact on their classroom practice. Using an early childhood theoretical framework which was predominately informed by developmental and socio-cultural perspectives I interrogated teachers' understandings of children, quality classroom practice and early childhood contexts.

Although the literature acknowledges the contested nature of quality within the ECD/Grade R context, research evidence indicates that the role of the teacher is pivotal if education is to be successfully realized in the early years. This notion of quality embraces particular aspects of practice such as managing the classroom environment, being able to engage children in the learning process through a process of sustained shared thinking and supporting learning in a variety of different contexts. Furthermore, good practice is informed by an in-depth understanding of contemporary issues embedded in socio-cultural contexts of children and families. Within the South African context Grade R is a problematic year despite being the first year of the Foundation Phase. Policy documents informing practice are ambiguous, Grade R teachers are not required to have a formal teaching qualification and they are not afforded the same conditions of service as other teachers. All these factors have served to marginalize the Grade R teacher.

The research sample comprised twelve teachers from ten schools who were purposively selected from GDE and free standing community Grade R classes. An important selection criterion was a willingness to be involved in the project. In this multiple case study data were collected through classroom observations, interviews, critical incidents and documentary evidence. The research findings were first analysed according to three broad themes and then further interrogated through three knowledge positions identified by Mac Naughton, (2003) as conforming, reforming and transforming positions.

Key findings revealed that although participants could not be definitively situated in any one of the three knowledge positions their practices were largely conforming; with few teachers using aspects of reforming practice. This study is significant within the South African context in that it shows similar findings to those of research done by Nias (1985) and Anning (1991) relating to teachers' perceptions of themselves and their practice. Teachers perceived themselves as being kind, caring and loving individuals who placed the welfare of children in their care ahead of academic considerations. They all intimated that they followed a constructivist orientation, but found it difficult to articulate a deep understanding of practice. In fact they displayed limited understanding of how in the early years teaching and learning can be realized through a pedagogy of play. A gap was revealed between teachers' espoused theories and their theories-in-use which were predominately didactic in orientation. The study showed the impact of current constraints of the Education Department. Given these constraints the role of South African universities should be to deepen both theoretical and practical insights into early years pedagogy through appropriate teacher-focused interventions.

Keywords:

Early Childhood Development; Grade R; Perceptions of practice; Constructivism; Sociocultural-historical orientation; Didactic or instrumentalist approach; Developmental theories; Constructions of children; Critical reflection; Effective practice; Contemporary ECD issues.

PUBLICATIONS AND CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

Material from this thesis has been presented at the following conferences and seminars:

Excell, L.A. and Linington, V. 2010. *Will Grade R really improve the quality of SA Education?* Paper presented at the Umalusi Grade R Conference. Wits School of Education. April.

Excell, L.A. and Linington, V. 2010. *Taking a debate into action: Whereto Grade R after the presentation of contested ideas and research findings reveal a considerable challenge?* Paper presented at the ECDI Indaba. University of South Africa. September.

Excell, L.A. and Linington, V. 2010. *Education for democracy through democracy: an ECD perspective.* Paper presented at the UNICEF Knowledge Building Seminar. Kempton Park November.

Excell, L.A. and Linington, V. 2011. *Taking the debate into action: does the current Grade R practice in South Africa meet quality requirements?* Paper presented at the 2011 International conference of Research, Development and Training, in Early Childhood/Foundation Phase Education. North West University, February, 2011.

Material from this thesis has been published in the following journals:

Linington, V., Excell, L.A. and Murris, K. 2011. Education for participatory democracy: a Grade R perspective. *Perspectives in Education.* Vol. (29), 1, pp. 36-45.

Excell, L.A. and Linington, V. 2011. Literacy begins in play: the pathway to the development of the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that underpin formal literacy learning in young children. *South African Journal of Childhood Education.* Vol.1(2), (*In press.)*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, a grateful thanks to Professor Jane Castle for her ongoing encouragement and support as well as for her insightful comments and suggestions;

Secondly, to my children Brenna and James for their humour, patience and technical assistance;

A big thank you goes to Naomi Roux for assistance with the diagrams and tables;

Thanks to my colleagues, for your continual support and words of encouragement. In particular to Viv Linington who has walked many a convoluted ECD/Grade R path with me and to Helen Ludlow together with whom I embarked on this PhD journey;

The running group – your sage advice and good humour was always appreciated; you provided an essential diversion. In particular, I would like to thank Dr Cas Houtman for his regular 'motivational talks';

Anne Pipe for editing the completed thesis and

Finally, to the participants of this study – thank you for your willingness and enthusiasm to share in this study. Without your cooperation I could not have completed this thesis. Your insightful comments relating to practice reaffirmed that ECD/Grade R remains a problematic phase but I would argue that its one strength is the passion and enthusiasm that you display for your work and the children you teach.

This thesis is dedicated to the ECD/Grade R community. I sincerely hope that in the not too distant future ECD/Grade R teachers will be given the recognition they deserve and all South Africa's children will have access to quality early years teaching and learning.

ABBREVIATIONS

ABET	Adult Basic Education and Training
ANC	African National Congress
AS	Assessment Standards
B.ED	Bachelor of Education
CAPS	Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements
DAP	Developmentally Appropriate Practice
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DoE	Department of Education
GDE	Gauteng Department of Education
GRADE R	The Reception Year
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECE	Early Childhood Education
EYP	Early Years Professional
FAL	First Additional Language
FETC	Further Education and Training Certificate
FP	Foundation Phase
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HoD	Head of Department
HSRC	Human Sciences Research Council
ISASA	Independent Schools Association of South Africa
JHB	Johannesburg
LO	Learning Outcomes
LoLT	Language of Learning and Teaching
NAEYC	National Association for the Education of Young Children
NCS	National Curriculum Statement

NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
NEPI	National Education Policy Investigation
NPDE	National Professional Diploma in Education
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
OBE	Outcomes Based Education
OFS	Orange Free State
PIPS	Performance Indicators for Primary Schools
QSA	Queensland State Authority
RNCS	Revised National Curriculum Statement
RSA	Republic of South Africa
SAAECE	South African Association for Early Childhood Education
SACE	South African Council of Educators
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
TED	Transvaal Education Department
TQS	Teacher Qualification Survey
UNISA	University of South Africa
WSoE	Wits School of Education
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

SCHOOL ABBREVIATIONS

BS	Bertha Solomon
EP	Egret Park
FDB	Fredrik Dawid Bezuidenhout
FM	Fatima Meer
JH	Jacaranda Heights
JP	Jabulani Preschool
HC	Help the Children
LS	Little Stars
RPS	Rissik Primary School
TPS	Thembani Primary School
YB	Young Beginnings

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CHAPTER 1: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH STUDY

1.1 *INTRODUCTION*

While there is no consensus on how best young children grow, develop and learn, there is general agreement today that the early years (those before the commencement of formal schooling) play a significant role in determining the extent to which children will develop and achieve their optimal learning potential. These early years appear to be the bedrock upon which future growth, development and learning depends (Reilly, 1983; Schweinhart & Weikart 1993; Heckman, 2000; Bruce, 2004). However, research has also shown that early childhood development (ECD) intervention, if it is to have beneficial consequences for children's learning and development, should be of a high quality[1] (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1993; Bredekamp & Coppell, 1997; 2006; Heckman, 2000; Bruce, 2004).

Within the western world, the dominant ECD perspective has been that of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), which is based upon western ways of doing and knowing (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). Towards the end of the 20th century, global and local imperatives began to challenge these contentions. Consequently, alternative views and perspectives are beginning to influence early childhood education practices and pedagogies (Cannella & Viruru, 2004).

Grieshaber & Cannella (2001) suggest that these alternative perspectives centre on diversity, identities, culture, intellect and the economy. They note that many educators in England, Australia and America continue to support the developmentalist notion of the universal child while others support a more formal didactic approach to their work with young children. In other words, according to Grieshaber & Cannella (2001), many ECD teachers have not taken cognizance of these new perspectives. And there is no reason to assume that South African ECD teachers are any different. Have they begun to engage with contemporary ideas and are they beginning to reflect critically on their practice in the light of modern trends? Do they, like their Anglo American counterparts support the notion of a universal child and a formal, didactic pedagogy? Or have they moved on?

[1] Quality, which is a contested notion, is explored later in this chapter (see 1.7). It is a subjective term which should be viewed from multiple-perspectives. It needs to be contextualised and to recognise diversity. It is informed by pedagogical practices as well institutional factors.

1.2 *BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM*

The relationship between high quality ECD programmes and the long term benefits for young children's optimal growth, development and learning is no longer questioned. Furthermore, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA, 1996a) and various education policy documents, such as the South African Schools Act (RSA, 1996b) and White Paper no.5 on Early Childhood Education (Department of Education (DoE), 2001a) support the notions of democratic citizenship and lifelong learning. The successful attainment of these ideals is largely dependent upon a rich and stimulating early childhood.

Contemporary lifestyles and changing social and economic factors in the adult population have necessitated that more and more children are going to preschool. Increasing responsibility is thus being placed upon the preschool to provide quality care. Yet it appears that there is little political and educational will to ensure that all of South Africa's children are given the best possible start on their path of lifelong learning (Porteus, 2004). This lack of political and educational will can, perhaps, best be understood against the background of problems in the South African education system as a whole. These problems began long before the inception of the new government in 1994 and were also informed by the broader political, economic and industrial factors that impacted the country (see chapter two).

The conceptualization and implementation of quality ECD/Grade R[2] programmes in South Africa are problematic (Wits School of Education (WSoE), 2009; Department of the Eastern Cape, 2008). As stated in the introduction, one way of ensuring that children are appropriately stimulated in the early years (including Grade R) is through their participation in high quality ECD programmes and practices. (The notion of quality will be explored in detail in 1.7.) Yet there appears to be little clarity and consensus within the South African context of what constitutes good ECD practice. During my years as a teacher[3] educator, I have been privileged to visit many different preschools, including Grade R classrooms which host ECD student teachers during their compulsory teaching experience. I have observed a great disparity in the conceptualization and

[2] Throughout this study, when I refer to ECD, I include the Grade R year because of the close relationship between the two constructs.

[3] With the inception of the new education system (1996), the term "preschool teacher" was replaced by "preschool practitioner". It is a term that is disliked by both qualified and un- or under- qualified teachers (WSoE, 2009; Eastern Cape Department of Education, 2008). Hence I have chosen to use the term teacher, and not practitioner.

implementation of ECD programmes and practices, despite teachers' claims that they adopt a play-based approach towards teaching and learning, which is similar in conceptualization to DAP (these ECD frameworks are discussed in chapter 3 of this thesis). Conversations held with a number of ECD teachers (including Grade R teachers) (WSoE, 2009) suggest that many of them do not have deep insight into, or understanding of, their daily ECD practice. They also find it hard to explain why they do what they do in the way that they do it. Many ECD educators appear to be uncertain of why they are actually offering their particular ECD programmes.

Why? I asked. Is it their understanding of what constitutes childhood? Is it their understanding of what comprises high quality ECD programmes? Is their approach determined by their own childhood experiences? Is it related to their own cultural beliefs, to their general education or to their particular ECD education and training? The introduction of outcomes-based education (OBE) through the National Curriculum Statement (NCS[4]) (DoE, 2002) appears to have further complicated the situation. In many instances teachers' practices appear to be driven by prescribed outcomes and assessment standards and not by pedagogic considerations (WSoE, 2009).

1.3 *STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM*

Given the above introduction, the problem statement is summarized as follows: There is tension between alternative views and perspectives of what constitutes good ECD/Grade R practice, what is articulated in the policy documents, teachers' perceptions of high quality ECD/Grade R practice, and their classroom realization of this practice. And this tension is exacerbated by rapid, ongoing social and political change. Even though high quality ECD/Grade R practice continues to be supported by a more traditional play-based approach, it appears as if classroom practice in South Africa is influenced by an increasingly formal didactic style where little cognizance is taken of children's different social, cultural, economic or historical contexts or learning through play.

Teachers, it seems, are not aware of contemporary ECD discourses. Consequently the implementation of a high quality ECD/Grade R programme may be compromised.

[4] When amendments to the National Curriculum Statement were published in 2002, this amended curriculum was referred to as the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS). Over time, the word revised has been omitted, and it is now referred to as the National Curriculum Statement (NCS).

Furthermore, there is a growing realization that teachers' motivation, constructions and understandings of their lives and work influence their thinking and pedagogy (Wood & Jeffery, 2002). ECD/Grade R teachers' perceptions of their practice deserve to be better understood and clarified to enable effective implementation of ECD/Grade R practice.

As limited research has been done within the South African ECD/Grade R context (Pence & Marfo, 2008), exploring teachers' perceptions relating to high quality ECD/Grade R practice seems to be a useful starting point. This is a broad study, as in unraveling and attempting to understand Grade R teachers' perceptions of their practice, many related constructs will need to be explored. These constructs include teachers' understandings of what constitutes quality practice, how they understand children and how their understandings influence their practice. Understanding teachers' perceptions of their practice requires exploring how teachers perceive themselves as well as the ECD contexts in which they are working.

1.4 *RESEARCH AIMS*

This research aims to explore (that is to probe, interpret, compare and theorize), using the frameworks of ECD theory, predominately located within a developmentally appropriate paradigm, and qualitative research, teachers' perceptions and understandings of high quality ECD/Grade R programmes and how these impact on classroom practice. It further intends to explore, through critical reflection, possible strategies that could improve aspects of classroom practice.

1.5 *RESEARCH QUESTIONS*

In order to explore these phenomena the following overarching research question was formulated:

What are teachers' perceptions of ECD/Grade R and how do these perceptions impact their practice?

The following sub questions have been formulated to further explore this question:

1. What is high quality/effective ECD/Grade R according to teachers? How do teachers construct childhood? What do teachers think young children need to know and learn? How do teachers think that young children learn best?

2. What type of (subject) knowledge do teachers of young children think they (the teachers) need to have in order to support the learning process?
3. What, according to the teacher, is her role in a preschool context in supporting young children's growth, development, thinking and learning?
4. Is there a disjuncture between the teachers' espoused theories of high quality ECD programmes and their theories-in-use? What are the implications for classroom implementation?
5. What alternative strategies could be identified by teachers for improving practice?

1.6 *RATIONALE*

There is a growing body of international literature on what constitutes high quality and appropriate ECD programmes (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Mac Naughton, 2003; Anning et al., 2009). (See 1.7 and chapter 4). This literature increasingly considers the impact of alternative ECD perspectives and pedagogies and challenges the notion of the universal child and a formal approach towards ECD practice. The shift entails a growing recognition of issues related to the social, cultural and economic contexts of children. The impact of cultural factors, mother tongue and other diversity issues relating to young children is increasingly being explored in relation to ECD pedagogy. Thus, though the notion of a play-based, more informal approach towards teaching and learning in the early years is continually reinforced (Gordon & Browne, 2008; Catron & Allan, 2008; Bruce, 2004; Mac Naughton & Williams, 2004; Riley, 2003; Mac Naughton, 2003; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001), contemporary authors caution us to heed the pitfalls of a too dogmatic, developmentalist approach which fails to consider anti-bias[5] and diversity perspectives (Walsh, 2005; Mac Naughton & Williams, 2004; Mac Naughton, 2003; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Dau, 2001).

Yet in South Africa there appears to be an ongoing shift towards a more formal approach to teaching and learning in the early years. Play is being sidelined and there appears to be a scant emphasis on anti-bias and diversity issues. This shift appears in part to be driven by (misinterpretations of) policies such as the NCS (see 2.2.2 & 2.2.4).

[5] The intention is not to imply that quality and an anti-bias curriculum is the same thing. The inclusion of the term anti-bias is to signal that contemporary debates around quality cannot exclude an understanding of what constitutes an anti-bias curriculum.

The South African Constitution (RSA, 1996a) and the South African Schools Act (RSA, 1996b) support the notion of a curriculum that embraces many different perspectives and pedagogies. This provides a democratic underpinning for sound educational practices. White Paper no. 5 on ECD (DoE, 2001a) takes this notion further and articulates an informal approach towards teaching and learning in the preschool years (Grade R is included in this articulation). Given that South Africa is a diverse country with many different cultural groupings, there are surely a number of different perspectives that influence the understanding and implementation of ECD programmes. There appears to be a disparity between what is articulated in the policy documents, contemporary ECD literature, teachers' perceptions of high quality ECD practice, and the classroom realization of this practice. This problem is not peculiar to the ECD field. There appear to be difficulties throughout the formal schooling phase as well (Block, 2009; Christie, 2008; Fleisch, 2008; Jansen, 2001a).

In 2007, the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) awarded a tender to the University of the Witwatersrand to investigate the implementation of the NCS in the Foundation Phase curriculum in Gauteng schools. Grade R is the first year of the Foundation Phase and, as such, was included in this study. However, Grade R does not necessarily sit comfortably in this phase. From a pedagogic perspective, the age of the Grade R child[6] supports the notion of a less formal curriculum. According to the Interim ECD Policy Document (DoE, 1996a) and White Paper no. 5 on Early Childhood Education (DoE, 2001a), Grade R is a preschool year underpinned by a preschool methodological approach. But from a curriculum perspective Grade R is the first year of the Foundation Phase (Biersteker Ngaruiya, Sebatane & Gudyanga, 2008) and as such must comply with the outcomes and assessment standards determined by the NCS. This, I would argue, has allowed for differing interpretations of Grade R implementation. Also, as previously mentioned, ECD is differently financed and staffed. Because of the rich environment for research and because of my involvement with this GDE project, I have chosen to focus this research study on the Grade R year.

[6] The Education Laws Amendment Bill of 2002 set the admission to Grade1 as the year in which the child turns seven. This meant that Grade R children were aged five turning six. In 2004, after this policy was successfully challenged in court, the school's admission age has been lowered to age five if children turn six before 30th June. By implication, the age cohort of the Grade R child has been lowered to age four turning five. This has obvious implications for programme delivery which will be discussed later in this thesis.

A final rationale for this study is that within the South African context there appears to be limited published research and academic writing in the ECD field in general and, in particular, pertaining to classroom practice. Furthermore within this context there is also little written about ECD teachers' perceptions and understandings of their practice and of what they perceive to be high quality ECD practices.

So far I have argued that the conceptualization of Grade R and ECD as a whole is problematic and fraught with inconsistencies in South Africa. This is evident in the funding given to this sector, the location of ECD sites and classrooms, qualifications of the ECD/Grade R teacher and registration requirements. These vary substantially from those applicable to the 'formal sector' and serve to marginalize the ECD teacher (DoE, 2001a and DoE, 2001b). The ECD teacher appears to have little status and few career opportunities within the formal education framework (see 2.2.6). It is therefore realistic to assume that many of these factors mentioned above which influence the nature and quality of teaching will influence ECD/Grade R teachers' perceptions of their practice and impinge on their realization of high quality ECD practice.

1.7 *QUALITY PRACTICE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT*

What constitutes quality ECD practice is an open-ended question, especially in today's world where the very notion of quality is contested (Moss, 1994; Dahlberg et al., 1999; 2007). Understandings of quality are inherently subjective and relative and thus any attempt at defining the term becomes a political process (Moss, 1994). According to Pence & Moss (2002) quality is a constructed concept. They maintain that the understanding of quality is often dominated by an exclusive few such as 'ECD experts' and government who exercise power and control, however well intentioned that control might be (Pence & Moss, 2002). They therefore advocate broader stakeholder involvement that recognises a wide range of values, beliefs and interests. In the process Pence & Moss (2002) claim that the prevailing exclusionary approach to quality could be transformed and an approach adopted that acknowledges trust, respect and caring for all participants. As Dahlberg et al. (2007) also contend, a contemporary understanding of quality acknowledges diversity and the notion of 'both/and' rather than the more dualistic 'either/or' approach.

On a more pragmatic note Broadfoot, Osborne, Gilley and Bûcher (1993) maintain that the quality of teaching is influenced by two main elements which together determine the nature of teachers' professional practice. The first are the external factors that impinge on teachers: administrative arrangements, including school ethos and management, traditional ideologies, changing policies, availability of resources and provisioning for training, as well as professional activity within the sector. These elements also relate to the subtle influence of parents and the local community. The second element comprises factors that are internal to the teacher herself[7].

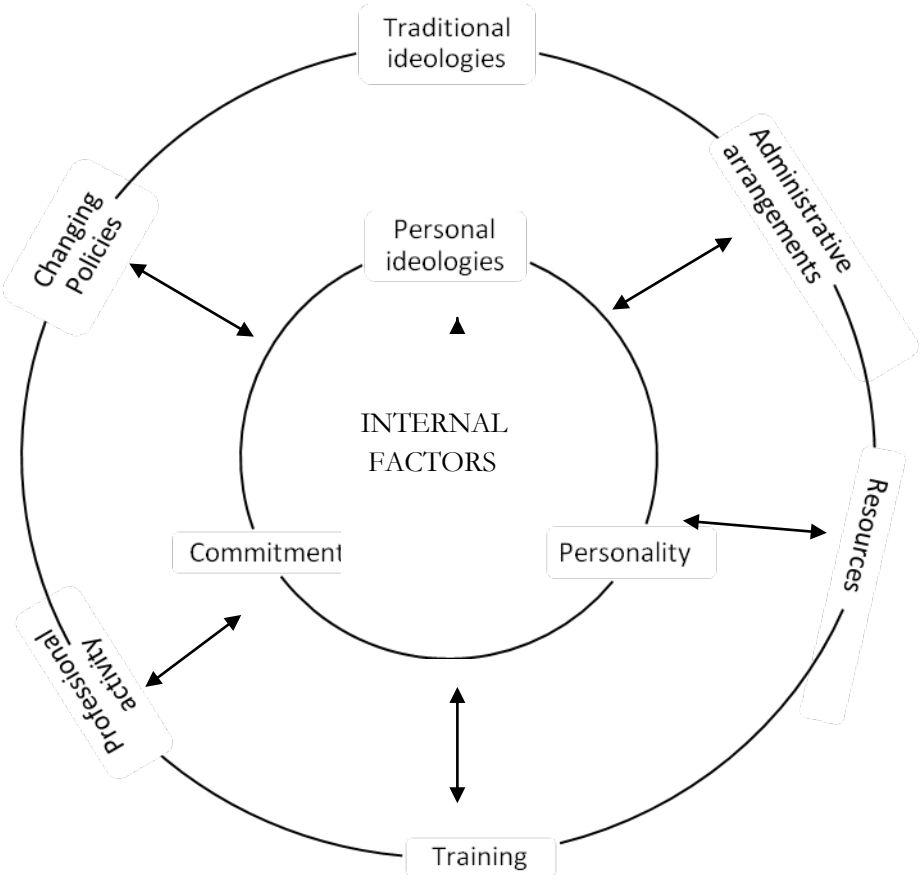
In fact according to Scheerens (1992); Todd & Mason (2005) and Christie (2008) the teacher factor has been identified as the most critical factor. Todd and Mason (2005), assert that the teacher is the person who exploits all other factors to enhance teaching and learning. The role of the teacher is thus pivotal in implementing an effective teaching and learning environment. These factors include the teacher's ideology, commitment and personality which combine to make up her professional persona. Hence teachers' understandings of children and their constructions of childhood, their own belief systems, attitudes and values towards teaching and learning will frame and influence their practice. (These 'teacher factors' will be explored further in chapter four.) Factors that impact quality practice from an early childhood perspective are considered in 1.7.1 and 3.2 & 3.3).

As Broadfoot et al. (1993:8) note, the 'actual perspectives held by teachers give meaning to their actions' and govern how they respond to reform brought about by social change. Rapid social change poses fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of education. These questions relate not only to the nature of the curriculum but also to important concerns about the delivery, organization and structure of such provision (Broadfoot et al., 1993) and these are concerns that impinge on ECD/Grade R delivery within the contemporary South African context. Within this contemporary context quality practice should also be informed by issues relating to diversity and anti-bias issues.

[7] The use of 'she' to describe ECD teachers is not intended to stereotype or to be exclusionary. I use it because, within South Africa, the vast majority of ECD teachers are female (DoE, 2001c).

In order to present a cohesive overview of the various factors influencing high quality teaching, a diagrammatic representation of both the external and internal factors is presented in Figure 1.1. The internal factors will be explored in chapter 4. Many of the external factors are discussed in this section and others will be interrogated in chapter 2.

Figure 1.1 Factors influencing high quality teaching (based on Broadfoot et al., 1993)



1.7.1 *The nature of ECD practice*

There is no one 'best ECD/Grade R practice'. The idea of developmentally appropriate practice (this notion will be fully discussed in 3.2) has been foregrounded as an effective ECD pedagogical approach since the late 1900s not to promote the notion of a universal child but as a way to counter the increasing formality which is increasingly impacting on early childhood education (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) (see 3.4.1). The pervasiveness of a formal approach, particularly in the year before formal schooling, has been noted in

research in many western countries (Anning, 1991; Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons &Taggert, 2002; Riley, 2003; Bruce, 2004; Gordon & Browne, 2008).

However, early childhood curricula in both England (Anning, Cullen & Fleer, 2009) and Australia (Queensland State Authority (QSA), 2006) continue to reinforce the notion that a developmentally appropriate play-based approach is a good way to support effective pedagogy in the early years. There is growing support for the adoption of a more critical stance (Dahlberg et al., 1999), especially from a sociocultural perspective (Anning et al., 2009; Rogers, 2011).

In an attempt to probe what constitutes effective pedagogy in ECD, a study entitled The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE), was carried out in England between 1997 and 2003 (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggert, 2004). This study investigated, among other things, the effects on children of different types of preschool provisioning and the characteristics of more effective preschool settings. A parallel study was carried out in Northern Ireland. In 2002, the findings of another study, Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) headed by Siraj-Blatchford were also released.

Results of these studies suggest that learning and development in both cognitive and social spheres need to be equally supported. Children who made the best progress were offered 'play-based learning opportunities which had both curriculum and social learning objectives and which were also intended to develop positive learning dispositions and communication skills' (Riley, 2003:xxiii). These findings concur with those of another study described by Riley. She cites Ramey and Ramey (1998, in Riley, 2003:xviii), who suggest that there are six 'developmental priming mechanisms' which can potentially enhance learning. These provide opportunities for children to explore their environment, without fear of punishment or ridicule, within a language-rich environment that mentors basic social and intellectual skills. They also acknowledge and provide opportunities to practice and expand these skills (Ramey & Ramey, 1998). In other words, there should be a focus on a more developmentally appropriate programme that foregrounds social and personal development, the enhancement of language skills and communication, and the promotion of critical thinking and problem-solving skills within a structured learning environment that considers the whole child and the mediating role of the teacher. As

Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002:10) state, 'The most effective settings encouraged sustained hared thinking[8]'. However, in their research these authors had not found many instances of this kind of thinking in the United Kingdom.

In the words of the EPPE report:

> ... some four year olds are in 'pre-school' provision but many are now in reception classes [Grade R]. All in all, combined centres [those which provide care and education], nursery schools and nursery classes seem to offer better education and care to young children than reception classes do (Sylva et al., 2004: 3-4).

Many South African children attend Grade R as their first schooling experience (see 1.2 and 2.2.1). As the ECD Audit noted (DoE, 2001c), they have not been exposed to preschool and often come from homes which are not sufficiently stimulating. Can they cope with the demands of a formal Grade R? Would they not be better placed within sociocultural, developmentally appropriate programmes which recognise whole child learning in a supportive, play-based environment where the teacher is a mediator and a supporter of knowledge? In this context, learning opportunities for all children are more likely to be enhanced.

A further, very significant finding of the EPPE study was the relationship between staff qualifications and quality. A clear trend showed that the quality of the learning environment increases with staff childcare qualifications. This finding concurs with findings from the 1999 Performance Indicators of Primary School Project (PIPS) which was headed by Tymms. Follow-up studies have confirmed the initial PIPS findings. Tymms (2004) reiterates that the children make the greatest progress during their first year of school. Some teachers and schools appear to make a bigger difference to children's performance than could ordinarily be expected. In some cases the variance was found to be as much as 40% (Riley, 2003). Tymms (2004) suggests that children's progress is more dependent upon teachers than their home background. Two important variables in predicting children's academic success at the end of year one at school are the children's starting point and the teacher. As Riley (2003) comments:

[8] Sustained shared thinking is associated with high quality pedagogy and entails deepening children's language and thinking capacity by engaging them in collaborative open-ended conversations rather than responding to children through directions which do not provide opportunities for thoughtful conversations with children.

> The quality of the training and the experience of the teacher is key. Children arrive in school with a vast store of knowledge but it is highly idiosyncratic and individual. … Teachers need strong subject knowledge across the curriculum and also to be aware of the appropriate pedagogy for teaching it. … The findings of these studies … confirm the ideology and theories of early childhood education held for over a century (Riley, 2003: xx).

What an awesome responsibility for any Grade R teacher, and perhaps more so in South Africa where many are under-qualified and working in poorly resourced teaching and learning environments (see 2.2.1).

Learning Dispositions

Research (Katz, 1995; Carr, 2001; Riley, 2003 and Bruce, 2004) has emphasised the importance of establishing positive learning dispositions in children. Katz (1995:62) has described these as 'relatively enduring habits of mind or characteristic ways of responding to experiences across types of situations'. Children's academic achievement and their ultimate life achievements depend on their attitudes to learning. When writing about New Zealand's *Te Whariki* curriculum, Carr (2001) lists five dispositions which she argues are essential for successful learning. These are taking an interest (motivation), being involved (participation), persisting with difficulty or uncertainty, communicating with others, and taking responsibility. Put simply, Carr suggests that children must be ready, willing and able to learn. Learning dispositions are strongly related to personal and social development. It is no surprise, therefore, that effective early childhood curricula prioritise these development domains.

Reflection

An important characteristic of effective early years practice that is gaining support is the concept of reflection, both on the part of the teacher and the children. I explore aspects relating to teachers' critical self-reflection process in chapter 4. Below, I outline a study that highlights the positive impact that reflection can have on children's learning.

In the 1960s, Schweinhart and Weikart, introduced the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project in Ypsilanti, Michigan. This was a compensatory programme aimed at combating the disastrous effects of environmental deprivation and poverty on disadvantaged preschool children (Brandt, 1986; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1993). The curriculum was underpinned by developmentally appropriate experiences. Teachers designed a classroom programme that reflected the expressed needs and interests of the children and met

predetermined educational goals. Central to the daily programme was a 'plan-do-review sequence'. This sequence encouraged children to achieve their goals by involving them in decision-making and problem-solving situations throughout the day. Through this reflection process, the children were able to deepen their understanding of their learning. As Riley (2003:92) notes, 'This provides an opportunity to embed learning by talking and listening'. It is also an opportunity to promote personal development which leads to the establishment of learning dispositions.

Apart from highlighting the importance of the reflective process for the children, the High/Scope programme has provided invaluable research data on the effectiveness of appropriate preschool programmes. A longitudinal study over a period of 27 years has confirmed the positive benefits of effective ECD practices on children's later learning and overall development (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1993), especially in the two years before the commencement of formal schooling.

1.7.2 *The early childhood curriculum and pedagogy*

No discussion on quality would be complete without making mention of the curriculum[9]. Like quality, the word curriculum is open to widely differing interpretations. Hoadley & Jansen (2009) distinguish between the intended curriculum and the enacted curriculum.

According to Hoadley & Jansen (2009) the intended curriculum is that which is prescribed. It provides a framework which is often set out in policy documents and official syllabi. It might be described in terms of content and input or in terms of outcomes and competences. One of the dangers of a prescribed curriculum is a narrow interpretation of what should be taught and of what should be learned (Hoadley & Jansen, 2009). Mac Naughton, 2003 maintains that a narrow interpretation results in an education process that reproduces the skills needed to achieve national economic, social and political goals and reproduces the values that enable a society to reproduce itself.

Narrowly interpreted, an intended curriculum could be likened to the technocratic or objectives approach espoused by Tyler (1949) and this approach is still influential to-day. Cornbleth (1990) argues that if curriculum is conceived as a tangible product such as a

[9] Understandings of this term curriculum, while still referring to prescribed learning and teaching (in other words, what should be taught), has changed over the years to take on a wider set of meanings (Hoadley & Jansen 2009) including the intended and enacted curriculum.

plan for instruction, the outcome becomes technocratic and results in a rational management model of decision making. Such curriculum planning involves a predetermined set of procedures, usually decided upon by someone outside the classroom. Goals are narrowly articulated in ways which will enable their achievement to be successfully measured in a reasoned manner. The curriculum product is then disseminated for implementation by teachers.

I would argue that this curriculum approach resonates with a instrumentalist perspective (see 3.4), where teachers make use of preplanned materials to meet predetermined outcomes based on prescribed developmental norms, and, in South Africa, Assessment Standards. The end result provides 'precision and control over the otherwise disorderly nature of curriculum and teaching' (Cornbleth, 1990:14). In other words, it is a decontextualised curriculum which negates the pivotal role of the teacher in teaching and curriculum planning and does not engage the children meaningfully in the teaching and learning process (see 3.2 & 3.4).

There is evidence that the South African Education Department is engaged in pursuing a more technocratic curriculum underpinned by a narrow interpretation of the NCS and strict adherence to specific learning assessment standards (The Times-Press Release, 7 July, 2010). Another example is the issuing of workbooks and prescriptive lessons (DBE[10], 2010a) that are included in the Foundations for Learning Document issued to Grade R public teachers this year. This approach is unlikely to enhance learning opportunities for young children (see 3.2 &3.3).

The enacted curriculum explores what happens to the plan in the context of schools and teaching. The enacted curriculum provides teachers with an opportunity to reflect more deeply on their practice, provides a space for teachers to be curriculum developers and acknowledges the role that teachers and learners play in a changing and adapting specified curriculum content (Hoadley & Jansen, 2009). The enacted curriculum is more closely aligned to the 'process approach' described by Lawrence Stenhouse (1975); Hoadley & Jansen (2009:71) suggesting that the process approach could also be linked to what is 'called a critical, or contextualized, or action-reflection approach to curriculum.'

[10] After the 2009 general election the Department of Education was divided into two government departments, namely the Department of Basic Education (DBE) with the mandate to oversee schooling and the Department of Higher Education to oversee all aspects of post-school education.

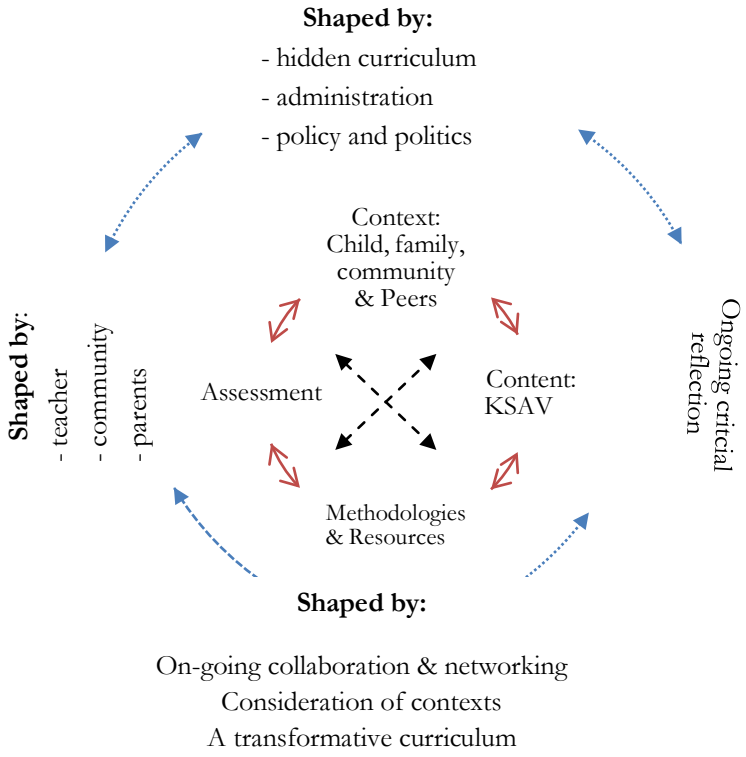
Cornbleth (1990) drawing on Stenhouse's (1975) work, argues that conceptions of curriculum are never neutral or value free. Explicitly or implicitly they reflect the curriculum developer's assumptions about the world and how these influence practice. Cornbleth (1990:24) reasons therefore that curriculum construction should be a 'social activity that is shaped by many contextual influences both within and beyond the classroom and accomplished interactively, both by teachers and students' (within the ECD/Grade R context I would include parents). This view of curriculum, which Cornbleth (1990:24) names the 'critical curriculum', focuses on what knowledge and learning opportunities are actually made available to children, how they are created and what values they reflect and sustain. In brief, it is a curriculum which engages all players and is open to alternative ways of viewing and knowing the world. Viewing curriculum as a contextualized social process reflects a critical underpinning and this approach could in part be aligned with the historical-sociocultural approach (see 3.3).

A more powerful and influential understanding of a critical curriculum was articulated by Freire (1970) who viewed the curriculum as being political in that it can either empower or domesticate people. Meaningful education should enable people to confront their everyday realities and provide them with the social and political tools to transform their lives for the better (Freire, 1970). According to many ECD theorists this critical approach should be informing ECD practices (Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Mac Naughton, 2003; Cannella & Viruru, 2004). According to these educationists a critical curriculum would provide education that would 'transform society to create greater social justice and equity' (Mac Naughton, 2003:188). This type of education would be linked to specific social and political contexts and require on the part of the teacher, on-going critical reflection (Grieshaber and Cannella, 2001). This reflection becomes especially necessary as individual reflections might be constrained by the individual's own particular social, cultural and political contexts (Mac Naughton, 2003).

The factors contributing to a critical curriculum are represented in figure 1.2. These include factors that would be considered in the intended curriculum such as certain knowledge, skills and attitudes and values (KSAV) children might be required to learn. But these are embedded in the enacted curriculum which explores what happens to the plan within the context of teaching and learning, for example, the hidden curriculum. The critical curriculum however, takes this a step further. Meaningful consideration should be given to diverse contexts and on-going critical reflection should underpin all

curriculum planning and pedagogy. In should, in fact, become a transformative curriculum.

Figure 1.2: A diagrammatic representation of a critical curriculum



Despite this more contemporary understanding of curriculum, South African curriculum approaches strongly favour a more technocratic approach (DoE, 2008) or at best a process approach which is more easily aligned with the enacted curriculum. And it is the enacted approach which can be more easily aligned with commonly accepted understandings of the early childhood curriculum because, as Riley (2003) comments, in early childhood education how children learn is seen as being equally important as what children learn. Riley (2003:17) further argues that it is 'knowing how to learn, to be able to engage, to concentrate and to persevere which empowers an individual to succeed in education.' In order to become proactive, autonomous learners, children ought to internalize certain skills, abilities and attitudes that underpin successful learning. Thus, as

Riley (2003) acknowledges, 'the opportunities to develop positive learning dispositions should make up a large part of what is conceptualized as curriculum' (p.17).

According to Riley (2003:18) when viewed through this lens curriculum is 'described as broadly meaning the knowledge, skills and values an educational establishment aims to impart to its pupils'. This includes both the explicit and implicit or hidden curriculum.

This understanding of curriculum resonates with that of National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC (see 3.2.1), who define curriculum as:

> An organized framework that delineates the content children are to learn, the process through which children achieve the identified curricular goals, what teachers do to help children reach these goals, and the context in which teaching and learning occur (NAEYC/NAECS/SDE, 1991:21).

This definition does not appear to have changed much over the intervening years. Gordon and Browne (2008) still quote the above definition in their writings on the ECD curriculum. However, they include the social and cultural context and a consideration of how different contexts impact learning.

This understanding of curriculum is closely associated with contemporary understandings of early childhood pedagogy which embrace the art and science of teaching. Pedagogy comprises the thoughtful consideration of an effective teaching and learning environment with planned opportunities for play and exploration. This refers to methodological approaches and strategies that inform learning as well as the teachers' role in the realization of effective teaching and learning in the early years including modeling, demonstration, questioning and direct instruction (Riley, 2003). As Siraj-Blatchford (2009:148) states, 'pedagogy refers to the interactive process between teacher and learner and the learning environment (which includes the family and community).' In short, teaching and learning in the ECD/Grade R environment is complex and multifaceted where teacher, child, home and classroom environments should be considered to ensure effective pedagogy.

Indicators of effective pedagogy include opportunities for co-construction of knowledge between teacher and children and sustained shared thinking, joint involvement in child-

teacher initiated activities and informed interactions in children's self-initiated and free-play activities (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). The teachers' role is proactive; they create playing and learning environments and are responsive to children's choices, interests and patterns of learning (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; 2006).

According to Bredekamp and Copple (1997); Abbott, (2001) and Carr (2001), many contemporary early childhood development models such as DAP, Reggio Emelia in Italy and Te Whariki in New Zealand have been influenced by sociocultural theories. Consequently, it is the sociocultural dimension that has impacted on early childhood practices in more recent years and this dimension has begun to sketch an additional role for teachers; a role where they co-construct learning opportunities with children based on a number of different contextual factors (see 3.3).

In brief, it appears that common threads run through some of the different understandings of effective early childhood pedagogy and curriculum. These include a play-based approach that embraces the cultural and social contexts informing learning, acknowledging holistic development which is promoted in an integrated fashion, and outlining a specific role for teachers. But it appears that teachers who adopt a historical-sociocultural approach (see 3.3) will also critically engage with ECD pedagogy, question taken-for-granted assumptions and reflect critically upon their own practice in a process that will 'foster personal and social emancipation from various forms of dominance' (Cornbleth, 1990:3).

1.8 *SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS STUDY*

This study has the potential to add to the body of knowledge about what constitutes high quality ECD/Grade R programmes within the SA context. If research can help provide insights into ECD teachers' understanding of young children and how they [children] best develop and learn, as well as ECD teachers' understandings of their classroom practice and what they believe they need to know in order to optimize teaching and learning, this should inform the design and implementation of high quality ECD/Grade R programmes within the South African context.

1.9 *ORGANIZATION OF THE THESIS*

The thesis is organized along the lines presented below.

Chapter Two sets the context for this study. I describe the history of the preschool movement in South Africa and show how the fragmented *apartheid* system of education fuelled the ongoing education reform that has been taking place in South Africa since 1994. I conclude this chapter by examining relevant literature on the current state of ECD/Grade R practice in South Africa.

Chapter Three presents an overview and a corresponding critique of the learning and developmental theories that underpin current ECD/Grade R practice. Alternative constructions of children and childhood are investigated. It explores three distinct perspectives that inform ECD/Grade R pedagogy namely, the developmental perspective, a socio-cultural historical perspective and the instrumentalist or didactic approach to early learning.

Chapter Four reviews current literature relating to the role of the teacher and the impact that teachers' perceptions have on their classroom practice. I consider how teachers position themselves according to different epistemological perspectives and how these perspectives influence practice. The literature review concludes with an overview of critical reflection and how this could help bridge the gap between 'espoused theories' and 'theory-in-use'.

Chapter Five outlines the research design which explores knowledge claims, strategies of enquiry, methodology and issues relating to interpretation of data. Ethical issues are also considered.

Chapter Six comprises the research results in the form of ten case studies.

Chapters Seven Eight and Nine present a thematic analysis of the research results. This includes teachers' perceptions of children as learning beings, their perceptions of themselves as learning beings and as professional teachers.

Chapter Ten commences with a summary of the previous chapters, a reflection on the research results through an alternative lens as well as a reflection on the methodology and research design. I conclude by outlining the contributions of this study and give suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER 2: SETTING THE CONTEXT

2.1 *INTRODUCTION*

This literature review sets the context for the study. In a qualitative research study, the literature review could be part of the introduction in that it serves to establish the context and introduces issues or problems that prompted the study, and it could be presented in a separate section and sketch a more detailed background to the problem being studied or it could be used inductively in a later section of the study to clarify findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Creswell, 2003; Mason, 2002).

In chapter 1, I highlighted the importance of early childhood development and argued if ECD is to have a positive impact, quality provisioning is essential. The role of the teacher is pivotal in ensuring this quality. Hence it becomes important to investigate their views of childhood, learning and ECD pedagogy; an important reason for this study. In South Africa quality ECD is variable and problems of provisioning come under the spotlight when considering recent ECD discourses which draw attention to the intended and enacted curriculum, pedagogy as an art along with issues such as diversity and social justice.

In order to better understand the present day ECD/Grade R situation I provide a brief historical background to the adoption of Grade R and its positioning within the NCS. I first outline three preschool models that have had the greatest influence on ECD provisioning in South Africa and present a brief historical overview of the preschool movement in this country. I review various documents and their impact on ECD services and provisioning. I examine how these documents and their interpretation impact on curriculum development and implementation, especially in the Grade R year. I conclude this chapter with an overview of some relevant research into ECD/Grade R practice that has been undertaken in South Africa.

2.2 *AN OVERVIEW OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM*

Education appears to have been constituted along racial grounds even before the industrialization of South Africa in the late nineteenth century. While little concern was

shown for the education of blacks (Ralekhetho, 1991), the Transvaal Government[11] introduced free education for white children in 1902 and this was followed by compulsory education for all white children between the ages of 7 and 14 (Christie, 1991). Black education, which was available to few children, remained in the hands of the church with little assistance from the State. After the Nationalist Government came to power in 1948, the *apartheid* system further entrenched educational inequality through the Eiselen Commission, which was appointed in 1949 to 'reform and control' Bantu education (Gordon, 1991:86). This Commission recommended that missionary education be transferred to the state '…and henceforth education should be segregated and in the mother-tongue' (Gordon, 1991:87).

This segregation, which was realized in ethnically-segregated departments of education, became strongly entrenched in the political, social and economic life in South Africa (Taylor, 1989) and resulted in a strong black resistance campaign. Despite various government attempts to crush this resistance, it continued to grow, and gathered increasing momentum throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. This volatile situation came to a head in 1976 when high school children went on the rampage in what became known as the 'Soweto uprising' (Hyslop, 1999).

There were many social, economic and educational reasons for these riots but the final catalyst was a language issue. Although lower primary education commenced in the mother tongue, black African learners in higher grades had to switch first to Afrikaans and then to English (the two official languages) to complete their schooling. There was a high drop-out rate, the majority of black children not remaining in school for more than four years (Christie, 1985).

Yet, despite the enormous problems that existed (and still do) at the lower primary schooling phase, this phase 'received surprising little attention' (Taylor, 1989:1) and responses by all stakeholders were minimal. A probable reason is that after the post

[11] South Africa comprised four provinces: the Transvaal, the Orange Free State (OFS), Natal and the Cape Colony. Prior to the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910, both the Transvaal and OFS fought valiantly for their independence from the British and experienced brief periods of being autonomous Boer Republics. However, this independence was short-lived and after the second Anglo-Boer war which ended in 1902 Britain regained control of all four provinces. The Transvaal was a large inland area, which, after the discovery of gold in the late eighteen hundreds, became the most economically and politically powerful province. The four provinces remained unaltered until 1994 when the African National Congress (ANC) came to power. The four provinces were divided into nine smaller provinces. Transvaal was incorporated into a number of new provinces. The economic hub comprising of the Witwatersrand and surrounding areas became a small inland economically viable province named Gauteng.

1976 education crisis, government attention was focused on addressing problems inherent in high school education.

In this volatile political and educational climate, preschool education received little government attention and was addressed only indirectly through the De Lange Commission, which was established in 1981 to investigate the state of the country's education. Though this was not a preschool focused initiative, the Commission explored provisioning and quality preschool care and education in South Africa and highlighted the importance of preschool education, especially for disadvantaged children (as cited in Millar, Raynham & Schaffer, 1991). The Commission's recommendations were supported by another study undertaken by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), the findings of which were published in 1983. Both studies acknowledged the 'importance of attaining school readiness, which is a fundamental prerequisite for successful progress in school' (Reilly & Hofmeyr, 1983) and recommended the introduction of a one-year to two-year bridging programme to prepare children (especially the poorest of the community) for formal schooling.

The *apartheid* government, however, did not implement these suggestions. It claimed that the state could not afford to subsidize comprehensive preschool education, and recommended that preschool education should remain a private and community initiative. It did, however, suggest a school readiness programme for the neediest children but each provincial and homeland education department was to decide on the most feasible way of doing this. In reality, very little was put into place for most children (Padayachee, Atmore, Biersteker & Evans, 1994; National Education Investigation Policy (NEPI), 1992).

When further exploratory studies were undertaken on how best to address pressing ECD issues, this proposed bridging year was criticized as being 'too little, too late' for the majority of South Africa's children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds (NEPI, 1992; Padayachee, et al., 1994).

However, perhaps because of financial expediency, it was this proposal for ECD delivery that ultimately found favour with the current government—the introduction of a compulsory reception year (known as Grade R[12]) for all South African children.

[12] Grade R refers to a reception year and is the year before the child commences formal primary school, namely Grade 1. White Paper no.5 on Early Childhood Education stated that Grade R would be

According to Biersteker et al. (2008:229), South Africa is one of the sub-Saharan African countries that is 'in the process of introducing a preprimary class as part of the primary education system.' It is envisaged that this compulsory year will ensure that children have at least one enriching year before commencing formal school.

The specific historical and political reasons relating directly to the provisioning of preschool education are explored in more detail in 2.2.1 of this chapter. However, to contextualize ECD, I present a chronology of the historical development of preschool education and some of the related educational influences in Table 2.1.

compulsory for all children in 2010. It was envisaged that 75-80% of these classes would be attached to existing primary schools. The remaining 10-15% of Grade Rs would be situated in community settings (DoE, 2001a). Within the Gauteng province (a centrally situated inland province, geographically the smallest of the nine provinces but having the largest population and being the industrial and economic hub of the country), approximately 40-50% of Grade R classes are still situated at community sites.

Table 2.1: A chronology of the major events which impacted on ECD in South Africa

Date	Event	Implications
1832	Missionaries open a preschool for slave children in Cape Town	Didactic model aligned with that of formal schooling. Preschools short-lived due to a perceived lack of demand.
1833	Preschool classes opened for poor European children.	
1839	Fröbel introduces the kindergarten, a play-based model which is influential in Europe.	This model was never truly accepted by the South African colonial government. The lasting impact on South African preschool practice is probably the name (often interchangeable with Grade R).
1861	British Infant School Model introduced in Great Britain.	It becomes a formal, authoritarian model which is adopted more readily by colonialists in South Africa.
1919	McMillan sisters introduce the open-air nursery school in England.	The nursery school model upon which the traditional South African model is based.
1930	First 'health classes' opened in Vrededorp and Fordsburg by the Johannesburg (JHB) Local Health Department.	Provision of preschool services for 'poor whites'. Based on the nursery school model. Emphasis on hygiene and nutrition.
1931 onwards	Preschools opened in Pretoria, Durban and Cape Town. Services extended to other cities and town.	'Whites only' schools. Schools established through various organizations or privately owned. Quality of services variable. Demand for better qualified teachers.
Early 1930s	Day nurseries and crèches for blacks opened countrywide. No qualified teachers.	Controlling bodies were Welfare and Church organizations. Registered with the Department of Bantu Administration – no educational influence.
1937	Witwatersrand Technical College begins training white nursery school teachers. Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) reluctant	Syllabus stressed cooking, housecraft and cleaning. The intention was for students to work in a variety of institutions caring for young children, not just teaching in nursery schools.

	to become involved in the training of preschool teachers.	
Between 1938 and 1958	Training courses for blacks initiated in Sophiatown (JHB) by the Anglican Mission. Various other courses offered throughout the country.	Department of Education and Training recognized these certificates. Training sporadic and not able to meet needs of country. Qualifications not on par with white counterparts.
1939	Nursery School Association of South Africa established.	Aim to ensure quality services and to improve training for teachers.
1948	Nationalist Government comes to power.	Decrees care and education for preschool children is responsibility of parents, NOT the state.
1962	Department of National Education assumes responsibility for preschool teacher training for whites.	A three year diploma in nursery school education is introduced.
1969	UNISA offers two post graduate diplomas.	Distance education option – open, therefore, to all racial groups.
1970	Provincial Colleges of Education accept responsibility for preschool training for whites.	A three- year joint preprimary/junior primary diploma is offered. Training continues to be offered by the Department of National Education.
1973	First provincial preschools for whites open in the Transvaal.	Transvaal Education Department (TED) schools are fully subsidized.
1976	Soweto uprising.	Far reaching implications for education in general.
1970s	The South African Association for Early Childhood Education (SAAECE) replaces the Nursery School Association.	Affiliation with OMEP (an international preschool organization). Establishes accreditation guidelines in an attempt to ensure quality preschool services and training for all citizens.
1974	First preschool opens for Indians in Lenasia in the	Opened by the Lenasia Muslim Association for middle and upper middle class children. Indian preschools often run by religious and Welfare Organizations.

	Transvaal. Number of preschools for Indian children increase from 1980 onwards.	
1980	Provincial education departments extend qualifications for whites to comply with national criteria (M+4).	Preprimary qualifications for white teachers now on par with those for other teachers.
1982	Homeland preschool training commences in, for example, Bophuthatswana's teacher training colleges.	The various South African Departments of Education slowly withdraw their meager support for preschool training.
1983	The De Lange Commission	A bridging year for disadvantaged children is recommended.
1985	Department of National Education terminates its preprimary training.	Training now the sole responsibility of the Provincial Education Departments and certain HEIs.
1986	Variety of preschool options available to white children. Services for other racial groups limited to Welfare and Religious Organizations.	Both subsidized and private preschools available. Many different types of service delivery, especially for whites. Quality is variable for all racial groups.
From late 1980s	Preschool training comes under threat because of the imminent closure of many teacher training colleges.	Formal training opportunities for preschool teachers are decreased. In 2001 when all teacher training colleges were closed, only a handful of universities continued to offer a formal preschool qualification.
From early 1990s	Move to close all provincial preprimary schools in the Transvaal, even though these were becoming multiracial.	Provincial supported preschools were finally closed in the early 2000s.
1993	SAAECE is disbanded in favour of multiracial South African Congress for Early	The intention is that this body will take over the work of SAACE and ensure educational redress and equity for teachers and children.

	Childhood Development (SA Congress for ECD).	
1994	African National Congress becomes the new democratic Government.	Far-reaching educational changes and new found optimism for significant changes to preschool education.
1995	A Curriculum Framework for Further Education and Training.	This was an important informing document for Curriculum 2005 (which was to become the new curriculum framework for South Africa).
1995	White Paper no.1 on Education and Training.	The introduction of the term ECD and a new educational vision. The intention to introduce in 2010 one compulsory preschool year to be called the reception year (Grade R). Grade R is to be first year of the Foundation Phase.
1996	The South African Constitution.	The democratic underpinning for all other Acts.
1996	The South African Schools Act.	The introduction of immense educational change, for example, an Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) system.
1996	Curriculum 2005: Lifelong Learning through a National Curriculum Framework.	The initial outline of the new curriculum is published. In reality, very little focus was on Grade R.
1996	The Interim Policy Document for ECD.	Advocates an informal approach to ECD. Informs White Paper no.5 on ECD.
2001	The ECD Audit.	Presents an overview of the current state of ECD in the country. Informs White Paper no.5.
2001	The National Pilot Project	Informs White Paper no.5. Findings suggest the most economical model is to locate Grade R at existing primary schools.
2001	White Paper no. 5 on ECD.	80% of Grade Rs are to be located at primary schools. Grade R is to become compulsory in 2010. Informal, developmental approach is reiterated.
2001	White Paper no.6 Special Needs Education.	Guidelines for building an inclusive education system.
2002	Revised National Curriculum	Grade R is firmly entrenched in the Foundation Phase.

	Statement (RNCS) is released.	Intended integration of Learning Areas into three learning programmes. Learning Outcomes (LOs) and Assessment Standards (ASs) clarified.
2003	Revised National Curriculum Statements: Teachers Guides for the Development of Learning Programmes.	Initially Grade R was not mentioned. However, interpretation of document reinforces a prescriptive approach towards teaching and learning in Grade R.
2007	National Curriculum Statement Assessment Guidelines for Foundation Phase Grades R -3.	Official interpretation has reinforced a performance-orientated approach. Specific LOs and ASs are assessed to the exclusion of other Learning Areas.
2008	Foundations for Learning Campaign. Grade R guidelines are published in 2010.	Focus on improving reading writing and numeracy abilities (DoE, 2008). Little is actually mentioned in relation to Grade R but the focus on assessment has been sharpened, resulting in a more formal approach to Grade R.
2009	Department of Government Communications and Information Systems	It is announced that Grade R will not become compulsory by 2010 but that the programme of action for the medium term strategy is to set up the early childhood development programme to ensure universal access to Grade R by 2014 (Government Communications, 2009).
2010	The draft Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) is published.	The NCS is to be replaced by this document. Four subjects comprise the Foundation Phase. A performance-driven discourse is prioritized.

2.2.1 *Development of the preschool movement in South Africa*

Within the Western world, the significance of early childhood education has been acknowledged since the time of Plato. The theories and practices of many great educators including Commenius, Rosseau, Pestalozzi and Fröbel, have all pointed to the benefits of laying a sound foundation in the years before formal schooling (Webber, 1978; Gordon & Browne, 2008; Nutbrown, Clough & Selbie, 2008). However, it was only during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the preschool movement gathered impetus. Different preschool models were developed according to the social and historical influences of the time.

The three models that have had the greatest impact on the South African preschool movement will be explained briefly and their influence on the South African movement outlined.

Preschool Models that have influenced ECD and Grade R Practice in South Africa

The kindergarten was advocated by Fröbel (1782-1852) as a play-based approach that attempted to achieve a balance between the child's freedom to grow and develop naturally and society's obligations to impart the desired skills, knowledge, attitudes and values needed by the child to become a successful citizen (Braun & Edwards, 1972). Though this model was widely acclaimed and influenced preschool models in both the United States and Europe, it was not widely accepted in England where alternative models were being developed. According to Prochner & Kabiru (2008) and Pence (2004), because of the reluctance of the English colonists to accept the kindergarten model, it has only had a modest influence on public schools in South Africa. It was introduced to South Africa in the 1930s and its most lasting influence is probably in the name itself. The term kindergarten is often used synonymously with other terms to describe the year before school (now termed Grade R—the reception year) in South Africa.

The second model was developed during the industrial revolution in Great Britain. Resultant poverty and neglect of many children prompted Robert Owen, a Scottish industrialist, to introduce in 1861 what has become known as the British Infant School model. According to Pence (2004) and Prochner & Kabiru (2008), the Infant School model, though developed on what was believed to be the child's natural learning style

and play, became a highly-regimented and authoritarian model emphasizing a more formal, school readiness approach which focused on preparing children for the demands of formal schooling (see 3.4). Prochner & Kabiru (2008) argue that, because of this authoritarian stance, it was easily assimilated into and strongly influenced the colonial school system. This influence is still visible in many contemporary ECD models in South Africa (Pence, 1999).

In 1919 Margaret McMillan, with her sister Rachel, introduced the concept of an open-air nursery school in an attempt to counter the effects of social and economic deprivation on young children in Bradford, England. In this third model, which became known as the nursery school, the emphasis was on hygiene, adequate nutrition and appropriate stimulation of children through motor training and development of the senses. Like the kindergarten movement, this model was underpinned by the notion of learning through play. The importance of play was reinforced by Susan Isaacs (1929), a prominent English early childhood educator of the early nineteen hundreds. This more informal approach towards the education of the young child has probably been the most influential model within the South African preschool movement but, according to Prochner & Kabiru (2008), it is the model that is the most difficult to assimilate into the public school system because of its differing philosophical underpinnings and different requirements in teacher preparation. This dichotomy between this model and a more authoritarian, didactic model of ECD/Grade R provisioning continues to plague the ECD field and is one of the reasons for the tensions that exist in current service delivery.

The South African Preschool Story— An Introduction

Within South Africa, the introduction of preschool education had a slow start and appears to have been driven by social and economic imperatives. The first preschool, which was introduced by missionaries, was opened in Cape Town in 1830 for slave children and this was followed by a class for poor European children in 1833 (Prochner & Kabiru, 2008). Prochner and Kabiru, (2008) contend that this was a didactic model which emphasized a more formal approach towards teaching and learning and therefore it became easy to later align this approach with that of the Infant School model. Prochner and Kabiru (2008) concur with Anning (1991) that the rationale behind the opening of these schools reflected the dominant thinking of the time that 'civilization was to be attained through knowledge of western literature and science that involved the

denigration and eventual elimination of local heritage' (Macaulay, 1935:119 cited in Prochner and Kabiru, 2008). Though this type of thinking might have changed in recent times, the acceptance of a structured, formal preschool model appears to be very well entrenched within many sectors of South African society. Today this formality is one of the tensions that impacts on the implementation of ECD/ Grade R services (see 3.4).
Despite this early start there did not appear to be much demand for early childhood education in South Africa until the 1930s. Seemingly, as in England and Europe, the more prosperous population was able to look after and educate their young children at home and the less affluent and indigenous people were left to their own devices.

Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s isolated attempts to reduce mortality and morbidity rates and to promote the healthy development of young children through the extension of health and welfare services were made. Social need and poverty provided the final stimulus for the Johannesburg local health department to introduce nursery health classes in Vrededorp and Fordsburg[13] in 1930 (Webber, 1958). These classes were followed by similar ones being established throughout the Transvaal as well as in the other three provinces.

However, most of these preschools were established through voluntary effort and private initiatives with some support from welfare agencies. There was little concrete support from the education authorities, a situation which did not change significantly for most South Africans during the remainder of the twentieth century (Webber, 1978). The majority of preschools were privately owned and run by white middle class women who had an interest in the welfare and education of young children. The preschool model that was adopted by these early pioneers was strongly influenced by the McMillan nursery school model. This model, reinforced by similar approaches from the kindergarten model, became, with minor adaptations, the prototype for organized private preschool

[13] These were, and still are, two inner city suburbs of Johannesburg. Van Onselen (2001:ix) describes Johannesburg as a "concrete encrustation set on rocky ridges … without fertile soil, striking natural vegetation, a lake or a mountain …" Van Onselen (2001) comments that from its founding in 1886 after the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg became the hub of the Transvaal Republic transforming it from a modest agricultural economy to a colony boasting the world's largest and most technologically sophisticated gold-mining industry. Men, women and children from all over the world poured into what van Onselen (2001: xvii) calls "the cauldron of capitalist development … giving the Rand a cultural diversity and social texture that bubbled with excitement and vitality". The early Johannesburg was characterized by class and racial diversity. The 'Randlords' pursued wealth and elsewhere in the city the dusty streets were filled with people eking out a living. Economic hardship, exacerbated by socio- political conditions in the early twentieth century contributed to the influx of Afrikaners to the city. Many "squatted" in the inner city suburbs of Vrededorp and Forsdsburg. Unemployment and socioeconomic hardship was rife, resulting in both national and local government relief efforts. One of these was the establishment of nursery classes.

provisioning. Hence, in South Africa a more child-centred play-based model which encouraged children to learn through exploration and discovery became the accepted preschool approach within the organized private preschool community during the mid nineteen twenties.

This model catered for children between the ages of three to six and classes preferably comprised a relatively small number of children. The older group (now the Grade R year) would have ideally housed not more than 20 to 24 children. The school day was short, beginning at 9am and ending at midday. Towards the latter half of the twentieth century, the length of the school day increased, for example, the school hours were between 7h30 and 13h00 to accommodate (to an extent) working mothers. This was the model of preschool education that was accepted by the education authorities when they eventually began to show a greater interest in preschool provisioning in the early nineteen seventies.

However, as already noted, since the inception of the preschool movement in South Africa, the play-based approach has always been challenged by some individuals who have opted for a more formal stance. (This scenario is similar to that found throughout the western world (see 3.2.1 & 3.4). There are many reasons for this tension between a play-based and more formal approach to ECD. As Anning, (1991; Anning & Edwards, 2006) notes some of these reasons include parental expectations and the top-down pressure from the formal school. Without an in-depth understanding of how young children best develop and learn (see chapter 3), it becomes 'the obvious thing to do'—to teach young children their numbers and letters as preparation for Grade 1. Within the South African context other possible reasons for this increasing formality include a lack of educational and political will to further the preschool movement (Porteus, 2004), limited subsidy for establishing and maintaining preschools, challenges with the registration of preschools and limited training of preschool teachers—challenges which still plague the ECD movement in South Africa today. These aspects are discussed more fully in the remainder of this chapter.

Preschool Provisioning, Training, and Advocacy

From the outset, state authorities appeared to distance themselves from becoming too involved in preschool education. It was chiefly through private initiatives, community and parental involvement that the movement continued to advance. In 1939, the Nursery School Association of South Africa was formed and it was this association (later renamed the South African Association for Early Childhood Education and then still later

Educare) that for many years kept issues relating to standards and quality service provisioning and training for preschool teachers on the table (Webber, 1978).

Because of the stance taken by the various education departments, different types of ECD provisioning and service delivery came into being. Types of service delivery were informed by race and to a lesser extent socioeconomic needs. Service provisioning favoured white children, with few services being available for children of other racial groups (NEPI, 1992). The *apartheid* government further entrenched the marginalization of preschool education by stating in its Manifesto on Education published in 1948 that 'parents must not shuffle off onto others the duty of bringing up their own children' (cited in Webber, 1978:94). The state accepted limited social responsibility for poor white children but offered little in the way of educational or other support for preschool children of other racial groups (NEPI, 1992).

The opening of nursery classes necessitated training for personnel working in these schools. However, from the outset, preschool teacher training was marginalized by provincial education authorities and universities alike (Webber, 1978). Training, which was fraught with difficulties, was predominately provided for white preschool teachers. Training opportunities for the other racial groups were sporadic and hampered by even more obstacles. Prejudice, fear, ignorance and deeply embedded political ideologies designed to entrench racial domination were some of the factors that mitigated against the development of preschool education for other racial groups (Webber, 1978; Van Den Berg & Vergani, 1986; NEPI, 1992).

In the 1970s, preschool education experienced a period of considerable growth when, following the National Education Policy Act of 1967, the white provincial education departments became responsible for what was now termed pre-primary education and were empowered to introduce pre-primary training courses (Reilly & Hofmeyr, 1983). In addition, a few shorter training courses were established for coloured and black teachers. These were, however, short-lived and began to be phased out in the 1990s, as were many of the courses for white preschool teachers.

This lack of state commitment to the development of preschool education and training (especially for the black and coloured population) resulted in a strong private initiative which grew in strength from the 1970s onwards. The majority of preschool training was

offered by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). As a result over 60% of preschool teachers today have been trained via this non-formal route (DoE, 2001a and DoE, 2001c). The influence of NGOs within the preschool sector is still strong. Many of the recent changes to ECD policy and implementation have been driven by the NGO sector which must be credited with keeping the ECD flag flying.

Possibilities of Change – Investigating the Introduction of a Bridging Year

Education for the majority of South Africa's children was in a dismal state, and the 1976 uprising in Soweto and elsewhere resulted in an almost total disruption of education for many children (see 2.2). During the early 1990s, the plight of the majority of South Africa's preschool children continued to worsen. For example, there appeared to be increasing disparities both in access to and in quality of preschool services as well as high Grade 1 drop-out rates (Liddell & Kemp, 1995). Despite various education departments accepting some degree of responsibility for pre-primary education, this was generally very limited and there was considerable variation in service provisioning, registration of pre-primary schools, the nature of teachers' qualification, the funding of schools and the fees paid by the children's parents (NEPI, 1992). For many education departments, the introduction of some form of pre-primary education within the primary schooling system where teachers did not necessarily have to have a formal pre-primary teaching qualification was seemingly the most economical strategy.

Despite the fact that little was done at the time, it appears as if the recommendations made by the De Lange Commission (see 2.2) and the HSRC study on preschool education were pivotal to later thinking and strategising about preschool and, in particular, Grade R provisioning. As noted by NEPI (1992:39):

> The option of providing a one year pre-school programme for all children prior to formal school entry, either within or linked to the schooling system has attracted great a great deal of support from the broader education field, including the ANC Education Desk.

In summary, therefore, in 1995 when educational transformation was ushered in, pre-primary provision for the majority of South African children was bleak—there was lack of access and in many instances quality was questionable (NEPI, 1992; DoE, 2001c). The majority of pre-primary teachers (who were now called practitioners) were trained via non-formal routes. The quality of the training was variable. Child care, including the

teaching of the Grade R year, was regarded as women's work, and it was seriously undervalued. Funding varied and was generally inadequate. Practitioners received low salaries; they had low status and few, if any, career paths. This, then, was the state of ECD when the new government came to power in 1994.

The release in 1995 of a proposed new education dispensation raised the expectations of many in the preschool sector. It was hoped that for the first time the country would have a government education department that had the welfare of the preschool sector at heart. However, these hopes have not been realised.

2.2.2 *A new education era*

The introduction of a new democratic government in 1994 brought many changes to the country as a whole. These were framed by an enlightened Constitution which was underpinned by values of human dignity, equality and freedom (RSA, 1996a).

During the period of political transition prior to the formation of the new democratic government in 1994, multiple stakeholders and documentation including the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) (1992), the African National Congress's (ANC) Yellow book (1994) and the National Training Strategy Initiative contributed to the development of a new restructured curriculum, which was first articulated in the White Paper on Education and Training (DoE, 1995a). These changes were passed into law when the South African Schools Act (RSA 1996b) was promulgated. A new philosophical underpinning that was to be realized in Curriculum 2005 was envisaged.

Christie (WSoE, 2009) writes that these curriculum changes were informed by two prominent discourses. One was the discourse of rights and the other a discourse of human resource development relating to times of global change. However, consultations about the new curriculum were limited and there was no attempt to seek consensus. I would also suggest that in these transformation debates, little if any attempt was made to collaborate widely in relation to Grade R issues.

In 1995 a discussion document *A Curricular Framework for General and Further Education and Training* (DoE, 1995b) was published. This document underpinned *Curriculum 2005: Lifelong Learning through a National Curriculum Framework* (DoE, 1996b) and *Statement of the National Curriculum, Grades R-9* (DoE, 1997a). These documents in turn informed Curriculum 2005 which contained a number of central features such as the endorsement

of constitutional rights and values that underpin the South African Constitution and the adoption of an outcomes-based, learner-centred curriculum model that would be relevant, integrated and promote critical and creative thinking (WSoE, 2009). Despite Moll and Naicker's (2008) assertion that there are few instances of learner-centredness and constructivism in formal school practice, I suggest that many of these features form the basis of high quality ECD/Grade R programmes (see 1.7; 3.2 & 3.3). Yet, ironically, with the introduction of the NCS these curriculum features once so prominent in previous ECD programmes (see 1.7.1 & 1.7.2) have become overshadowed by the predominately didactic approach of contemporary ECD/Grade R programmes (WSoE, 2009) (see 3.4).

From a preschool perspective far-reaching education changes were introduced. An important innovation was the introduction of the term 'early childhood development' (ECD). This was defined as:

> An umbrella term which applies to the process by which children from birth to nine years grow and thrive, physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, morally and socially (DoE, 1995a:23).

This definition has had many implications for both the preschool and junior primary phases of education. It blurred the boundaries between these phases and emphasized a more developmentally-appropriate approach towards the education of young children (see 3.2). However, other educational changes introduced by White Paper no.1 (DoE, 1995a) did not necessarily provide support for the implementation of this definition. An important change in this regard was the reformulation of the formal schooling phases. What was previously the Junior Primary Phase became the Foundation Phase which was to include Grades 1–3, plus an additional year of schooling, Grade R. As previously mentioned Grade R was to have become compulsory for all children by 2010. However, due to implementation constraints this date has been postponed until 2014 and the status of Grade R has reverted from being compulsory to becoming universal. The exact meaning of a 'universal' Grade R year has not been clarified.

The White Paper on Education and Training (DoE, 1995a) provided new possibilities for the realisation of ECD services. In February 1996, the *Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development* was released. This Interim Policy acknowledged the inherited situation, the challenges facing the ECD sector and the steps needed to address these challenges. It clearly situated the envisaged curriculum framework for ECD within a developmentally-

appropriate paradigm (see 3.2.1) and acknowledged the role of the non-formally trained teacher in the roll-out of ECD provisioning. Furthermore, it reaffirmed the government's commitment to ECD and stated that 'a strategy has been devised to phase in the implementation of the reception year' (DoE, 1996a:1).

Informing this strategy was the implementation (in the same year) of the National Early Childhood Development Reception Year Pilot Project. A significant recommendation from this study, the findings of which were released in 2001, was that public primary schools were to become sites for Grade R and that approximately 85% of Grade R classes were to be situated at public schools. The National ECD Pilot Project (DoE, 2001b) and the Nationwide Audit of ECD Provisioning in South Africa (DoE, 2001c) — the aim of which was to provide accurate information on the nature and extent of ECD provisioning, services and resources — were the two principle documents that informed Education White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Education, which was released in October 2001. The principle recommendation in this paper is:

> …the establishment of a national system of provision of the Reception Year for children aged 5 turning 6 that combines a large public and smaller independent component. In this regard, our medium-term goal (2010) is for all children entering Grade 1 to have participated in an accredited Reception Year Programme (DoE, 2001a:8).

This White Paper clearly locates the envisaged Grade R within an ECD paradigm. It acknowledges the many challenges that plague the ECD sector. These include:

> …the measures to improve quality, equity and cost-effectiveness of Reception Year Programmes, the further development of the norms and standards, the qualifications framework and career paths for ECD practitioners; and ongoing development of the curriculum for the Reception Year, and the provision of more effective support to ECD practitioners to improve their teaching practices (DoE, 2001a:58-59).

However, although the documentation acknowledges an informal approach towards the realisation of Grade R and implicitly acknowledges the importance of high-quality ECD programmes and practices for both children and teachers, nowhere is it spelled out what such a programme would entail. As noted at the outset, in terms of the *Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development* (DoE, 1996a), provision of a 'reception programme' had to demonstrate that the programme follows the national curriculum guidelines which are

laid out in the Learning Programmes and in the National Curriculum Statement (DoE, 2002). The policy documents give very little input on how to implement an effective teaching and learning programme for the Grade R child.

2.2.3 *Towards an organized curriculum for the Grade R year*

The introduction of an official curriculum for ECD is a relatively new concept in South Africa and came into being with the introduction of the NCS. An HSRC investigation into education revealed that 'there is no fixed curriculum for preprimary education and consequently curriculum development falls on the individual preprimary teacher' (Reilly & Hofmeyr, 1983:3). The onus was therefore on the individual teacher to ensure appropriate learning content and learning experiences were included in the daily programme (Reilly & Hofmeyr, 1983). These decisions were based on a deep and rich understanding of children, how they learn and the widely debated questions 'What knowledge is of most worth, and how is it best conveyed to children?' Teachers' interpretation of these questions was, of course, influenced by their understandings of childhood and children (see 3.3.2) and their understandings of quality education (see 1.7.3).

This early childhood curriculum was viewed through a broad lens; guidelines were provided by various education departments as well as the NGO movement and underpinned by the notion of a play-based approach towards teaching and learning. The organized preschool movement adopted a traditional play-based approach towards ECD/Grade R (see 1.7; 3.2.1) (Reilly, 1983). The introduction of a compulsory Grade R year (see 2.2.1) shifted the ECD discourse (perhaps unintentionally) from one that predominately emphasized an informal, play-based approach towards teaching and learning to one that focused on the NCS with specified Learning Areas, LOs and ASs; in other words, a more structured curriculum approach.

The NCS (DoE, 2002) provides for eight Learning Areas, namely Languages and First Additional Language, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Life Orientation, Arts and Culture, Technology and Economic and Management Sciences. Each Learning Area has specific LOs which are the same across all years of schooling. It is the ASs that change for each grade. In the Foundation Phase the eight Learning Areas are merged into three Learning Programmes, namely Literacy, Numeracy and Life Skills. This integration is clearly articulated in the NCS document yet somehow the three Learning Programmes

appear to have been (erroneously, I would argue) equated with three specific Learning Areas, namely Language, Mathematics and Life Orientation. Consequently, these three Learning Areas are driving the Grade R curriculum to the exclusion of other LOs and ASs that comprise the other five Learning Areas. This perception is becoming entrenched and can in part be explained by the assessment policy guidelines (DoE, 2007) which stipulate that children are only to be assessed in the specific three Learning Areas mentioned above, namely Language, Mathematics and Life Orientation.

2.2.4 *Critique of the National Curriculum Statement*

The NCS (DoE, 2002) was informed by the notion of a united, democratic and internationally competitive country with literate, creative and critical citizens leading productive lives, motivated towards life-long learning in a country free from violence, discrimination and prejudice. These are all attributes that should underpin a high quality ECD/Grade R programme (see 1.7). Yet, it appears that in the interpretation of this document, these lofty ideals have become forgotten, or even lost.

According to Christie (WSoE, 2009:26), Curriculum 2005 was lacking in a number of crucial dimensions. 'It did not specify core knowledge and concepts in relation to content; it did not elaborate on pedagogy; and it did not take into account the different contexts in which the curriculum would be implemented in South African schools.' Consequently, Curriculum 2005 proved to be unwieldy and difficult to implement. It was heavily criticised by a number of South African educationists such as Jansen and Taylor (2003); Jansen (2001a; 2001b) and Taylor and Vinjevold (1999) because of 'its hasty implementation with scanty resources into unequal contexts, and of its slender notions of learner-centerdness and constructivism' (WSoE, 2009:27). These criticisms resulted in the introduction of a more streamlined Revised National Curriculum Statement in 2002 (currently referred to as the National Curriculum Statement) where the fundamental approach of an outcomes-based, learner-centred and integrated curriculum without specific content was retained, together with a cumbersome system of continuous assessment.

It appears that this interpretation of the NCS has been uncritically accepted by many ECD/Grade R teachers, teacher unions and other early childhood organizations (WSoE, 2009). There are many reasons for this unquestioning acceptance of the new curriculum, including amongst others, the massive political shifts in South Africa that commenced in 1990, the massive educational changes, the inferior status of early childhood

development and ECD teachers (see 2.2.6), contested understandings of what constitutes high quality early years practice and inadequate ECD stakeholder representation in the curriculum debates that followed the 1994 transition.

South Africa's curriculum documents, or at least teachers' interpretations of them, appear to have further entrenched a didactic teaching and learning approach (see 3.4). The current emphasis on the implementation and assessment of specific LOs and ASs related to the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills has, it appears, resulted in a restricted interpretation of the NCS in which the pedagogical needs and interests of the Grade R children have been marginalised. Teachers ought to be able to place the LOs and ASs within a broad theoretical framework and use this framework to guide the implementation of an effective Grade R curriculum; one that is informed by a play-based approach sensitive to contextual and other factors which could be aligned with the NCS LOs and ASs. However, many teachers will need support to do so competently and confidently.

The NCS could provide space for such an alternative curriculum as it assigns a major role to the teacher in designing curriculum and assessment. The Teacher's Guide (DoE, 2003) suggests that Learning Programmes be developed by a team of teachers, while work schedules (which provide an overview of the yearly planning) and lesson plans be drawn up by the individual teachers. Core knowledge and concepts, scope and sequencing, and planning of assessment become the responsibility of the teacher. This is not a new concept in early years teaching (1.7 & 2.2.3). A comment echoed by many ECD teachers during this research study comes to mind, 'We have always been OBE based'.

Why then, with the introduction of the new curriculum did ECD/Grade R teachers become so accepting and uncritical of the narrow, prescriptive, interpretation that was given to the NCS? Perhaps, as Christie (2008) argues, the NCS curriculum approach requires more from teachers than the documents themselves acknowledge. I explore this question in more detail in chapter four when I interrogate the pivotal role of the teacher in ensuring effective curriculum delivery.

Given the abovementioned problems with the implementation of the NCS, a radical curricula revision entitled Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) is envisaged for 2012. Key changes include the replacement of the Learning Areas with subjects. The Foundation Phase will comprise four subjects, namely Home Language,

First Additional Language, Mathematics and Life Skills (which has been broadened to include beginning knowledge, and arts and culture) (DBE, 2010b). However, the proposed documents are worrying as there still appears to be scant acknowledgement of contextual diversity and very little in the way of appropriate methodological suggestions that would promote effective Grade R pedagogy. In its current form, CAPS is I suggest a document that will promote the ongoing pervasive formal creep and entrench a more formal approach towards Grade R pedagogy (1.3). At the time of writing this document has not been finalised.

2.2.5 *A selection of South African research literature*

I examine a report released in 2008 by the National Treasury of the Republic of South Africa and interrogate two research projects that investigated understandings of a quality Grade R within a South African context.

National Treasury Report

This report argued for viewing Grade R through a different lens, one that would enable a more reliable assessment of what is being achieved rather than success being measured through the number of children who have access to this year of schooling (National Treasury of RSA, 2008). The report outlines the confusion relating to the understanding of quality in ECD and highlights the importance of the DoE explicitly clarifying curricula expectations for Grade R. These should, according to the report, include input relating to structured play and appropriate methodologies to enable teachers to achieve the NCS Learning Outcomes. Of crucial importance is the setting out of indicators that would enable the judging of quality in Grade R.

The Eastern Cape Department of Education

In 2008 this Department released the findings of the first stage of a research project which investigated the quality of teaching and learning in Grade R in 250 classrooms (Eastern Cape Department of Education, 2008:9). Overall, the results are disturbing and the conclusion was that many schools are not in a position to implement an appropriate and acceptable reception year, despite an increase in the number of Grade R children who attend these schools. The classroom environment and the educational programme were found to be so lacking in substance that they could possibly be harmful to the wellbeing of children, from an educational as well as a health perspective.

Unsurprisingly, the quality of teaching and learning was found to be exceptionally low with only 12 schools showing evidence of competence according to the NCS outcomes and Level 4 ECD practitioner outcomes. As I have already argued, the NCS itself is a problematic document. The recommendation that the national DoE should focus on the quality of the Reception Year programme within the framework of the Foundation Phase programme is problematic (Eastern Cape Department of Education, 2008) because of the more formal approach to that has seemingly been adopted. Furthermore, as I have previously argued (see 1.7) there are contested understandings of what constitutes a quality Grade R programme and I would suggest that the DoE has not yet engaged rigorously with this debate.

The Zenex Grade R Research Project

This project, the findings of which were released in 2010, explored the meaning of quality within the Grade R context. Various indicators were interrogated including costing, the number of children who have access to Grade R and the 2006 Department of Social Development's guidelines for Day Care centres (these focus predominately on appropriate settings and the emphasis is on pre-Grade R children or children between birth to 4 years) (SAIDE, 2010:10). The positioning of the Grade R year came under scrutiny with most participants agreeing that this is a unique year and is at best a bridge into formal schooling. Participants in this study agreed that Grade R children have special learning requirements best met through a play-based approach that facilitates continued development on the birth to nine trajectory; in other words, a model that is framed by developmentally appropriate practice. Not it appears, a curriculum model which is underpinned by an understanding of social and cultural contexts and which will further equity and social justice (see 3.3.2).

The report emphasises that being able to identify the target audience is another important dimension in the quest to understand what comprises quality in the Grade R context. Within South African ECD/Grade R discourse this includes children, their parents, the community and teachers. An important dimension is, of course, appreciating their individual contexts. For many this context is a disadvantaged one; many children come from impoverished homes (see 2.2.1) and Grade R might be their first exposure to any form of organised learning. I would argue that given this scenario the appropriateness of the programme needs careful consideration, and quality could be equated with a play-based programme that takes cognizance of holistic development

underpinned by a deep understanding of sociocultural contexts and a specific (critically reflective) role for the teacher.

The problematic area of ECD/Grade R teacher qualifications was also explored in the report (see 2.2.1; 2.2.2 & 2.2.6). Suffice it to say, however, that this report sketches a picture of poorly qualified teachers, who currently have few career pathways. And as research in other countries has shown (see 1.7.1), this can have a negative impact on classroom delivery (Sylva et al., 2004).

Given the current status quo, the report stresses the need for collaboration and networking across the ECD sector; this includes NGOs, HEIs and the many government departments involved in the multisectorial approach towards ECD. Within this framework of collaboration, curricular issues need to be interrogated. This includes reviewing programmes in relation to content both for children and for teachers.

Finally the report recommends ongoing support for teachers to enable them to enhance the children's teaching and learning. This support should relate to curriculum in general but in particular to planning, choice of content, methodologies as well as learning resources. In closing, the report acknowledges the remarks made by the National Treasury Report (2008:6) namely, '...adding Grade R to the existing responsibilities of people with no previous knowledge of Grade R, and limited understanding of what it entails, is viewed as a problematic approach.'

2.2.6 *The present realities*

Unresolved issues inherited from the past continue to plague Grade R delivery, especially in the public schooling sector. The Grade R teacher is often poorly qualified (the lowest recommended qualification being a full ECD, NQF (National Qualifications Framework) level 4[14] and some teachers have no ECD/Grade R training). The Draft Findings of the HSRC Teacher Qualifications Survey (TQS) (DoE, 2009), commissioned by the DoE, found that in public schools only 42% of Grade R teachers had a professional teaching qualification. Of these 42% only 12% have a specialisation in preschool teaching. Less

[14] The introduction of the new education dispensation in 1996 resulted in a new qualification framework for the country. All qualifications are rated on a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and accredited by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). A full level 4 ECD qualification equates to a Further Education and Training Certificate (FETC) which is the equivalent of a school leaving certificate awarded to Grade 12 learners. A level 4 qualification is not recognized by the Department of Education for salary purposes; nor is it recognized by the South African Council for Education (SACE) as a teaching qualification. Therefore Grade R teachers with a level 4 ECD qualification cannot register as teachers with SACE and are only paid a stipend known as a conditional grant by the provincial Department of Education.

than 5% of the professionally unqualified Grade R teachers have ECD or ABET (adult basic education and training) qualifications.

ECD qualifications (including those of the Grade R teacher) do not equate with the qualifications laid down for educators in other phases of education (DoE, 2000), and most HEIs do not offer preschool qualifications. It is difficult for many Grade R teachers to register with the South African Council for Educators (SACE) as professional teachers because their qualifications are below the recommended registration starting point of REQV 13[15]. Many teachers have received provisional accreditation but there is as yet no acceptable solution to this impasse.

Salaries remain low. In Gauteng, (at the time of writing in 2010) the practitioner grant is R3 000 per month, barely over the poverty line of R2500. Furthermore, salaries are not always paid on a regular basis. Sometimes teachers have to wait two months or more for their money (WSoE), 2009). In addition, current preschool qualifications determined by the NQF are not recognised for salary purposes by the Education Department. Government funding for this sector remains low (less than 2% of the gross education budget) and there is no career path for teachers. Thus conditions of service vary substantially from those applicable to the teachers in the 'formal sector' and serve to marginalise the ECD (and Grade R) teachers (DoE, 2001a, b).

2.3 *CONCLUSION*

In this chapter I presented a brief overview of the South African Education system and showed how this has impacted (or not) on the delivery of ECD/Grade R provisioning. By tracing the development of the preschool movement I demonstrated how these different understandings have influenced current ECD/Grade R provisioning. Conflicting policy documents (DoE, 2001a; DoE, 2002, DoE, 2008a; b) have led to contested understandings and implementation of ECD practice in general and the implementation of the Grade R year in particular. It has been informed by half-truths and a lack of deep understanding of how children best learn, develop and grow, and therefore what constitutes effective Grade R pedagogy.

[15] The recommended REQV 13 refers to a teacher who has a school leaving certificate (grade 12) plus a three year teaching qualification. SACE has granted many practitioners provisional accreditation pending the upgrading of their qualifications. This means they will have to further their qualifications but they are often hampered by the poor quality of their initial schooling. Some have gone on to complete an NQF level 5 ECD qualification which SACE currently recognizes for registration purposes.

This dismal position has over the years been exacerbated by ineffective regulations relating to accreditation of programmes and registration of schools, the lack of ECD funding (both for service provision and training) and the presence of poorly qualified or unqualified ECD teachers. This has been aggravated by the low status that is generally accorded to ECD/Grade R practices and pedagogy. Curriculum as noted in 1.7 is a highly contested issue. South Africa, it seems, has yet to engage in rigorous debate about what constitutes high quality Grade R practice.

In the following chapter I present alternative understandings of early childhood education. It interrogates the value of play as a framework for quality early learning and explores three distinct perspectives that inform and influence ECD pedagogy, particularly in the western world. I have chosen to interrogate these perspectives for the following reasons. The first perspective, a developmental orientation realised through DAP, has been particularly dominant throughout the African continent including South Africa (Nsamenang, 2006; Pence, 1999; 2004). This perspective continues to dominate early childhood discourses and pedagogy. The second approach, the instrumental or didactic approach is becoming increasingly pervasive and despite evidence to the contrary is being readily adopted by teachers as appropriate ECD practice. The third orientation, a historical-sociocultural perspective, offers an alternate view for practice.

CHAPTER 3: UNDERSTANDING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

3.1 *INTRODUCTION*

The purpose of this chapter is to explore three distinct perspectives that inform and influence ECD/Grade R pedagogy, namely a developmental perspective, a socio-cultural orientation and a didactic or instrumentalist perspective. In chapter 2, I traced the historical and contextual factors which led to the uptake and dominance of an ECD approach informed by a developmental perspective, and illustrated that despite this dominance there appears to be ongoing support for adoption of a more formal stance. In chapter 1, I showed that new pedagogical approaches to ECD were emerging from the influence of historical-socio-cultural theory. This chapter is a combination of a theoretical framework and a review of relevant and recent research which informs these three different perspectives. It comprises three sections.

Firstly, I examine western contemporary understandings of ECD/Grade R practice. I examine the importance of whole child development and learning, the theoretical constructs underpinning this notion, namely the developmental psychological tradition, and how children's learning is enhanced through appropriate early learning practices in an approach known as developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). I then review theories put forward by Gesell, Skinner, Bandura, Piaget, Erikson and Vygotsky which underpin DAP, as well as the contribution of brain research to an understanding of learning and development.

Secondly, I investigate the influence of contextual factors on young children's development and learning through what Anning, Cullen and Fleer (2009:1) term a 'historical-sociocultural theory'. 'New' ways of viewing children and their families coupled with alternative pedagogical approaches are emerging. This theory, which foregrounds the cultural and socially constructions of learning, has in recent years challenged the individualistic developmental perspective of learning as well as the instrumental or didiactic approach to early learning. Because of these challenges this paradigm will be interrogated and used as a lens through which to critique the other ECD perspectives highlighted in this thesis.

Thirdly, I explore a more didactic approach. Anning (1991) refers to this approach as an instrumental or utilitarian view of education inherited from the primary school. I examine how this approach competes with the more traditional play-based approach (DAP) towards early learning.

3.2 *THE DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGICAL TRADITION*

Early childhood education within the western world draws on a traditional body of knowledge that has informed learning in the early years. Early influences (see 2.2.1) came from Fröbel, the father of the kindergarten, the McMillan sisters, Susan Isaacs, and, in the USA, many early educators adopted Dewey's (1858–1952) philosophy, and preschools reflected the principles of a child-centred approach that encouraged active learning and social cooperation (Gordon & Browne, 2008). During the nineteen hundreds this body of knowledge was informed by different theories (mainly from the field of developmental psychology) and disciplines (predominately medicine and education). Many of these theories and much of the research that was generated in the mid to late 1900s affirmed what was often intuitively accepted by earlier proponents of the nursery school and kindergarten models (see 2.2.1). Children's learning is best supported through a play-based, informal approach towards teaching and learning that promotes the holistic development of children (Pellegrini, 1991; Spodek, Saracho & Davis, 1991; Moyles, 1989; 1994). As Riley (2003: xx) writes, 'play-based activities appear to meet all…educational aims'.

3.2.1 *Towards an understanding of Developmentally Appropriate Practice*

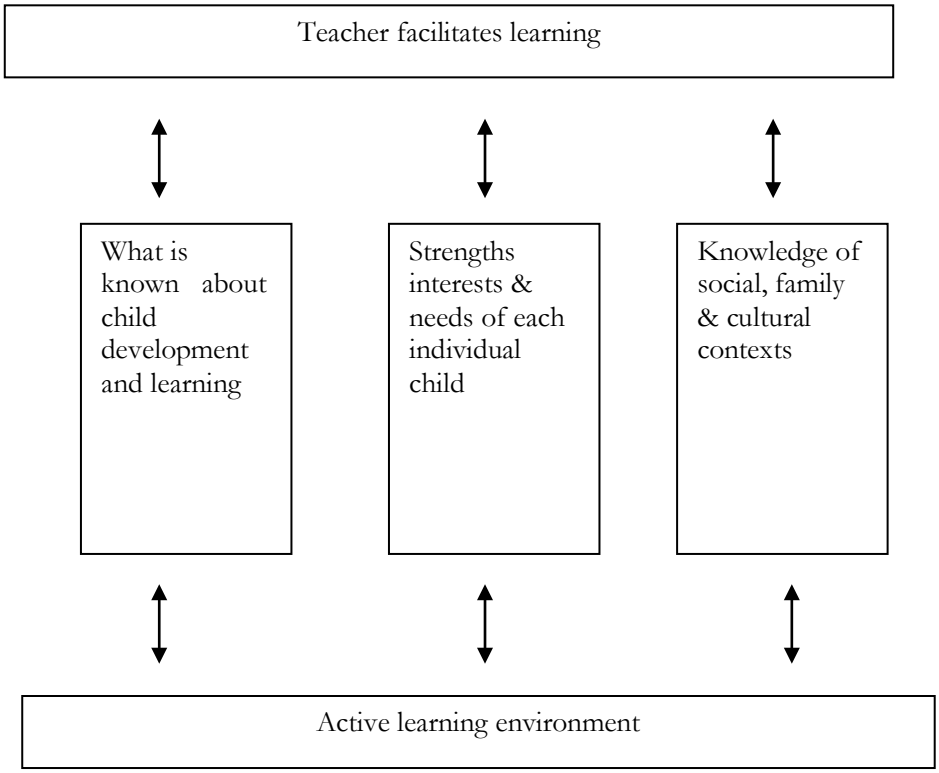
Despite the recognition of the value of play as an important vehicle for early learning, it has not necessarily been central to many ECD programmes. During the latter half of the twentieth century, political, social and economic pressures resulted in an explosion of different types of ECD services and programmes in America (Gordon & Browne, 2008) and England (Anning, 1991). These ECD services were not always subjected to rigorous state control. In the USA and England, for example, the registration of preschools and accreditation of programmes was haphazard and preschool teachers were not necessarily required to have a teaching qualification. This resulted in varying quality of ECD services and one of the consequences was the increasing formalization of preschool education

during the latter half of the twentieth century (Gordon & Browne, 2008; Stipek, 1994; Spodek et al., 1991).

In an effort to curb these more didactic, skills orientated approaches, an American organization, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) published a position paper in the late 1980s which outlined standards for high quality care and education. These guidelines, based on developmental learning theories, advocated an approach that became known as DAP (Morrison, 2006; Gordon & Browne, 2008). After in-depth consultation and collaboration with early childhood professionals, this position paper was adopted in 1996 (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). The most recent position paper adopted in 2009 describes DAP as being 'grounded both in research on child development and learning and in the knowledge base regarding educational effectiveness, … the framework outlines practice that promotes young children's optimal development and learning' (NAEYC, 2009:1). Furthermore, this paper stresses that teachers ought to keep in mind the identified goals for children's development and learning and be intentional in helping children achieve these goals (NAEYC, 2009).

According to NAECY (1997; 2009) three pillars form the foundation of DAP. These are: (1) what is known about child development and learning? (2) What is known about the strengths, interests and needs of each individual child?, and (3) knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which children live. The role of the teacher is to facilitate learning through an active learning environment (NAEYC, 1997; 2009).

Figure 3.1: **A diagrammatic representation of DAP**



The first pillar outlines a role for the teacher who is expected to have good insight into what can be typically expected from a child at a specific age and what strategies and approaches would best promote optimal development and learning. According to NAEYC (2009), with this knowledge teachers can make reasonable decisions about what would constitute an appropriate environment, materials, interactions and activities. With these insights teachers should be able to promote the unique learning needs of each child as well as recognize diversity within the group. The second pillar should enable teachers to become responsive to individual differences in children and this responsiveness should allow them to make necessary and appropriate adaptations to their practice. NAEYC (2009) advocates that for teachers to be in a position to do this effectively they need to know every child extremely well. This in depth knowledge comes from teachers employing a range of classroom strategies as well as observing children and holding dialogues with parents and caregivers. The third pillar refers to the values, expectations, behavioural and linguistic conventions that shape the children's lives. This includes 'striving' to understand the children's communities so that the learning and teaching opportunities are relevant, meaningful and respectful to the both the children and their

families (NAYECE, 2009). According to Gestwicki (2007), the teacher should find a balance between her knowledge and understanding of the children and the family's desires and expectations.

DAP can therefore be viewed as an approach that is informed by what is known about children with respect to their developmental needs, their interests, abilities and home background and supported by a responsive teacher who promotes an activity-based learning environment (Kontos & Dunn, 1993; Stipek,1994). Within DAP the teacher bases new learning on that which the child already knows and is able to do. One of the teacher's roles is to challenge and stimulate the child so that new learning and skills are appropriated. In addition, the teacher reflects on the teaching and learning process, and in so doing new goals are articulated, and a positive continuous learning cycle is set in motion. Nothing is left to chance – all learning is intentional; 'setting up the classroom, planning the curriculum; making use of various teaching strategies, assessing children, interacting with them and working with their families' (NAEYC, 2009:10).

DAP is guided by 12 principles of child development and learning that inform practice. Though each principle describes an individual factor they are interconnected and cannot be viewed in isolation (NAEYC, 2009). The twelve principles are derived from the developmental and learning theories that underpin DAP and these theories are discussed in 3.2.2 when I present an overview of the informing developmental and learning theories. For the sake of clarity however, these principles are briefly mentioned here.

The first principle is based on the notion of holistic child development and that children are thinking, moving, feeling and interacting human beings. The interrelationship between the developmental domains is acknowledged. The second and third principles talk to the sequence and rate of development which stem from Gesell's maturational theory (Gesell, 1974). Principle four espouses the interaction between biological maturation and experience while number five explores the effects of early intervention (both cumulative and delayed) on child development and learning. Principle six acknowledges the increasing complexity and self-regulation and symbolic capabilities of the child. Principle seven embeds optimal development within an affective framework while number eight explores the importance of the social and cultural contexts in relation to development and learning. Numbers nine and ten relate to how children learn and attempt to understand their world and to the types of teaching strategies and interactions that support this learning. Principle ten acknowledges the importance of play as a vehicle

for self-regulation as well as for promoting language and for cognitive and social competence. Number eleven encompasses the Vygotskian notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978) and the last principle talks to the notion of learning dispositions (see 1.7.1). These 12 principles reinforce the strong developmental underpinning of DAP but do make an attempt to acknowledge alternative cultural and social contexts. However, as discussed later on in this section this acknowledgement is not far reaching enough.

Proponents of DAP acknowledge that successful implementation is complex (Adams & Swadener, 2000; Goldstein, 2006) and consequently as Grisham-Brown et al., (2005) and Nutbrown (2006) argue there is no consensus on how DAP should be implemented and what counts as appropriate early childhood education (Hatch, 2007). Despite this lack of consensus Pence & Marfo (2008) and Procher & Kabiru, (2008) note that DAP has been extremely influential and has guided and continues to guide early childhood practices in Africa.

According to Davin and van Staden (2005) within the South African context DAP implies that the learning environment is structured to enhance learning opportunities offered to the children. However, within this structure the children will be offered choices and a variety of activities to promote optimal learning and development. The daily programme comprises teacher-guided activities (whole group activities such as language rings, stories, music, movement or science and numeracy rings), child-initiated activities (free play) and routines (transition periods) - those everyday occurrences that give structure and consistency to the day (for example, toilet time, snack time and tidy up time) (Davin & van Staden, 2005). Because children should be engaged in active participatory learning, the importance of learning through play is highlighted (Kontos & Dunn, 1993). Within this teaching and learning environment teachers should be able to maximise the numerous incidental learning opportunities that present themselves throughout the day including during free play and routines. Sufficient and enriching opportunities for both outdoor and indoor free play should be provided. The pivotal role of the teacher as a supporter, and facilitator of learning is also acknowledged. This entails balancing what is known about effective ECD/Grade R practice (see 1.7), meeting current day educational demands and ensuring children are immersed in an appropriate play-based early learning programme (Davin & van Staden, 2005). It is an approach

which is underpinned by many implicit, taken-for-granted assumptions (Fleer, 2008) which have far reaching implications for practice.

The importance of play in optimizing early learning in DAP

As already stated, appropriate opportunities to play are crucial if the educational aims of DAP in early years teaching are to be met (Spodek et al., 1991; Riley, 2003; Bruce, 2004; Gordon & Browne, 2008; Wood, 2009; Rogers, 2011). Furthermore free play[16] is an essential component of DAP. Yet it is the very nature of a play-based approach that opens possibilities for alternative interpretations (Spodek et al., 1991; Riley, 2003; Bruce, 2004).

These different interpretations stem from different constructions of childhood (see 3.3.2) and different understandings of early childhood pedagogy (see 1.7.1). The exact nature of play and what teachers mean by a play-based approach is an area of debate and differing interpretation (Stipek & Byler, 1997). One thing appears to remain consistent, however: the acceptance that high-quality, well-planned and developmentally appropriate experiences will use play to promote learning (Pellegrini, 1991; Pramling Samuelsson, 2005; Pramling Samuelsson & Carlsson 2008). But what exactly is play and why is it an essential component of any early learning programme?

Play is the cornerstone of learning and theorists such as Piaget (1964), Erikson (1977) and Vygotsky (1978) (see 3.2.2) all acknowledge the pivotal role of play in enhancing growth, development and learning in the young child. The nature of play, its characteristics, and how it promotes growth, development and learning has been well-documented over a period of time (Garvey, 1977; Rogers & Sawyers, 1988; Moyles, 1989, 1994; Pramling Samuelsson, 2005; Johannsson & Pramling Samuelsson 2006). Wood, 2009 contends that while there is substantial evidence on learning through play there is little evidence on teaching though play. She comments, 'linking play and pedagogy has long been a contentious area because of the ideological commitment to free play and free choice' (Wood, 2009: 27).

[16] Free play is the term given to a form of play which is emphasized in DAP and traditional western approaches to ECD practice. In free play the children's right to choose what to play, how to play, and often, when to play is emphasized. Though the adult has a role in the structuring and facilitation of the play opportunities, children's play is largely self-initiated and controlled; during free play adults have minimal interaction with children (Gordon & Browne, 2008; Spodek et al., 1991).

Throughout history there have been attempts to define, explain and understand play but as Spodek et al. (1999:187) note both work and play are not concepts 'that can be identified in an all-or-one manner.' While there might be some debate relating to the stages and types of play[17], there is general agreement that play is a universal phenomenon and knows no cultural boundaries. It is culturally bounded, however, and children reflect their own social values and family ethical practices through play. What they play and how they play is determined by their specific cultural context (Nsamenang 2010; Wood, 2009; Gordon & Browne, 2008; Spodek et al., 1991).

According to many educationists such as Rogers and Sawyers (1988), Moyles (1989; 1994), Gordon and Browne (2008) and Spodek et al.(1991) play is a self-satisfying activity through which children come to understand life and gain control over their world. Other criteria by which play can be identified include that play behavior is spontaneous and requires the active engagement of the players. It is personally motivated by the satisfaction embedded in the activity and not governed by social demands. It is the activity itself rather than the goal that are important. Children supply their own meaning to play activities and control these activities themselves. Furthermore, play is free from rules imposed by the outside and if rules do exist they can be modified by the players. Play is useful to children because it helps them to understand their world both cognitively and affectively (Bruce, 2004; Spodek et al., 1991). Bruce (2004) further notes play allows the mind to become flexible, adaptive and imaginative and suggests that if imaginative types of play behaviours are encouraged they will help children to become more creative in adulthood.

Research has unequivocally shown that 'play and playful forms of activity potentially lead to towards increasingly complex forms of knowledge, skills and understanding, particularly in the social and cognitive domains' (Wood, 2009:30). Play should therefore be an essential underpinning component of early learning programmes. However, within the context of practice there is evidence to show that play can be problematic (Wood,

[17] As early as 1932, Parten described changes in children's social play. Children were described as progressing from solitary, unoccupied or onlooker players to becoming parallel players and finally engaging in cooperative play at approximately age five (cited in Spodek et al., 1991). Piaget (1962) outlined stages in play development as practice play, symbolic play and games with rules. These stages corresponded to the intellectual stages of development namely, the sensorimotor, preoperational and concrete operations stages described by Piaget (see 3.2.2 for further discussion on Piaget's theory). Different types of play have also been described. Play has been categorised as being indoor or outdoor play. Different play activities could comprise block play, construction and manipulative play, educational toy area, creative play, dramatic or fantasy play, sand and water play, wheel toys, climbing apparatus to name some different activities.

2009). If it is to be of educational value, teachers should neither idealise, nor trivialise play. It must be of sufficient intellectual challenge, especially for older children and sufficiently rigorous to guarantee optimal learning opportunities (Bennett, Wood & Rogers, 1997). Bennett et al. (1997) have shown that play can be repetitive and a waste of time. Bennett et al. (1997) found that in certain reception year classrooms play was limited in frequency, duration and quality. Good quality learning outcomes were not always achieved and it was difficult to sustain progression in learning through play. Where good quality play opportunities were limited, children were frustrated and lacked focus (Bennett et al., 1997). It is important for teachers to heed these findings and ensure that programmes incorporating play are framed by effective pedagogies. These ideas will be interrogated in more detail when the historical-sociocultural view is explored (see 3.3.3).

A critique of play and DAP

In recent years, contemporary ECD theorists such as Mac Naughton (2005) and Grieshaber and Cannella (2001) have interrogated the value of play through an alternative perspective, namely a post structural lens. They, together with other ECD educationists, for example, Spodek et al. (1991), Pramling Samuelsson (2005) and Gordon and Browne (2008) do not question the overall value of play in promoting early learning but ask pertinent questions such as whose learning does it privilege and whose learning is being marginalized? (Mac Naughton, 2005; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001). Mac Naughton (2005) has challenged the theoretical hegemony of developmentally appropriate practice especially in relation to gender preferences in play activities and gendered patterns of play. Mac Naughton (2005) argues that play always involves a power relationship between children, and each child's ability to play freely needs to be examined in the light of these power relationships. Concerns range around a number of issues, relating to, for example, racism, sexism, homophobia and classism (Derman-Sparks, 1991; Dau, 2001). These are issues which Mac Naughton (2005); Grieshaber and Cannella (2001) and Dahlberg et al. (1999) argue are not being addressed by a developmentally appropriate approach towards early childhood learning where the dominant culture, informed by western ways of knowing and doing, is privileged.

Grieshaber and Cannella (2001:7) state, for example, that 'developmental or child psychology has established itself as the grand narrative….or dominant discourse

regarding those who are younger' and Mac Naughton (2005) comments that 'some of this knowledge has settled so firmly into the fabric of early childhood studies that its familiarity makes it just seem 'right', 'best' and 'ethical" (p.1). Furthermore, they argue this dominant DAP discourse has given rise to the idea of a universal child, now a widely debated and contested notion in ECD literature. It is this tacit acceptance of a particular understanding of children and pedagogy that is being challenged by competing and contested understandings of what and how children should learn (see 3.3).

These authors also contend that the benefits of play are not universal and necessarily shared across all children and that play is not always a spontaneous activity in children's home and community cultures (Wood, 2009); Mac Naughton, 2005; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Dahlberg et al., 1999). Though little has been written about play within the African ECD context, Nsamenang (2008) suggests that play is an important part of African children's childhoods, but within an African context the emphasis is on peer involvement and learning. Though this emphasis is at odds with the focus on the individual which is foregrounded in the principles of DAP, it is this western understanding of DAP and play that informs ECD policy in South Africa. ECD in South Africa is underpinned by a developmental approach which highlights the importance of knowing who the young child is and planning learning and teaching environments and activities around each child's capabilities (DoE, 2001a; Davin & van Staden, 2005).

In an attempt to address some of the criticisms, especially those relating to issues around social and cultural contexts, the proponents of DAP acknowledged that it did not provide a space for teachers to make decisions which were culturally harmonious for the children they were teaching (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). They also acknowledged that developmental milestones informing this approach were based on data obtained from white, middle class children (NAEYC, 1997). According to Gordon and Browne (2008), adaptations to DAP, underpinned by the concept of culturally appropriate practice, have since been embraced (NAEYC, 2009). Gordon and Browne (2008) describe these as 'the ability to go beyond one's own sociocultural background to ensure equal and fair teaching and learning experiences for all' (p.53). Yet, in a rapidly changing world, these adaptations do not appear to have been sufficiently far-reaching. A possible reason could be that the 12 principles that inform DAP (see 3.2.1) continue to be drawn from developmental and learning theories that are predominately based on the dominant

western culture where developmental domains and a child's achievement of these are privileged.

Some of these learning and developmental theories which inform DAP are now reviewed as they provide the basis for understanding why DAP has become so influential and why some of the criticisms mentioned above have been leveled at this approach.

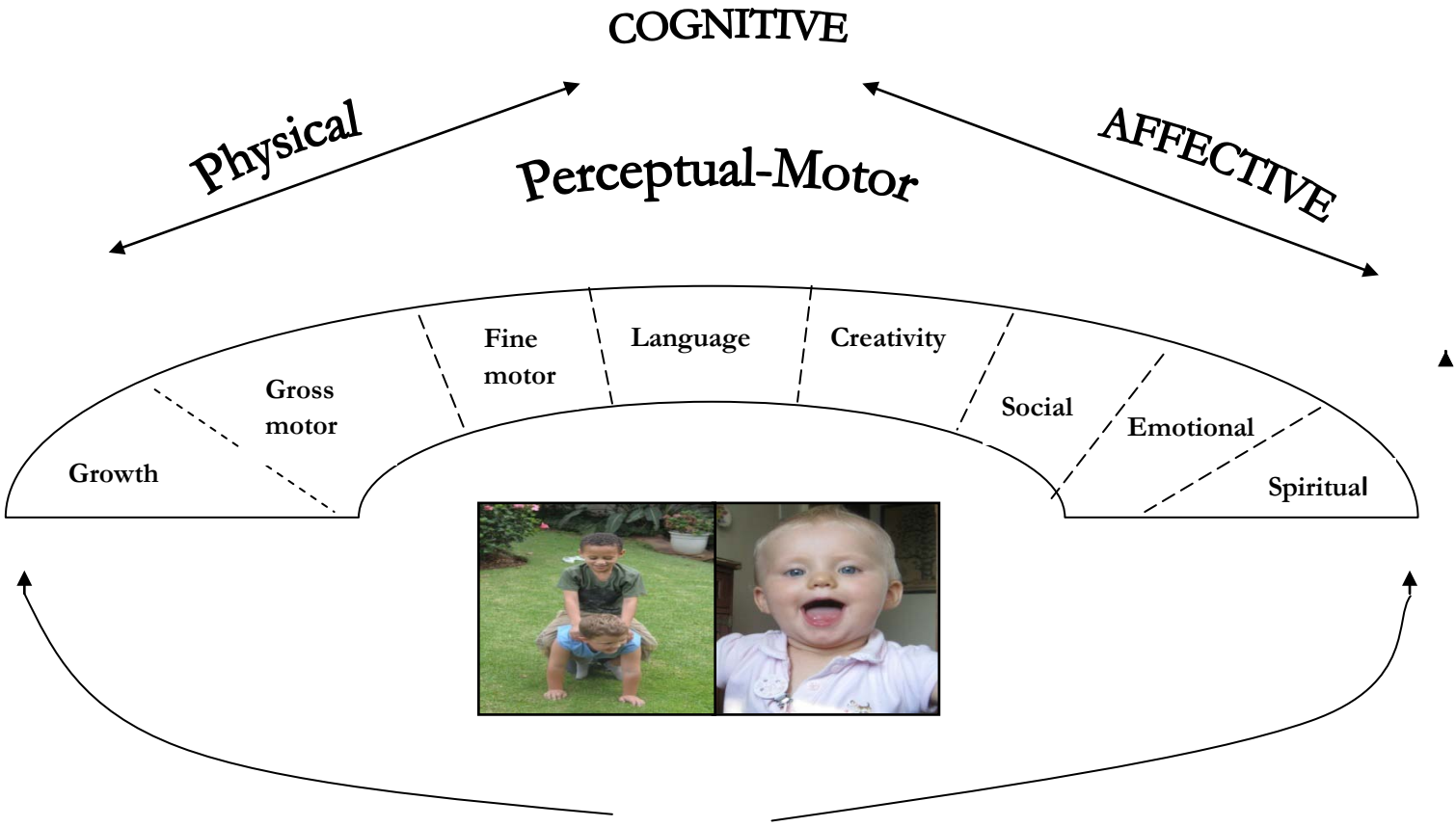
3.2.2 *Developmental and learning theories informing DAP*

The concept of whole child development

Central to a developmentally appropriate approach is the concept of the whole child (NAEYC, 2009). This concept is based on the principle that all aspects of human growth and development are integrated, and that all domains should be equally and simultaneously promoted and developed (Gordon & Browne, 2008; Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2006; Spodek & Saracho, 2006; Charlesworth, 2004). Growth and development are dynamic and constantly changing and are difficult to describe and predict. More recently the important influence of historical and cultural contexts on development has been recognised (Gordon & Browne, 2008), as well as the importance of early experiences in promoting optimal development. As Walsh (2005) and Woodhead (2006) argue, it is this contemporary developmental approach that should today be informing DAP and early childhood education. The focus should shift from privileging specific developmental domains to recognizing diverse cultural and social contexts.

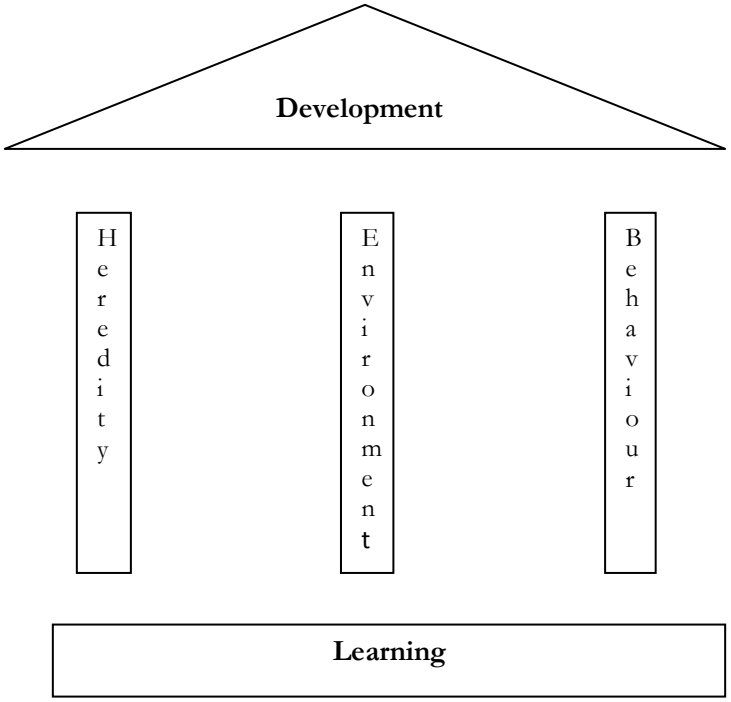
Different domains of development have been described. This separation into developmental areas is useful for the purpose of studying one or other area in depth or for planning particular learning activities, but children should be viewed in totality as these domains are interdependent. Psychologists recognise three broad domains, namely physical, cognitive and psychosocial development (Sprinthall, Sprinthall & Oja, 1994; Papalia et al., 2006; Santrock, 2003). In some early childhood literature, these domains are extended and might include physical, perceptual-motor, cognitive, language, social, emotional, creative, aesthetic, moral and spiritual development. Yet no one domain can be understood or its development enhanced in isolation.

Figure 3.2: A concept of whole child development



Today it is accepted that learning and development is influenced by heredity, the environment, and maturation of the body and the brain as well as behaviour (Papalia et al., 2006; Santrock, 2003; Sprinthall et al., 1994). Maturation is closely linked to brain development and the notion of critical and sensitive periods of learning (Riley, 2003; Bruce, 2004).

Figure 3.3: Correlation between heredity environment, behaviour, learning and development



The Theory of Maturation

The notion of maturation was captured by an American physician, Arnold Gesell (1880-1961), and is outlined in the Theory of Maturation. Because of the ongoing influence that this theory has had on ECD practice I would argue that it is necessary to place this theory in context in order to understand how it can both inform and constrain teaching practice.

Gesell was intrigued with the notion that children's internal clocks seemed to determine their growth and development. He identified age-appropriate developmental norms and then described the behaviours that supported and accompanied this development (Gesell, 1974). Maturation is described as the process of physical and mental growth that is determined by heredity. Maturation and growth are interrelated. Growth refers to the physical development of the child, while maturation alludes to the quality of that growth. Maturation theory supports the notion that much of development is genetically determined (Crain, 2005). Today this somewhat rigid notion is contested as the role of

the environment is acknowledged as also impacting hugely on children's development (Santrock, 2003; Crain, 2005; Papalia et al., 2006).

According to Gesell's theory, maturation sequences occur in an orderly and predictable way. Normal development includes a wide range of individual differences and, though the sequence of development is the same for all children, the rate varies (Illingworth, 1975). The sequence of development appears to be consistent across race, culture and countries. For example, all children will first develop head control, and then sit before walking. The average ages or norms when this behaviour is acquired would be head control at three months, sitting between six to eight months and walking at 13 months. Yet, we all know of children who either walked before a year or after 18 months, and they appear to be 'normal'. Milestones of development provide useful guidelines of anticipated behaviour; they should not be viewed as the ultimate determinant of what is 'normal'.

Another important principle of development is that 'development is dependent upon the maturation of the nervous system' (Illingworth, 1975:131). In other words, children cannot perform certain tasks unless they are physiologically and neurologically ready to do so. This principle can be closely related to newer research on brain development (see the following page) and both the principles of development and the findings on brain research should inform ECD/Grade R practice. For example, many of the perceptual-motor behaviours, such as spatial orientation, are only properly mastered and refined by children at around ages six to seven, and this mastery is promoted through movement activities (Gallahue, Werner & Luedke, 1975; Gallahue, 1982; Williams, 1983; Gallahue & Donnelly, 2003; Ayers, 2005). Yet teachers frequently persist in offering children, especially Grade R children inappropriate and sedentary activities such as worksheets to develop these skills (Jordan, 2009; WSoE, 2009).

What does maturational theory tell teachers about working with children? In brief, maturational theory is most useful in describing children's growth, development and typical behaviour. If used cautiously, the norms of development can inform teachers and parents if the child's development is within the normal range. The norms could thus become a useful tool to inform, for example, observation and assessment practices. Used judiciously, they can support good practice and help ensure that activities are both age appropriate, differentiated and meet the learning needs of all children. All these aspects should inform pedagogical practices. They should not become the determining norm or

standard upon which teachers base their practice. Furthermore, cultural and social contexts should always be considered.

New brain theories and learning

According to Bransford, Brown and Cocking (1999), findings from neuro and cognitive science suggest that learning changes the physical structure of the brain which alters how the brain functions, '… learning organizes and reorganizes the brain' (p.141). Different learning experiences enhance the brain's adaptability, promote the development of alternative neural pathways and boost memory. In other words, appropriate experiences will enhance the functional organisation of the brain and lead to greater learning. These findings have crucial consequences for South African children. Research findings show that the majority of five year olds are at a disadvantage because of exposure to multiple risk factors such as malnutrition and inadequate stimulation (Sameroff, 2005; Walker, Wachs, Meeks Gardner, Lozoff, Wasserman, Pollitt, et al., 2007).

Bransford et al. (1999:141) also note 'different parts of the brain may be ready to learn at different times' and that 'some experiences have the most powerful effects during specific sensitive periods, while others can affect the brain over a much longer time span'. Finding out which aspects of learning are tied to sensitive or critical periods (for example, some aspects of phonemic awareness, perception and language learning) and for which type of learning the time of exposure is less critical will have a significant impact on early learning.

The successful introduction of, for example, the First Additional Language (FAL) could be strongly influenced through the optimal utilisation of these developmental periods. As Bruer (2001:4, cited in Bruce, 2004) states, 'The core idea is that having a certain kind of experience at one point in development has a profoundly different impact on future behaviours than having the same experience at any other point in development.' This position is supported by Isbell and Isbell (2007) and Ayres (2005) who suggest that there are critical periods during which children more easily acquire essential perceptual-motor behaviours that support the acquisition of formal learning skills such as reading and writing. If teachers could plan teaching and learning experiences around these critical or sensitive periods the learning opportunities offered to young children could be enhanced.

Other findings arising from current knowledge of brain-based learning include the awareness that the basic area of the sensory-motor cortex is functioning and the brain is

more efficient from approximately ages six to seven (Gallahue & Donnelly 2003). From these findings it appears as if children at these ages are ready to embrace additional experiences—perhaps the challenges of more formal schooling?

Another important finding (long suspected but now proven) is that stress can impact negatively on brain development. Elkind (1991; 2001) maintains that inappropriate teaching and learning environments (see 3.4) result in stress which can have detrimental consequences for children's future learning. Furthermore, studies on brain-based learning point to learning being enhanced through an interactive play-based teaching and learning environment which is informed by a kinaesthetic approach incorporating all the senses. This approach, I would argue, could be realised through a culturally, contextually sensitive, developmentally appropriate programme (see 1.7.1; 1.7.2; 3.2.1 & 3.3.3) on what constitutes effective pedagogy in the Grade R year).

Piaget and Vygotsky: constructivism and child-centeredness

Piaget (1896-1980) sketched a portrait of children who are active agents in their own learning. They are sensory-motor learners, who interact with the environment and construct their own knowledge through exploration and discovery (Ginsburg & Opper, 1979; Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2006). Cognitive development occurs in stages and at each stage children's minds develop new ways of learning. Cognitive development involves a search for equilibration which occurs through a process of adaptation involving two processes which Piaget termed assimilation and accommodation (Piaget, 1964). Through these processes children develop increasingly complex cognitive structures which Piaget called schemata (Piaget, 1964). According to Piaget the shift in children's thinking from illogical and egocentric to more flexible and logical thinking depends upon neurological development and experience in adapting to the environment.

For Piaget, play serves the functions of assimilation and accommodation. He described three stages of play which are defined by the type of assimilative acts the children use. These are practice play, symbolic play and games with rules (Bruce, 2004). Symbolic play, where children either make themselves into something they are not or use objects for a purpose for which it is not normally used, is typical of preschool children. Games with rules promote social interaction and self-regulation, and provide valuable learning opportunities to Grade R children.

While Piaget focused on the individual's learning and was concerned with how cognitive development takes place from the 'the inside out', Vygotsky was more concerned with how it happens from the 'outside in' (Moll, 1989).

Vygotsky (1896-1934) highlighted the importance of social interaction in the construction of knowledge thereby recognising that knowledge is neither absolute nor unchanging. Because meaning is socially constructed, it is not static and meanings will change according to different cultural, historical or social contexts (Donald et al., 2006). Language is a powerful carrier of values and information and it is central to meaning making and cognitive development.

Another important Vygotskian principle is the zone of proximal development (ZPD). This is not a static space, always the same for all children. Rather, it represents the difference between a child's existing level of understanding, and what the child is able to achieve with a measure of assistance. In Vygotsky's words, the ZPD is:

> …the distance between the [child's] actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978:86).

For Vygotsky, therefore, successful teaching occurs when teachers can identify each child's ZPD and, through mediation, facilitate the child's learning.

As Vygotsky noted:

> What the child can do in cooperation today he can do alone tomorrow. Therefore the only good kind of instruction is that which marches ahead of development and can lead it; it must be aimed not so much at the ripe as at the ripening functions (Vygotsky, 1986:188).

Working with the ZPD requires teachers to understand individual children's current capacities and assist them to achieve at the point of their emerging capacities. For teachers, this means selecting appropriate tasks and providing appropriate assistance to children, including active modelling, instructing and questioning. In Vygotsky's words: 'the teacher, working with the child, explains, informs, corrects, and forces the child himself [sic] to explain' (cited in Gredler & Shields 2004:23). The goal is then for the child to be able to use the earlier collaboration independently in problem solving.

Vygotsky viewed play as a leading factor in child development, which, like schooling, also operated in advance of development. 'In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour, in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself' (Vygotsky, 1978:129). He also claimed that, while imitating their elders in culturally patterned activities, children generate opportunities for intellectual development (Vygotsky, 1978). Initially, their games are recollections and re-enactments of real situations, but through the dynamics of their imagination and the recognition of implicit rules governing the activities they have reproduced in their games, children achieve an elementary mastery of abstract thought. Howard (2010) maintains that, according to Vygotsky, symbolism during imaginative play represents children's first experiences with systems they will later apply in numeracy and literacy. In this sense, Vygotsky argues, play leads to development and for Vygotsky play, in particular socio-dramatic play, is the lead activity for children between the ages of 3-6 years (Karpov, 2005).

Both Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories of cognition and language have been criticized for the universal assumption that they can be applied to all people at any time and place (Dahlberg et al., 1999; Mac Naughton, 2003). Although post structuralists, amongst others, have questioned the universality of both Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories, I propose that their notions on play are valid and constitute a sound rationale for a play-based curriculum in early childhood. As Vygotsky (1978:129) asserts, 'In their play children project themselves into the adult activities of their culture and rehearse their future roles and values'. However, within early learning environment teachers should ensure that all children are equally advantaged during play opportunities. In other words children should all have equal access to play opportunities which are sensitive to their unique contexts.

Contemporary post structural ECD theorists ask whose play is privileged and whose play is marginalized? (Grieshaber & Cannella, (2001); Mac Naughton, 2003). In this regard teachers should be aware of issues such as race, gender and social class. Are all children included in the various play opportunities, do these opportunities provide for different understandings of play and afford all children the opportunity to reach their maximum potential? Wood (2009) and Mac Naughton 2003 point out that in much of the western world teachers' constructions of play favour the dominant group, namely a white, middle class understanding of play based on a constructivist interpretation. Furthermore, Mac Naughton (2003) asserts that children's attitudes to race and ethnic difference (which are

often negative – for example, children do not choose to play with a black doll) are explained in terms of the constructivist notion that children cannot hold 'multiple perspectives and their inability to conserve their natural need to sort and classify objects and people' (p.47). This explanation is based on a Piagetian framework which emphasizes that 'young children's cognitive incapacities produce these behaviours' (Mac Naughton, 2003:46). This notion of limiting children's cognitive capabilities to a stage and age related hierarchy is being increasingly questioned. Alternative constructions of children view them as competent and capable social actors participating in constructing and determining their own lives (Dahlberg et al., 1999; 2007).

This notion of children being social actors challenges the Piagetian idea of individual learning experiences where children construct their own meaning and that this process can be aided by self-discovery or guided discovery which is core to much of the traditional western thinking about early childhood (Mac Naughton, 2003). From a Piagetian perspective the teacher should create an appropriate learning environment to support exploration and self-discovery learning. Thus the emphasis is on individual learning experiences, which privileges children of white, middle class households and does not take cogniscance of other cultural approaches where peer learning and interaction are favoured (Nsamenang, 2008).

This idea, purported by constructivists, that learning is a strongly individual, value-free cognitive pursuit has been criticized by many contemporary theorists (Dahlberg et al., 1999; Mac Naughton, 2003); Pence and Moss, 2002; Penn, 2009). For these theorists knowledge and learning are always social and 'always embody ethics and values and politics' (Mac Naughton, 2003: 49). In other words consideration must be given to whose knowledge is being included and excluded in teaching and learning situations. A further challenge to the constructivist view is that the developmental stages in thinking always exist in specific times and cultures. Critics challenge the notion of a universal theory of thinking asking whether the stages of progress towards adult thinking are universal and how we can account for different ways of thinking about the world in different cultures (Mac Naughton, 2003). This critique could also apply to the following theorist.

Erikson and the psychosocial theory of development

This theory foregrounds affective development, which Charlesworth (1987:382) defines as 'the area that centres on the self-concept, and the development of social, emotional and personality characteristics'. Erikson (1977) outlined eight stages of psychosocial

development, each representing a critical period of social/emotional development. Each stage requires the balancing of a positive trait with a negative trait. Successful resolution at each stage results in the development of a particular virtue or strength (Erikson, 1977). This theory provides an important informing perspective into the concept of whole child development and has been influential in the field of early childhood education for two reasons. Firstly, it highlights the importance of play as a critical element in whole child development because, as Erikson asserts, it is mainly through fantasy play that a sense of autonomy and initiative are developed. In addition, it is through play that children begin to make sense of their world and the adult world that they are observing. Secondly, this theory suggests guidelines for the role of the teacher in the lives of children. The teacher provides an emotional base and is the social mediator for the child. To enable a teacher to effectively fulfill these roles, I would argue, requires an insightful teacher who has both knowledge of child development and insight into what constitutes effective pedagogy in the Grade R year (see 1.7; 3.3.1 & 3.3.2).

Some other significant theorists who have informed child development and ECD practices

As this section of the literature review focuses on the traditional developmental approaches that influence pedagogy in the Grade R year, other theorists whose research has informed the notion of whole child development and who provide further insights into how practice is interpreted and implemented are presented. Space permits only the briefest of overviews, but their ideas should not be omitted.

Theory of behaviourism and learning

Behaviourism is a theory which describes observed behaviour as a predictable response to experience. Behaviourists claim that children learn about the world through the environment — by reacting to conditions or aspects of their environment that they find pleasing, threatening or painful (Crain, 2005; Papalia et al., 2006). Behaviourists suggest that people learn through a series of associations forming a connection between a stimulus and a response. Two kinds of associative learning are classical and operant conditioning. Learning largely becomes the development of habit (Crain, 2005). Children respond to rewards known as behaviour modifiers (Charlesworth, 1987; 2004) and according to Slee (1998, cited in Mac Naughton, 2003) behaviour modification strategies become the currency of the school.

Another form of conditioning is observational learning or modeling. This perspective, which grew out of S-R learning traditions, was articulated by Albert Bandura and is known as Social Learning and, more recently, Social Cognitive Theory as reinforcement has been broadened to include a cognitive response (Bandura, 1986). Children learn appropriate social behaviours by observing and imitating other people, usually 'significant others' with whom they come into contact, for example, a parent, teacher or superhero. The type of behaviour imitated is frequently that which is perceived to be valuable in the child's culture. Imitation of models is an important element in how children learn language, deal with aggression, develop a moral sense and learn gender-appropriate behaviour (Bandura, 1986; Papalia et al., 2006). Mac Naughton (2003:36) contends that, through this passive process of socialisation, 'social behaviours are caught not taught.'

Mac Naughton (2003:35), for example, comments, 'They [supporters of social learning theory] believe that since children learn attitudes that directly reflect a culture's value, manipulating a child's environment creates desirable gender role outcomes' and no consideration is given to the fact that children might (and sometimes do) reject the role models and social expectations they might encounter. If equity issues and social justice is to be promoted, Mac Naughton (2003) stresses that teachers should become more than just 'good' role-models. Children should be actively encouraged to interact meaningfully with equity related issues.

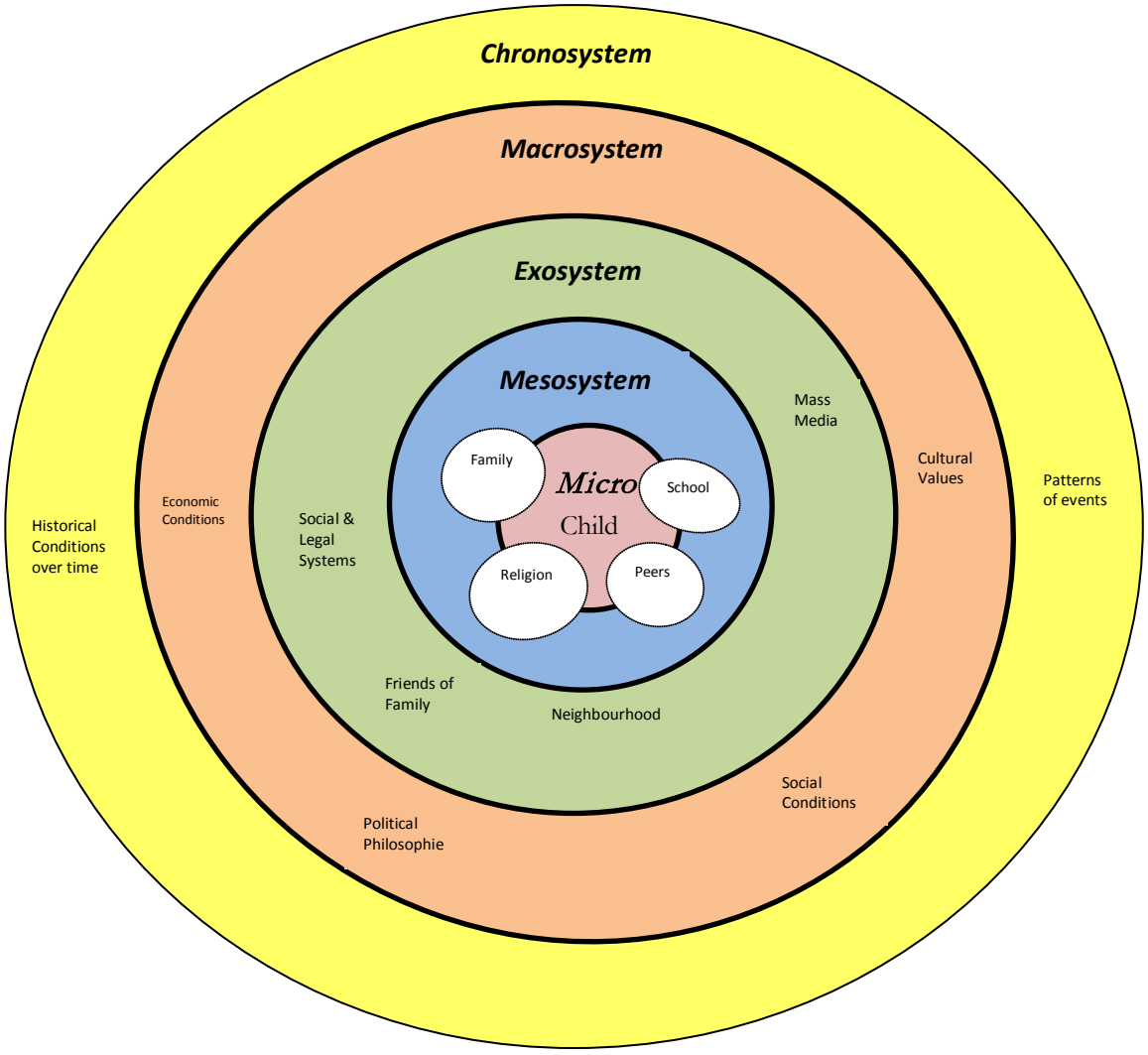
As the foundations for these behaviours are all laid down in the children's formative years, that is, the years before formal schooling, behaviourism cannot be dismissed as it is an important informing theory impacting children's development and learning. Specific applications to ensure effective classroom teaching and practice would consider the physical environment, the daily programme and the teacher/child interaction. These elements of behaviourism relate to effective classroom practice (see 3.2.2). But practice will only be truly effective if teachers actively engage with equity and related issues (see 4.3.1).

A bioecological theory

In the 1970s, Bronfenbrenner proposed a model comprising a range of interacting environmental and inherent characteristics that foster healthy development of children (Moen, 2006). This model describes how development occurs 'through increasingly complex processes of regular, active, two-way interaction between the developing child

and the immediate, everyday environment' (Papalia et al., 2006:36). This model is represented in figure 3.4.

Figure 3.4: Ecological theory showing the various influences in a child's life (Adapted from Gordon & Browne, 2008; Donald et al., 2006).



Bronfenbrenner identified interlocking contextual systems that continually interact with each other and influence the child. These systems range from those that are closely related to the child (the microsystem), such as the family, peers and the school to those

systems that are further removed, such as economic conditions and political philosophies, but which nonetheless influence the microsystem (Donald et al., 2006). This theory highlights the responsibility of teachers to take cognisance of the major contextual influences in a child's life such as the family, socio-economic status, race, ethnicity and culture, and to acknowledge the relationship between these influences, the child's development and learning, and the teacher's own professional practice (see 4.2.1). As such it has informed and broadened DAP and has highlighted the necessity of ensuring good working partnerships between teachers, families and the broader contexts (Gordon & Browne, 2008).

3.2.3 *A critique of developmental theories*

In recent years, developmental theories have been subjected to intense criticism (see 3.2.1) which has both fuelled and been fuelled by emerging theoretical debates on constructions of childhood and children (see 3.3.2). Today, it is acknowledged that the concepts of children and childhood are social constructions—ideas accepted by members of a particular society at a particular time on the basis of shared perceptions or assumptions (Dahlberg et al., 1999; Papalia et al., 2006).

According to James and Prout (1990), psychology has provided the dominant developmental approach towards understanding children and this understanding has been influenced by the perceived naturalness of childhood that is implicit in developmental models. Furthermore, James and Prout (1990) claim that children's development is seen to progress from the simple to complex and the irrational to rational based on models of childhood that connect biological with social development. The 'individual' was often slotted into a number of social roles and, though developmental theory, purported to explain how children acquired social roles it frequently did not do so (James & Prout, 1990).

James and Prout (1990), arguing from an interpretive sociological perspective, claim that psychological explanations do not explain the sociality of children. They suggest that biological accounts of childhood were used to explain the social facts of childhood with little account taken of the cultural component (James & Prout, 1990). Consequently, a traditional model of childhood and socialisation developed containing an implicit cultural bias. This gave rise to the notion of the universal child who is constructed within a normative framework. While this overview of James & Prout's (1990) assertions might be seen to sit at odds with previous claims made in this thesis supporting the play elements

of Piaget's and Vygotskyy's theories I would argue to the contrary. For both Piaget and Vygotsky it is through play that children make sense of the world and if the notion of free play is adhered to children should be free to make independent choices which are not necessarily culturally bounded. It is often teachers and their interpretations of the world that limit children's exposure, choices and activities and reinforce a normative framework. As Mac Naughton (2003) notes, children make their own meaning, but not under conditions of their own choosing" (p. 49). Because of these constraints any non-compliance is seen as difference which is interpreted as abnormal or deviant and as such must be corrected (Mac Naughton, 2003; 2005; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Dahlberg et al., 1999).

Consequently, Mac Naughton (2003); Cannella and Grieshaber (2001); Dahlberg et al. (1999), amongst others, challenge the appropriateness of developmental theories and, in particular, developmental milestones as these milestones have been determined through observation of predominately western, white middle class children and reinforce the notion of the universal child. Furthermore, because developmental theories are based on western thinking where knowledge is culturally privileged, a very particular understanding of children and how to educate them has resulted, and this has served to decontextualise children. These authors state that this understanding is grounded in modernist thought which seeks universal, predetermined human truths that can be discovered and understood through science. The assumption is that the world is predictable and that a preconstituted body of knowledge can be transmitted to the next generation by stable autonomous individuals through a dominant discourse.

James and Prout (1990) assert that the dominant developmental position has been extremely productive in the creation of knowledge about childhood and is extremely resistant to change. They postulate that this resistance to rethinking childhood is twofold. Firstly, it is due to a male-dominated society which does not give worth to child care (and, I would suggest, the education of young children) and the activities of children themselves. (Could this also be a reason for the perceived low status of ECD teachers articulated in 1.7.2 and 2.2.6?) Secondly, the notions of socialisation are part of the practice of teaching and so critics of socialisation meet with even wider resistance.

James and Prout (1990) explain this resistance to change in terms of what Foucault (1977) refers to as 'regimes of truth'. They write:

> Ways of thinking about children fuse with institutionalised practices to produce self-conscious subjects (parents, teachers and children) who think (and feel) about themselves through those ways of thinking. The 'truth' about themselves and their situation is self-validating. Breaking into this with another 'truth' (produced by another way of thinking about childhood) may prove difficult (James & Prout, 1990:23).

Teachers often have fixed predetermined ideas about how children best develop and learn and this in turn influences their practice. Becoming a self-reflective teacher (see 4.4) is one way of countering resistance towards change and of opening up new pathways of possibility for early childhood teachers and their practice.

3.2.4 *Closing remarks*

This section of the literature review has outlined a number of different developmental theories that have influenced early childhood education. Each theory has provided a specific thread which relates to an essential component of whole child development and each one must therefore be taken into account in the attempt to realise high quality pedagogy in the early years. However, I argued that, although an in-depth knowledge of development theory has relevance for ECD/Grade R practice, by itself it is not sufficient to ensure high quality early childhood education (Walsh, 2005). This knowledge should be applied with caution. Norms are guidelines and not a cast in stone, unchallengeable canon.

Consequently, a group of contemporary ECD theorists are arguing for alternative approaches which foreground cultural, political and historical explanations of learning and development. These ideas are now explored.

3.3 *AN ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTUALISATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PEDAGOGY*

In this section I explore an alternative orientation, namely a sociocultural-historical or historical-sociocultural perspective that is gaining credence. It is starting to inform early years education in England, Australia and New Zealand and is challenging dominant developmental perspectives, including DAP. According to Anning et al., (2009), developmental explanations of teaching and learning are beginning to be replaced by

theories that foreground the cultural and social nature of learning. They argue that, in recent years, the natural progression has been towards a sociocultural–historical orientation. According to Anning et al., (2009) sociocultural-historical theory can be viewed as an umbrella term reflecting various theories that incorporate the social constructivist theory of Vygotsky (see 3.2.2), post-Vygotskian explanations (see 3.3.2) of development and learning, 'cultural-historical, activity theory, cultural-historical activity theory as well as aspects of postmodernism/post structuralism (see 3.3.1) that have highlighted the significance of shared discourses and practices in early childhood' (p.1). The historical-sociocultural perspective has provided a space for ECD researchers and practitioners who are interested in context to think and act differently about their practice (Anning et al., 2009).

In a diverse country like South Africa an alternative perspective towards teaching and learning opens a space to reconceptualize ECD/Grade R pedagogy and assessment practices and introduce exciting new possibilities that provide opportunities to consider an 'indigenous curriculum' and to recognize agency, voice and the complex identities of children and teachers who have been previously silenced. These challenges should encourage early childhood teachers to interrogate their own understandings of young children and critically reflect upon their early childhood practices (see 4.4).

In this section I present an overview of the origins and some of the theories informing this perspective. I also explore how this perspective can be implemented in the classroom through the notion of a 'pedagogy of play'.

3.3.1 *Towards an understanding of a historical-sociocultural perspective of high quality ECD/Grade R pedagogy*

The sociocultural-historical perspective draws from different schools of theory that have different theoretical traditions and are informed by different ideas. As Mac Naughton (2003:71) comments, 'the social constructionists are a diverse family with a diverse heritage'. In the sociocultural–historical perspective, the lens has shifted from a focus on the individual to engage critically on how the individual has (or has not) appropriated the discourses which surround them because, as Mac Naughton (2009) argues, meaning, knowledge and learning is not a uniquely individual, value-free, cognitive pursuit.

3.3.2 *The origins of historical-sociocultural theory*

This theory has its origins in sociological and anthropological roots and is informed by a range of differing orientations including post-structuralism, post colonialism and critical constructivism (Yelland, 2005; Wood, 2009). The increasing realisation that social reality is not fixed, constant or unitary, has led to the emergence of alternative paradigms which view children as social actors and childhood as a particular kind of social reality (James & Prout, 1990). There is a growing acceptance that there are many childhoods rather than a single universal phenomenon. Furthermore, children should be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own lives, the lives of those around them and the society in which they live (Prout & James, 1990).

Childhood as a social construction

Hendrick (1990) maintains that in 1963, Aries, a French philosopher, was the first to suggest that the concept of childhood is a modernist construction emerging in Europe between the 15th and 18th centuries. This concept is informed by adults' understandings of both the institution of childhood and the construction of children and is dependent upon prevalent social, economic, political and historical influences. James and Prout (1990) note that making and breaking the concepts of childhood is in itself a continuing and changing social activity in which people are created, facilitated and constrained. As Hendrick comments, (1990:36):

> Definitions of childhood must be dependent to some extent on the society from which they arise because there is always a relationship between conceptual thought, social action and the process of category construction.

Similarly, James and Prout (1990:218) acknowledge the 'dialectical processes that have shaped and reshaped thinking about children' over a period of time. At each historical moment, mediated by class (usually professional, middle class), and to some extent gender, children have been constructed differently. Hendrick (1990) agrees that these constructions have not been static and suggests that over the last two hundred years many different definitions of childhood have been identified. These have ranged from Rousseau's notion of the Romantic child (where the innocence and value of childhood was prioritised), to be replaced by that of the Evangelical child (who had a potentially evil disposition) and then followed by a number of differing constructions that were 'influenced by the industrial revolution, the combined effects of urban growth, class

politics and the 'rediscovery of poverty' (Hendrick, 1990:36). During the nineteen hundreds, war, welfare, psychology and medicine began to exert their influences and constructions of childhood began to take on new features.

Though the focus might have altered with each differing perception, some threads of previous thinking continued to influence each construction. Consequently, contemporary understandings of childhood and children are peppered with many of these different understandings, but have, according to many present day theorists (Hendrick, 1990; Dahlberg et al., 1999; Cannella & Grieshaber, 2001; Mac Naughton, 2003) been predominately influenced by a more 'scientific approach' which has attempted to embrace a set of assumptions concerning the truth about the world. This 'truth' has been refined in accordance with the principles of paediatrics, medical hygiene, and child psychology (Hendrick, 1990).

Dahlberg et al. (1999; 2007) have critically engaged with some of the constructions produced within the dominant early childhood discourses, in particular developmental psychology. They argue that these discourses are 'located within the project of modernity' (p.43) and have been embodied by parents, practitioners, researchers and politicians. They maintain 'there is no such thing as the child or childhood' (p.43). Instead Dahlberg et al. (1999) suggest that there are many children and many childhoods, each constructed by our particular understandings of childhood and children. Dahlberg et al. (1999; 2007) have identified four interrelated constructions of young children and outlined how they have been understood and conceptualised. They argue that these constructions have arisen from the dominant discourses, which are located in the project of modernity and which have been embodied by many parents, teachers, researchers and politicians and impact on traditional ECD practice.

These constructions are: the child as 'knowledge, identity and culture reproducer; the child as an innocent, in the golden age of life; the young child as nature…or as the scientific child of biological stages; and the child as labour market supply factor. Each of these constructions is briefly discussed.

The child as knowledge, identity and culture reproducer

In this construction the child is seen as an empty vessel or tabula rosa – Locke's child. The child starts life with nothing. The challenge is to have the child 'ready to learn' and 'ready for school' by the age of compulsory schooling (Dahlberg, et al. (1997). Relevant

knowledge, skills and dominant predetermined and socially sanctioned cultural values are therefore imparted to the young child. Dahlberg et al. (2007) maintain that viewed from this perspective, early childhood is the foundation for successful progress through life. The child begins a journey starting from the incompleteness of childhood to the maturity and full human status of adulthood. The child is in the process of becoming an adult.

The child as an innocent, in the golden age of life

This second construction which has been held for many centuries views the child as innocent, possibly a bit primitive. Dahlberg et al. (2007) comment that, 'It is a construction which contains both fear of the unknown – the chaotic and the uncontrollable- and a form of sentimentalisation' (p.45). They (ibid) claim that this construction is based on Rousseau's child. Childhood is seen as an innocent period; it the golden age and reflects the belief in the child's capacity for self-regulation and the innate will to seek out Virtue, Truth and Beauty. Adults in turn have a deep desire to protect the child from a potentially harmful and violent world. However, as Dahlberg et al. (1999; 2007) comment, hiding children away from a world of which they are already a part is self-deceptive on the part of the adult as well as showing children that they are not taken seriously; nor are they respected.

The young child as nature…or as the scientific child of biological stages

This construction closely relates to the previous two and views the child as 'nature, an essential being of universal properties and inherent capabilities whose development is viewed as an innate process – biologically determined (Dahlberg et al., 1999:46). This construction produces a child who is a natural rather than a social phenomenon. This is an abstract and decontextualised, essentialised and normalised defined through abstract notions of maturity or stages of development. Cultural determinants and the idea of a child having agency have little influence in this construction. Hence the notion of a universal child made up of many different developmental domains. Dahlberg et al. (1999) contend that despite the talk of a holistic perspective the construction of this child is frequently reduced to separate measurable domains of development.

The child as labour market supply factor

This fourth understanding heralds from the twentieth century's construction of motherhood and is also based on nature. Dahlberg et al. (1999) argue that the construction of children being biologically determined to need exclusive maternal care is

becoming increasingly influential in the western world. They claim that not to receive or to give this care is unnatural and harmful and could distort children's attachments to their mothers or other people (Bowlby, 1969). However, Dahlberg et al. (1999) challenge this construction as they note there is no empirical evidence to support this view. However, they also note that it is becoming increasingly difficult to meet this perceived need for exclusive maternal care. Changing economic and social conditions have seen more and more women entering the labour market. Plus the 'traditional two parent family' is on the decline. These factors have led to a further construction of children as a labour market supply factor. Because mothers have to work, (and Dahlberg et al. (1999) comment on the gender discourse that places the role of caregiver almost exclusively in the hands of the women) non-maternal care must be offered to young children. This has resulted in various groups becoming interested and involved in, and investing in child-care.

These constructions tend to support a picture of a dependent, needy and under-developed child and of a childhood that has been made into a very specific kind of age-graded and age-related condition (James & Prout, 1990) where these needs (which are acknowledged to be variable and many) have been prioritised (see 3.2.3 for a critique of developmental theories and 3.2.1 for a critique of DAP).

Woodhead (1990:65) suggests that 'the expression of children's needs give the impression of universal objectivity' and as such it is easy to accept these needs as authoritative expressions of fact. This almost uncritical acceptance of a needy child has given rise to the notion of the 'universal child' (3.2.3) whose needs have to be met, usually by the more competent adult. The result has been attempts to normalise childhood and to assume all children will grow, develop and learn in the same way. Thus any digression from the accepted norms is seen to be abnormal, different or deviant. Attempts to normalise children (see 3.2.1) result in an assimilation[18] approach to education where 'one size fits all' (Mac Naughton, 2003).

But, as Woodhead (1990:65) asserts, 'If one delves a little bit more deeply there are a range of complicated personal and cultural values alongside empirical claims about childhood'. As such, different material and cultural forces that define the features of childhood need to be recognised and acknowledged. Woodhead (1990) argues that

[18] Assimilation is the process by which a new group becomes part of the dominant culture.

cultural values can be readily overlooked in a homogeneous society as it becomes easier to share a normative framework of cultural practices and values, but in a diverse society simple generalisations about children's needs are much more problematic. In diverse societies it becomes important to distinguish the 'scientific from the evaluative, the natural from the cultural' (p.73). In other words, various contexts, for example, historical, social and cultural experiences and expectations should be considered when interacting with and teaching young children.

Despite highlighting the importance of the social and cultural components that construct childhood, Woodhead (1990) argues, and is supported by Walsh (2005), that a consideration of children's needs cannot be entirely abandoned. He suggests that children inherit a distinct human nature as well as being brought up in a particular culture. Childhood which is recognised as a period of immaturity necessitates that children are dependent upon adults to protect them and it means that judgments must be continually made for them by those responsible for their care. The length of the dependency and the cultural articulation of what is in their best interests will vary from society to society and from time to time (Woodhead, 1990; Solberg, 1990; Boyden, 1990; Rogoff, 2003). Nsamenang (2008) offers support for these arguments when he suggests that an Africentric approach to ECD should draw on long standing traditions and heritages as well as modern perspectives.

Perhaps it would be wise to take cognisance of Prout and James' (1990:7) assertion that the concept of 'childhood is neither natural nor a universal feature of human groups but appears as a specific structural and cultural component of many societies.' Another important assertion to heed is that a post modern perspective projects values of diversity and the notion of 'both/and rather than the dialectic either/or approach' (Dahlberg et al. (2007:118).

Within this framework from a South African perspective there is a place for ECD/Grade R teachers in South Africa (especially confronted with the demands of the NCS, (see 2.2.3 & 2.2.4) to both acknowledging and recognising the importance of developmental culturally appropriate guidelines as they can inform practice (see 3.2.1) (but not for overemphasising or becoming over reliant on them) as well as for embracing the diverse cultural contexts of the children they are teaching. Penn (2008) further, (perhaps unintentionally), supports this view when she writes, 'early childhood education premised on the early interventionist theory might ameliorate the consequences that children from

disadvantage backgrounds suffer in later school life' (p.382). However, teachers ought to bear in mind Cole's (1996:1) assertion that 'developmental norms are not the gatekeeper that privileges certain understandings and perspectives while restricting other diverse forms of knowledge.' The focus becomes the social situation in which the child is embedded and the 'view of development moves away from internalizing development as a feature of the child where a particular developmental milestone is not achieved, and towards viewing development as the relations between the social context and the biological child' (Anning et al., 2009:6).

The post structural influence

This notion of 'both/and' confirm the post modern and post structural views that the world is incoherent and discontinuous (Mac Naughton, 2003). For the post structuralist nothing is constant; everything and everybody is fluid and there for there is constant flux (Mac Naughton, 2003). Consequently the post structuralist movement (amongst others) has been influential in challenging some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about children and childhood and has questioned, for example, the prevailing notion of a universal child. Post structuralism has been strongly influenced by the work of Michael Foucault (1926-1984) which explored the relationships between knowledge, truth and power and the effects of these relationships on us and the institutions we create. In fact, for Foucault there is no absolute truth. 'Truths' are fiction that expresses the politics of knowledge of that particular time and place (Mac Naughton, 2005). Therefore, a post structural perspective like a critical theory perspective acknowledges that education and knowledge is never neutral or value free and recognizes that knowledge and education is always political (Freire, 1970). Post structuralists challenge the idea that individuals can think and act freely outside of the politics of knowledge.

This approach challenges the Enlightenment notion of a rational and coherent individual telling rational and coherent stories about themselves (their identity) and their society. The politics of our time and place influence which stories are told, when and by whom. Consequently some stories are heard more frequently and given more status while others are silenced and marginalized. Sharing these marginalized stories, therefore, becomes a political act (Mac Naughton, 2005:4). Furthermore, in this perspective language is strongly connected with 'the politics of knowledge and those politics are evident in the language used to think of ourselves (our subjectivities) and to describe our actions and institutions (Mac Naughton, 2005:4).

From a post structural perspective the ideological commitment to early childhood practices including play are viewed as 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, 1977) that generate and reinforce dominant perspectives and generate authoritative consensus of what should be done in the field (Rogers, 2011). As Mac Naughton (2005) asserts 'over time these claims have settled so firmly into the fabric of early childhood studies that its familiarity makes it just seem right, best and ethical' (p.1). However, as new understandings of children have begun to rupture these familiar understandings and have introduced competing and contested notions of children and childhood important questions are being asked such as what is best, right and ethical for children? Which knowledge is best and whose practices are right? Thus, as already stated, in this perspective there is not one correct way of viewing children or early childhood practices (Mac Naughton, 2005). How then do teachers (amongst others) 'recognize the political processes of privileging one form of knowledge of children and early childhood education over another and in so doing through education transform inequitable relations of gender, race, class, sexuality ability and age?'(Mac Naughton, 2005: 2).

Consequently, as a result of many interrelated developments a new construction of children has emerged. Dahlberg et al. (1999; 2007) outline a fifth construction of childhood, namely, that of a *the child as co-constructor of knowledge, identity and culture.* In this construction children are both part of, but also separate from, the family. They have a recognized and independent place in society and as part of a social group. Childhood is not viewed as a marginal stage or as a preparation for adulthood but as an entity in its own right. It is one of the components of the process of life. While childhood is a biological fact, the way in which it is understood is socially constructed. Children are social actors participating in constructing and determining their own lives as well as the lives around them. Children have agency and a voice of their own. As such, they should be taken seriously and be involved in decision making processes. This construction also acknowledges that relationships between adults and children involve the exercise of power and cognizance needs to be taken of how this power relationship plays out. In this construction learning is a communicative and cooperative activity in which children construct knowledge and make meaning together with other adults and children (Dahlberg et al., 1999; 2007). This construction of children has had a profound impact on contemporary understandings of early childhood pedagogies, in particular the historical-sociocultural approach.

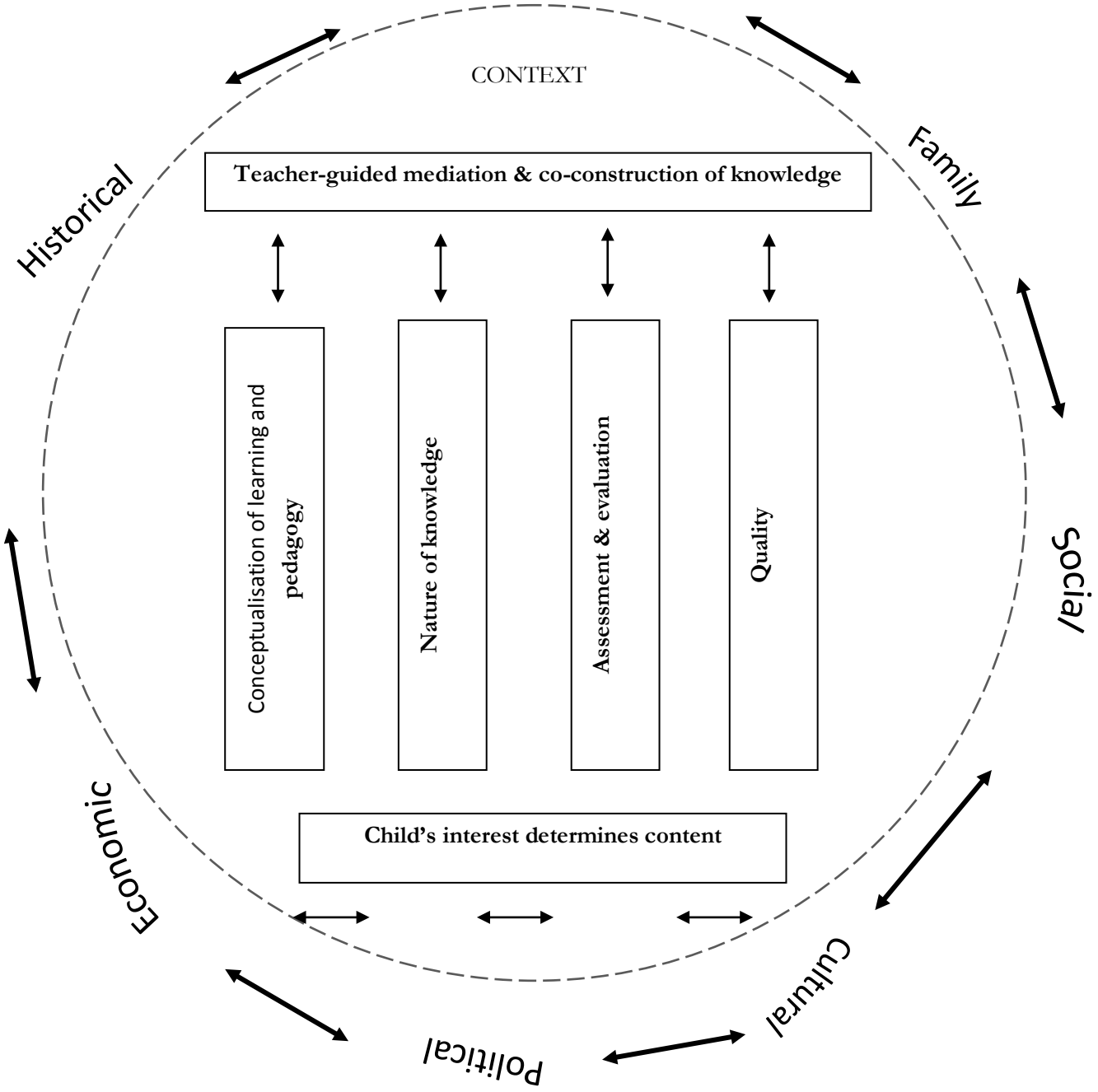
3.3.3 *Explaining the historical-sociocultural approach towards ECD*

In this approach early childhood education is framed broadly in terms of cultural contexts and not in relation to the individual child reaching standardised age-related norms of development. The focus has shifted to how teachers and children interact and the types of intersubjectivity that are being built through a focus on the children's interests (Anning et al., 2009).

Four broad strands underpin early childhood practice from this perspective. These are the conceptualisation of learning and pedagogy; the nature of knowledge; assessment and evaluation; and quality in the early years. Anning et al. (2009) argue that these four strands necessitate significant changes in both teaching strategies and methods of assessment as there is an increasing recognition of the importance of the role of adults, 'particularly their knowledge base and their capacity for sustained shared thinking' (Fleer, Anning & Cullen 2009:188) and because children are increasingly being recognised as powerful players in their own learning. They are viewed as capable, competent and unique human beings who are able to make and co-construct meaning together with responsive adults such as the teacher as well as their peers.

Co-construction of meaning and understanding require that teachers become aware of what children know, are thinking and understanding to enable them to engage with a body of knowledge. Reciprocally teachers need to learn to share and develop their own thinking about the topic. 'Co-construction requires that teachers are willing to find out more about content knowledge as well as develop excellent dialogue skills' (Jordan, 2009:43). The historical-sociocultural approach is represented diagrammatically in figure 3.5.

Figure 3.5 A diagrammatic representation of the historical socio-cultural approach



As mentioned in 3.3 two of the specific theoretical perspectives on which the historical-sociocultural perspective draws are Vygotsky's socio-historical orientation and Wertsch's sociocultural theory. Wertsch, del Rio and Alvarez (1995) and post-Vygotskians, place their position under the term 'sociocultural' because, they claim, this term is able to

reflect how Vygotskian heritage 'has been appropriated in contemporary debates in the human sciences, at least in the West' (Wertsch et al. in Daniels, 2001:78).

For Vygotsky (1978) learning is the collaborative construction of knowledge through the mediation of psychological tools which become a type of meditational means. These tools are 'symbolic cultural artifacts…most fundamentally language — that enable us to master psychological functions like memory, perception, and attention in ways appropriate to our cultures' (Kozulin, 1998:1).

Interpersonal relations are, for Vygotsky, another type of meditational means (Daniels, 1996). In sociocultural-historical informed pedagogy mediation is underpinned by the notion of co-construction. As Wood (2009:29) asserts:

> Indicators of effective [preschool] pedagogy include opportunities for co-construction between children and adults, including 'sustained shared thinking', joint involvement in child- and adult-initiated activities and informed interactions in children's self-initiated and free-play activities. The practitioner's role is conceptualised as proactive in creating play/learning environments, as well as responsive to children's choices, interests and patterns of learning.

Hence, the importance of play in early learning (see 3.2.1) is still acknowledged but as Wood (2009:27) suggests 'linking play and pedagogy becomes a contentious issue because of the ideological commitment to free play' which is foregrounded more strongly in developmental approaches such as DAP. Wood (2009) also comments that while there is substantial evidence of learning through play there is less evidence of teaching through play and suggests that the historical-sociocultural approach places a greater emphasis on the role of the adult in planning for play. Wood (2009) asserts that alternative strategies for implementing an effective play-based curriculum in early years education could be explored through a 'pedagogy for play' (p.27) which she defines as:

> The ways in which early childhood professionals make provision for play and playful approaches to learning and teaching, how they design play/learning environments, and all the pedagogical decisions, techniques and strategies they use to enhance learning and teaching through play' (Wood, 2009:27).

Furthermore, according to Wood, in a sociocultural approach, learning through play is not left to chance. She comments:

> Play is sustained through reciprocal and responsive relationships, and is situated in activities that are socially constructed and mediated. While children's interests remain central to curriculum planning the subject disciplines enrich and extend the children's learning (p.27).

As previously noted (see 3.2.1), a deep understanding of a play-based curriculum remains a contentious issue. Wood (2009:29) confirms this when she writes:

> In contemporary curriculum models which endorse play within an integrated pedagogical approach achieving good quality play in practice remains a substantial challenge especially where teachers face competing demands for accountability, performance and achievement and competing notions of what constitutes effective teaching and learning.

And, faced with these challenges the possibility exists that the historical-sociocultural approach will also have to compete with more didactic models. .

3.3.4 *Challenges to implementing an historical- sociocultural approach*

Like DAP, this perspective requires a very particular understanding of young children and how they develop and learn. Both approaches foreground play and outline a definite role for the teacher. But the historical-sociocultural approach necessitates that teachers think more carefully about contextual factors and recognise the significance of cultural contexts in which diverse children grow and learn. As Podmore, (2009) notes, teachers need help to make the transition from a constructivist developmental perspective to a historical-sociocultural perspective. And this will necessitate thinking differently about children, the type of programme offered to them, working with families and assessment. Alternative assessment strategies based on a sociocultural perspective are possible. Fleer and Richardson (2009:130) argue that, while approaches to teaching have moved towards a sociocultural approach, 'assessment and evaluation have generally stayed within a Piagetian framework.'

If one heeds Dahlberg et al's. (2007) assertion that dualistic or binary positions be avoided DAP does not have to sit in opposition to a 'pedagogy of play'. It could be argued that there are features of play outlined in the sociocultural approach that are compatible with the notion of play articulated in DAP (see 3.2.1). The teacher has a definite role in planning an interactive, learning environment that offers challenging and stimulating choices to children that will promote holistic development. However, the

sociocultural approach places more emphasis on the role of the teacher in mediating play as well as recognising and managing different sociocultural contexts that might be represented in the teaching and learning environment, which, as already mentioned, is not overtly acknowledged in DAP. Furthermore, the notion of whose knowledge and whose play is privileged or marginalised is not considered in DAP.

3.3.5 *Concluding remarks*

In this section of the literature review I outlined an alternative approach to ECD/Grade R pedagogy which views children's teaching and learning through a sociocultural lens. Development is not seen as a linear trajectory but rather as a relationship between society and children and takes place when children participate in the activities of their cultural community. The role of the teacher as a co-constructor of meaning rather than as a facilitator of the learning programme is emphasised. This orientation has generated new discourses and possibilities for early childhood teachers and their practices.

This approach could have particular relevance to South Africa because it recognises of a wide range of historical, political, socio-cultural and economic contexts. I however, would suggest that this model has not yet been widely considered or accepted by South African teachers who continue to be influenced by a predominately developmental approach increasingly shaped by a formal discourse inherited from the formal schooling sector. I now explore this third approach that informs ECD/Grade R teaching and learning.

3.4 *AN INSTRUMENTALIST VIEW OF EARLY YEARS PEDAGOGY*

A third approach that informs early years pedagogy is what Anning (1991) describes as an instrumentalist or 'utilitarian view that education is about introducing children to the basic skills which will make them into useful and productive workers and citizens' (p.17). There has always been an acceptance of such an approach (see 1.7.1). In fact one of the reasons for the introduction of DAP was to counter this increasingly formal stance (see 3.2.1). I present an overview of this approach and interrogate it with particular reference to the implementation of the NCS and the corresponding challenges associated with South African curriculum documents.

3.4.1 *Explaining an instrumentalist perspective*

Ongoing formal creep is pervasive and in times of education change appears to gain in popularity. A more formal, didactic approach is based on direct instruction that could be likened to Tyler's technocratic curriculum (see 1.7.2). As Hedges & Cullen (2005) note, calls for more academic learning tend to result in the adoption of an overt approach to subjects. The children's learning experiences are focused on the attainment of academic skills to be acquired. Basic skills are largely interpreted as literacy and numeracy with the emphasis on learning to read (Anning, 1991) and children are evaluated on the basis of a predetermined standard of achievement (Kessler, 1991). The style of instruction is largely didactic and the teacher plays a much more interventionist role than she would in a more child-centred classroom. The teacher determines the skills that children ought to acquire and instructs large groups of children usually at the same time. The learning materials comprise chiefly of worksheets, ditto cards and flash cards while other similarly structured abstract materials dominate the curriculum (Bredekamp & Coppell, 1987). Children tend to learn isolated skills through memorization, drill and the completion of worksheets. Free play, and in particular outdoor free play, is marginalized.

There are many possible reasons why teachers adopt a more didactic approach. According to Anning (1991), the statutory school discourse emphasizes the preparation of children for 'real' school, particularly the induction into and achievements in the basics of literacy, numeracy and the world of work. Anning (1991) further argues that in one sense the teacher is merely responding to demands of society or, more accurately stated, the parents, who want the teacher to 'get on with 'proper' schooling … 'normal' parents are suspicious of learning through play' (p.17). In another sense, ensuring that children meet the expectations of the Grade 1 teacher (see 4.2.5) as well as national assessment criteria reinforces in teachers the need to teach to the assessment standards.

Jeynes (2006) remarks that teaching to the test have become the commonplace strategies in many classrooms. Teachers have become merely deliverers of information and children are the receivers, thereby causing learning and success to be limited to performance on standardized tests (Hyun, 2003).

Not much appears to have changes since the early nineteen nineties when Anning (1991:19), writing about the UK commented:

> Infant teachers in the 1990s find themselves pulled between the relentless currents of child-centred progressivism and utilitarian demands to teach basic skills. Marooned in such an uncomfortable position, it will not be surprising if they feel vulnerable and confused as to how they should set about reaching the shore. This uncertainty has been further compounded by legislation that prescribes a National Curriculum core and foundation subject content and assessment procedures for 5-7 year olds mainly on the basis of a secondary school curriculum backed down to infant classrooms.

A further reason for the introduction of a formal, didactic approach stems from the later part of the nineteenth century when these approaches were being advocated as a way to compensate for previous disadvantage as well as to accelerate learning. Two cognitive psychologists, Bereiter and Engelmann proposed a more formal, didactic approach as a way to enhance children's learning (Bereiter, 1986). Though initially children exposed to this programme appeared to make great academic strides, these were short-lived and were not sustained in primary school. These findings have been replicated in more recent research. A study by Macon (2002) suggests that while there might be an initial advantage, there are no long term gains for children taught through a formal approach. Later school achievement is lower for children taught didactically than for children taught through a play-based, child-centred approach (Marcon, 2002; Hedges & Cullen, 2005). Hyuan (2003: 121) comments, rather than 'leveling the playing field' a didactic approach is more likely than ever to leave historically disadvantaged children even further behind.' In this regard it would be wise to heed Stipek's (2007:734) assertion that 'ironically to achieve high academic standards we need to be more, not less concerned about the non-academic aspects of child development.' Research evidence appears to be conclusive - there are no long-term benefits for learning resulting from direct instructional models (Sylva & Nabucco, 1996; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997, cited in Meade, 2006).

Yet despite these findings there appears to be ongoing calls for more formal early childhood programmes. Hseuh & Barton (2005) note, teachers are increasingly using formal approaches at a younger age. This assertion resonates with comments by Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002), that despite constant validation of the value of play, it continues to have an insecure place in curriculum, while a more didactic approach appears to be exerting an ever-increasing influence over ECD/Grade R pedagogy.

Christmas (2005) reinforces the above comments when she notes that, in the UK, the introduction of the National Curriculum for children between the ages of 5-11 years

appears to have eroded the central place of play in the reception year curriculum. Practice has been adapted to meet prescribed learning outcomes and to accommodate the 'negative downward impact of this curriculum' (Christmas, 2005:143) and in the process play has been sidelined. According to Anning (2006) research evidence on implementing the statutory foundation phase curriculum revealed that the ideological clashes between pre-school and school approaches were still evident and pre-school staff remained confused about appropriate forms of pedagogy. They were uncertain of how to manage the complexities that arise from competing pedagogical approaches (for example, child-centred versus teacher-directed). Consequently activities were frequently ill matched to children's learning capabilities. Activities were either too formal or prescriptive, or not challenging enough. In addition appropriate opportunities for outdoor play remained problematic. Seemingly the older the children, the less choice they were given in choosing activities (Anning, 2006). These findings confirm that tensions between a more play-based approach and a more formal, teacher-directed programme continue to plague the ECD terrain.

The situation is not much different in the USA, where Stipek & Byler, (1997); Katz and Chard (2000) and Goldstein (2006) describe similar pressures to teach children the basics of literacy and numeracy in a more structured way. Zeng & Zeng, (2005) and Gordon & Browne (2008:166) assert that '… parental pressure and teacher uncertainty have led to curricula with more table tasks and less active play periods in the daily schedule'. Hirsch-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk & Singer (2007) suggest that good early childhood pedagogy has been sacrificed for the sake of curriculum goals and that preschool classes have replaced playful learning with practice and drill. Hirsch-Pasek et al. (2007:3) write, 'play has become a four letter word. In an effort to give children a head start on academic skills such as reading and mathematics play is discouraged and didactic learning stressed.' As Anning (2006) notes the challenges of increasingly formal early childhood pedagogy remain a recurring dilemma.

In South Africa, a particular interpretation of the NCS (see 2.2.3 and 2.2.4) provides a legitimate reason for foregrounding the basics in the Grade R curriculum (WSoE, 2009). Within the South African context, many teachers appear to be doubtful about appropriate Grade R pedagogy. This uncertainty is exacerbated by many teachers being inadequately qualified (see 2.2.5 & 2.2.6) and receiving limited classroom support (WSoE, 2009). This has resulted in a narrow and somewhat prescriptive interpretation of the

NCS which is realized in a more didactic classroom approach. The teaching of literacy and numeracy skills is being emphasised at the expense of an integrated Grade R curriculum and fuelling what could be termed inappropriate pedagogy.

The NCS (DoE, 2002) and related policy documents talk to effective pedagogy (see 1.7.2; 2.2.2; 2.2.3 & 2.2.4) but do not sufficiently elaborate on the implementation of such an approach. Neither do the NCS and other policy documents related to Grade R (see 3.2.1) sufficiently acknowledge the value of play in ensuring quality Grade R provisioning. A consequence of this appears to be that many public schools are implementing a 'mini Grade 1' that fails to optimise appropriate teaching and learning opportunities (WSoE, 2009).

Concluding remarks

As already argued, in South Africa (see 1.7.1) and elsewhere (United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia and America), there is a distinct discourse of early childhood education drawing on the discipline of developmental psychology which emphasizes children learning through first-hand experiences, within a child-centred learning environment where learning through play is pivotal. In recent years an alternative approach, one that emphasizes the importance of children's diverse contexts and that focuses on both learning and teaching through play has been advocated. Yet despite play being acknowledged as one of the most valuable learning tools for young children (see 3.2.1) a play-based approach remains vulnerable to top-down, formal influences stemming from primary school (Anning, 1991)

3.5 *POSITIONING MYSELF IN THE THREE APPROACHES*

Each approach offers a unique lens through which to view ECD/Grade R teaching and learning practices. The dominant developmental discourse, articulated in DAP, emphasises the uniqueness of each child and focuses primarily on the individual. As such it adopts a highly positivistic, decontextualised and universalizing approach to children. A strong criticism of this perspective is that it can result in an overemphasis on developmental milestones which may result in viewing the child through a deficit lens. However, despite the critiques of DAP, I would agree (because developmental theory offers direction for practice) with Wood (2009) (see 3.3.3) and Walsh (2005) who suggests that 'abandoning developmental theory would be seriously short-sighted' (p.42). As Walsh (2005) argues, development theory is 'necessary but not sufficient.' It needs to

be tempered with 'contemporary developmental theory which considers contextual factors, such as culture' (p.42-43). Even Penn (2008), who has questioned the applicability of certain western ECD frameworks (and DAP in particular) to the African context has acknowledged that DAP might provide guidelines for practice, even if it culturally insensitive. She does, however, assert that it needs to be made relevant for different contexts.

Acknowledgement of social and cultural contexts underpins the second perspective namely, the historical-sociocultural. Children are perceived as being capable, integrated beings with potential to learn within their social and cultural environment. In this approach the importance of both teaching and learning through play is highlighted. The teacher's role is conceptualized as being proactive in creating play/learning environments, as well as responsive to children's choices, interests and patterns of learning. An important facet of the historical-sociocultural approach includes the reconceptualisation of early childhood pedagogies in relation to considerations of diversity and equality (including gender and race stereotypes) through a process of collaborative professional development.

Both approaches advocate the importance of young children learning through play and if articulated thoughtfully, could complement one another. The role of the teacher however, is viewed differently; the sociocultural perspective places a greater emphasis on the role of the teacher in co-constructing learning opportunities with the children. Play is viewed through an alternative lens, one that considers the knowledge-power relations among children and between children and adults (Wood, 2009). There is a greater understanding that play, 'is not simply the child's world, but reflects children's understanding and interpretation of the complex social and cultural worlds they inhabit' (p. 31). Sociocultural theory also demands that context be considered and that teachers critically reflect critically upon all aspects of their practice.

It is possible that both perspectives, if not carefully conceptualized, could unintentionally fuel the third perspective, the utilitarian approach. Just as the over emphasis on developmental milestones can support the notion of a universal child and a narrow, prescriptive approach where teachers teach to developmental norms, the sociocultural perspective could fall into a similar trap. The teacher could cease to be a mediator and co-constructor of learning and adopt a didactic, prescriptive role where telling replaces suggesting. Both of these consequences would support a narrow interpretation of the

curriculum which would be underpinned by a more didactic stance. A stance, which proponents of high quality ECD/Grade R pedagogy argue could lead to a 'watered down' Grade R. A 'watered down' Grade 1 cannot fully serve the educational interests of children between the ages of four-to-six years (see 3.3.1 and 3.3.2).

3.6 *CONCLUSION*

In this chapter I considered three current approaches to early childhood education in the western world. The first considers the dominant discourse DAP which remains influential in many English speaking countries. It is also the accepted approach in many African countries (Pence & Moss, 2002; Pence, 2004).

In South Africa, for example, early proponents of nursery school education (see 2.2.1) based their programmes on a developmental paradigm. It was this approach which influenced policy makers when the South African education system was being overhauled and initial policy documents supported a developmentally appropriate approach towards ECD/Grade R delivery (DoE, 1996; 2001).

Yet, despite intentions to adopt a less formal approach, when a new curriculum was mooted the focus was on a more academic, didactically orientated curriculum (DoE, 2002). As the literature review has shown there has always been a tension between the more formal didactic approach described in 3.4 and the less formal play-based one. In fact DAP was introduced in an attempt to counter this more formal approach.

DAP however, has come under increasing fire from some contemporary theorists who argue that a developmental approach foregrounds a dominant western perspective based on white middle class norms imposing an image of a universal child. This paradigm serves to decontextualise most children in South Africa as their cultural, political social and historical contexts are not recognized.

To counter the theoretical hegemony of DAP an alternative orientation, namely the historical-sociocultural perspective was articulated. This perspective is framed by a play-based pedagogy but one that highlights the importance of learning and teaching through play. Furthermore this perspective recognises that children come from diverse contexts and these contexts inform pedagogical practices. It is an approach which views children

as capable and competent beings who are able, together with the teacher and/or other children, to co-construct their own knowledge.

This alternative perspective opens a space to reconceptualise ECD/Grade R practices and introduce exciting new possibilities. Such possibilities should seek to recognize and confront discrimination, celebrate diversity and build respectful and democratic early childhood communities (Mac Naughton, 2005). This type of approach would not only resonate with the values of equity and respect contained in the NCS (see 2.2.3), but also offer Grade R children an opportunity to move into formal schooling with skills, attitudes, values, beliefs and dispositions which could enable scholastic success as well as consolidate a lifelong learning pathway.

In the following chapter I explore literature and research relating to ECD/Grade R teachers understandings of their practice, the different epistemological positions that ECD/Grade R teachers can adopt and how these positions can influence practice. I examine the role of critical self-reflection and interrogate how constructive critical self-reflection could begin to transform pedagogical practices.

CHAPTER 4: TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRACTICE AND THE ROLE OF CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION IN CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

4.1 *INTRODUCTION*

This chapter builds on the previous three chapters. In chapter 1, I sketched the background to the problem and examined in particular the external factors that contribute to understanding and implementing a high quality ECD curriculum. In chapter 2, I reviewed the history of the South African ECD movement and traced the historical and conceptual factors that impact quality ECD/Grade R provisioning in South Africa. Chapter 3 provided a platform from which to discuss three different approaches to ECD. Two of these approaches namely, DAP and the instrumentalist approach, dominate ECD practice in South Africa. The third, the historical-sociocultural perspective points to alternative possibilities of conceptualizing and implementing ECD practice in South Africa.

In chapter one I argued that quality education makes a difference in the lives of children. However, I have also shown (see 2.2) that in South Africa education is in crisis (Bloch, 2007; Jansen & Taylor, 2003; Jansen, 2001). Evidence from the latest annual national assessments (DBE, 2011) show that less than 40 % of FP children are able to read and write by the time they reach Grade 3. Many of South Africa's children are functionally illiterate. Seemingly our education is not of a high enough quality to result in meaningful education that can effect social and economic change. However, improving the quality of education is extremely complex and as Broadfoot et al. (1993) argue is dependent upon multiple factors which are both external (see 1.7) and internal to the teacher herself. In this chapter I explore some of these internal factors. I examine teachers' perceptions of their practice and factors that influence these perceptions and explore some possibilities for changing practice. In so doing I provide an important context for understanding the research results.

This chapter in particular explores conceptual issues relating to the overarching research question, *What are teachers' perceptions of ECD/Grade R and how do these perceptions impact their practice?*, and to the following research questions, *What is high quality/effective ECD/Grade R according to teachers?, What, according to the teacher, is her role in a preschool context in supporting*

young children's growth, development, thinking and learning?, and *What alternative strategies could be identified by teachers for improving practice?.*

This chapter is divided into three sections. Firstly, I explore teachers' perceptions of themselves, their teaching and learning and consider how these perceptions inform professional practice. Secondly, I examine three different epistemological positions that teachers can adopt and reflect on, and how these positions impact practice. Finally, I investigate how the role of critical self-reflection could begin to transform pedagogical practices.

4.2 *TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEMSELVES IN RELATION TO PRACTICE*

Section 1 commences with an overview of professional practice and considers the relationship between teachers' perceptions of practice, and their professional development. This is followed by an interrogation of primary and preschool teachers' perceptions of their practice and how these inform their pedagogy. I present a combination of relevant literature and a sample of international and local research findings and attempt to identify gaps in the literature, particularly in relation to ECD/Grade R teachers.

As mentioned in 1.7, the quality of teaching is influenced by two main elements. Those factors external to the teacher, which include policy determinants, provisioning for teaching, training models, curriculum design, administrative issues and traditional ideologies (Broadfoot et al., 1993) have been explored in chapter one. In this chapter, I interrogate those aspects which are internal to teachers themselves. These aspects include teachers' skills and commitments, their ideologies and personalities, which combine to make up the teachers' professional persona. Together, according to Broadfoot et al. (1993), these internal and external factors combine to determine the nature of their professional practice. And as Kostelnick, Soderman & Wheren (2007) argue there is a strong link between the teachers' professional practice and quality education.

4.2.1 *Towards an understanding of professional practice*

Professionalism, as Gordon and Browne (2008); Mac Naughton (2003) and Spodek et al. (1991) acknowledge, is underpinned by core values which include how teachers view and understand themselves, their practice and their perceived challenges as well as identifying

what helps them cope in the classroom environment. These aspects will always be informed by teachers' beliefs and understandings of what and how children learn.

Teachers' actions and behaviours, and ultimately their professional practice, are influenced by their perceptions of the world (Pajares, 1992, Nias, Southworth & Campbell, 1992; Fullen & Hargreaves 1991). Stipek (2004) and Zeng & Zeng (2005) both state that studies of teachers' beliefs are few. They also acknowledge that a possible challenge with such studies is that teachers might only tell you what they think you want to hear. Pajares (1992) suggests that teachers' perceptions and subsequent behaviours are shaped by their belief and value systems even if these systems are implicit and unarticulated. Both Pajares (1992) and Kagan (1992) argue that teachers' belief systems are influenced by affective, social and cultural factors that arise directly and indirectly from the contexts in which they themselves grew up and were trained. Even if these initial contexts are far removed from the contexts in which teachers today find themselves, these contexts might still affect teachers' professional practice. And it is through practice that teachers are able to realize the sorts of people and practitioners that they perceive themselves to be (Chen & Chang, 2006).

Teachers' realisation of their professional practice should be informed by appropriate documentation and relevant legislative frameworks (see 2.4) as well as teachers' own knowledge about quality ECD/Grade R practice (see1.7.1) and an ethic of care (Mac Naughton, 2003). Furthermore, being a professional includes networking with various bodies such as professional associations, other relevant organisations as well as parents, families and the community in what Hargreaves (2003:17) calls a 'professional learning community.' Taking risks within an atmosphere of 'professional trust' calls for independent adults who are open to collaboration and reciprocal learning. This collaboration should be broad, not only with colleagues who think in a similar way. Through this collaboration, the values underpinning professional practice should change over time as teachers gain new perspectives from their engagement with society, children, children's families and colleagues as they, in Hargreaves' term, become immersed in the 'knowledge society' (2003:xviii). According to Hargreaves, (2003:19), '…teaching is not a place for shrinking violets, for the overly sensitive, for people who are more comfortable with dependent children than they are with independent adults.' These remarks have relevance for ECD teachers whom research shows (Nias, 1985 and Anning, 1991) do not

readily collaborate with other people and establish very close interdependent relationships with the children they teach (see 4.2.3 & 4.2.4).

Viewed in this way, professionalism can lead to a strengthening of power and an increased respect and make schools into effective 'learning organisations where capacities to learn and structures to support learning and respond constructively to change are widespread among adults as well as among children' (Hargreaves, 2003:20). As Smylie & Perry (2005) comment learning is enhanced by opportunities to work and learn from other teachers of similar position and status, and engagement therefore encourages teachers to change practice.

However, professionalism more often results in increased domination by those in power (Mac Naughton, 2003). Teachers who adopt narrow philosophical constructs and a more authoritarian approach towards teaching tend to reinforce their ways of doing and knowing with little thought to alternative perspectives of teaching and learning and, of course, change. Hargreaves (2005) and Day (2008) comment, excessive education change (and this has been rife throughout the western and developing world, see 2.2.2) can lead to fear and anxiety and teachers can begin to doubt their efficacy which of course can impact negatively on practice.

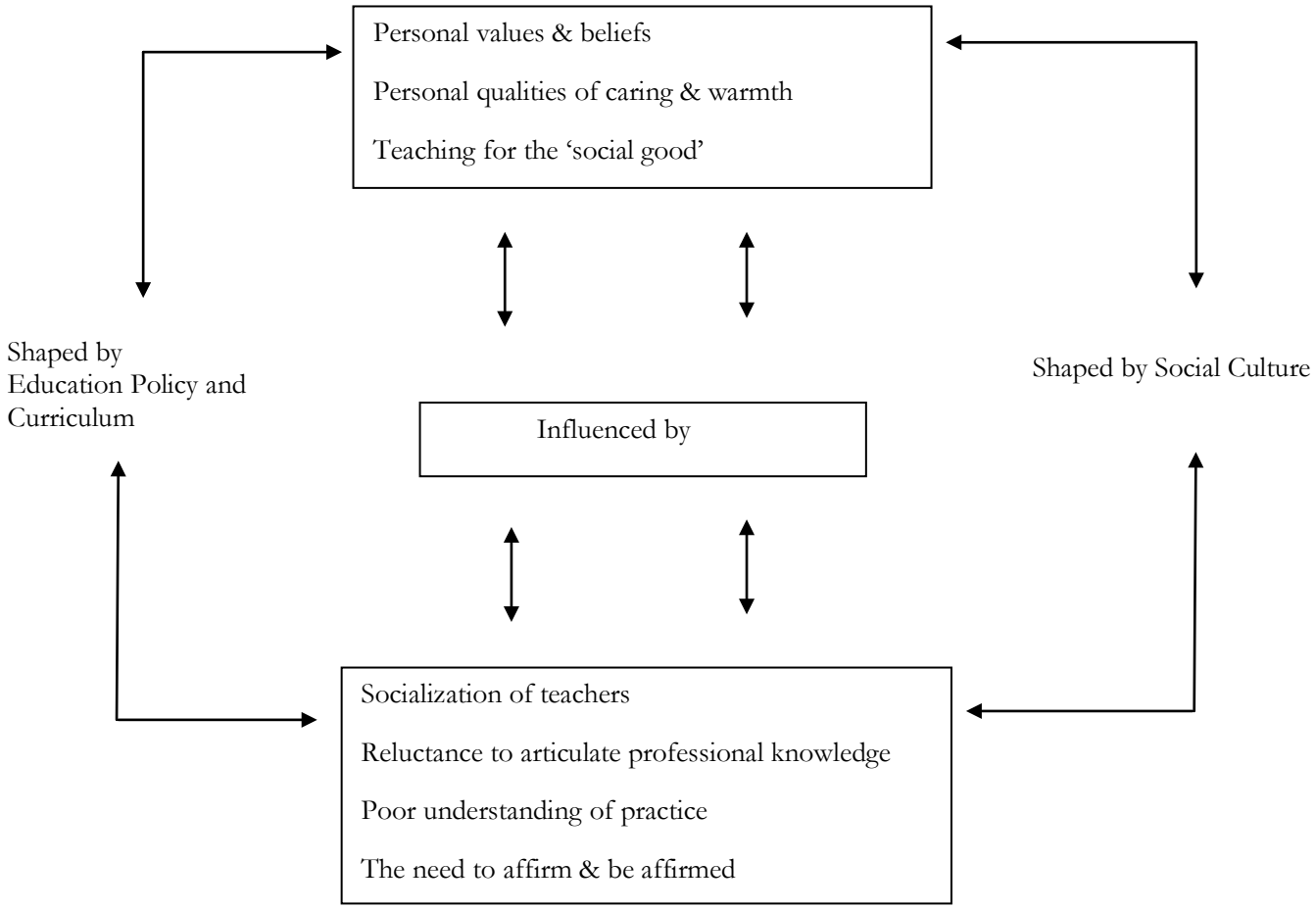
4.2.2 *Teachers' constructions of themselves: a general overview*

Ball and Goodson (1985); Nias (1985; 1987) and Biott and Nias[19] (1992) suggest insights into teachers' perceptions of themselves and their practice is of vital significance in understanding their actions in and commitments to their work, because their perceptions of themselves are closely linked to their sense of self. This in turn shapes and is shaped by their professional persona. These views are supported by Wilcox-Hertzog &Ward (2004) who comment that assessing teachers' beliefs could be a way to guide teachers towards practice that is more appropriate. Hseuh & Barton (2005) further contend that teachers' values and beliefs as well as their professional behavior play an influential role in children's learning experiences.

[19] These texts could be considered to be classic texts as they give a comprehensive overview of early research into teachers' understandings of themselves and their practices. Though old, their findings are still applicable in current conditions of teachers' work.

Woods (1990) and Hargreaves (2003) suggest that teachers possess personal qualities that are integral to the holistic process of teaching and learning. Qualities such as commitment, sensitivity and enthusiasm have always been held in high regard. Waller (in Francis and Skelton, 2008) contends that the construction of teachers is generated by the nature and status of teaching in society and these constructions are influenced by policy as well as popular culture. Consequently, the construction of teachers has shifted over the years. The belief in a single, stable and enduring identity has been challenged and is being replaced by a notion of multiple identities. A longitudinal study by Day and Kington (2008) showed that, though teachers are changing their identities and though teachers might have multiple identities, these are neither intrinsically stable nor intrinsically fragmented. Today there is an increasing recognition of a personal as well as a professional teacher identity and though these can be construed differently, if teachers are to remain in teaching there needs to be a strong connection between the two (Day & Kington, 2008). Figure 4.1 is a diagrammatical representation of factors impacting on teachers' constructions of themselves. These factors concur with those mentioned by Broadfoot et al., 1993) (see 1.7). In this diagram external factors such as policy factors such as education policy and curriculum (see 1.7 and 2.2.2) shape teachers perceptions. Internal factors are those which influence these perceptions. These internal factors will now be discussed.

Figure 4.1: Factors impacting on teachers' constructions of themselves



4.2.3 *Teachers' attitudes towards teaching*

Various studies internationally indicate that teachers are becoming disillusioned with teaching. Ball and Goodson (1985) maintain that teachers' idealism is becoming fragile and Hargreaves (2003) asserts that in part this is due to education systems developing an ever narrowing sense of purpose. This narrow sense of purpose (interpreted as an educational world dominated by test scores and achievement targets), has removed the sense of purpose from teachers who, in a social and educational landscape fraught with change, are losing their sense of vocation and compromise their idealism and value systems through the adoption of short term survival strategies. Waller (in Hargreaves & Woods, 1984) presents a negative image of teachers who are perceived as having a low social status. This has not necessarily improved in the intervening years (Ryan & Ackerman, 2005; Anning, Cotrell, Frost, Green & Robinson, 2004). Stereotypes exist of bored, unenthusiastic, inflexible and discontented teachers (Supovitz & Turner, 2000).

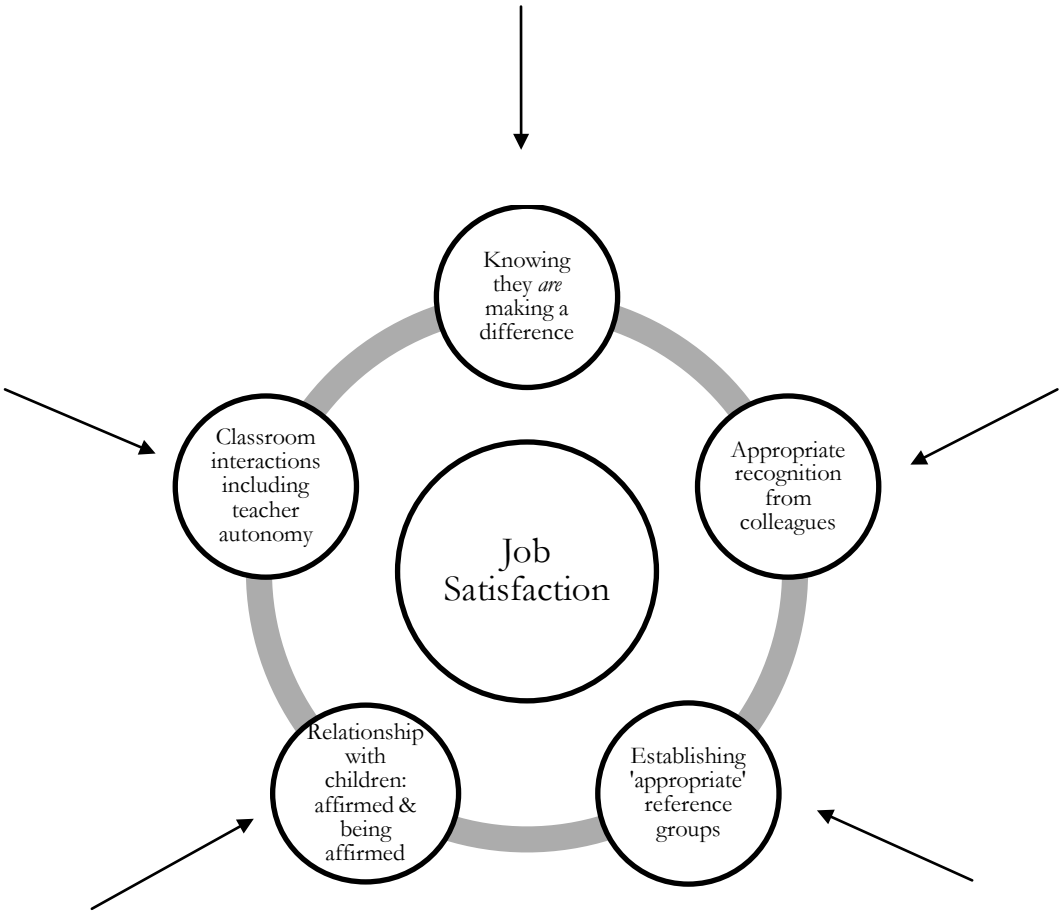
According to Webb (1985), teaching satisfaction comes from the act of teaching, coupled with the realization that they are making a difference. Teaching demands times when one is not sure of the outcome; is the teaching having any positive effects on the students? Often, students are not as responsive as teachers expect them to be (Sikes, 1985). As Webb (1985:83) comments: 'This uncertainty is pervasive and cuts deeply into teachers' senses of satisfaction and accomplishment'. In a child-centred pedagogy it can be difficult to determine what progress, if any, children are making (Gordon & Browne, 2008) and this can impact job satisfaction.

Teaching satisfaction is also negatively influenced by a lack of recognition from colleagues and administration which appears to increase a teacher's sense of isolation. Yet, despite common challenges and dissatisfactions, teachers do not readily collaborate and cooperate with each other to establish a sense of community within their school environment (Webb, 1985).

Teachers acknowledge the negative impact of this sense of isolation. It is difficult to get any indication of how well they are doing in their job. Much of this feedback comes through tenuous sources, for example, primary school teachers mention knowing what ex-pupils have made of their lives. Furthermore Webb (1985:84) contends that, 'because teachers have difficulty in assessing their classroom accomplishments and receive little recognition from the community, colleagues and administrators, their professional self-esteem is kept in continual jeopardy.' Thirdly, this isolation deprives teachers of the power to influence school-wide decisions that affect their conditions of work, and their frustrations are increased. It follows, of course, that if teachers do not often speak of common problems they are not likely to object to decisions that impact negatively on their professional lives — a situation which Hargreaves (2003) claims teachers must rectify. Research also shows that that money becomes more important when the job is proving unsatisfactory in other respects. In brief, positive feedback appears to be essential to enable teachers to achieve a sense of achievement and it enhances the perceptions of professional competence. Furthermore, Wilson & Loewenberg-Ball (1996) have concluded that teacher autonomy is essential for job satisfaction but as Kwong (2002) states increasing government intervention leads to a decrease in teacher autonomy. This again results in lower levels of teacher satisfaction.

These factors are represented diagrammatically in figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2: Factors influencing teachers' levels of job satisfaction



Because of the aforementioned challenges, Ball and Goodson (1985) contend that many teachers (especially in the higher phases) who have a professional commitment to teaching are much more likely to see themselves as subject specialists with their subject, providing the avenue for advancement and also personal satisfaction. Sikes (1985), Bennett (1985) and Nias (1985) all point to examples of teachers who find more substantial commitments and identity reinforcement outside of the normal work of teaching and of school. These findings are supported by Woods and Jeffery (2002) and Day and Kington (2008) where teachers, in the face of ongoing educational change, have been forced to become more strategic and political in defending their self-identities. They attempt to retain their values, self-esteem and sense of commitment while adjusting to a myriad of changes. Woods and Jeffery (2002:105) write:

> In education there is no direct route to change be it restructuring education or raising educational standards. Such desired outcomes however politically willed have to be realized through teachers who have beliefs, feelings and values and thoughts – in short an identity. Before they can apply themselves to best effect they have to work out how to

> organize a personal identity or identities congruent with the social identity and self-concept – to know who they are.

Critical incidents influence perceptions about practice

Fink & Stoll (2005) suggest that policymakers pay attention to biographical and personal influences on teachers and their work because understanding how lives effect work unlocks how teachers relate to educational change. As long ago as 1985 Measor (see footnote 18) argued that important life stories could be revealed in critical incidents which she suggested revealed major choices and times of change in people's lives (Measor 1985). These events result in teachers selecting particular kinds of actions that in turn lead them into specific directions which have implications for identity (McMullen & Alat, 2002). Though critical incidents can occur throughout a person's teaching life they usually happen during periods of uncertainty as it is then that one is forced to make choices.

Measor (1985) has identified three major trigger factors. These are: *Extrinsic factors* which can, for example, be brought about by historical events such as war. Within the South African context, *apartheid* could perhaps be viewed as a critical phase where circumstances or conditions forced certain decisions and actions During this era, a decision (or not) to go teaching, would have for most people depended upon, for example, their geographical locations and whether or not they were able to obtain the necessary entry qualifications. Policy decisions are another example of extrinsic factors which force decisions and actions on teachers. As Ryan & Ackerman (2005) remark, teachers enter the field through various paths. *Intrinsic factors* can occur throughout a person's teaching career but some of the more crucial identified periods include choosing to enter the teaching profession, teaching practice, mid career moves and the pre-retirement period. The third trigger refers to *personal* factors, for example, marriage, divorce and childbirth. These periods provoke critical phases and can propel people into a different direction. As Ryan & Ackerman (2005) comment teachers have to navigate planned and unplanned change while growing and developing.

Measor (1985) maintains that 'the incident itself probably represents the culmination of the decision making, it crystallizes the individual's thinking rather than of itself being responsible for that decision' (p.62). Measor (1985) further suggests that critical incidents involve claims about the self; claims about image, about teachers' ability to teach well or establish discipline. They represent a claim about being a proper teacher and often

challenge and alter the image that the teacher has of herself. Critical incidents involve a reassessment of priorities and can change that which a person wants or sees as important; they can change a person's trajectory.

Closely tied to the notion of critical incidents and an important consideration within the South African context is an earlier finding by Lortie (1975), who pointed out that teaching is white collar, middle class work and as such offers upward mobility for people in blue collar or lower-class families. It begs the question, 'what are teachers' motivations for entering the teaching profession'? Obviously these motivations can impact positively or negatively on classroom practice and teacher professionalism.

Ball and Goodson (1985:21) suggest that many teachers choose the profession by default. 'The decision to become a teacher might also be a negative one or series of "non-decisions". Teacher training is a second best alternative to university or marking time while searching for a more positive interest elsewhere.' Likewise Sikes (1985) found that not many teachers had a clearly conceived career map and they worked towards short term objectives such as getting through to the end of the term. Ball and Goodson (1985) contend that the concept of a career in teaching is problematic, especially for women who construct their careers in both a subjective and objective sense differently to men. And these constructions disadvantage women. For some woman teachers (those who are middle class and married), teaching is a means of providing an extra income. These findings have important ramifications within the South African context, where many female teachers head single parent families and for many there are few career opportunities (see 2.2.6).

Personal factors affecting practice

Anning & Edwards (2006) suggest that personal life experiences give teachers empathy with the people with whom they have to deal. This might be because, as Goodfellow (2008) noted, ECD teaching is seen as being motherly. Ackerman (2006) supports this contention when she states that teaching young children is seen as an extension of women's familial role of rearing children. Lobman & Ryan (2007) comment further that the persistent image of a preschool teacher is one who loves and cares for children. While these views might be highly problematic especially for contemporary ECD theorists (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Mac Naughton, 2003), they offer support for Sikes' (1985) suggestion that those teachers who are mothers display greater understanding and sympathy towards the children they teach. She writes, 'Teachers with children develop a

different perception of and attitude towards pupils. Relationship becomes more parental and perhaps in some ways more relaxed and natural' (Sikes, 1985:80). This positioning of ECD teachers by themselves might further enhance their perceived lack of status (Goodfellow, 2008; Ackerman, 2006) and career opportunities. Furthermore, Sikes (1985) notes that, with age, teachers appear to develop a natural authority, and discipline often becomes easier. It is worth commenting that in early years education, this natural authority might be more marked in the parent-teacher relationship, rather than in the relationship with young children. This could have unforeseen consequences for the success of parent-teacher partnerships (see 4.2.4).

Closing remarks

Teachers' perceptions of practice are influenced by a myriad of factors that include social and educational change. These perceptions are closely related to job satisfaction, which is frequently influenced by feelings of isolation and detachment from both the classroom environment and the schooling system as a whole. The result is a new and different construction of teachers and their classroom practice. As Francis and Skelton (2008:2) explain, recent research has resulted in 'insights into the complexities of teachers' motivation, constructions and understandings of their lives and work' and supports the contention that teachers' personal identities influence their thinking and their pedagogy. Yet in the face of these challenges, primary teachers appear to have maintained a more substantial identity than their higher phase counterparts (see 4.2.3).

4.2.4 *Perceptions of primary school teachers*

As previously mentioned, there is growing recognition that constructions of teachers' identities are changing. According to Woods and Jeffery (2002), primary teachers have also begun to reconstruct their identities, and the holistic humanism of the old identities has been replaced by a 'more instrumental and situational outlook, with the substantial self finding more expression elsewhere' (Woods & Jeffery, 2002:89). Yet, despite these assertions, recent research (Troman & Raggl, 2008 and Day & Kington, 2008) continues to support the image of the nurturing primary school teachers of yesteryear (Nias, 1985; Woods, 1990) who exhibit humanist, nurturing characteristics, often expressed as love and caring.

This notion of the caring primary school teacher receives strong support from Nias's (1985) contention that primary teachers have a defining professional persona. Nias (1985) suggested that they are tenacious and stubborn and possess a broad commitment to a set of ideals and beliefs related to service and helping to change society for the better. They choose to teach at this level because they believe that in this phase they are more easily able to reconcile their personal ideals and values with their professional activities. They are teachers who see their interests as caring primarily for children (not dissimilar from Goodfellows' (2008) finding that early years teachers are motherly), and encouraging their intellectual development. The findings from a study of 100 primary teachers in England led Nias (1985) to postulate that primary teachers were committed to teaching and that they accepted that teaching is a professionally demanding occupation. Participants were motivated by clearly defined criteria. These included the 'desire to care and give' (p.110); referential support for their religious or political beliefs, for example, 'I am a Christian first and this shapes all that I do' (p.110) and family motivation, if parents, for example, were teachers. As Nias (1985:110) writes:

> Sustained by these forces they believed, for example, 'Most of what I do is because I think it's *right* to do that. It doesn't matter what the others do'; 'My own upbringing, my family especially – that's stronger than any influence in school'.

Hargreaves (2003:47) claims that 'this kind of caring has a rather paternalistic quality about it' and comments that 'this is not enough anymore' in a knowledge society. He argues that care must be more than charity or control. Children and parents must be given agency, dignity and voice.

The role of reference groups in sustaining values and beliefs

In order to support their position, primary teachers seek the backing of reference groups which Nias (1985) describes as groups of individuals used for self-evaluation and as a source of personal goals and values. Though reference groups alter according to various social settings or the differing roles demanded of teachers, Nias (1985) found that it is through these reference groups that teachers are able to sustain their values and personal identities. In fact, Nias (1985) argues that the reference group is fundamental to the establishment of identity in teaching. In many cases, those teachers who failed to find a reference group left the profession.

In rare instances, a reference group could constitute the entire staff which, as a group, collectively strengthens their commitments to teaching, increased job satisfaction and a shared belief system. However, often the reference group comprises of one or more like-minded teachers who extend mutual support and allow teachers to behave in a way that was consistent with their value system.

Within the school environment, Nias (1985) contends that pupils become valuable reference groups, as children can be called upon to shape and reinforce teachers' values and actions when teachers find it difficult to align with many of the ideas emitted by the school. Nias (1985) postulates that it is difficult to question teachers' claims about children's satisfaction with the teaching process because they (the teachers) work in a relatively isolated classroom space which is difficult to penetrate. Hence, children can be easily used to confirm any number of beliefs and practices and it becomes hard to refute or challenge the teachers' assertions. However, it could be argued that perhaps children become important reference groups for some teachers because they have deeply embedded nurturing needs, which are, to some extent fulfilled by the children they are teaching.

Nias (1985) further argues that, when participants had no reference group at school, they found one outside, so great was the need for referential support in order to define and sustain their sense of personal and professional identity. These extra-school groups can also take many different forms, such as joining a union or an association or even further studies. They also looked to teachers elsewhere; be they in different schools, family or university friends. Nias (1985) concluded that talking with like-minded people is a critical element enabling the formation of individual values and reference groups. She also suggests the more the extra-school reference group supported the teachers the less the need to find support within the school.

According to Nias (1985:117):

> Reference groups can simultaneously promote and impede the development of the profession and of the individual within it. On one hand they are crucial to establishing and maintaining shared values among the group. If this is achieved it facilitates mutual understanding and provides encouragement and support in a lonely occupation. On the other hand they might frustrate the negotiation of shared collegial norms. Reference groups used for the defense of one set of values can obstruct the open discussion of, and agreement on others.

Nias (1985) argues that, outside their shared reference group, teachers neither wish nor are able to talk to one another, a finding corroborated by Webb (1985). Nor do they choose to enter into potentially conflicting situations. Like Webb (1985), Nias (1985) contends that teachers lack a shared language which enables them to engage meaningfully with each other about common concerns. She suggests, and this notion is supported by Hargreaves (2003), that teachers do not want to because the process of creating such a language would threaten the social context which sustains and defends their substantial self (Nias, 1985). It is possible that this substantial self is closely related to the nurturing, loving and caring perceptions that primary teachers have of themselves (Goodfellow, 2008), and teachers therefore avoid possible situations that might threaten these perceptions.

However, Nias (1985) claims that when participants find it hard to remain isolated, for example, when teachers perceive the need for affective and affiliative support, (especially when they come under threat from pupils, and in the case of ECD/Grade R teachers, possibly parents), they aligned their frames of reference more closely with those of their colleagues even though they are not willing to make them their own. In these instances teachers are under strong emotional and material pressure to conform to the norms of the staff membership group. As Ryan & Ackerman (2005) note implementing change depends on the teachers' capacity and will to do so.

4.2.5 *Perceptions of early years' teachers*

Though much of the discussion thus far has focused on the higher phases of education, there is no reason to assume that these research findings will be different for ECD/Grade R teachers. There appears to be a paucity of research on the preschool teacher's perceptions of practice. Jingo & Elickers (2005) and Pence & Marfo, 2008) note that this situation is even more dire for developing countries; one of the reasons for conducting this research. Anning (1991; 1997) has explored the role and perceptions of the infant teacher, and Grieshaber and Cannella (2001) and Mac Naughton (2005) have done work on embracing identities in ECD. This more recent work critiques ECD though a post modern lens and argues for the acceptance of multiple contradictory identities instead of the notion of 'the good ECD practitioner' that has been articulated by the dominant DAP discourse (see 3.2.1) (Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Yelland, 2005; Mac Naughton, 2005).

In the following section I examine literature and research on ECD teachers' perceptions of their work with a particular emphasis on their professional identity and how this identity impacts effective teaching and learning and relationships with parents.

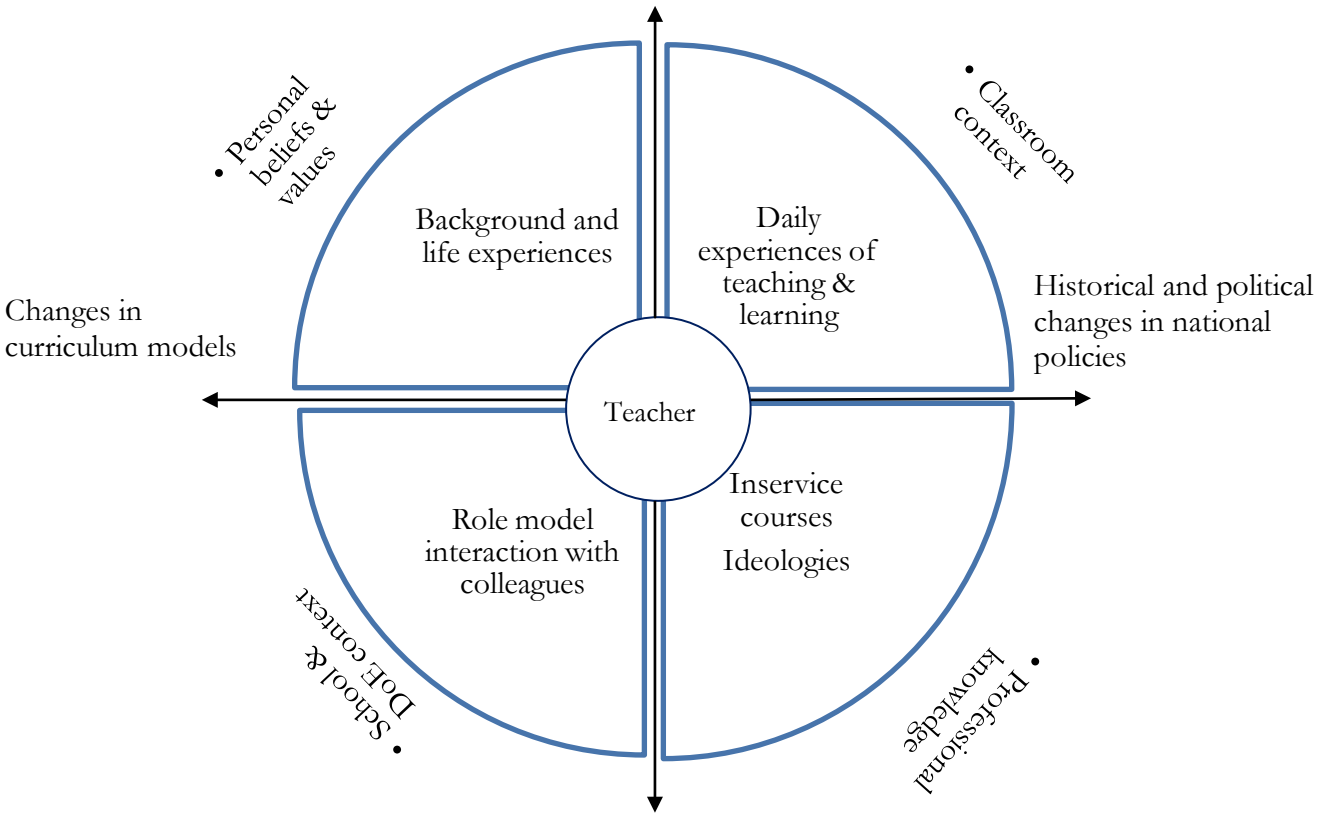
ECD/Grade R teachers' perceptions of practice

Writing from the perspective of British primary and infant schooling, Anning (1991; 1997) sketches a portrait of predominately female early years' teachers who bring into the classroom a set of values which have been acquired from their own personal histories as well as from the professional contexts in which they have worked. Subsequent education, personal situations and careers might have broadened their life experiences but teachers tend to present a set of aspirations that reflect white, British, middle class assumptions (Anning, 1991). The values they hold (and most teachers come from middle class or skilled working class family backgrounds) have strongly influenced their behaviours as teachers and result in teachers using multiple strategies to 'impose their middle-class cultural views of appropriate school interests and behaviours on their school populations while at the same time preserving their ideology of the innocence of childhood' (Anning, 1991:58). Anning (1991; 1997) further maintains that infant school teachers have been socialised by very specific processes that include male-dominated views of the world and of teaching, narrow career advice at school and not being encouraged to study for higher degrees. Unlike Nias's (1985) study, where primary teachers viewed themselves as successful teachers having intellectual interests and capacities, Anning (1991; 2006; Anning et al., 2004) argues that many early years teachers have low expectations of their own academic capabilities. They appear to be 'reluctant to articulate their professional knowledge' (1991:46) and in part therefore have themselves to blame for the lack of recognition given to the expertise of early years teachers and for the low status accorded to this phase of teaching. Anning (1991; 1997) presents a picture of non-critical teachers who lack in-depth understanding of their practice. She notes that teachers find it difficult to make useful links between theory and their daily work in the classroom. Possible reasons include problematic training where, for example, theories were not made accessible to them. Another reason is that teachers are reluctant to challenge the conventional wisdom offered to them by psychology. Anning notes:

> Teachers perpetuate practices derived from the ideas of early proponents of preschools without recognising the origins of their beliefs, or in fact questioning the validity of what they habitually do (1991:9).

Furthermore, these teachers are bombarded with conflicting influences, beginning with the myth that 'all children want to learn' (Anning, 1991:18). Anning (1991) further contends that 'teachers are caught between relentless currents of child-centred progressivism and utilitarian demands to teach basic skills' (p.19). And given these conflicting influences, it is not surprising teachers feel vulnerable and confused. She notes that the gap between rhetoric and reality remains a constant feature in the infant classroom. These conflicting influences which bombard teachers are represented diagrammatically in figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3: Conflicting influences of teachers (Adapted from Anning 1991:18)

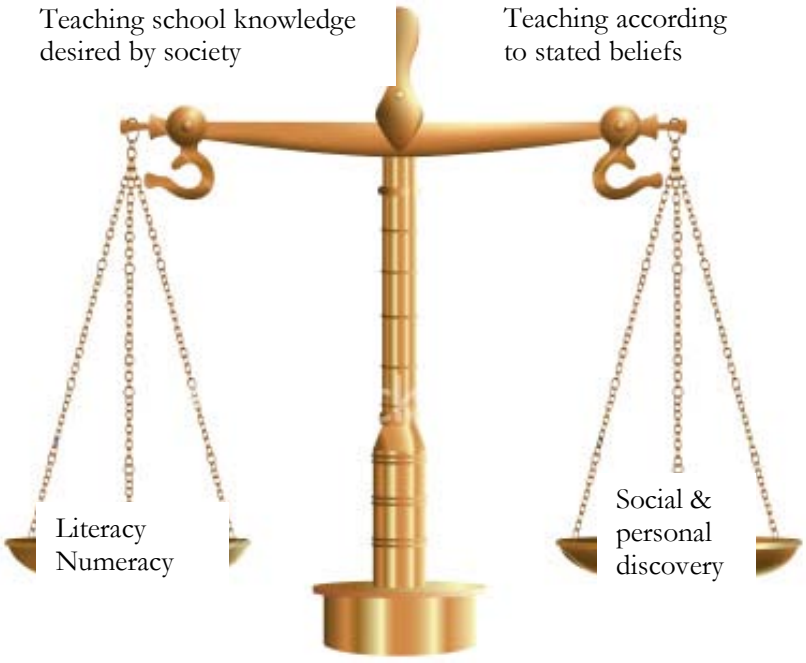


Teachers' perceptions of classroom practice

Tensions exist between how teachers perceive their various roles as facilitators and mediators of knowledge as they are pressurised to adopt a more instrumentalist approach (see 3.4.1). Anning (1991; 2006; Zeng & Zeng, 2005; Goldstein, 2006) note that there are strong pressures from within the educational system to instruct children in the basics, namely literacy and numeracy (see 3.4), and Anning (1991:81) argues that 'teachers are

imbued with a sense of urgency to get children numerate and literate.' Hisch-Pasek et al. (2007: 3) support this assertion when they comment that play has been sacrificed for curricular goals as 'playful learning has become replaced by practice and drill'. This formal approach is diametrically opposed to the more progressive approach which underpins infant teachers' highly rated beliefs about early learning. These beliefs include developing in children personal qualities or dispositions (see 1.7.1) such as self-confidence and independence, positive attitudes to learning, including enjoyment, a sense of achievement and satisfaction from learning Riley, 2003; Bruce, 2004). Teachers also deem it important to promote the development of moral judgment, language and social skills (Anning, 1991; 1997, Stipek , 2004; Bredekamp & Coppell, 1997; Kwon, 2002). As Anning (1991) comments 'On the one hand teachers see their role as being responsible for teaching children the kind of knowledge that is deemed desirable by society but on the other hand their role is guiding children through a voyage of discovery towards their own personal knowledge' (p.48). Teachers are in a recurring dilemma (Anning, 1997) and experience tension is trying to balance their roles. Woodhead (2006) confirms this when he acknowledges that there are disparate approaches to early childhood pedagogy (see chapter 3) and teachers are caught in the middle. This attempt at maintaining a balance is represented in figure 4.4.

Figure 4.4: The Teacher's Dilemma



Anning (1991; 1997; 2006) suggests that children have become the victims of this tension. They are either overwhelmed or bored and frustrated, caught in a system which is not necessarily pedagogically sound. For example, Eddowes, Aldridge & Culpepper, (1994) and Stipek, (2004) contend that children in appropriate child-centred classes display less negative behaviour. Hargreaves concurs. He writes '… putting excessive emphasis on literacy and numeracy, marginalizes the attention to personal and social development that is the foundation of the community' (Hargreaves, 2003:xx). Teachers' obvious dilemma is how to reconcile these opposing roles and this will have implications for sound pedagogy and high quality ECD/Grade R programmes.

Relationship with children

These dilemmas have further consequences for teachers' relationships with children. Anning (1991; Anning & Edwards, 2006) comments that teachers set high value on the quality of their relationships with individual children and acknowledge that, as an instructor, they have to have some level of control over the behaviour of the class. However, teachers trained in a tradition of child-centredness might experience difficulties 'reconciling the needs of the individual with the needs of the class' (Anning, 1991:56). Furthermore, when organising children into routines to allow teaching to take place, teachers are forced to coerce individual children into norms of acceptable school behaviour. Anning (1991) notes that teachers often feel uneasy about this dichotomy which relates to the potential abuse of power that is inherent in every teacher-child relationship in schools. She comments that, 'Teachers moderate the exercise of their power by clearly identifiable strategies designed to soften the process of establishing authority' (Anning, 1991:56).

Relationship with parents

Research evidence continues to point to the importance of the home and family in ensuring quality early childhood education (Sammons, et al., 2003, Anning (2006; Gordon & Browne, 2008; Mac Naughton, 2003; Alexander, 1997; Spodek et al. (1991). And as previously argued quality education is dependent upon a number of external and internal factors (see 1.7). An important internal factor is the perceptions (including attitudes and beliefs) of teachers. Therefore teachers' perceptions of parents and how they interact with parents will impact either positively or negatively on early childhood

pedagogy. As this thesis is exploring teacher's perceptions of their practice, no literature review would be complete if mention was not made of this parent-teacher relationship. Hence, this aspect of the literature review informs findings relating to research questions 3 and 5.

Anning (2006:9) notes that 'what parents do is more important than who they are.' EPPE research has indicated that when parents actively engage in activities with their children intellectual and social development is enhanced (Sammons et al., 2003). Learning begins at home and as Alexander (1997:76) remarks, 'learning within the family is more lasting and influential that any other'. He goes on to say:

> Family life can be a source of inspiration and personal growth and stimulation but family experiences can also cause stress, distress and even inhibit learning. It can lead to suffering and long term disadvantage.

Family scenarios that depict disadvantage can be found in many South African classrooms. Many children come from disadvantaged and deprived households where the parents/caregivers themselves are illiterate, unemployed and possibly ill with, for example, tuberculosis or AIDS (DoE, 2001c; Schneider & Salojee, 2007). Heeding these different contexts is imperative if positive teacher-parent interactions are to be fostered. As Anning et al. (2004) comment, parenting is limited within specific cultural exchanges over time. But it is important to acknowledge, as Alexander (1997:78) does, that most families are 'good enough' and as he points out 'parental pressures have increased since the 1970s and family patterns have changed significantly, and past experience is no longer an adequate guide to the future.'

These diverse scenarios present different challenges for the teachers. On the one hand, parents are not necessarily confident about their role as parents (Alexander, 1997) but, on the other hand, parents often believe that they have expert knowledge about their child (Mac Naughton, 2003). Mac Naughton (2003) further contends that teachers also believe that their expert, professional knowledge about children equips them to know what is best for the children and that parents need to learn about this expert knowledge in order to help their children. According to Mac Naughton (2003:250), the two sides argue their case in the same way. 'I have specialized knowledge to which you must defer.' Each side sees themselves as 'the ones who know best' and this can result in a knowledge-power struggle that can lead to misunderstandings between the two parties about the nature and purpose of early childhood education as well as about the nature and purpose of parent

involvement. It is preferable if both parties realise that they can learn from each other through establishing open, honest, reciprocal relationships.

Research from various continents (Europe, Asia, Australia and Africa) confirms that building positive relations with parents is widely viewed as being problematic (Mac Naughton, 2003; Hargreaves 2003). Despite teachers' best intentions, and however warm and inviting a school might initially appear, the overwhelming emphasis is, in most instances, on the parent as a vehicle for the child and maintaining the existing institutional routine which often excludes meaningful parent-teacher interaction (Alexander, 1997).

Teachers need to respond to these challenges sensitively if they are to develop a collaborative relationship with parents. In a changing world, teachers should encourage parents to be true partners in their children's learning by promoting an extended web of learning to establish meaningful partnerships with parents. Parent-teacher interactions will be further interrogated in 4.3 when I explore how teachers position themselves in relationship to different epistemological positions.

4.2.6 *Closing remarks*

According to Anning (1991), classroom tensions have elicited specific responses from many teachers. They have bowed to outside pressures such as parental expectations and demands from principals by spending most of their time interacting with children who are engaged in basic skill activities. Furthermore, teachers justify this approach because 'judgments about how good a teacher is, are made by colleagues based on how well children do in the primary school' (p.49). Given the finding that teachers are rarely confrontational (Nias 1985), it is not surprising that teachers have opted for this approach (see 3.4).

I would argue that if these are challenges for the British Infant School system how much more so for many South African ECD/Grade R teachers who themselves have not had the benefit of good primary education and who in many instances have minimal ECD/Grade R qualifications (see 2.2.6).

Teachers, especially early years teachers, bring to their work a sense of self, the preservation of which is of prime importance to them (see 4.2.4). Because this sense of

self is strongly embedded in their belief system and because the personal nature of teaching often makes it impervious to outside influences, Hargreaves (2003); Woods (1990); and Nias (1989) contend that teachers find it difficult to alter their educational, social or moral beliefs and values or practical theories which underpin their daily actions and decisions, or in other words, their classroom practice (Biott & Nias, 1992). Consequently, it is difficult and slow to effect educational change as one is attempting to change basic assumptions, attitudes and beliefs (Woods, 1990; Biott & Nias, 1992). This calls for a radical shift in professional self-perception.

Nias (1985) further argues that the support of reference groups (4.2.4) is an additional inhibiting factor. She maintains that when teachers report that they have altered practice this is not really the case. Practice has been modified to ensure the maintenance of their substantial self or to ensure social survival within the group. She comments, 'Teachers might hear what is said to them but not respond because they are listening to other voices' (Nias, 1985:117).

One option, she maintains, may be to provide opportunities and encouragement for teachers to talk to one another about those aspects of their job that really matter to them. Nias (1987) suggests that change in teaching only occurs when the individual who is the teacher changes. This view is supported by Mac Naughton (2003) and Hargreaves (2003). As Nias (1985:117-118) notes, 'If the person makes the agenda the practitioner may join the debate.'

However, this is not easy as there is a close link between primary teachers' sense of professional competence and their sense of self as competent people (Nias, 1989). She further argues when teachers are made aware of the gap between their espoused ideologies and their actual classroom practices this causes enormous tension and feelings of guilt within them. Anning (1991) concurs and stresses it is important to acknowledge the sense of disquiet and anxiety caused in teachers when outsiders have identified gaps between their espoused theories and practice.

But Anning (1991; 1997) argues that it is only when teachers are confronted with the gap between their espoused theories and theories-in-use (Argyris & Schön 1974) (see 4.4) that they begin to make sense of their habitual teaching strategies, recognize their strengths as well as their weaknesses and become realistic in their analysis of what is possible in the classroom. Furthermore, it is only when they begin to reflect critically on their work (see

4.4) that they can begin to transform practice (Brookfield, 1995). It is through critical reflection that teachers begin to identify the types of knowledge bases that inform their pedagogical positions (see 4.3).

4.3 *EPISTEMOLOGICAL POSITIONS THROUGH WHICH TO VIEW ECD/GRADE R PRACTICES AND TEACHER*

Mac Naughton (2003) acknowledges that contemporary ECD practice is informed by varying paradigms which have led to different understandings of children and practice. Consequently, the field is fraught with contradictions and uncertainties. These include the way childhood and children are constructed, understandings of curriculum and ECD pedagogy as well as of the broader ECD context which underpins all practice.

Mac Naughton (2003), drawing on the work of Habermas, a contemporary critical social theorist, has outlined three epistemological positions, namely, conforming, reforming and transforming through which to view and critique current ECD practice. According to Mac Naughton (2003), Habermas has argued that within a given area of knowledge there are three knowledge positions. These positions are technical (finding out what happens and how this can be controlled); practical (finding out what things mean to people and understanding events rather than controlling them); and critical or emancipatory (finding out if what is known is in some way distorted or biased). A technical interest often leads to knowledge that conforms to current understanding and practices; a practical interest leads to knowledge that is reformed in the process of gaining new insights and a critical interest to transforming knowledge during the process of critical questioning. It is during this questioning process that teachers and others with whom they interact become more empowered and are more able to think critically about their practices (Mac Naughton, 2003). According to Mac Naughton (2003), the third approach is the one that most effectively opens a space for critical reflection and for becoming a critically reflective teacher (see 4.4).

Mac Naughton (2003) contends that these three approaches to knowledge or, as she terms them, 'knowledge interests' have 'shaped and continue to shape the curriculum landscape of early childhood education' (p.4). Each of these knowledge positions provide an alternative lens through which to analyse teachers' understandings of children, what they think young children ought to know and learn, their own practice as well as how

they view themselves, the communities with whom they work and the related pedagogical contexts.

The reasons for including this alternative paradign are as follows. Firstly, ECD, especially within the context of developing countires is an under theorized field with a paucity of literature on ECD teachers' classroom practices (Jambunathant & Caulfield, 2006; Jingo &Elickers, 2005; Pence & Marfo, 2008). The available literature (and this is also often the case in developed countries) (Grieshaber, & Canella, 2001; Mac Naughton, 2003) points to uncritical practice informed by the dominant developmental model which is often realized through DAP (Dahlberg et al., 1999; 2007; Pence & Moss, 2002; Pence, 2004; Penn, 2009) or a more formal approach to early years teaching (Anning, 1991; 1997; Hisch-Pasek et al., 2007). Secondly, little if any consideration is given to contextual factors. Families and children are viewed through the same lens and the notion of a universal child, where one model fits all, prevails. Social and cultural contexts are at best acknowledged but culturally appropriate practices are not necessarily adopted (Walsh 2005). Issues relating to for example, diversity and social justice are often sidelined. Thirdly, within an ever changing world and demands for greater accountability, practice continues to be infomed by many 'taken-for-granted assumptions'. Despite increasing pressure on ECD teachers to adapt their practices they are 'often left with little guidance or support on how to navigate through these changing professional landscapes' (Mac Naughton, 2003:1). Fourthly, as Mac Naughton (2003), Hargreaves (2003) and Brookfield (1995) assert, changes to practice can only begin to take place if teachers are willing to reflect critically upon their practices. This requires insight into their practice and appropriate support to make this reflection a meaningful exercise. Consequently, these three knowledge positions espoused by Mac Naughton (2003) provide a conceptual framework for enabling teachers to critically reflect on their work. This framework offers more than one perspective and acknowledges that teachers are able to recognize, reflect and choose between the different perspectives. This framework provides easily accessible guidelines which enable teachers to position themselves in one or other knowledge position. Finally, because of the underpinning critically reflective component, this framework offers insight and support to enable teachers to reposition themselves and adopt what is termed a more transforming position which in 'moments of ambiguity and uncertainty, transformative learning, creativity, change and innovation become possible' (Mac Naughton, 2005: 203).

I briefly explain each of these three knowledge positions and explore the relationship between each position and ECD teachers' understandings of children, their positions on the early childhood curriculum and their insights into ECD contexts.

4.3.1 *The conforming knowledge position*

This position is informed by maturational theory; behaviourism and social learning theory (see 3.2.2). According to Mac Naughton (2003), these theories are rooted in enlightenment thinking which reinforces the belief in the innocence of childhood (see 3.3.1). A consequence of this period which saw the birth of European intellectualism, the pursuit of reason and of understanding the world now known as science, resulted in children becoming a focus of interest with an increasing emphasis on being able to predict and control human behaviour.

The concept of maturation is influenced by the belief that growth towards adulthood is driven internally. Maturation proceeds through a series of stages in an orderly and sequential manner which begins prenatally and continues after birth (Crain, 2005; Mac Naughton, 2003). A range of age-based behavioural norms have been mapped for children. Though Gesell acknowledged the role of the environment for supporting growth and development, environmental factors play no direct role in the sequential unfolding of structures and action patterns (Crain, 2005). In contrast, for the behaviourists learning is determined by the physical and social environment. They argue that behavior is driven by physical and social conditioning not by innate psychological or biological structures. Culture determines learning and a specific behavior is more likely to be repeated if it is reinforced by other people (often an adult) or the environment (Crain, 2005; Mac Naughton, 2003). As Mac Naughton (2003) notes behaviourism has had a powerful influence on many early childhood educators' view of learning. She writes 'the ideas that we conform to our culture as we learn, and that praise, positive rewards such as 'gold stars' or a special role in the classroom can reinforce positive behaviours and assist children's learning are widespread. Because of the theoretical underpinning of this position, Mac Naughton (2003:14) dubs it 'conforming to nature, conforming to culture.'

Understanding children

Teachers who adopt this position view children predominantly through a maturational and behaviourist lens (see 3.2.2). Children are required to meet fixed, predetermined milestones and behaviour can be controlled through reinforcing stimuli chosen to evoke a specific response (see 3.2.2). Adults decide what type of behaviours children ought to acquire and then reinforce these accordingly.

The **conforming perspective** views children as being dependent upon more knowledgeable others for their optimal growth, development and learning. As such they are passive learners who lack initiative and merely reproduce knowledge that is given to them. Growth and development becomes measurable and this measurement is articulated through developmental norms or milestones which are generally uncritically accepted. This understanding of children has reinforced the notion of the universal child and 'a one size fits all' approach towards ECD (Mac Naughton, 2003; 2005; Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001). They argue that this attempt to normalise children has resulted in an assimilation approach towards equity (and I would suggest to ECD practice in general) with the underlying belief that, when people all share the same values, they share an equitable social world. Assimilation approaches towards education attempt to create a common culture or set of norms for behaviour and actively work to ensure everyone is a member of that culture. As Mac Naughton, (2003:20) states, 'Within an assimilation model developmental, social and cultural diversity is problematic. If we are different we can't be equal'.

Consequently, this position supports a teacher-directed, goal orientated approach towards learning. The teacher decides upon the specific outcomes which children are expected to reach. Creativity and initiative is often sacrificed in the process.

ECD teachers' positions on the early childhood curriculum

The curriculum is a tightly structured coherent plan for learning, based on measurable developmental and national goals. Planning becomes a rational process in which time is segmented and tightly organised with its use and flow controlled by the teacher. The knowledge focus is geared towards that which is considered to be significant within the dominant culture and aims to shape children by deliberately transmitting desired social values and knowledge to them. Knowledge is organised in ways (themes or subject areas)

that make sense to the educators. According to Decker and Decker (1984 and Bredekamp & Coppell (1987) (see 3.4.1), teacher-directed activities include rote learning and drill tasks. Highly structured materials such as worksheets dominate the learning programme. In short, the teacher is in control of learning and decides what, when and how learning will happen.

Teaching strategies are often structured on behaviourist principles. Teachers use rewards as key motivators of children's learning and aim to reinforce desirable learning outcomes and attempt to extinguish unacceptable learning and behaviours. Observation and assessment is objective and measures children's progress towards predetermined developmental norms or pre-specified learning outcomes.

ECD teachers' insights into ECD contexts

Teachers who adopt a **conforming to knowledge** position view themselves as the professionals who understand how children best learn and should be educated. Parents are expected to conform to teachers expectations of what is 'best' for the children (Mac Naughton, 2003). Teachers acknowledge the importance of the home and of establishing links between home and school, but tend to subordinate parents' knowledge. This can create a hierarchical relationship with parents that might make it hard to establish equitable communication possibilities with parents. A consequence could be that teachers who are teaching children from alternative contexts expect their parents to conform to the dominant pattern. This can result in conflict between diverse cultures, traditional knowledge and the expert's (teacher's) knowledge, and privilege the parents from the dominant culture over others. In addition, within the South African context, language might also be contentious. Many parents cannot communicate in the language of learning and teaching (LoLT). They are therefore 'othered' and their views marginalised. Ethnocentric knowledge based on limited cultural viewpoints is accepted as the 'truth' privileging the views of the dominant group.

According to Mac Naughton (2003), the major beneficiary of the conforming knowledge position is the state. She comments, 'if parents accept that their ignorance …excludes them from their children's education they are encouraged to become involved in financing and running their child's centre on a voluntary basis' (p. 263). The end result, she argues, is the easing of pressure on the state to provide early childhood services that

are appropriately funded and managed. 'Using the rhetoric of "community control of services" the state can then abdicate its responsibility to young children' (p. 263).

Mac Naughton (2003) contends another consequence of equating involvement and voluntary work creates class-based divisions between parents associated with their ability to do voluntary work. Those parents in full time employ (often working class parents) might, because of work constraints, be unable to volunteer or to attend, for example, committee meetings, fund raising events and so on. These assertions have implications for Grade R education in South Africa.

Some concluding comments

The conforming position privileges the dominant culture and it is this culture which determines the most valuable and desired knowledge and skills that children ought to acquire. The assumption is that the knowledge is value free and that there is one best way to teach this knowledge. Hence, the dominant forms of knowledge are accepted and taught without being questioned (Giroux, 1988). Giroux (1988) advises that teachers interrogate their knowledge assumptions by exploring other possible avenues of knowledge and alternative ways of transmitting this knowledge. Multicultural societies often feature diverse and conflicting notions about what ECE should achieve and the conforming position does not open a space for these considerations.

This position could be aligned with the technocratic curriculum (see 1.7.2) which still appears to be a dominant curricular approach (Hollis, 1996; Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 2008). A technical approach to the curriculum disempowers teachers and children as they make decisions within a much narrower framework (Cornbleth, 1990). Goodfellow (2001:3) comments, 'a technical view denies the real character of professionalism where knowledgeable and reflective practitioners make informed, intuitive and commonsense judgements as they engage in their work with young children.' This position supports social and cultural stereotypes and thus reinforces the same ways of doing and knowing for the teacher with a taken-for-granted, business-as-usual approach towards curriculum development.

In this knowledge position, critical reflection of teachers' assumptions and values does not inform practice. Likewise observation and assessment are driven by structured goal-driven tasks often in the form of standardized tests. McNeil (2002:245) suggests that 'such tests mask racial, class, gender, and cultural hegemonies that devalue certain groups

while privileging others.' A consequence is that traditional approaches to observation and assessment deprive certain children of the right to be heard and can underestimate and disadvantage children, as the teaching approach is not readily applicable to all cultural groups.

4.3.2 *The reforming knowledge position*

This approach holds that education can, and should, produce a rational individual capable of independent thought and self-discipline, often referred to as the self-governing child. The focus is child-centred with an emphasis on self-realisation, autonomy, individual growth and development in order for all children to reach their full potential as autonomous beings. This position, which is often articulated as a developmentally appropriate play-based programme, is located firmly within a constructivist's paradigm which has been driven by theorists such as Piaget, Erickson and Vygotsgy as well as the more recent work on neuroscience (see 3.2.2). Learning occurs through an interaction between nature and nurture/culture.

ECD teachers' understandings of children

Children are viewed as active participants in their own learning; they are concrete, experiential, learners and it is through interacting with their environment that children drive the process of assimilation and accommodation and hence cognitive development. Their current stage of cognitive development will influence how and what they learn. As children develop at an ever increasing rate it is possible to monitor their growing independence and to measure their competence at each stage of development. Though the importance of social interactions and realities are acknowledged in the learning cycle, the process of creating knowledge is seen as highly individualised (Mac Naughton, 2003). Teachers value individual differences but do not necessarily respond to these in culturally appropriate ways. As such, the dominant culture and ways of doing tend to be privileged, and, like the conforming position, teachers often adopt an assimilation model. As Mac Naughton (2003:51) comments, 'If there are cultural differences about how parents and children understand individual learning and its place in the curriculum, these are not usually heeded by the educators'.

ECD teachers' positions on the early childhood curriculum

Teachers who adopt the reforming position take cognisance of holistic development and acknowledge play as one of the most effective ways of promoting learning and development. The environment is structured in ways that enable children to partake in free play and child-initiated activities. The teacher is both a facilitator and mediator of knowledge. The result is a creative, stimulating and challenging age appropriate programme but it does not necessarily heed different cultural, language or other differences. DAP (see 3.2.1) fits neatly into this position.

Knowledge is developed in and through children's changing interests. As such, it is an emergent curriculum (Vander Wilt & Monroe, 1998) that is responsive to daily happenings and acknowledges that formal education is inappropriate for young children. Information gained through careful observation of the child guides teaching and learning decisions. Observation and assessment based on developmental norms becomes the basis for knowing the child and informing the learning process.

Teachers' insights into ECD contexts

In the **reforming approach** teachers and parents collaborate to produce the self-governing child. They acknowledge that they each bring specific, unique knowledge about the particular child, children in general and about teaching and learning. Through sharing this knowledge they reinforce and reform each other's knowledge. They work together for the good of the child in a collaborative mutual way. Mac Naughton (2003) acknowledges that this approach is ambiguous. Though the importance of parental involvement in supporting children's learning is recognised, teachers do not appear to involve parents as true partners, advocates and decision makers in the curriculum. Furthermore, this position is often reinforced by school policy which acknowledges parental involvement in non-educational issues but subordinates parents to teachers' expertise in curriculum decisions.

Some concluding comments

The reforming position focuses on individual needs and interests, privileging culturally narrow and or ethnocentric individualistic goals. Dahlberg et al. (1999; 2007); Grieshaber and Cannella (2001) and Mac Naughton, (2003; 2005) claim that this exclusive focus on the individual child prevents ECD teachers from adopting a holistic, all embracing

approach towards teaching and learning and their practice. As Mac Naughton (2003) writes:

> Critical constructivists reject the idea that meaning, knowledge, and therefore, learning is a uniquely individual, value-free cognitive pursuit. They believe that knowledge, and thus learning are always social and embody ethics, values and politics. They are always accomplished within the dynamic of power and the specific conditions that produce that dynamic will inevitably produce much of what is constructed and learned. If we don't look for whose knowledge is being included and excluded in the classroom we become ignorant of the inequalities and injustices that are produced in our culture and our ignorance perpetuates them (p.49).

Mac Naughton (2003) contends that teachers who adopt a reforming position and acknowledge the need for adopting more equitable practices do so from an individualistic perspective, despite the imperative that changes to practice should be broadened to include issues relating to gender and race. As Derman-Sparks (1989) and Dau (2001) note, in today's fractured and complex world it is essential to acknowledge the validity of cultural knowledge and ways of learning that enhance self-esteem, cultural pride, identity and self-concept in all children.

Mac Naughton (2003) further argues that, because this position describes *how* to teach and *not what* to teach, little guidance is given on how to decide about appropriate curriculum content. This is perhaps why many teachers revert to a more conforming position where the curriculum pathways are clearly outlined. (See the critiques on play and DAP in 3.2.1.)

4.3.3 *The transforming knowledge position*

This position is informed by several schools of thought that support a critical pedagogy which views children as unique, capable individuals, living and learning within complex environments. According to Mac Naughton, 2003:70), 'we both transform and are transformed by nature and culture and…our capacity to be transformative holds the key to maximizing young children's learning'.

Teachers who embrace a transforming position do not accept that there is a single truth regarding the child; there are many truths, no single certainties (Dahlberg et al., 1999;

2007; Mac Naughton, 2003). Transforming theorists have therefore adopted a broad framework through which to view practice and recognise that there are competing ideas about learning and multiple ways of living and being in the world. As such they are willing to challenge any practices to the contrary and act appropriately to ensure high quality and equitable ECD/Grade R practices. Because they do not recognise the notion of the universal child they choose to replace the term development with the process of becoming human which Mac Naughton (2003:74) states, '...is a complex web of interactions between historical, social, linguistic, emotional, communicative, emotional, political and cultural dynamics in our particular world.' However, I pose the question; 'Can the nature factor be totally excluded?' (See3.2.1).

ECD teachers' understandings of children

Proponents of the transforming knowledge position believe that no one universal theory of children, of learning or human development can explain and predict development across cultures and across times (Rogoff, 2003). Mac Naughton (2003:74) argues that, 'despite staged and hierarchical ways of thinking about cognition and learning, in practice our understandings of the world are messy, context-bound and culturally specific.' Transformation happens through interactions with others. Collaborative learning becomes an essential classroom feature and children are viewed as powerful co-learners.

An important premise is that 'differences between adults and children are culturally constructed and not natural' (Mac Naughton, 2003:73). I would argue that this particular construction of childhood needs to be thoughtfully interrogated, especially relating to implications for practice (see 3.2.3). The questions to ask include what differences are culturally constructed and when do these differences become a matter of concern? I would argue that it is *how* these differences are interpreted and managed that becomes the cultural construction which impacts either negatively or positively on children and their learning.

Teachers who adopt a transforming position still construct children as experiential, active, concrete learners but the children's role as co-constructors of knowledge is given new meaning and prominence. The structuring of the environment, the choice of content and how this is mediated become focal points (see 3.3.2). Within this framework, the implementation of play (see 3.2.1) which is acknowledged as being an important vehicle through which young children learn is reconceptualised (see 3.3.3). Important questions

include 'Whose social practices and whose knowledge will be privileged through play' and 'which [groups of] children will be marginalised or 'othered' through play activities'? Continual engagement with and ongoing critical reflection on early learning programmes by teachers becomes vital to ensure all children are equally advantaged by play opportunities.

ECD teachers' positions on the early childhood curriculum

According to Dahlberg et al. (1999; 2007) and Mac Naughton (2003), teachers have a choice. They can either choose to be actively involved in transformation of inequalities in their work or implicitly involved in reproducing inequalities. Transforming teachers recognise that knowledge is socially constructed and therefore problematic because it serves the needs and interests of a particular group of people. Knowledge is culturally limited and culturally bounded (Mac Naughton, 2003). These teachers engage critically with knowledge, rather than focus on its consumption. Meaningful content is generated through interaction with the children. Content is developed from what children know; it honours their cultural experience and knowledge and extends children's capacity to be active in their own learning. The curriculum is not unplanned but grounded in children's life experiences, interests and concerns. An approach to curriculum planning that is informed by children's interests - an emergent curriculum (Vander Wilt & Monroe, 1998) and the emphasis on active learning is not dissimilar to the reforming position (see 4.3.2). But the similarity ends here as teachers who adopt the reforming position do not engage critically with content or contexts.

Within the transforming position, teachers focus on challenging stereotypes and identifying silences and inaccuracies about a multitude of people within the curriculum (Jones & Mules, 2001). Such teachers are sensitive to practices that perpetuate and elevate the cultural and social biases of a majority group and consequently marginalise the knowledge, languages, values and traditions of minority groups.

Teachers who adopt this position push the boundaries; they focus on issues relating to social justice, equity and diversity. A transforming position adopts an anti-bias approach towards education which emphasizes equity and social justice and aims to empower children and to challenge discrimination and oppression (Derman-Sparks, 1989). Active involvement in the transformation towards a more just society opens up multiple possibilities for children such as the ability to confront justice and to resist oppressive ways of becoming and being assisted to recognise and deal with what is fair and unfair in

their world (Reardon, 1995). This approach rests on the belief that teachers can work with children and their families to build a better world; one that reflects 'lived democracy'. As Mac Naughton (2003:197) writes:

> …a critical/'transforming' approach…should ensure that content is transformative…For example, children from socially, culturally and economically privileged groups should learn how to work towards the production of a less unjust society... Similarly, children from subordinate groups should gain the 'primary goods' that give them the social, economic and cultural privileges. This should not just be given or taught to children. The content should teach children how to think and act.

And Mac Naughton (2003:197) justifies these comments by quoting Freire who states 'one teaches how to think through teaching content' (Freire 1993, in Darder 2002:139).

Planning is driven by reflection-on-action (see 4.4). Time is used flexibly in response to individual children's needs which also determine how space is structured. Teachers are alert to any equity implications of either time or space.

Within this approach, goals are carefully chosen to link with children's specific experiences and issues but also to include the voice of the marginalised, oppressed or silenced. Observation and assessment practices have to consider more than one view of the child. As this position acknowledges that it is not possible to be totally objective, teachers have to recognise their own biases and the particular lens(es) through which they observe and assess children (Mac Naughton, 2003).

A transforming approach towards curriculum opens a space for teachers to reflect critically (see 4.4) on their practice and their teaching. A cautionary note is however necessary. Teachers' critical reflections may be constrained by a number of political and social conditions. Class, race, gender, ability or other circumstances might limit their capacity to reflect critically on the ways in which their own biases are influencing their choice of curriculum goals. This might restrict their ability to develop goals that are transforming for particular groups of children (Mac Naughton, 2003).

Teachers' insights into ECD contexts

The transforming approach involves the recognition of knowledge-power links in the relationship between teachers, parents and the community. Parents and teachers negotiate shared meanings around children, teaching and learning contexts and content.

The idea of a fixed, predetermined body of knowledge is replaced with an open-ended framework where there is place for many possibilities. The notion of the 'expert' teacher gives way to a collaborative approach where the agency of all people is recognised and affirmed. Teachers give parents a real voice; meanings are negotiated that should benefit both sides equally. This approach is underpinned by the notion of democratic education, 'inviting parents and others to form policies, manage resources and evaluate services; and by devolving decisions about what and how children should learn' (Mac Naughton, 2003:269).

This is in contrast to Foucault's (1977) position that in the modern world, social institutions survive and thrive through 'regimes of truth' about how we should think and how we should behave and feel towards ourselves and others (Mac Naughton, 2003). Drawing on this notion, Mac Naughton (2003:84) suggests that most 'early childhood centres survive and thrive through creating and maintaining regimes of truth (or systems of management).' These 'regimes' prescribe 'how we should think, feel and act towards ourselves as early childhood professionals and towards children, parents and colleagues' (Mac Naughton, 2003:84).

Instead, transforming teachers recognise the diversity of the communities with whom they work. They also recognise that all legislation and documentation can reinforce dominant cultural values and as such strengthen what Foucault referred to as a 'regime of truth'. They also interrogate:

> Society's general policies of truth, the types of discourses it accepts and makes function as true; …the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true as these 'truths' sometimes work against justice by excluding rather than including different ways of understanding and being in the world (Foucault, 1997:131 cited in Mac Naughton:289-290).

It can be an uncomfortable journey to adopt a less conventional position, such as a transforming knowledge view, as it requires a commitment to an ideal and plenty of hard work. Teachers who adopt this position have to be goal orientated in their communication with parents and steadfast in adopting anti-bias practices when communicating with children and parents. Priorities include practising respectful cross-cultural communication, acknowledging parents' views of their children and being able to reflect critically on, for example, race, religion, ethnicity and disability in their

relationships with parents. It becomes both enriching and challenging to create and sustain a collaborative relationship that fosters a sense of well being for all.

Mac Naughton (2003) contends that this type of collaborative approach could result in a community of learning where parental involvement is at the core of the child's learning. Within such a community, all players have to acknowledge each others' ways of understanding and viewing particular knowledge and communication between teachers, parents and all stakeholders becomes an essential vehicle to establish and maintain such a community. As Hargreaves (2003:161) comments, 'teachers are not deliverers but developers of learning'.

Some concluding comments

The nature of a transforming position is that it critiques itself as possibilities are explored. A critique of this position is that it does not subscribe to methodologies. *What* to teach is interrogated but not the *how*. In an educational landscape filled with uncertainty and a top-down technocratic approach, this can push teachers towards accepting a more instrumental approach where there is both clarity and direction.

As has already been acknowledged, the transforming position is often a difficult one to adopt as society's dominant majority enjoy, consciously or unconsciously, maintaining inequalities that benefit and privilege them. Few groups wish to lose their privileges. Therefore, the likelihood that the privileged will be disadvantaged, possibly in subtle ways, by a transforming curriculum has to be considered as a reason for teachers not adopting a transforming curriculum. Teachers who adopt this position might be in an untenable situation where the demands of the system and the dominant groups clash with their pedagogical philosophy and approach toward teaching and learning. And, as Anning (1991) and Nias (1985) have shown, teachers do not deal well with conflict (see 4.2.5).

4.3.4 *Closing remarks*

These three knowledge positions can, in part, be aligned with the three different approaches towards ECD/Grade R practice outlined in chapter 3. The conforming position resonates with the instrumentalist approach, the reforming position with DAP and the transforming position can be likened to the historical-sociocultural approach.

According to the reconceptualists (for example, Yelland, 2005; Grieshaber and Cannella, 2001; Mac Naughton, 2003 and Dahlberg et al., 1999; 2007), in contemporary ECD practice DAP has positioned itself as 'the absolute truth' and in so doing privileges the dominant culture and social mores upon which these truths are based, i.e. a white middle class society. As such DAP defines appropriate and inappropriate ways of working with children and that regulates (controls) how we talk about young children's best interests.

I would argue that the above comments are even more applicable to the instrumentalist approach which fails to take cognisance of the whole child and foregrounds the notion of a universal child who should meet age-related specific developmental norms. The focus is on narrowly determined learning outcomes which are frequently achieved through inappropriate methodologies. In short it is a curricula approach that is pedagogically unsound. DAP advocates an approach which stems from the children's interests and concerns and is grounded in a child-centred approach which acknowledges the importance of play and it does provide curriculum support. It is worth reiterating Walsh's (2005) comment that a consideration of development factors is necessary but not sufficient. It is also worth noting that, though the reforming position has taken cognisance of cultural factors, this has not been sufficient to realize equity and social justice within the ECD/Grade R classroom.

To sum up, if teachers are going to privilege all children and families whom they teach, they should give careful consideration to their knowledge position. And this requires that teachers embrace an increasingly critical reflective outlook that considers how their values relating to children, their families and teaching have been, and are continuing to be, adjusted/ modified over time to reflect changing and alternative contexts.

4.4 *BECOMING A CRITICALLY REFLECTIVE TEACHER*

In section 3, I interrogate the role of critical self-reflection and how this can inform practice. I examine the notion of espoused theories versus theories-in-use and explore how, through critical reflection, teachers could begin to alter their practice.

Teaching is not a neutral practice. It is embedded in historical, social, economic and political agendas, the existence of which many primary teachers (and I would argue ECD/Grade R teachers) are not even aware. Research findings (Nias, 1985; 1987; Ball & Goodson, 1985; Anning, 1991; Biott & Nias, 1992; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Mac

Naughton, 2003; Hargreaves, 2003; Yelland, 2005) (see 4.2) unequivocally indicate that the majority of teachers teach innocently. Brookfield (1995:1) comments that such teaching 'at best…is naïve. At worst, it induces pessimism, guilt and lethargy.' This notion of innocent teaching is somewhat paradoxical given that widely articulated aims of this group of teachers are to change society for the better (Nias, 1985), instilling in children a love for learning and a belief and value system underpinned by democratic insights and a respect for all people (Nias, 1985; 1987; Anning, 1991; Woods & Jeffery, 2002) (see 4.2). But as Brookfield (1995) notes, the achievement of these goals necessitates the realisation that teaching for democracy is never unambiguous. What teachers think of as fair and just practices can be experienced as marginalising, oppressive and constraining by others. 'One of the hardest things teachers have to learn is that sincerity of practice does not guarantee the purity of their practice' (Brookfield, 1995:1).

Teaching innocently will not enable teachers of the 21st century to teach for the 'knowledge society' (Hargreaves, 2003) or to ensure the principles of equity and social justice are introduced to children. The adoption of a critically reflective, collaborative approach in which shared meanings are negotiated enables teachers to articulate their views with others. This entails that teachers recognise and are able to negotiate different and perhaps competing knowledges of children, their contexts and of teaching and learning.

Brookfield (1995) claims that an effective way of rupturing innocent teaching is for teachers to challenge, through adopting a critically reflective approach towards practice, their taken-for-granted assumptions about the world, as these assumptions frame how teachers think and act. Mac Naughton (2003) agrees that the adoption of a critically reflective practice will foster a collaborative, transforming approach towards teaching and challenge implicit and often unarticulated taken-for-granted beliefs about teaching and learning.

4.4.1 *What is critical reflection?*

Because many differing understandings of reflective practice have been incorporated into education discourse, Brookfield (1995:8) cautions that 'reflection is not, by definition, critical.' Reflection becomes critical when it considers power relationships in education and 'how these distort educational opportunities and interactions' (ibid) and when assumptions that appear to make teaching lives easier but actually work to the contrary are questioned; in other words critical reflection will help to uncover hegemonic practices

(Brookfield, 1995). According to Brookfield (1995:15), this term was introduced by Gramsci in 1978 to 'describe the process whereby ideas, structures, and actions come to be seen by the majority of people as wholly natural, preordained and working for their own good, when in fact they are constructed and transmitted by the powerful minority interests to protect the status quo that serves those interests.' Over time hegemonic assumptions become deeply embedded and oppressive. They become difficult to recognise as they are included into many aspects of everyday life and of teaching practices. Brookfield (1995) suggests that hegemonic assumptions are eagerly embraced by teachers as they are seen to represent what's good and true and therefore to be in their own best interests. Yet he argues (ibid) that this could not be further from the truth and that 'the very cruelty of hegemony is that teachers take pride in acting on the very assumptions that work to enslave them' (p.15). In fact, it through hegemonic practices that the more powerful (often those in authority) subtly control the actions of others by reinforcing many hegemonic assumptions.

The ideas and practice of hegemony become so deeply embedded in everyday actions that they become part of the commonsense way of ordering the world and are uncritically accepted as true. Mac Naughton (2003) comments that some truths are more powerful than others and are often accepted as such because they have institutional backing. She further argues that 'each truth competes to be seen as right and correct – i.e. the truth.' …. If we know '*the'* truth then we know the right way to act, the right way to teach, the right way to behave' (Mac Naughton, 2003:75). Reconceptualists would, for example, place child development theory in this category. Brookfield (1995) cites the notion of teaching being a vocation and of caring, dedicated, hardworking teachers who 'serve the children' in their care as another hegemonic concept. In this instance, teachers, for example, embrace added functions under the guise of being good teachers when in fact the only interests being served are those of the administration.

Mac Naughton (2005) has highlighted some of the assumptions that frame early childhood practices. Drawing on the work of a Foucault she acknowledges that 'much of his work explores the relationships between knowledge, truth and power and the effects of these relationships on us and on the institutions we create' (p.5). Mac Naughton (2005) argues that truths about, for example, gender or sexuality resonate more powerfully when they are institutionally produced and sanctioned and when truths are produced in this way they regulate and sanction us in a discrete and tactfully way

(Rabinow, 1984). Mac Naughton (2005) maintains that the early childhood education field has grown through developing a set of truths about practice and these 'regimes of truth' dominate early childhood practices and dictate how things should be done. The evidence for this position is based on Gore's (1998 cited in Mac Naughton, 2005) eight identified 'micropractices of power' that operate in the classroom to reinforce 'regimes of truth'. The eight identified practices are surveillance, normalisation, exclusion, classification, distribution, individualisation, totalisation and regulation. Mac Naughton (2005) for example, contends that normalisation occurs when children's behavior is compared to developmental norms and that classification happens when truths are used to differentiate between groups or individuals for instance by talking about normal and delayed development. A further example could be when specific truths are used to regulate ways of thinking and being by invoking rules and limiting behavior.

4.4.2 *The critically reflective journey*

As has been noted, by for example, Brookfield (1995) and Mac Naughton (2003), reflection is not an easy task. Undertaking a critically reflective journey requires commitment, patience and tenacity. It also requires strength of character, as it can be an emotionally harrowing journey. In the process, teachers open themselves to uncertainty, criticism and possible dissent from colleagues, parents and children. For Brookfield (1995), the journey necessitates interrogating practice through four critically reflective lenses which he has identified as autobiographical; seeing ourselves through the eyes of students (I would read children and parents within the ECD/Grade R context); colleagues' experiences; as well as theoretical literature. Each lens allows teachers to focus on elements of practice from a slightly different perspective and will highlight aspects of practice that are distorted or simply taken-for-granted in a non-critical way.

Mac Naughton (2003) recommends that teachers ask themselves probing questions which will enable them to determine their knowledge position (see 4.3) and suggests that in order to develop a more transformative approach, the boundaries of what teachers know, believe and want for children and families in their community will need to be blurred. 'Each requires a serious commitment to theory, practice and professionalism and an 'ethic of care' that acknowledges the risks and dangers of change in each person' (p.293).

Argyris and Schön (1974) view the critically reflective path through yet another lens which they have called Theory in Action. Though their work was based on organisational change, there is no reason to suppose that teaching is different. Argyris and Schön (1974) claim that people need to become competent in taking action (thinking about what they have done, for example), and simultaneously reflecting upon this action if they are to learn from it. They maintain that behaviour and learning can be analysed in terms of two different practices which they have called theory-in-use and espoused theories[20].

If, as is often the case, people are unable to reflect upon their theory-in-use, this results in what Argyris and Schön (1974) term single loop learning. Argyris and Schön (1974) maintain that through various socialisation processes (which begin in childhood) people are taught to react to others and to disquieting situations in ways that cause least disruption. They develop a set of defenses which are often considered to be 'attributes of maturity, poise, dignity and adulthood' (Argyris & Schön 1974:84). People might believe, for example, they value learning, self acceptance or being original but are quite unaware of how to behave according to these values. Group norms are developed to support their premises and as these phenomena become part of the social landscape there becomes less need for changing them. This model therefore encourages learning that preserves the existing behaviour and makes it difficult to change as practices or behaviours are based on what has or has not worked in the past. Single loop learning assumes that problems and their solutions are close to each other in time and space (though they often are not). Change involves doing things better without necessarily examining or challenging underlying beliefs and assumptions.

They contrast single loop learning with double loop learning which leads to insights about why solutions work. This requires critical scrutiny or critical reflection of situations or specific behaviours. This deeper questioning might then lead to more substantial and

[20] Theories-in-use are those theories that govern observable behaviour or actions. Espoused theories are those 'to which he [they] give[s] allegiance and which is communicated to others' (Argyris & Schön, 1974:7). These two theories might not be congruent or compatible with each other and the people concerned might not be aware of these incompatibilities. Theories-in-use are a way of ensuring a certain type of constancy and of meeting perceived demands. They enable people to set boundaries to their actions especially because most people do not think about or are even aware of their theories-in-use. Therefore, they have no constructive way of reflecting on them. Argyris and Schön (1974) maintain that theories-in-use can only be judged in conjunction with the behavioural world that is conducive to the development of that theory-in-use.

meaningful behavioural changes and shift how behaviours and their possible consequences are framed.

Progressive incongruity, incompatibility or inconsistency between theories-in-use and espoused theories leads to dilemmas which people find intolerable and therefore require resolution. According to Argyris and Schön (1974), effecting realistic behavioural change which moves people from single loop to double loop is a challenging undertaking and entails a number of steps for all concerned and is steeped in collaborative learning. The initial steps are producing individual awareness and growth that lead to the development of new behavioural competences and a favourable relationship between individuals (those promoting the change of behaviour and those whose behaviour is changing). In other words, the commencement of the critical reflective journey is undertaken together with other people.

Once teachers have embarked on this journey (and it could be a slow and difficult start), it becomes an evolving process where teachers continually enquire into practice and modify and adjust it accordingly. It might also include some risk taking and experimentation. As such, it can be an exciting and invigorating journey. In the process, deep seated beliefs and taken-for-granted assumptions change.

Brookfield (1995) does not recommend that this journey is undertaken alone and in fact, Argyris and Schön (1974) acknowledge that it cannot be successfully undertaken on one's own. It requires support from others to be able to reflect meaningfully on practice and to effect change. This could be problematic as teachers do not readily collaborate with others or appear to be willing to share ideas about practice (Nias, 1985) (see 4.2.4). They are comfortable to remain in reference groups that confirm their existing beliefs and value systems. And as Brookfield (1995) notes, this becomes a potential obstacle, because if people who share similar thoughts and ideas are the support system, existing assumptions and beliefs are confirmed without acknowledging the need for change — possibly the beginning of a regime of truth.

These obstacles, I would suggest, need to be heeded, in particular by primary and early years teachers whose notion of being a good teacher is deeply embedded in their sense of self which is perceived to be nurturing, loving and caring (Lobman & Ryan, 2007; Ackerman, 2006; Goodfellow, 2008) (see 4.2.2). These perceptions of self could prove

to be very resistant to change. I elaborate further when I interrogate the research results and the discussion thereof.

One way of overcoming this resistance is through Mac Naughton's (2003) suggestions that teachers work with others within learning contexts to build a 'critical community …where each person's history, knowledges and social and cultural identities are valued, validated and included' (p.293). Early childhood teachers who reflect carefully and critically upon their knowledge and values and consider how these inform and influence their practice could become such a community. This practice would be informed by an ongoing reflective action cycle.

4.4.3 *What critical reflection means for teachers and teaching*

Becoming critically reflective enables teachers to enrich both their personal and professional lives. Practice becomes an object of (systematic) enquiry. Teachers become better able to develop, articulate and question the rationale that underlies their teaching practice. There is an increasing awareness that curricula do not just happen but have arisen out of conflicts of interest in which the wishes of certain individuals and groups prevail or have become dominant. Teachers become more aware of issues of power and control, and, as a consequence, of oppressive practices which are often unintentional. More deliberate thought is given to creating democratic classrooms. Teachers become better able to name and confront classroom dilemmas which they would have previously ignored. There is an increasing realisation that curriculum and teaching are constructed and tentative notions framed by human agency. It is therefore possible for teachers, parents and children to dismantle and reframe these notions. In becoming critically reflective, teachers discover their voice and their own agency and learn to speak about practice in a way that is authentic, consistent and enables them to transform practice (Brookfield, 1995).

If teachers retain narrow theoretical constructs, largely ignore issues related to diversity and remain comfortable within an assimilation model, they are unlikely to develop a balance between personal-professional agency that will enable them to achieve greater community recognition of and commitment to the early years (Mac Naughton, 2003). Their teaching approach will remain relatively static and they will be accepting of, rather

than critically engaging with, policy, legislation and Grade R contexts in general. Mac Naughton (2003:300) comments that when teachers:

> Begin to address the broader social and political realities that inform and shape [their] values and practice, [they] will begin to assess [their] roles and responsibilities in working with young children and their families against a wider range of frameworks.

This thesis explores ECD/Grade R teachers' perceptions of their practice. It attempts to unravel what these teachers consider to be high quality practice, their understandings of young children and what young children need to know and learn. It explores what teachers believe they need to know in order to support the learning process. It further investigates what alternative strategies teachers believe would be useful for improving practice and if there is a disjuncture between their theories-in-use and their espoused theories. None of these concepts under investigation are absolute. Teachers' practices, knowledge and understandings of practice reflect particular understandings framed by particular theoretical underpinnings located in a particular space and time. Rapidly changing education systems coupled with contemporary understanding of ECD practice call for teachers to rethink their practices. As previously argued, this only becomes possible if teachers begin to reflect critically on their practice, start interrogating their taken-for-granted assumptions and imagining new possibilities for practice. It is through a process of critical reflection that they will start identifying tensions between their espoused theories and their theories–in-use and work towards a practice that is more representative of contexts and issues relating to social justice.

Ongoing critical reflection should enable teachers to focus on issues relating to social justice and consider, for example, who is advantaged and who is disadvantaged by how teaching and learning occurs and what will lead to action that will create changes. In so doing, early childhood practices become redefined and can further advocacy.

4.5 *CONCLUSION*

The 21st century calls for professional teachers who are both collaborative and reciprocal learners who can teach democratically to meet the demands of a diverse and challenging school community. Yet research paints a picture of teachers who are becoming increasingly disillusioned with teaching and who are finding it difficult to meet these education challenges while at the same time retaining a professional persona. Teachers

have been forced to reconsider their beliefs, values, roles, biographies and ambitions in ways they had not anticipated.

However, despite these social and education challenges, primary teachers appear to have retained their image of being nurturing, caring and loving teachers who rate educating children for the social good and the promotion of personal and social development as their educational priorities. It appears that affirmation from even one like-minded other person is sufficient for these teachers to sustain their belief in themselves and enables them to reject interaction and collaboration with other colleagues or teachers who have dissenting views.

Reconceptualist theorists demand that teachers rethink the nature and practice of early childhood education. They argue teachers should reconceptualise their practice through alternative lenses that allow them to question whose interests are being served by current knowledge and contemporary practices.

Mac Naughton (2003) contends that ECD teachers can position themselves according to three different knowledge positions, a conforming, reforming or transforming position. It is the transforming teacher who recognises the diverse demographic in each classroom, who is the democratic educator teaching for social justice. Changing one's perspective and becoming a transforming educator is an arduous journey fraught with pitfalls. Achieving a transforming position will afford teachers the opportunity to address broader social and political realities that inform and shape their values and practice and to assess their roles and responsibilities against a wider range of frameworks.

Change is difficult to effect and is seemingly initiated through a process of critical self-reflection. This critical reflective journey is a demanding one and requires commitment and perseverance from those engaging in it. In the early childhood phase, critical reflection should focus on social justice and how teaching and learning occurs, who is privileged and who is disadvantaged and what will lead to action that will create changes. In so doing, early childhood practices become redefined and can further advocacy.

In the next chapter I present the research design. I unpack the research paradigm and describe the research sample and its selection. I outline methods of data collection and analysis and examine issues of reliability, validity and generalizability. Ethical considerations are also reviewed.

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH DESIGN

5.1 *INTRODUCTION*

This chapter describes how the research has been conceptualized and planned. An important purpose of research design is to lend rigour to the research process. This helps to ensure that the research is systematically conducted and that there is accountability for the quality of the research as well as the research claims. The first step in achieving these aims is a careful conceptualization of the research framework. In order to realize this step a number of qualitative researchers, Crotty (1998), Mason (2002) and Creswell (2003), amongst others, suggest that the researcher pose a number of probing questions. Creswell (2003) has outlined three questions that underpin the research design. These are:

1. What knowledge claims are being made by the researcher (including a theoretical perspective)?
2. What strategies of inquiry will inform the procedure?
3. What methods of data collection and analysis will be used?

(Creswell, 2003:5).

These questions informed the discussion of the following points:

- The research paradigm
- The research sample and its selection
- The methods of data collection
- Analysis of data
- Presentation of the research results
- Issues of reliability, validity and generalizability
- Ethical considerations

5.2 *THE RESEARCH PARADIGM*

This qualitative research study is grounded in a philosophical assumption that is largely interpretive as it aims to explore, understand and interpret a specific phenomenon or social reality – ECD/Grade R teachers' perceptions of high quality ECD programmes and how these impact on classroom learning.

The philosophical assumption underlying this research is social constructivism. According to Mertens, (2005), this is often combined with interpretivism. Socially constructed knowledge involves understanding the life world of the participants, how they negotiate and make meaning through social and historical constructions, theory generation and multiple-participant meaning (Creswell, 2003). The underlying assumption is that 'individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work based on their historical and social perspective' (p.8). The researcher therefore seeks to 'make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world' (Creswell, 2003:9). This manner of generating data and a pattern of meaning necessitates that this paradigm is largely inductive. Mason (2002) recommends that qualitative research should go beyond mere description; it should produce explanations and arguments that yield rich, nuanced, complex and multi-dimensional possibilities that will offer insights into how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, produced or constituted.

Because qualitative research aims to describe and interpret the nature of a phenomenon or social reality, both the researcher and participants should have opportunities to become actively engaged in the research process. To achieve this, Mason (2002) suggests that researchers ask themselves difficult questions. This should include self-questioning activities which Mason (2002:5) calls '*reflexive acts'* which are described as:

> Thinking critically about what you are doing and why, confronting and often challenging your own assumptions, and recognizing the extent to which your thoughts, actions and decisions shape how you research and what you see.

I was mindful of questioning my assumptions throughout the data collection process as well as during the analysis and writing up stage. I kept a journal and made notes of my own thoughts while observing. I often came back to these notes when I was attempting to make sense of a specific set of data. For example, many participants mentioned that they have less status than teachers in other phases. Why I asked myself is the ECD sector so accepting of this situation? Why do we not collectively complain – and, am I any better off at Wits? – [being at that time the only full-time ECD lecturer at the University, (interview reflection, 21 October[21], 2008).

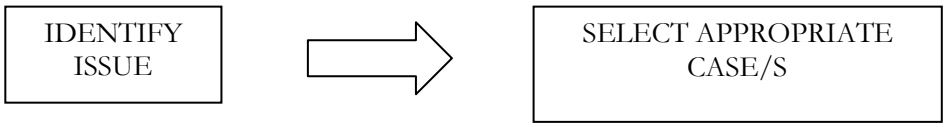
[21] A schedule of when I visited each school is given in chapter six (see table 6.1).

My attempt to involve the participating teachers as active participants in this research project proved to be more challenging. Participants were all given copies of the transcripts and asked to respond in terms of accuracy, or to make any additional comments that would clarify their input. During the interviews I also asked them to recall some critical incidents which had possibly influenced their current practice and had as a result required them to think more deeply about what they do. Many participants found this difficult to do. I asked in a number of different ways but did not want to appear overbearing or demanding. I was after all a guest in their school, (journal entry after interviews held on 14 August and 9 October, 2008). Another way of encouraging participants to become actively engaged in the research was to invite them to take photographs of, for example, activity areas, or other areas such as wall displays that they felt was representative of their classroom practice (or they told me what to take. (A number of photographs included in this thesis were the choices of the teachers (see 5.2.1 - children playing with blocks, 15 July, 2008 and 6.2.5, the value tree) However, many of the chosen pictures involved images of children who were then readily recognisable and had to be deleted.

5.3 *SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS*

I gave considerable thought to the selection of the participants to be included in these instrumental case studies. According to Rule and John (2010), in an instrumental case study the issue is first identified and then the cases are selected. Figure 5.1 depicts this process.

Figure 5.1: Instrumental case study (Rule & John 2010:15)



In this study, the issue centred on perceptions of practice, and Grade R teachers were the cases. In order to obtain a true reflection of their perceptions of practice it became necessary to select multiple cases.

Rule and John (2010) provide a rationale for this type of selection. Multiple cases allow for better representation of the class of cases and a possible comparison across cases. They also afford some breadth as well as depth of focus, accommodate methodological replication (use of same methods, techniques and instruments of data collection and analysis) and they are amenable to study within a common theoretical framework. Furthermore, 'multiple case studies, if they reveal common findings, can generate tentative generalizations that might be further tested in future studies' (Rule & John, 2010:22). They provide a good way of testing methods in a variety of settings.

However, multiple-cases also have limitations which I had to heed when analysing data. According to Rule and John (2010), these include being tempted to look for similarities and disregard differences; skimming over the specific context of each case in the quest for generalities; difficulties in replicating the same methodological regime in different cases and accepting that a multiple case study design cannot generate findings that represent all cases of the population.

Selection criteria are therefore crucial and should reflect the purpose of the study. Rule and John (2010) recognize that important criteria might stipulate exemplary cases or contrasting cases of the phenomenon under study. As stated in chapter one, and elaborated in chapter two, there is a great variation in ECD/Grade R pedagogical environments and in teachers' qualifications, geographical locations of preschools, and schools reflecting different socio-economic contexts. These factors therefore became the determining selection criteria. The final sample comprised ten schools and 12 Grade R teachers who reflected many of these different criteria. Grade R teachers were purposively sampled from GDE schools which were included in the Foundation Phase Research Project (see 1.6) as well as from free-standing community Grade R classes which met the selection criteria and who indicated a willingness to be involved in the project.

I chose to locate this study in the Gauteng province, in the greater Johannesburg area, because I believed that most of these differences and variations are encapsulated within this geographical area. I already, because of my position as a teacher educator, (see background of the problem, 1.2) had insights into the teaching and learning environments of many community preschools and a select number of GDE Grade R classrooms. This background information proved to be helpful when selecting schools.

My involvement in the Foundation Phase GDE project informed the selection of GDE Grade R teachers. Involvement with this project gave me the opportunity to meet Grade R teachers, Foundation Phase Heads of Department (HODs) and school principals. I also consulted with GDE Foundation Phase and Grade R programme coordinators before finalizing the choice of GDE schools.

I consulted with a number of informed sources such as Directors and/or trainers of ECD NGOs who are involved with ECD teacher training and service provisioning and committee members of the ISASA Pre-primary Committees before finalizing the selection of free-standing preschools. I consulted these people to counter possible researcher bias and to enable me to select participating schools from as wide a pool as possible. Their input gave me a greater contextual understanding of many of the schools and presented me with a wider selection of possible schools and staff whom I could invite to participate in this research study. The final selection was made by me independently of any of the informed sources previously mentioned. Therefore I do not believe that the confidentiality of either a specific school or teacher was compromised by this process. Most importantly, within this framework, the main criterion for selection was a willingness (as already mentioned) to participate in the study.

Castle (1996:20), comments that 'it is perhaps, unrealistic to expect strangers to discuss sensitive issues openly when confronted "cold" by a university-based researcher'. This was one of the reasons why I, where possible, organized the sample based on previous, personal interactions and/or recommendations. Several teachers and principals from differing teaching and learning environments indicated their willingness to participate in this research study. Thus, based on their willingness to participate, if they met the selection criteria they were included in the study.

To ascertain willingness I first contacted the head of the school to establish a willingness to become involved in the research study. But I left the invitation open so that the principal could change his/her mind and if teachers were reluctant I could step away.

If the principals indicated a willingness to participate I then independently contacted the teachers, usually telephonically. I discussed the proposed research study with the teacher and assured her that if she was reluctant to participate there would be no coercion. I also told her that my observations would be confidential and findings would not be shared

with the principal or any other staff members. She was also informed that if she was unwilling to participate I would not pursue the matter. I had to bear in mind the possibility that pressure could have been placed on teachers by for example, the principal (either overtly or passively) to participate in this study. But I assured all teachers that they were under no obligation to take part in this study. For example, there would be no repercussions, employment or otherwise. As previously mentioned, I only confirmed that I would be doing some research in a particular school once I had ensured teacher willingness.

Very few of the people I approached were reluctant to participate. For example, I had tentatively selected two schools, but when I phoned and spoke to the respective principals they appeared to be hesitant. In both cases I decided not to pursue my research in those schools. In another school, the principal was enthusiastic, but not the teacher. I did not include this school in my sample but I do not believe that anyone was disadvantaged because I had left a door open by not finalising my visit prior to discussing the possibility with the teacher.

In every school, I worked collaboratively with both the head of the school[22], Grade R teachers and, if applicable, the Foundation Phase HoD. I acknowledged that the principals could be useful research allies as well as research participants. Principals are (presumably) familiar with the Grade R year and have the responsibility for ensuring and monitoring quality. I envisaged that they would be able to provide a managerial perspective on a number of the research questions.

5.4 *DATA COLLECTION*

In qualitative research, methods of data generation should be flexible and sensitive to the social context and should take place in the natural setting. For this reason I went to the participants' places of work which enabled me to 'develop a level of detail about the individual or place and to be highly involved in actual experiences of the participants' (Creswell, 2003:181). An interactive, humanistic stance that makes use of multiple methods is the preferred approach in qualitative research. This requires that the researcher think strategically about the integration of the different methods used. For

[22] In the formal sector, and some community settings, this will be a principal; in other community settings this could be a crèche supervisor or director or the owner of the preschool.

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example, Mason (2002) asks if one method of data collection/generation is contingent upon prior analysis of data from another method.

In this study, I made use of observations, interviews, critical incidents and documentary evidence. I chose these methods of data generation because, as Mason (2002) comments, my ontological and epistemological position 'suggests that the participants' knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences and interactions are meaningful properties of the social realities' that my research questions were designed to explore (p.63). These methods allowed a meaningful way to generate data through communicating interactively with participants. Furthermore, these methods require that 'the researcher also acknowledges her active and reflexive role in the process of data collection' (Mason 2002:66). This meant that I displayed both sensitivity and empathy with all communication that I had with participants. An open, non-judgmental approach is more likely to yield rich data. The nature of this type of data generation required that I engaged in a similar undertaking so that I was able to experience what I had asked of the participants.

Another important decision that I had to make was to determine what counted as data. Is data only what participants articulate or are non-verbal cues also considered? Do memories and unwritten interpretations count? As the researcher, I continually needed to question my own assumptions and judgments. According to Mason (2002), data can be literal, interpretive and/or reflexive. As the researcher, I acknowledged that I needed to 'read' the data for what it meant and for what could be inferred as well as 'read' something about my role and my relationship with the participants.

Making use of multiple methods of data generation provided for depth, roundedness of data and additional dimensions. It opened up possibilities of diversity of perceptions and of exploring multiple realities in which people live. Multiple methods also provide a form of triangulation [23] which reduced the risk that conclusions would reflect the 'limitations of a specific method' (Maxwell, 1996:75). As Merriam (1998) and Cohen and Manion (1994) both comment, the nature of qualitative research suggests that it is

[23] In its broadest sense triangulation refers to the use of a combination of methods to explore one set of research questions. Multiple sources of data lead to a fuller understanding of the phenomena being studied and do not corroborate each other. Using different methods to investigate the same phenomenon does not imply that the efficacy or validity of different methods and sources can be judged by comparing the products (Mason, 2002). Issues relating to validity, reliability and trustworthiness are discussed in 5.7.

impossible to have an exact replica, so triangulation assists with clarifying different interpretations.

The first step was to identify the constituent elements of a high quality ECD/Grade R programme (see chapters one, two and three). In order to explore these, I did a thorough research of relevant ECD literature, South African policy documents as well as talk to some 'ECD experts[24]' in South Africa. These people included academics at some South African universities where an ECD specialization is offered, for example, UNISA, personnel at some of the larger ECD NGOs who are respected members of the ECD fraternity and members of various ECD organizations. The information gleaned in this way assisted with answering in part the first research question - *What is high quality ECD/Grade R practice?*

5.4.1 *Observations*

Observations allow the qualitative researcher to experience or observe a setting first hand through immersion in that particular setting. This specific lens enabled me to observe a variety of interactions and behaviours as well as spatial and temporal dimensions (Mason, 2002). This added to the depth and complexity of the data generation process, as I was able to observe the physical teaching and learning environment as well as specific aspects of classroom practice and the teacher's interaction with the children, her peers and any significant others. The school setting fully encapsulated, as a physical and social space and place, all that I was interested in studying. I was seeking to understand the setting and its organization, in as much as it provided the backdrop for the successful implementation of 'good' ECD practice, as well as the cultural practices, assumptions and perceptions of the Grade R teachers, 'the interactional rules and the taken-for-granteds which seem to be operating in elements of spatial and physical organization' (Mason, 2002:89).

Because this is an interpretative study using observations as a data generation method allowed me to reflect on both my ontological and epistemological position (Mason,

[24] In South Africa ECD is a fragmented and under theorized field. There are few academic institutions that offer ECD on a graduate or post graduate level. The bulk of ECD training is driven by the NGO sector (see 2.2). The 'experts' with whom I spoke were those people who were present at the various ECD seminars that I attended such as the UNICEF Knowledge Building Seminar (2008) and the GDE ECD Indaba (2010). The selection of 'experts' was therefore random. People with whom I spoke represented very different ECD sectors, and had different understandings of what constitutes quality ECD/Grade R practice. No one was chosen because, for example, I thought s/he had similar understandings to me. In this way I believe possible research bias was countered. When I was confronted with opinions that were different to mine I was forced to think critically about what was being said.

2002). From an ontological perspective the interactions, actions and behaviours and the way people interpret these is central to data generation. My epistemological perspective suggests that knowledge or evidence of the social world can be generated by observing, or participating in, 'real-life experiences. In other words 'meaningful knowledge cannot be generated without observation, because not all knowledge is articulable, recountable or constructible in an interview' (Mason, 2002: 85). Observation allows for the data to reveal itself in multidimensional ways. Mason (2002) also notes that through observation the researcher becomes 'a knower' because of the shared experience with those being researched. But Mason (2002) cautions, being a knower does not limit the opportunity for those being researched to have a voice or to be represented in interpretation and presentation of data.

Successful observation calls for a combination of activities that includes observing, participating, listening, communicating and recording. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) suggest that fieldwork is personal, emotional and identifies work that is concerned with physical work and the spatial location of bodies. To this end, I planned on being (as far as is possible) a non-participant observer.

I realized, however, that initially my presence in the school might be disruptive, but I hoped, as the children and teacher became more comfortable with my presence, I would cease to be an object of interest and fade into the background. It would have been unrealistic, however, to expect that I would have no interaction with the children or teacher. Observation is therefore not neutral (Mason, 2002). Thus as Mason, 2002 suggests I needed to consider questions of selectivity and perspective, to become aware of what I was looking for and to develop some critical awareness of how this informed my observations. In order to meet these criteria I ensured that I was familiar with the literature on what constitutes a high quality programme, and I used an observation schedule (mentioned later) to guide observations. I also needed to consider the question 'what am I not seeing' and 'how could this influence data generation?' (Henning, 2004). Furthermore I needed to ask some self reflexive questions such as 'by being a nonparticipant observer do I in influence the setting in any way', and 'as a nonparticipant observer how will my actions be interpreted and responded to?' There are no easy or correct answers to these questions. What these questions do mean is that as a researcher I had to continually keep them in mind and consider how they might shape the data (Mason, 2002).

Another question to consider was what power did I exert over those being researched? I was 'invading' a privileged, closed and personal space (Nias, 1985). Mason (2002) acknowledges that participants might feel stress, anxiety and guilt during data collection. During observational studies people are on view for a long time and for a wide range of activities. This greatly increases the researcher's capacity to do harm during the data generation process (Mason, 2002). Thus ethical considerations are crucial (see 5.8). To offset any possible participant stress and anxiety I reiterated the aims of my study and reassured participants that data would not be shared with any school member, it would only be used as detailed in the letter of informed consent. I also endeavoured to build a respectful relationship with the participants based on trust and negotiation. The nature of observation at times requires that the researcher has to make some 'on-the-spot' decisions ethical decisions (Mason, 2002). For example, there were times when I sensed I needed to walk out of the classroom (field notes, 8 October). The reason for this was that the children were being particularly rowdy, the teacher was shouting at them and few if any children were responding to what she was saying. I think that by leaving the classroom I allowed the teacher the space to reestablish her authority.

I believe there were two incidents that signified that teachers did not necessarily feel anxious or stressed by my visits. At two schools, where some teachers had not wanted me to observe their practice, I was invited by these teachers to come and observe what they were doing in their classrooms (field notes, 16 July and 9 October). To me, this indicated that those teachers whom I had been observing did not feel threatened or uncomfortable.

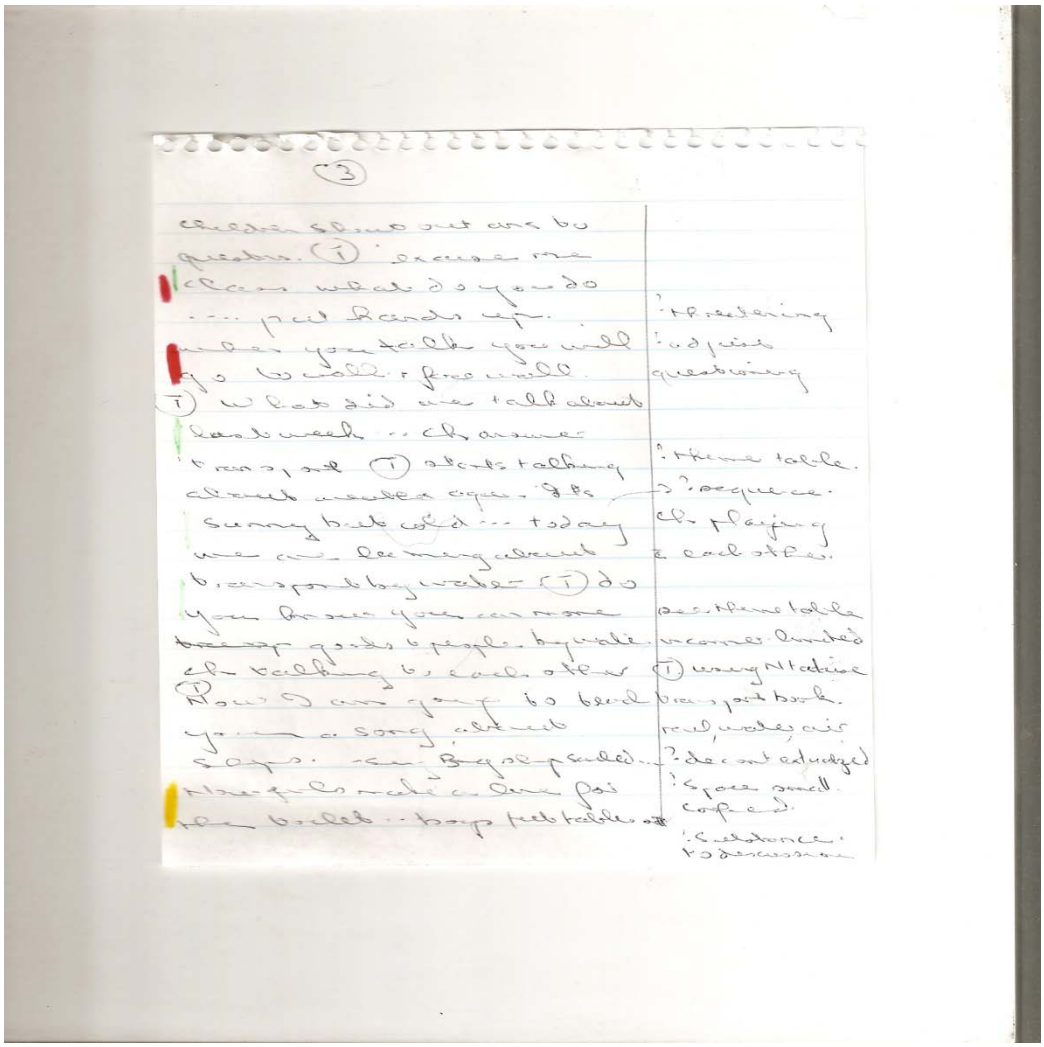
I spent a minimum of two to three[25] full days at each school where I observed both the indoor and outdoor school environment. I generally arrived before 8H00 and left at the end of the school day (usually between 13H00 and 13H30. This afforded me the opportunity of observing various aspects of the school day, including the three standard components of a daily programme (see 2.2.1), namely child-initiated activities (free play), teacher-guided activities, and routines (Catron & Allen, 2008; Gordon & Browne, 2008; Davin & van Staden, 2005). I deemed this to be important because high quality practice

[25] This time period could be critiqued as being too short and therefore not allowing teachers enough time to feel relaxed, comfortable and to act naturally. One of the reasons for observing practice was to gain a firsthand impression of the teachers' social world and to answer research question four, 'Is there a disjuncture between the teachers' espoused theories of high quality ECD programmes and their theories-in-use? What are the implications for classroom implementation?'. I believe I was able to gather sufficient data during the stated observation period to enable me to fully answer question four.

within an ECD context should be integrated and all aspects of the school day provide learning opportunities that should be realized by the teacher. Initially teachers appeared to be a bit apprehensive but I do not believe that my presence adversely affected their practice.

I adopted a two-pronged approach for recording data based on Creswell's (2003) suggestion that the researcher makes use of 'an observational protocol' (p.188). Firstly, I made detailed field notes to record both 'descriptive notes (portraits of the participants, a reconstruction of dialogue, additional descriptions of the settings and accounts of particular activities or events) and reflective notes (the researcher's personal thoughts, such as speculations, feelings, problems, ideas, hunches, impressions and prejudices)' (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992:121). I wrote in a notebook with a dividing line down the middle to separate the two types of notes. I transcribed these notes after each visit. Figure 5.2 provides an extract from these notebooks.

Figure 5.2: Sample of field notes from my note book



The observation schedule

The second observational protocol was an observation instrument (see appendix 1). The Foundation Phase Research Project (see 1.5) made use of an observation instrument in addition to non participatory observation in an attempt to standardize the data collection process as there were a number of different researchers with different educational experiences and perspectives employed in the project. This FP instrument was based on the notions of authentic and productive pedagogies[26] that inform quality practice. I was largely responsible for adapting this instrument entitled, 'In Teachers' Hands' to meet the specific requirements of the Grade R year (WSoE, 2009). This observation protocol was not designed to become a rigid or prescriptive observation instrument. Rather, the intention was that it would guide the observation process and help ensure that different observers, in different school contexts, captured as far as possible similar data.

In Teachers' Hands was designed for use in an Australian study to identify teaching practices that lead to improved literacy in the early years of schooling (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005). Six dimensions related to effective pedagogy were identified. These were participation (ways in which teachers organise and motivate children's participation in classroom activities; knowledge (teachers' use of content knowledge to effectively teach skills and concepts); orchestration (classroom management); support (the way in which teachers support learning); differentiation (ways in which teachers differentiate tasks and provide for different levels of challenge) and respect (both between teachers and children and between children. Though the Australian study concentrated on literacy learning, there is no reason to assume that the findings would be different for other subject areas because, regardless of the subject discipline, effective pedagogy and effective teachers would embrace the same six dimensions of good practice that informed this study.

[26] The concept of authentic pedagogies was generated by Newmann, Marks and Gamoran (1996) who were critical of meaningless school work and the isolated and superficial knowledge in many curricula. They posed an alternative question which explored those qualities that are critical to authentic intellectual work. (Newmann et al., 1996). They suggested three criteria, namely construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and the value of learning beyond school. The research on Productive Pedagogies was built on this framework and 'highlights four dimensions of classroom practice that make a difference to students' learning' (WSoE, 2009: 49). These four dimensions include intellectual quality, supportive classroom environments, engagement with difference, and connectedness to the world beyond the classroom. The Productive Pedagogies research suggests that all students benefited from classroom practices that scored highly on all four dimensions. It was this discourse of classroom practice that informed an Australian study entitled '*In Teachers' Hands'* which is described in 3.3.2. The observation tool used in that study was adapted for use in this study.

The six dimensions mentioned above that were used in the Australian Observation Schedule were refined to meet the specific requirements of a Grade R teaching and learning environment (see 1.7.1) and aimed to capture elements of the pedagogical approach outlined in this literature review. Additional dimensions were included in the instrument to ensure that the criteria set out in the South African Grade R curriculum guidelines, the ECD White Paper (DoE, 2001) and the NCS (DoE, 2002) were met.

The instrument was designed on three levels. Firstly, nine specific areas were selected for observation. Each area was assigned specific criteria which underpin effective Grade R pedagogy. Lastly, each criterion was illuminated with a set of indicators to guide observation and strengthen reliability. For example, a specific research area considered the school policy on inclusion. One criterion included individualisation and one of the guidelines was whether specific strategies were introduced to ensure that each child's unique needs were met. I made use of this instrument as it incorporated many of the identified elements of an appropriate ECD/Grade R teaching and learning environment (see 1.3) and also identified criteria for what makes effective teachers (see 4.2). It also correlated with some of the research questions. For example question one, 'What is high quality/effective ECD/Grade R according to teachers' and 'How do teachers think that young children learn best'? The instrument provided a framework for assessing pedagogical practices across all ten schools and was a way of ensuring that I observed similar practices in all the schools. The instrument also provided some insight into research question three, 'What, according to the teacher, is her role in a preschool context in supporting young children's growth, development, thinking and learning'? For instance, the example mentioned above on inclusion ensured that during the observation visits the teachers' practices (or not) in this regard were noted.

The NCS is based on values of equity, respect and social justice (DoE, 2002). These values were acknowledged in the section which explored the NCS Values of social justice, human rights and inclusivity. Under this head some of the guidelines for the observer included encouraging children to share, take turns, teacher models a democratic approach by, for example, encouraging children to have a voice; conflict is handled constructively with an emphasis on helping children acquire the skills to solve conflict themselves and valuing children's ideas and including these, where possible, in the daily programme.

This instrument could be critiqued for two reasons. The one is that it was based on a Eurocentric model which has been predominately informed by a developmental discourse. This instrument did not however, foreground a developmental model or seek to assess teachers' practices through a developmental discourse. It was informed by literature-based international research (Siraj-Blatchford, 2002; Anning and Edwards, 2006; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009 that indicates that there are certain identified elements of good practice that remain constant (see 1.7.1 & 3.2.1) regardless of the context. I would argue that it was these elements which framed the research instrument. The adaptations that I made attempted to be sensitive to different contexts and took differing contexts and elements relating to social justice into account. Furthermore, as the literature review has outlined (see 1.7.1 & 3.2.1), ECD practice in South Africa is framed by a developmental discourse which is supported by specific policy documentation (DoE, 2001a; DoE, 2002). If these are the official guidelines for practice in the South African context I argue the research instrument reflected and measured current accepted ECD/Grade R practices within the South African context. This of course does not mean to say that policy informing practice should be cast in stone or that practices should not change. A final supporting remark for using this instrument is to reiterate that it was a guideline to inform observation. It was used to support my observations. As previously mentioned all observations were predominately captured by detailed field notes which also reflected my thoughts where I continually reminded myself to challenge my own thoughts and assunptions.

The second critique is that an instrument of this nature might be perceived as somewhat reductionist because it promotes the idea of data collection and of excavation of knowledge rather than of data generation and the reconstruction and interpretation of knowledge (Mason, 2002). Henning, 2004 comments that at times researchers go to a site to explore issues that will reveal more about the data that has been acquired through interviews or in documents. In these instances Henning (2004) suggests that the researcher construct a schedule to note specific aspects of the phenomenon being observed. As I was a non participatory researcher these comments are applicable to my research study. I therefore suggest that the instrument lent an element of rigour to the study. It helped focus the observations on the actual settings and ensured a degree of consistency. (Issues relating to reliability, validity and generalizability are discussed later in this chapter.) This dichotomy between a reductionist and a knowledge creation

perspective towards data generation was addressed during the interview process (see 5.4.2).

Data generated from these two observational approaches yielded rich, rounded and specific information about each setting and teacher. After each observation visit, data were transcribed and organized around a series of themes and codes. The criteria for the selection of these themes and codes were informed by the research questions and literature review as well as the preliminary findings (see 5.7 for an overview of the data analysis).

Prior to entering schools and commencing observations, I obtained informed consent from all relevant stakeholders (see 5.8 for a more detailed discussion on informed consent). Teachers, in particular, needed to know what I was observing and why I had chosen to observe their practices in the way I have described and that the outcomes of all observations would remain confidential. I also had to consider how my identity and status (which was known to all participants) as a university lecturer, might be perceived by them. If they viewed my position from a hierarchical perspective there was the possibility that the nervousness and anxiousness which observations might generate, and to which I have already referred, could be exacerbated. To counter this possibility, I adopted Mason's (2002) suggestions and gave some thought to the demeanour that I would adopt in the different settings. I decided that I would if at all possible be friendly, respectful and unassuming. I would introduce myself and thank the teacher for her willingness to allow me, a guest, into her classroom. I waited for the teacher to suggest a way forward. The emphasis was on negotiating a respectful, trusting and considerate space where we could share ideas and views (Mason, 2003). I believe that this was a useful approach because at no time did I observe or sense any hostility or irritation displayed by the teachers.

Prior to commencing the observations I also gave serious thought to how I would handle any 'suspect practices' that I might witness (for example the use of corporal punishment). I decided that I would manage these sensitively with the teacher in a way that demanded an 'active moral practice' (Mason, 2002:103). Fortunately I witnessed no such incidents the observation visits.

I also had to acknowledge that participating teachers would be 'on view' for a considerable length of time and in a wide range of activities. I realized that it would be

important to establish an open and honest relationship with the participants and afford them appropriate opportunities to clarify any aspects of their practice at any time. The relationship between me and the participants was another area worthy of careful consideration. I had to bear in mind that some participants might wish to establish a close rapport with me and others might wish to keep a distance (Mason, 2002)

I needed to respect their wishes and continually asked myself the question 'to what degree does our relationship influence data collection and the interpretation thereof?' Another challenge was to ensure that I, as the researcher, did not impose my own judgments or interpretations. Hence, I had to account for how I came to the interpretations I made. This required that I continually question my own assumptions. Once the field notes had been transcribed I discussed them with the relevant participants and invited them to clarify or expand on any aspect of their practice that I had observed. This, I envisaged, would allow me to explore alternative interpretations and possibly suggest tentative conclusions. I also discussed preliminary findings with ECD colleagues in order to explore alternative interpretations (see interviews below). This process of data collection has contributed to an audit trail that will allow interested people to navigate the research process from beginning to end, enable them to trace my steps, if so desired, and to judge the trustworthiness of the outcomes (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

5.4.2 *Interviews*

Preliminary analysis of classroom observations offered some insights into how best to proceed with follow-up interviews. Semi-structured interviews provide a more effective means of exploring the research questions that are focused on involvement and value dimensions (Mason, 2002). (See appendix 2 for an outline of proposed questions.) Through this approach, I was able to refine the data generation process and probe aspects of data relating to specific perceptions and values. Through semi-structured interviews, I gained insights into the teachers' beliefs and attitudes to ECD in general, their awareness of changes in ECD policy and their attitudes towards their practice, in particular. At the same time, this approach created space for teachers to express their own individual thoughts, understandings and possibly their frustrations. By giving them a voice, they became active participants in the research process and I was able to gain greater insight into their particular practices and constructions of childhood. This relatively informal style, which Burgess (1984:102) calls 'a conversation with a purpose', facilitated interactional dialogue. This flexible and fluid approach presented opportunities

for critical reflection and is becoming an integral aspect of contemporary classroom practice (Brookfield, 1995). In most instances, I interviewed participants after the classroom observations. These interviews were therefore able to provide some insights into any discrepancies between the participants 'espoused theories' and 'theories-in-use'.

It is essential to ensure that interviews generate relevant data. I therefore paid attention to their planning and gave careful consideration to how the interviews would be conducted. Though the notion of a structured, pre-planned interview runs contrary to the concept of a semi-structured interactional interview, some degree of preparation was necessary to ensure the intended ground was covered. Mason (2002:67) recommends that the researcher develops 'a set of intellectual and social skills' and suggests that the researcher thinks about the following:

- What is expected from the participants?
- If the interview is intending to generate situated knowledge, how can one ensure that the appropriate context is brought into play?
- Are the participants required to work through specific aspects — if so, how can these aspects be elucidated for them?
- Are the questions planned to ensure a focused interview without writing a script?
- What is the scope and sequence of the interview? The nature of a semi-structured interview means that, though the researcher has given these questions thought, she might have to 'think on her feet' as she intuitively assesses the situational and social dynamic of each interview.
- Thought also needs to be given to working out how to ask the questions; what words to use and how to phrase them. This is particularly important when the researcher cannot speak the home language of the participants.

- The researcher needs to be respectful. She should listen to what people are saying, remember what has been said to her and maintain a balance between listening and talking. She must also observe the social situation, be sensitive to visual and spatial cues and to the mood of the interviewee (Mason, 2002).

I was very aware that if the interviews were going to generate the intended data, I would have to have established a relationship of trust with the participants. This entailed being sensitive to their particular social context and ensuring that participants understood the

purpose of the research so that they did not feel their personal integrity or status in the school was in any way compromised by the research. They had to be aware that at all times their confidentiality was respected and they also had to know that they had the option of withdrawing at any stage of the study. I believe that I was able to establish and consolidate this type of relationship with all the participants by the completion of the classroom observations.

All interviews were tape recorded, with the permission of the participants. Participants were shown how to operate the recorder, and invited to switch it off if they wished to say something off the record. These recordings were transcribed and copies of the interviews were returned to the participants for comment. This type of interaction gave the participants a greater measure of control over the research and enabled them to become more active research participants. It also assisted with data verification and ensured that participants' perspectives had not been misrepresented. This, of course, talks to issues relating to validity (see 5.7).

Transcripts were emailed to participants but where the participants had no access to email, the transcripts were hand delivered. Participants were asked to read the transcripts and invited to retract or add to anything that had been said. It was interesting to note, however, that, despite asking participants more than once for feedback, only two participants responded.

Another challenge was to ensure that I, the researcher, was not imposing my own judgments or interpretations. Through a process of ongoing critical reflection I have constantly examined my interpretation of the data and tried to account for how I came to the interpretations I made. This required that I continually questioned my own assumptions. I also made notes of my own observations, experiences and interpretations of the interviews to assist me in refining this process.

Another way of questioning my assumptions (this also informed issues relating to authenticity and trustworthiness) was to allow others to interrogate my findings and interpretations thereof. According to Brookfield (1995:35) 'our colleagues serve as critical mirrors' and 'may suggest new readings' of the material under scrutiny. This enables us 'to claw a path to critical clarity' (Brookfield, 1995:36). In this study, tentative conclusions were presented to colleagues working in the ECD field as well as at a public seminar in

an attempt to explore alternative interpretations and conclusions. Connections between participants' perceptions and high quality ECD programmes and classroom practice were explored in this process.

5.4.3 *Visual methods and documents*

Documentary sources are also considered respected methods of social enquiry. Documents that can be generated through the research process include diaries, written accounts and stories, biographies, charts, etc. I included the generation of critical incidents as documentary data. Another was photographs. Both critical incidents and photographs added depth, richness and complexity to the data generated by the interviews and the observations. Each one is discussed briefly.

Critical incidents

Critical incidents tell a story and explain why teachers adopt certain practices. Critical incident technique identifies the significance, especially the emotional significance, of actions and events on people as they carry out tasks related to education, training and work. In this study participants were asked to identity positive and negative experiences, activities and events ('the critical incidents') related to their ECD/Grade R practices and to report the outcomes of these actions or events. In this way opportunities are created for people to become interpreters of their own experiences (Castle, 1996). Critical incidents are therefore stories that hold significance to the person who experienced them. Plummer (2001:48) has referred to certain documentary input as 'accessories to a life story' which help to convey personal or cultural biographies. I believe critical incidents fulfill this function. Critical incidents are useful to explain a particular phenomenon and can identify issues that might require further attention and research. (See chapter 4.2.2 for a more detailed discussion on critical incidents and how they impact on practice.)

As this study explored teachers' perceptions, the use of the critical incident technique was an effective way of encouraging the participants to reflect on their own experiences and practices and how these have impacted on their relationship with the school community and their teaching. This technique asked participants 'to articulate their beliefs, hopes, possibly fears and challenges, as well as their ways of making sense of their experiences, their practical knowledge, and their way of solving problems' (Castle, 1996). Through this process Tripp (1993), suggests that participants come to a better understanding of

their own beliefs and practices. By using critical incidents, the participants have a voice. They have the power to choose what they think is critical and to classify the issues as having a positive or negative impact on their lives (De Marrais & Lapan, 2004).

Interpretation of critical incidents requires empathy, as participants could reveal sensitive information. Again, participants were afforded the opportunity to reflect on any interpretations that I made and were invited to make alternative suggestions. Interpretation of the incident was done jointly with the participant. The participants were invited to read out their sketch, identify the significance of the incident and suggest alternative ways of dealing with the dilemma (after observing, 21 October). Alternatively, I isolated, categorized and interpreted these incidents myself (after interview, 15 July) and reported initial findings to the participant and other colleagues as described in the section above on interviews. Again, I received very limited feedback from the participants. I surmise that there was minimal feedback because of the in depth discussions we held about each incident. Therefore the renditions were an accurate account of the 'story'.

Photographs

Mason (2002) asserts that if documentary evidence is used the researcher must give consideration to ontological and epistemological positions. For example, words and text cannot produce all of the elements of visual images. Photographs produce at the same moment both a document and a visual image. They become an alternative form of data generation and provide clarity on the spatial and temporal organization of the teaching and learning environment such as the location of a theme table, the positioning of an educational toy corner or the layout of outdoor play material (Mason, 2002). It is sometimes much more difficult to capture these images verbally (see, for example, photographs taken during observation visits on 30 July; 23 September; 30 September and 9 October) and therefore photographs provide an alternative source of data and can be helpful in elucidating a particular point.

It could be tempting to see photographs as hard evidence but, as with all data, they need to be viewed and interpreted in the context of how they are produced (Mason, 2002). I made use of a digital camera and asked teachers to take pictures themselves. Where participants were not familiar with the camera I showed them how to use it and reassured them that whatever images they photographed would be of value to the research findings. At some schools, the teachers showed me what they felt was worthwhile to photograph and asked that I do this on their behalf (see photographs taken on 1

October; 12 November). This approach allowed the teachers to become more active participants in the research as they decided on the particular images they wished to take. I also took photographs of my own choice. Again, as the researcher, I practiced self reflection and asked myself why I took a particular image at a particular time. I also questioned why participants chose particular images. Responses given at the time included that they were examples of good practice and the teachers' were proud of the children's work (during observations 30 September and 12 November).

This method of data capturing provided another way of including the participants and enabling them to become active participants in the research process. Bogden &Bilken, (2003) note that taking photographs could be seen as intrusive and possibly damaging as participants might feel that they are under camera surveillance. However, I would argue to the contrary. Participants were proud to point out specific images and to discuss them. Likewise, when appropriate, photos were also used as a stimulus to help teachers to focus or engage with specific topics during interviews. Looking at photographs and discussing them triggered focused discussion from different perspectives and stimulated some creative thinking about the use of visual images. In addition, the photographs provided a reference point for the interpretation of the data and were useful to trigger recall when the data were analysed.

The decision not to photograph children proved to be a difficult one. At all schools the children were very interested in the camera and wanted to pose for pictures. In fact during some observations (15 July; 23 July and 26 August) children came to ask me to photograph thems. With the permission of the teacher, I took the photographs, shared them with the children and then deleted the images. Occasionally children were unintentionally photographed when capturing a particular image. I have used one or two of these images in the thesis because they illustrate a particular point better than written text. However, I have ensured that the children cannot be identified. While I realize that children represent a vulnerable population and as such rigorous procedures should be followed if they are to be photographed, I do not believe that they suffered any ill effects through being captured on film. For the same reason I did not do any video-recordings because it would have been impossible to exclude the children from the footage. Another possible critique of including visual images in the thesis is that photographs of settings and the interior of classrooms makes claims of confidentiality difficult. However, these photographs were taken more than three years ago. During this time both outdoor

and indoor contexts have changed. This would make it difficult to identify specific schools. In addition, consideration was given to ethical issues (see 5.8). I obtained informed written consent from both the school principal and the teacher before any photographs were taken.

5.4.4 *The data collection plan*

Data were collected according to the following guidelines:

1. The data collection process was negotiated with participating schools.
2. Letters were written to obtain relevant consent from principals of selected schools and participating teachers.
3. Ethics clearance was obtained in June 2008 — protocol number 2008ECE73 (see appendix 3).
4. Relevant people, e.g. university lecturers, ECD directorate, other involved ECD players and stakeholders were interviewed.
5. School visits were planned. Two to three visits per school. These times were decided upon in consultation with participants.
6. Interview times were negotiated with participants. The interviews were held soon after the completion of the observations.
7. Data were transcribed and sent to participants for comment and clarification.

5.5 *DATA ANALYSIS*

Analysis of data involves understanding complexities, detail and context. I adopted an interpretive and reflexive approach.. Prior to analysis, I typed up interview notes and transcribed the taped interviews. I also combined the data gathered from the field notes and the observation tool. I then read through all the data (I confess to feeling extremely overwhelmed at this point.). Prior to coding the information I contacted the participants (either by email or telephonically) and asked for any changes that they wished me to make. (As previously mentioned I had ensured that all participants had received a copy of their transcripts.)

I then began the onerous task of data analysis. I reread all the transcripts and during this process began assigning codes, a process of choosing labels and assigning them to different parts of the data. These codes were identified by the research questions, the observation schedule, the questions used for data capturing, the preliminary findings and the literature review. Different coloured pens were used to code similar material (see appendix five for an example of coding similar units of meaning). The data were analysed for similarities, differences and code absences (the absence of coded data in certain transcripts). This process is also known as axial coding (Rule & John, 2010). In order to obtain breadth and depth, I analysed the data both horizontally as well as vertically.

Some codes were assigned deductively, in other words they were informed by the research questions and literature review (examples included words and phrases alluding to the nurturing nature of teachers such as caring, loving, passionate about children and words and phrases that suggest children learn through play such as children learn informally, children need time to play and children learn through exploration and discovery). Additional codes were created by reflecting on the data, in other words they were inductively determined (Rule & John, 2010). The most striking code to emerge through this process was teachers attitudes towards parents (parents are selfish, parents are demanding, parents are difficult to please, parents are supportive and our parents need education).

Once the codes were decided upon the data was reread to ensure that the codes made sense and related to the research questions (Henning, 2004). This required some careful thought. In some instances this relationship was obvious. In response to an aspect of research question 1, *How do teachers think children learn best*?, the code relating to 'play' seemed appropriate. But I had to critically reflect on the merits of choosing the code 'attitudes towards parents', because there was no obvious relationship to a research question. Yet a study of the literature supports the acceptance of this code because the importance of the home and the influence of parents in early learning cannot be excluded (Anning & Edwards, 2006) see (4.2.4.) Thus there was a correlation between this code and research questions 3, *What, according to the teacher, is her role in a preschool context in supporting young children's growth, development, thinking and learning*? and research question five, *What alternative strategies could be identified by teachers for improving practice*? Identifying

improved ways of collaborating with parents becomes an important strategy in supporting learning in the early learning environment.

Once the data were coded I read across different codes in order to establish categories. For example, I looked at the units of meaning informing the two questions mentioned in appendix five. Responses to these two questions could be aligned. A possible category, *Perceptions of children as cognitive and affective beings* was identified. These categories then informed the construction of themes, in this case, *Teachers, perceptions of children as 'learning beings*.'

I then transferred these codes comprising material that had been identified as similar onto large sheets of flip chart paper so that I could start to identify categories. As this was interpretive research these categories were reassessed after a further reading of the data. I then had to establish the relationship between all the categories. In order to do this I followed Henning's (2004) suggestions and asked some probing questions such as, What are the relationships in meaning between all these categories; what do they say together and about each other; what is missing; how do they address the research questions; what has been foregrounded in the analysis and what has moved to the background and do any other data analysis have to be completed?

Through this process of extracting and constructing themes from the categories (Henning, 2004) I identified three broad themes each with subsections. Each theme provided answers to different facets of the research questions which are reiterated below.

1. What is high quality/effective ECD according to teachers? How do teachers construct childhood? What do teachers think young children need to know and learn? How do teachers think that young children learn best?

2. What type of (subject) knowledge do teachers of young children think they (the teachers) need to have in order to support the learning process?

3. What, according to teachers, is their role in a preschool context in supporting young children's growth, development, thinking and learning?

4. Is there a disjuncture between the teachers' espoused theories of high quality ECD programmes and their theory-in-use? What are the implications for classroom implementation?

5. What alternative strategies could be identified by teachers for improving practice?

The three themes focused on all aspects of practice and included:

1. *Teachers perceptions of children as 'learning beings'*
   Issues explored in this theme include teachers' understandings of children and how they believe children learn, what they ought to learn and what they think motivates children to learn. This theme answers most of the enquiries posed in question 1 and partly addresses question 3.

2. *Teachers perceptions of themselves as 'learning beings'*
   Issues relating to teachers' understandings of themselves as teachers are interrogated. Their understanding of curriculum and pedagogy(ies) is investigated. What is their understanding of practice and what will enable them to improve their practice? This theme answers questions 2 and partly questions 3 and 5.

3. *Teachers as 'professional beings'.*
   The role of the teacher as a professional and her relationship with the parents and community is interrogated. This theme addresses, in particular, research questions 3 and 5.

Research question 4 is addressed when answering the other research questions and these responses have, in turn, informed each theme. Question 4 was also informed by the teachers' understanding of critical reflection and how critical reflection impacts classroom practice.

I further analysed the findings according to the knowledge positions that teachers have adopted. These knowledge positions have been identified and described by Mac Naughton (2003), (see 4.3). As noted in chapters two, three and four, contemporary ECD literature (Mac Naughton, 2005; Mac Naughton, 2003; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001, Dahlberg et al., 1999) strongly suggests that ECD practices be critiqued through alternative approaches and paradigms.

Analysing the data according to these different knowledge positions offered insights into teachers' understandings of Grade R children, their own practices and related Grade R context. I would argue that this alternative perspective provided a lens through which the extent (or not) that teachers critically engaged in reflective practice could be determined and it offered a possible explanation for engaging (or not) in reflective practices.

During the analysis process I shared some of the tentative findings with certain ECD colleagues in the field. I found this to be a helpful and insightful process because I could share my findings and thoughts with others. Their comments and insights were useful and offered different interpretations and possibilities. In addition I presented a section of the research to colleagues at a PhD seminar, held in 2009 at the university. Again different perspectives were voiced which forced me to question some of my own assumptions. In addition, at a writing retreat held towards the end of 2010 I shared my findings with colleagues from different divisions and faculties of the university. They reflected on my findings through totally different perspectives and once again I was forced to think deeply about my findings. Through these processes I believe I was able to generate alternative readings and interpretations of the data.

5.6 *PRESENTATION OF THE RESEARCH RESULTS*

The results are presented in 10 case studies. (See chapter six.) Merriam (1998:19) suggests that case studies allow for 'in-depth understandings of the situation and meaning for all involved' in order to generate knowledge. Rule and John (2010) suggest case studies generate understanding of, and insight into, the phenomenon being investigated by offering a thick, rich description of the case. The focus is on the complex relations within the case and the wider context around the case as it affects the case. It is therefore intensive rather than extensive and it affords a deeper investigation rather than a more superficial appraisal of the issue. Case studies also explore general or specific problems within a focused setting. As Merriam (1998:19) notes, case studies are 'bounded' and are therefore contained within specific parameters. In addition, they can generate theoretical insights or test existing theories.

As stated in 5.3, these particular cases were chosen in the belief that deeper understanding of these cases would lead to an improved insight of the ECD/Grade R field in general and teachers' perceptions of what contributes towards high quality practices. Each case was contextualized according to the specific historical, cultural, social and physical context of the case. The case studies included biographical information on each participant an overview of the school context, their perceptions of early childhood development, how these influence their professional practice and the impact on classroom practices. The information gathered from the critical incident techniques was used to illuminate material obtained from observations and interviews.

Visual images were also included (where possible) to clarify a particular context or a specific point. Finally, strategies for improving classroom practice were considered.

5.7 *ISSUES OF VALIDITY, RELIABILITY AND GENERALIZABILIITY*

Notions of validity, reliability and generalizability are all concepts related to the quality of the research. They are also terms that have been drawn from the traditional positivist and modernists' methodological traditions from which the criteria for evaluating research have conventionally been drawn (Guba & Lincoln, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005 and Mason, 2002). These positivist and modernist approaches to quality issues do not sit comfortably with qualitative researchers who reject the notion of an ultimate truth and 'a real reality out there' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As Seale (1999) comments, modernist terms of validity and reliability used to capture quality are 'no longer adequate to encapsulate the range of issues that a concern for quality must raise' (p.7). Hence there is no consensus on how the quality of qualitative research can be judged. Notions such as trustworthiness and authenticity are increasingly being accepted as alternative approaches to ensuring that the evidence is meaningful and that the research is rigourous and of good quality.

5.7.1 *Validity*

Guba and Lincoln (2000) suggest that, in the contemporary context and in qualitative research, validity (which suggests researchers are observing and identifying what they say they are) needs to be considered from two angles. The first argues for a rigour in the methods used for data generation which refers to how well the methods used are matched to the research questions being asked and the kinds of social explanations one is hoping to generate. Mason (2002) suggests that one way of promoting validity is for the researcher to explain how the methods are valid. Triangulation can help to clarify this process if it encourages researchers to approach research questions from different perspectives. According to Mason (2002) the researcher must ask the question, 'How do the methods match to the research questions and the type of social explanation to be developed'? (p.189). In this thesis I chose to examine teachers' perceptions of their practice through a case study approach using multiple methods of data collection. The reason for this choice was that when envisaging the research design, I was able to link the research questions to the methods and the methodology. Since validity of data generation

requires reflection on the quality of methods in relation to research questions there is a blurring of the distinction between validity and reliability (Mason, 2002).

To ensure validity of data generation I had to ask some probing questions. For example, were the methods rigidly and insensitively employed? I would argue 'no' for reasons previously mentioned (see the discussion on 5.4 on the chosen methods). Another important consideration centred on why for example, I made use of semi-structured interviews and observations, and how did these methods show data generation? I would argue that that choice of methods was sound. For instance, data generated from interviews such as those held on 16 July, 24 September and 15 November, revealed that teachers believe that children learn best through play and that emphasis should be placed on the holistic development of the child. Yet observations showed that despite teacher's espoused theories, their practice was inherently didactic with scant emphasis on play, especially outdoor play (observations done on 14-6 July, 23-24 September, 8-9 October and 12-15 November). These findings were corroborated by some of the photographs (see for example, the photographs taken on (9 October and 12 November). Some of the questions I had to continually ask myself were, 'Does the interview have the capacity to generate relevant data and how authentic and accurate are the documents, (in my case the photographs)? In brief I suggest that the flexibility and fluidity of the chosen methods enhanced the validity of data generation.

The second type of validity that needs to be scrutinised is validity of interpretation of data. This involves questioning the data analysis and the interpretation on which it is based. This is obviously dependent upon the methods used as well as the rigour with which the results are interpreted. Schwandt (1996 in Guba & Lincoln, 2000) suggests that social enquiry be resituated in a framework that is characterized by 'aesthetic, prudential and moral considerations as well as more conventional scientific ones' (p. 206) and argues that, if social inquiry is underpinned by rigourous questioning about the potential of human knowledge and limits, then we have a basis for thinking about entirely different criteria for judging social inquiry. And this should permeate the entire research study.

Mason (2002:191) notes researchers can be confronted with a 'crisis of representation' because in this form of validity 'perspectives need to be substantiated and interpreted rather than to claim them as a universal truth.' This requires that the researcher trace the route by which she came to that particular interpretation and explain how the data were

woven together to interpret specific instances of the data set. This implies that the researcher must be reflective. She must have insight into her own position and also try and read the data from different perspectives. Nothing can be taken for granted or as being self-evident. For example, in this thesis data were woven together holistically by case as well as cross-sectionally by theme (see 5.5). Mason (2002) points out that the researcher cannot claim validity of interpretation by claiming she has a 'fixed standpoint' which grants epistemological privilege (p.193) and which is granted by one's social location and experience. Neither can she claim validity of interpretation through checking the data with people whom she claims have this epistemological privilege –a procedure called respondent validation (Mason, 2002: 193. Research participants could be included in respondent validation. Both positions have merit, but, as Mason (2002) argues, they are not a substitute for questioning the data analysis process and the interpretations made during this process. Validity of method and interpretation must be demonstrated through careful retracing and restructuring of the routes by which they have been reached. This necessitates strong reflexivity and calls for a sense of responsibility in representing the words and practices of other people in a particular way (Mason, 2002).

Ultimately ensuring validity, therefore, depends on conceptualization of the overall research design, the researcher's ability to explain how issues of validity were confirmed and by the willingness to critically reflect upon these issues.

5.7.2 *Reliability*

Reliability involves the accuracy of research methods and techniques. In qualitative research this does not imply standardization of methods but rather that data generation and analysis has been appropriate to the research question and has also been thorough, honest, careful and accurate. Again, reflexivity on the part of the researcher is essential to ensure that data has not been misrepresented or invented or recorded in a haphazard way. An 'audit trail' is another way of promoting reliability (see 5.4.1). In this way, the researcher's procedures and logic can be 'audited'.

5.7.3 *Generalizability*

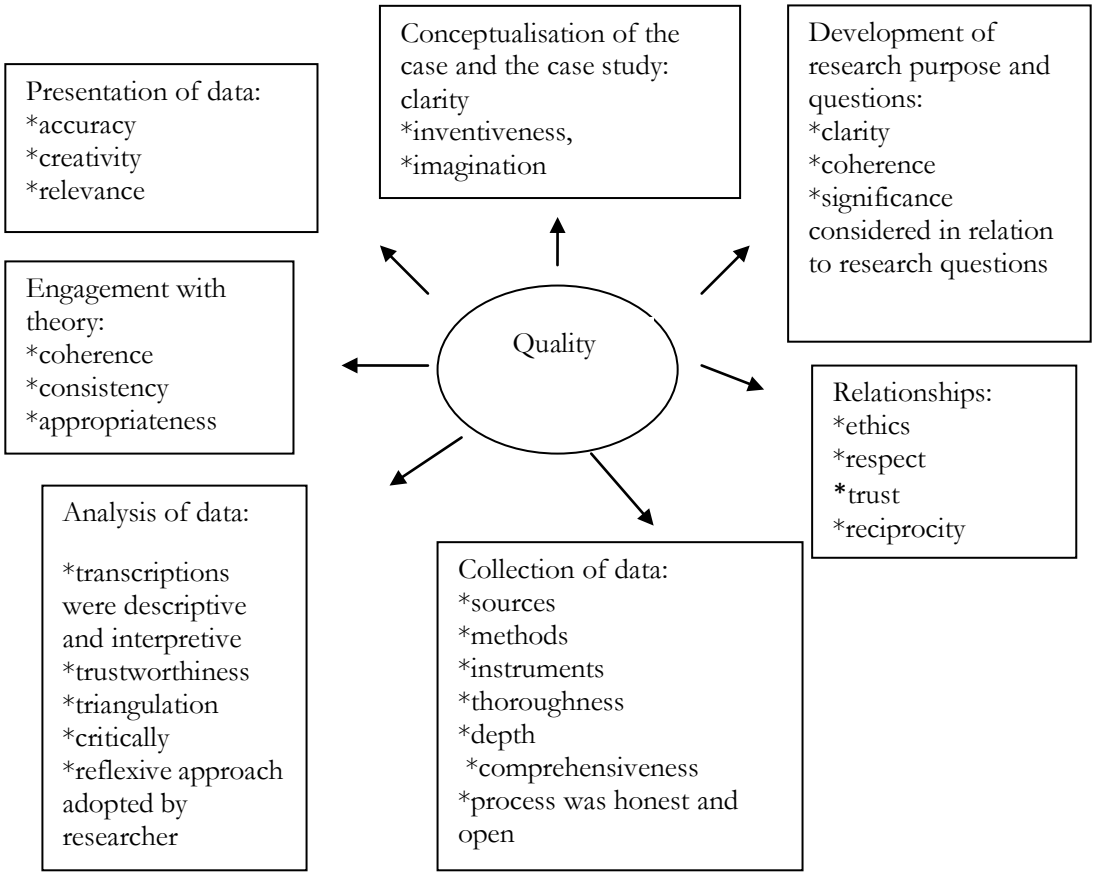
Generalizability involves the extent to which the researcher can make some form of wider claim on the basis of research and analysis. Because much of qualitative research is not based on a widespread representative sample, it might be inappropriate to make broad generalizations. Mason (2002) states the researcher may make claims for the generalizability of explanations based on the rigour and quality of the research. These claims will include comparing phenomena that are revealed through different contexts.

Maxwell (1996) suggests that generalizability can be either internal or external. Internal generalizability refers to the generalization within the setting or group and validity is dependent upon it. Rule and John (2010) support Guba and Lincoln's suggestion that, in a qualitative study, the concept of *credibility* becomes an alternative to internal validity. External generalizability refers to its setting beyond the group. In recent years, external generalizability is becoming an increasing focus of attention. There is an increasing school of thought that generalizations should be framed in such a way that they feed into wider sets of issues or questions or fuel debates about issues that relate to public concerns (Mason 2002). Rule and John (2010) argue that the term *transferability* has emerged in qualitative research discourse as an alternative for the generalizability or external validity of a study.

Throughout the conceptualization and implementation of this study I have attempted to consider issues relating to validity, reliability and generalizability, in other words quality.

Figure 5.3 depicts the steps that were followed to ensure that issues related to quality, trustworthiness and authenticity of this research study were considered throughout the research process. This diagram is informed by the conceptualization of the research (see 5.2 and 5.4) the research questions (see 1.5) and factors related to all aspects of the research design including consideration of the research sample, data collection and methodology, data analysis and ethical considerations which are outlined in chapter five. Consideration was also given to the presentation of data (see chapters6-9 for a detailed discussion).

Figure 5.3: A diagrammatic representation of the research steps followed to ensure quality, trustworthiness and authenticity (adapted from Rule and John, 2010).



5.8 *ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS*

Researchers have a responsibility to ensure that their research is conducted within an 'ethic of respect' to those who participate (Strike, 2006). Throughout this study I acknowledged that the participants were people with rights and these rights needed to be respected, as a good research relationship should involve a partnership that is underpinned by mutual respect and trust. I believe that a respectful relationship was established and maintained through a variety of ways, many of which have already been mentioned. For example, no fixed arrangement was made with the school authorities until teachers had accepted the invitation to participate in this study. They were all informed both verbally and through the letter of informed consent about the research procedures. Observation and interview times were arranged at the convenience of the participants. I believe that I behaved in a respectful way in the classrooms and did not

overstep the researcher-participant boundary. In addition, I acknowledged all their contributions and attempted to include them as active research participants. The fact that I received a limited response was not, I would argue, because participants felt marginalized or thwarted in any way. I would suggest that this limited response had more to do with personal factors relating to their life styles. Many of the teachers have families, they are wives and/or mothers. Some were studying further. They all had busy lives. They gave verbal approval. (When I telephoned for example, the response was, 'It's fine, I have nothing further to add'.) In addition if teachers had felt they were not being treated respectfully I would have been invited into classrooms where initially the teachers had not wanted to participate in the study (see observations 14-16 July and 8-9 October).

The aim of this research study was to explore teachers' perceptions of early childhood development and how these impact on classroom practice. This comprises teachers' beliefs and attitudes and knowledge about how children develop and learn and what they think is the best way to promote children's learning and development. Because these issues relate to the 'identity of the teacher', they raised a number of ethical issues. Whose perspectives are being documented and whose practice do we seek to understand and for whose benefit? This could have resulted in a clash of values to which I, as the researcher, was constantly on the alert. One way to counter any possible discord is to acknowledge the reciprocal nature of the research and to ensure that an ongoing dialogue exists between researcher and participants. I ensured, therefore, that there was a mutual exchange of views and ideas. In addition, participants were informed up front about the aim and nature of this research. I believe that participants felt confident that, in exchange for their consent to participate in the research, I acted in a reasonable and responsible manner, and only did that which we jointly negotiated when they signed the consent form. The discussions that followed the observations and interviews were intended for the mutual benefit of all participants and to ensure that no one had been misrepresented. These sessions offered an opportunity for reflective feedback and focused on particular aspects of classroom practice. I believe that this focus on classroom practice and teaching and learning events helped to deflect the emphasis from centering on individual subjectivities.

Though there were no direct and obvious benefits to individual participants, through critical reflection teachers were able to gain greater insights into their practice and

consider alternative or additional ways of doing and knowing. A further indirect benefit is that, through participation, they are contributing to a body of knowledge relating to ECD/Grade R classroom practice in South Africa.

Though this research took place in Grade R classrooms, the children were not actively involved in the data collection processes. Young children are vulnerable to many outside influences and I therefore endeavoured to cause as little disruption as possible during observation schedules. Though I intended to be as non-intrusive as possible during the observation periods, the presence of a stranger in the school, especially the classroom, did arouse the interest of the children. Many asked 'what are you doing?' However, after a brief response they rapidly reverted to their original activities. Occasionally I was asked to read them a story or to comment on their work. This I did with pleasure if I felt that it would not disrupt the class. I also anticipated that the teachers might initially feel nervous as they were 'under scrutiny'. I hoped that by doing a number of observation visits I would become 'part of the furniture' and cease to be actively noticed by both teacher and children. After I had been in the classroom for a couple of hours, the teachers appeared to become more relaxed and appeared to forget about my presence in the classroom. On day two, they appeared to be at their most relaxed but by day three, I had the impression that they *were* beginning to feel they were under scrutiny. By then I had collected more than enough data and left the classroom feeling thoroughly enriched. I believe that these observations allowed me to collect accurate data in a natural setting and this enhanced the validity and reliability of data generation.

In order to meet the ethical considerations, all participants were informed of the aims and purpose of this research. Their informed, written consent was obtained prior to any collection of data. This written contractual agreement (see appendix 4) stipulated that all data collection will remain confidential. Participants will be informed when the research thesis is released and if they so desire they will be given a copy of the relevant sections. Participants were also made aware that the data might be used in subsequent publications or seminar and conference presentations. However, their right to privacy and that of the school will be maintained at all times. Only if it is considered to be of benefit to the participants and only if they give prior consent will their names be made public. The participants were also informed of their right to discontinue participation if they so wish. However, none of them chose to exercise this right. I sincerely hope that they were

aware of the value of the research and this enabled them to remain active participants through the research period.

In addition, informed, written consent was obtained from all relevant controlling authorities. As the sample was taken from both government schools and free-standing community preschools I needed to obtain permission to undertake this research from the Gauteng Department of Education, the principals and teachers of the specific government schools as well as the principals and, if appropriate, management committees of the free-standing schools.

During this study, the collected data was stored in my study at my home where I was the only person who had access to it. Since the completion of the research study, all data has been stored under lock and key in the storeroom opposite my office at the university. I and one other lecturer have access to this storeroom. After a period of five years, all data pertaining to this study will be destroyed.

5.9 *CONCLUSION*

In this chapter, I outlined the research design. I set out in detail the research process, the criteria for the selection of participants, the process of data collection and the data analysis procedures. Justification for their choice was given in terms of quality, and trustworthiness of data. Ethical considerations were taken into account.

In the following chapter, I present the research results which are encapsulated in ten case studies. These vignettes detail the context, pedagogical perspectives and teacher perceptions of appropriate ECD/Grade R practice.

CHAPTER 6: RESEARCH RESULTS

6.1 *INTRODUCTION*

In this chapter, the research findings are presented in the form of ten case studies. Each case or vignette presents an overview of the school, the particular Grade R context, the views of the participating Grade R teacher(s) and, if appropriate, the principal and HoD. As mentioned in chapter 5, the names of the teachers, the schools and the administrators have been changed to ensure confidentiality. To my knowledge no pseudonyms that have been given to the participating schools are currently names in use by existing schools. The schools have been ordered according to the socio-economic status of the school and/or the teachers' qualifications. This was not a deliberate or predetermined ordering but as I began to analyse the data, initial findings and interpretations suggested a common thread was socio-economic status and/or teacher qualifications. The schools have therefore been arranged as a matter of convenience from the more advantaged to the less advantaged. There is nothing to say, for example, that Egret Park is more affluent than Jacaranda Heights or that Thembani is more impoverished than Little Stars. Based on the qualification criterion, Bertha Solomon was placed in sequence before Fatima Meer. This form of ordering gave me a useful way of working with the data.

6.2 *TEN CASE STUDIES*

Categorising the schools according to the sequence mentioned above provided a convenient way of ordering them and of working with the data. Table 6.1 has been compiled in order to provide the reader with an overview of the range of schools observed in this study. In this table I make brief mention of the surrounding neighbourhood; not to be judgmental but in an effort to place each school in context and to give the reader an overview of the different situations of each school. Within the South African context there are huge socio economic disparities within and between communities and these can and do influence the type of early childhood education which is provided for young children (DoE, 2001b & c).

The table presents a brief resume of information relating to both the school and the teachers. The schools are presented in the order that they appear in the thesis.

Table 6.1: An overview of Grade R classes observed in this study

Name of school, teachers and observation dates	**Geographical location**	**Type of school**	**Features of the surrounding community**	**Number of staff and their positions**
Egret Park (EP) *Principa*l Moira *Teachers* Liz Brenda Maureen Dates 14-16 July	Far north of Johannesburg. Periurban location. Predominantly white population	Prestigious, advantaged. Attached to a private education college. Christian (Methodist) ethos Caters for children aged 3 to school completion. Most children are white. Aftercare provided. Children provide own meals. Well resourced. All teachers hold formal teaching qualifications (degrees or diplomas).	Peri-urban residential area. Upper to middle class. Cluster homes/ large plots. Green, leafy suburbs. Parents mainly professional and/or entrepreneurs.	Principal of preschool. Secretary for preschool. 4 Grade R teachers. 8 other teachers. 7 teaching assistants. Kitchen and cleaning staff. Therapists (OT, physiotherapy, speech but these also supply the preparatory school). Support staff, e.g. security
Jacaranda Heights	Northern suburbs. Residential	Prestigious, advantaged. Free standing preschool for children	Upper middle class suburb. Large free-standing	Principal. Secretary.

(JH) *Principal* Naomi *Teacher* Alison Dates 30 Septem-ber – 1 October	area. Predomin-ately white area.	aged between 2-6 years. Most children are white. Aftercare provided. Children bring snack but lunch provided if they stay for aftercare. Well resourced. All teachers hold formal teaching qualifications (degrees or diplomas).	homes. Leafy, well-maintained upmarket residential area. Parents mainly professional and/or entrepreneurs.	4 teachers. 2 teaching assistants. Cook and cleaning staff. Security guard.
Bertha Solomon (BS) [27] *Principal* Nandi *Teacher* Ella Dates 22-24 July	Northern Johannes- burg. Com-mercial area.	Free standing school for children between 1-6 years. School reflects racial demographics of country: white, coloured, Indian and black children. Full day option. All meals provided. Sufficient resources. Principal has a Masters degree in	Former upmarket residential suburb. Large properties. Mainly private businesses. Treed suburb. Caters for middle class professional and working class parents who do not live but rather work in this area.	Principal (also a teacher). 3 teachers. 2 teaching assistants. Secretary Cleaning outsourced. Security guard.

[27] Bertha Solomon (1892-1969) was one of South Africa's first women's rights activists.

		education Other teaching staff have equivalent of ECD NQF level four qualifications.		
Fatima Meer [28] Preschool (FM) *Principal* Mrs Areff *Teacher* Fatima Dates 12 and 15 Novem-ber	Residential area Western suburbs.	Muslim ethos. Free standing school in a residential suburb. Children between 3-6 years. Mainly Indian children; a few blacks. No aftercare. Children provide own snack. Sufficient resources. All staff have equivalent of ECD NQF level four qualifications.	Mixed racial population, predominately Indian and blacks with a smattering of whites in the area. Strong Muslim community. Professional, entrepreneurial and working class community. Small, free-standing houses and large homes accommodating extended families. Professional and working class parents.	Principal (also teacher). 4 teachers. 2 cleaners. Security guard.

[28] Fatima Meer (12 August 1928 — 12 March 2010) was a South African writer, academic, screenwriter, and prominent anti-apartheid activist.

Young Beginnings (YB) *Principal* Amelia *Teacher* Mary Dates 20 - 21 October	Western Johannesburg. Predominately coloured township.	Began as an educational service to the community. Free standing preschool for children aged between 1-6 years. Mainly coloured and black children. Cooked meals provided. Option of full day care. Grade R teacher held a formal teaching qualification. Other teaching staff have equivalent of ECD NQF level four qualifications Sufficient resources.	Residential area. Free-standing houses – smallish, reasonably well maintained. Informal settlement within walking distance. Caters for working class parents who live in this area.	Director/principal. Secretary. 6 teachers. 2 teaching assistants. Cook and cleaning staff.
Rissik Primary School (RPS) GDE controlled school *Principal* Mrs Ferreira *Teacher* Helena	Residential area. Eastern Johannesburg.	Ex model C public school, Grade R – 7. Mainly black children; a few white and coloured children. Prefabricated Grade R classroom situated in the quadrangle of a primary school. Children provide own snack. There is an option of a feeding scheme which school provides independently of education department. Option of aftercare.	Well established multiracial residential area Racially mixed population but predominately black. Free standing houses – 3 bedrooms, 1 bathroom. Evidence of a squatter/homeless population. Otherwise working class population. Evidence of	Principal. 1 Grade R teacher. 1 teaching assistant (shared with Grade 1 teachers). Full complement of teachers Grades 1-7. Full complement of support staff.

Dates 23,24 and 28 Septem-ber		Adequate resources but usage is strained because of numbers and space. Grade R teacher is formally qualified.	unemployment.	
Jabulani Preschool (JP) *Principal* June *Teacher* Busi Dates 12-14 August	Working class township suburb in Moroka, Soweto. South Western Johannes-burg.	Free-standing school. Caters for children between 2-6 years. All black children. Part of an NGO franchise which controls the school. Full day option. All meals and snacks provided by school. Reasonably resourced. Grade R teacher and principal have equivalent of NQF level 5 ECD qualification. Both are studying for formal qualifications.	Well established neighbourhood. Sub economic houses on small properties. Working class parents but some unemployment. Not many gardens or trees in area. Some evidence of squatters and overcrowding.	Principal. 1 Grade R teacher. 3 teachers. 2 teaching assistants. Cook and cleaners. Caretaker lives on property.

FDB (GDE con-trolled school) *Principal* Mr Nov-ember *Teacher* Gloria Dates 26-28 August	Coloured township. South Western Johannes- burg	Public primary school – Grades R -7. Mainly coloured; a few black children. 2 Grade R classrooms. School is on a GDE feeding scheme which provides food for the majority of children in the school. Children may bring own lunch. Sandy playing fields which need attention. No aftercare. Reasonably resourced. Grade R teachers have equivalent of ECD NQF level four qualifications.	An impoverished residential area. Mine dumps a prominent feature. Sand roads within neighbourhood. Near to a railway line. Small houses many with attached zinc lean-to's. Informal settlement nearby. Unemployment rife. Poverty evident. Social pathologies such as alcoholism, wife abuse.	Principal for primary school. 2 Grade R teachers. Full complement of teachers for Grades 1-7. Other support staff. Security guard.
Little Stars (LS) *Principal* Margie *Teacher*	Residential suburb. Eastern Johannes- burg.	Free standing preschool. Situated in Church grounds and preschool classes are held in church hall. Caters for babies and toddlers as well as children between 3-6 years.	Racially mixed population. High rate of unemployment. Increasing numbers of refugees. Free standing houses on	Director/Principal. 1 Grade R teacher (also the preschool supervisor). 3 teachers. 2 teaching assistants.

Emily Dates 29-30 July		Mainly black children; a few white, coloured and Indian children. Small but reasonably well-equipped outdoor playing area. Breakfast, lunch and two snacks provided by school. Poorly resourced. Teachers have the equivalent of an ECD NQF level four qualification.	small properties. Small houses, not well maintained. Evidence of overcrowding. Evidence of squatters/ homeless people.	Cook and cleaners. Security guard.
Thembani Primary School (TPS) (GDE conrolled school) *Principal* Mrs Nkosi *Teacher* Sally Dates 8 – 9 October	Poor residential area in central Soweto.	Public primary school. All black children – predominately Isizulu speaking. 2 Grade R classes. GDE feeding scheme but children can bring own lunch. Playing fields are not well maintained. Reasonable resources but insufficient for number of children in class. Teachers have the equivalent of an ECD NQF level four qualification.	Poor neighbourhood. Small houses Evidence of poverty and informal settlements.	Principal. 2 Grade R teachers. Full complement of teachers Grade 1-7. Other support staff including a secretary and security guard.

Table 6.2: Indoor resources found in participating schools

Indoor equipment	EP	JH	BS	FM	YB	RPS	FDB	JP	LS	TPS
Book corner	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Fantasy corner	X	X					X	X		X
Theme table	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Literacy table/corner	X	X				X	X			X
Numeracy corner/table	X	X		X			X			X
Blocks	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Lego	X	X		X		X		X		
Other construction toys	X	X				X				

Puzzles	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Educational toys (dominoes, snap etc.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Mani-pulative toys, e.g. lacing cards	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X
Home-made perceptual games		X			X			X		
Multiple art materials	X	X				X		X		
Computers	X	X			X	X		X		
Musical instruments	XX	XX				X		X		
Library	X	X				X				

Table 6.3: Outdoor resources found in participating schools

Outdoor equipment	**EP**	**JH**	**BS**	**FM**	**YB**	**RPS**	**FDB**	**JP**	**LS**	**TPS**
Wooden jungle gyms	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	
Climbing apparatus	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Sandpit	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	
Cycle track	X	X	X (not used)		X					
Swings	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	
Water trough	X	X	X (not used)		X			X		
Added daily										
Hoops	X	X			X	X (not used)	X (not used)	X		X (not used)
Balls	X	X			X	X (not used)	X (not used)	X		X (not used)
Cricket bat and ball	X									

Other	X	X	X (not used)		X					
Extra curricular activities	Playball offered in the morning (free for all children)	Ballet offered after school morning (parents pay)		Ballet and karate offered during the morning (parents pay)						

All visits took place in 2008. The first school that I observed was Egret Park (14-16 July). This is a private school which follows a three term year. It therefore has different school holidays to public schools. I commenced data collection in July when the majority of public schools were on holiday. Egret Park was the only school which could accommodate the dates when I was free to collect data. Hence I began with this school.

6.2.1 *Egret Park Pre-Preparatory School*

This is a prestigious private school situated on the banks of a river in the far north of the greater Johannesburg area. This position provides an optimal, enriching school environment where children have, for example, countless opportunities to interact with nature and view rich birdlife right on their doorstep. The grounds and buildings are expansive, well kept and portray a sense of tranquility and restfulness. There are in essence three autonomous but interlinked schools, a pre-preparatory, preparatory and a high school, each with its own principal. In the interview (14 July) the principal noted that the school, which embraces a Christian ethos, was established about ten years ago in response to changing demographic patterns and is currently experiencing rapid growth. This growth is based on the city expanding in this direction and changes in inner city population which have pushed middle and upper class white and black families into the northern suburbs. Furthermore, prior to my research visit in July 2008, the school had undergone a voluntary independent quality assurance evaluation and received a favourable report which noted that the parents were extremely positive about the school. I surmise that this factor, coupled with the building of many upmarket housing complexes, has fuelled the expansion of this school.

The pre-preparatory school accommodates 250 children and offers classes ranging from grades 000[29] to Grade R. The majority of the children are white and many attend the aftercare facility. The LoLT is English and it is taken for granted that all children are fluent in this language. There are currently five Grade R classes comprising 110 children. Thus there are 22 children in each class — by South African standards an ideal classroom size. All Grade R classes are staffed by teachers who have formal, recognized teaching qualifications but not all have an ECD qualification. Three of the Grade R teachers, Brenda, Maureen and Liz, were willing to participate in this research project. They were all welcoming, informative and cooperative.

[29] Grade 000 is the name given to the class for children between 3-4 years. Grade 00 would refer to the class for children ages between 4-5 years. It is a term commonly used by private schools which offer both preschool and preparatory schooling.

During the interview (16 July) the three participating teachers agreed that have all given serious consideration to why they chose to teach Grade R and why they are still teaching it. They all described themselves as nurturing, caring people who are passionate about what they do. Despite many daily frustrations (which according to the teachers ranged from interfering parents to pressures to implement a more formal programme) they described Grade R teaching as a highly satisfying job where noting the children's progress or just being hugged by a child was affirming and rewarding.

The principal, Moira, (interview, 14 July) who by her own admission started out as an unqualified teacher many years ago, is now busy with post-graduate studies in ECD. She stated fervently that all Grade R and ECD teachers should be appropriately qualified and bemoans the current state of affairs in the early childhood field (she was referring to low qualifications, problematic registrations of preschools and the perceived increasing formalization of the early childhood curriculum). She commented that ECD has always been outcomes-based and that she has embraced the NCS enthusiastically. Both her own and the teachers' planning (which was shown to me voluntarily) closely follows the NCS format. All teachers are acutely aware of meeting the stated learning outcomes and assessment standards.

Children playing with building blocks

Both the teachers (interview 16 July) and the principal (interview 14 July) stated that children learn best through play but they all commented that the programme had become very intense; acknowledged that it was hard to meet all the (perceived) NCS educational demands and said

that this was often at the expense of creativity: art, music, and from my own observations (14 & 16 July), periodically, story time.

However, the teachers all agreed that they implemented a high quality Grade R programme where the children's learning potential is maximized. The reasons for this, they suggested, were many and included support from the principal and peers, the school environment and the excellent resources that the school provided.

Observations (14 July) revealed that the classrooms were large and airy with plenty of natural lighting and all opened onto a wide, covered veranda. There were two carpeted areas for floor and group work and sufficient tables and chairs for all children. Each classroom was extremely well resourced, a fact that was acknowledged by participating teachers. Each Grade R classroom had, for example, a well stocked book corner, at least two different sets of blocks and other construction toys, a variety of well maintained educational toys and puzzles as well as a different fantasy corner, for example, a 'gym', a 'dentist's room' or a 'hospital corner'.

Fantasy corner

There was a theme table in each classroom. Children were allowed to interact with the items on the table and during the time I spent at the school I saw a number of children playing with the plastic farm animals that were part of the display. Attention had also been given to different kinds of learning corners. There was a literacy learning corner with a THRASS chart (this is a phonics programme that in some quarters is becoming accepted as the solution to many of the literacy problems found in South African classrooms), and a table displaying items beginning

with the letter of the alphabet that was being discussed during that week., which was the letter 't'. Children were encouraged to bring things from home beginning with this letter to place on this table (observation, 15 July). Yet if the emphasis was on emergent literacy one would have expected, for example, to see some labels on the table allowing the children to make links between the item and its written name. Likewise the book corner could have been more closely situated to the phonics table. This was not the case. Numeracy learning corners were also evident. The walls were covered different teaching and learning support materials such as pictures relating to the current theme, alphabet posters in upper and lower case, and number charts. There were also displays of the children's art work.

The timetable (daily programme) was displayed on the wall of each classroom and indications were that the children had a varied but demanding and even challenging schedule. From my observations children were constructively occupied throughout the day. The programme was balanced in that it allowed for kinaesthetic, three dimensional (3D) as well as two dimensional (2D) activities but it became apparent that the programme leaned towards the more formal aspects of Grade R. For example, if the children do audiblox (a whole group teacher-directed activity done with each class once a week) they did not do creative art that day (observation 15 July).

Classroom set up for audiblocks

Observations on all three days showed that the pace of the morning schedule forced children to complete activities within specified periods of time. Their morning was highly organized, almost, it seemed, pressurized. Children seemed to have little time 'just to be'. The sense of a relaxed and smooth transition from one activity to another was missing. Neither did daily routines receive a

sustained focus. Some time was spent on the tidy up routine but little on toileting or snack routines. Consequently, valuable incidental learning opportunities to reinforce life skills and good habits like washing hands before eating were lost.

By the teachers' own admission (interview 16 July), 'the Grade R curriculum is hectic…too little time to do everything.' It appeared to be a perceptibly structured programme where some of the traditional preschool activities have given way to perceived necessary curricular changes. For example, there was little time allocated to music activities and, on certain days, music competed with story time. Both music and stories, I would suggest, are essential components of a good preschool/ Grade R programme.

Observations (14-16 July) revealed however, that it was a language-rich environment with plenty of opportunities for children to both talk and listen. At times, opportunities for extending the children's learning were overlooked and questions could have been more open-ended, encouraging children to use their imaginations, to think creatively and to solve problems. In two of the classrooms there was a values tree but during the time I spent at the school there was no mention made of the values mentioned on this tree. It appeared as if opportunities to engage with issues relating to social justice and diversity were not recognised.

The outdoor play environment was well planned and resourced. Children had many choices that included climbing apparatus, swings, a cycle track and sandpit. Over and above these permanent fixtures additional outdoor equipment was set out each day. This could include bats and balls or an obstacle course.

However, the choice of indoor or outdoor playing space was strictly controlled by the teachers (observations 14-16 July). All children played indoors or outdoors. No choice of venue was offered to the children. Outdoor play time was two half-hour sessions each morning. Children were, I suggest, deprived of valuable opportunities to exert a measure of appropriate independence and to make some realistic choices of their own. Teachers appeared to view their role during outdoor free play in a more supervisory capacity rather than as a mediatory role. Outdoor play time appeared to be, as was the case in many other schools, more like 'break' or 'time out from learning'; much as would happen in a primary school. Given that during the morning (conversations during free play, 14-16 July) the staff frequently referred to an increasing incidence of learning difficulties such as low muscle tone and ADHD[30] in particular, it would

[30] ADHD is the acronym for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

seem appropriate for staff to reconsider some of the approaches towards outdoor play and perhaps to the programme as a whole.

This notion of increasing learning difficulties was further supported by teachers' suggestions that many of these difficulties are probably aggravated by the more sedentary life styles that they say many children lead at home. Parents[31], the teachers said, give material goods generously to both their children and the school but did not appear to be able to give their children the necessary time and attention to promote holistic development. According to Maureen, 'parenting is not happening...parents don't understand how learning happens and when you talk to them they have no idea where you are coming from' (interview, 16 July)

During the interview parents were described as being affluent but hardworking with some struggling financially to send their children to this school. They have high expectations for their children and want the best for them but, according to the teachers, did not really want to become too involved in their children's education. 'Parents pay high fees and it is all expected to happen at the school.'

There is no doubt that the children were immersed in a busy challenging day that provided plenty of opportunities to engage in meaningful learning. But perhaps the morning was too structured negating the value of purposeful play in early learning. (see 3.2.1) However, children were visibly happy, enjoyed their school day and appeared to be ready for the challenges of tomorrow (at the same school).

6.2.2 *Jacaranda Heights Nursery School*

Situated in a converted house in an established, tranquil, leafy-green residential area in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg, this prestigious, privately-owned, free-standing preschool opened more than fifteen years ago.

[31] Parents were not a focus of this thesis; consequently there was no specific research question that explored the teachers' perceptions of parents (see 1.5). However, the research questions opened a space for parents to be mentioned. For example, part of question one asked 'how do you think children learn best?', and question five explored alternative strategies for improving practice. In all cases teachers mentioned parents; both as a source of support and as a challenge. Because of this unanimous response I felt it was essential to record the teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards the parents.

Entrance to the preschool

During the interview (30 September) Naomi, the principal, stated that they offered high quality preschool education to children between the ages of two to six in the mornings and an aftercare facility in the afternoons. The school employs five qualified teachers and a secretary. Both the buildings and gardens are in pristine condition and it is evident that profits are ploughed back into the school.

Like Egret Park, this school is also affiliated to, and has been accredited by ISASA and both principals have been actively involved in the ISASA pre-primary committee. It is run with meticulous care and efficiency under the guidance of the owner, who is also the principal. Naomi has a senior primary teaching qualification but says she has made it a point to become knowledgeable about preschool education, in both theory and practice. Under her leadership, the school appears to have embraced OBE and offers an integrated Grade R programme that incorporates the eight Learning Areas with an emphasis on literacy and numeracy.

Naomi, in a letter to the parents dated January, 2008, outlined the Grade R programme. She wrote:

> Children need a bridging year between nursery school (informal, concrete-base learning) and primary school (formal abstract learning). This is a vital learning period in a child's life where many children have a need for a more structured in-depth programme that offers stimulating age-appropriate activities without entering the area of formal learning.

Observations (30 September & 1 October) confirmed that the implementation of the programme appeared to adhere to these sentiments. There was a large, spacious, well-resourced Grade R classroom situated in the original house. French doors opened onto a paved patio on one side and into a well maintained garden on the other. On both sides appropriate outdoor play activities were on offer. Maximum use was made of these features. For example, during child-initiated activity time, children have to be constructively occupied but, unlike Egret Park, can choose to play either indoors or outdoors. Outside play opportunities provided rich choices for the children. Activities on offer included a variety of perceptual-motor activities such as visual matching and visual association games, blocks, puzzles, play dough, completing creative art activities as well as water and sand play.

An example of creative art activities

The daily programme, labelled as the timetable, appeared prominently on the wall and it reflected a balance between child-initiated and teacher-guided activities and routines. This was one of the few schools (Little Stars being the other) where I saw, for example, a toilet routine, not only being implemented, but the Grade R teacher, Alison, making use of the incidental learning opportunities that these routines present. Children were engaged in a spontaneous discussion on the value of hand washing. The teacher-guided activities that I observed (30 September & 1 October) included theme discussions, numeracy and music rings that offered rich learning opportunities for the children to develop, amongst other things, language, numeracy, critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Alison extended the children's learning through good questioning techniques and also through using appropriate songs and rhymes that suited the

teaching context. For example the theme was 'Caring for our world'. During the morning language ring Alison asked many open –ended questions asking children what they thought they could do, for example, to recycle waste. Children were encouraged to think of alternative solutions.

The LoLT is English, and though this was the home language of the majority of the children there were some who were not proficient in English. Though some songs were sung in other languages, for example Isizulu, there was little evidence of additive bilingualism being implemented in the classroom or of an in-depth awareness of issues related to anti-bias and diversity. During the observation (30 September) I noticed little assistance was given to one young boy who had a poor command of English. During the music ring he was simply expected to look around him and to follow what his peers were doing. Consequently, he started drumming late and found it difficult to stop when told to do so and this appeared to cause him some embarrassment.

One of the outdoor play areas

Like the children at Egret Park, these children had a demanding and challenging morning in the classroom. However, observations on both days revealed that in-between the indoor activities the children were allowed to go outside to 'let off steam'. This definitely calmed some of the more energetic boys who were then more eager to participate in the creative art and other activities on offer. Though the programme reflected a daily story (documentary evidence) at the end of the morning this did not always seem to take place (observation 1 October). Literacy activities such as letter land (another phonics programme) appeared to take precedence. This is a pity, as story time is an important literacy activity (in which phonics could be incidentally

included) and also allows a teacher to end the morning on a calm and restful note. Appropriate story choices also allow teachers to introduce elements of anti-bias and diversity education into the programme in a non-threatening way (Saracho & Spodek, 2010).

Outdoor free play, termed break, was considered to be an important part of the preschool day (interview 30 September). Children had a 45-minute outdoor play session after the midmorning snack. They had a variety of activities from which to choose. Climbing apparatus, cycle track, swings, sandpit, water play and a variety of movement apparatus were provided. Additional options included a well equipped library (situated in a wooden hut) and a well-resourced fantasy room that is available to all children in the school. The Grade R teacher, Alison, commented (conversation on 30 September during free play) that the Grade Rs preferred playing co-operative games to spending time in the fantasy room. Does this sentiment perhaps reflect a rather 'formal' Grade R approach? (see 3.4.1).

Alison appeared to be an energetic and experienced preschool teacher who holds a diploma in pre-primary education. The interview (30 September) revealed that she too is passionate about what she does and says 'It's who I am …I could only do preschool…teaching is what I do best…every day…I am confident, I know what I am doing.' She said preschool children should know 'they can do anything their heart desires. There is nothing to stop them doing anything…count, draw, play…they need to be happy and they need to be confident.' During the interview she stated that a preschool teacher should have good general knowledge and that academic subject knowledge is something that can be researched. She fervently believes that teachers need to have a good idea about classroom management and discipline. 'Teachers need to be consistent and they need to be reading up, going to talks, listening to new ideas on how to discipline because teachers can be very erratic when it comes to discipline issues.'

She appeared to be a self–reflective teacher and during the interview acknowledged that she could become better informed about subjects such as science and design and technology. She also stated quite categorically that teaching 'was draining' and 'by 1 o'clock if you are a good teacher, who is really spending a busy day doing what you are supposed to be doing in that classroom you are finished, really finished, drained.' She was looking at taking some time off at the end of the year to regenerate. She stressed that it was school holidays that helped her cope. She also acknowledged that a supportive school, parents and a supportive principal were

essential in helping her provide quality teaching. And responses from children such as a hug are immensely affirming. She said:

> I believe I only became a good teacher about 10 years ago. This was after many trials and tribulations and it was only after a couple of incidents with parents that I realized how important it was to plan and prepare and to set up extension programmes in [full] view of the parents so that they know each day what you will be teaching their children.

The teaching staff (during the morning tea break) acknowledged that the school has a strong, supportive parent community. During the interview both principal and teacher described the parents as being highly educated and wanting the best education for their children. 'Parents support the programme, the approach towards teaching and learning as well as school functions.' But, according to Naomi, this is ongoing hard work that commences at the beginning of each year and needed to be constantly reinforced. Alison admitted, and recalled a critical incident (1 October) as her example, that her understanding of parental expectations had influenced her teaching approach. She said 'you have to be sensitive to the community, to their social standing, level of education...these parents have pushed me further…they are highly educated and I have to come across as an educated teacher.' However, teachers denied that the parent body had influenced the school to put a more formal programme in place. During the interview Alison said 'the principal constantly stresses that she believes in creativity and the value of an integrated programme in which children experience physical, cognitive, social and emotional… this is where leadership comes in…'

It appears to be a school where there is strong leadership. The principal views the Grade R year as being unique.

> It is not a formal year…it is not an informal year. It is a combination of the two. And you have to have a teacher who understands… an intelligent teacher … if you don't have that understanding it is too informal and not enough learning will be taking place and if it's too formal …ag … you need to get a child ready for formal school but not to fall into the pitfalls of workbooks. You need a lively, flexible, creative programme.

And this is definitely the type of atmosphere that prevails in this school.

6.2.3 *Bertha Solomon Educare Centre rapidly*

This preschool is set in spacious grounds in a former residential suburb that has changed rapidly into a commercial area. The double story colonial house does not make an ideal preschool venue but imaginative use of available space has changed the house into a spirited preschool that accommodates children between the ages of one to five. The Grade R class is situated on the same grounds, a short distance away from the main school in renovated outbuildings. These outbuildings provide a space for implementing a creative and exciting learning area for the children. The area surrounding the outbuildings is fenced off, giving the Grade R children a private playing area in addition to the main playgrounds.

This school was opened in the mid 1980s by a large corporate educational institution. It employs four teachers including the principal, two teaching assistants and a secretary. It can accommodate 120 children and because employees of the institution had not filled all the places, it was opened to the public. Of all the preschools I visited (22-24 July), this school was probably most representative of current South African demographics. The LoLT is English but the children have various mother tongues, some of which are official languages of South Africa and some that represent other African and European languages. During her interview[32] (22 July) the principal described BS as a middle class school, parents are employed and generally hardworking; fees are reasonably high but nowhere in the range of the two previous schools. She said the school offers a morning educational programme as well as an aftercare facility. Breakfast, a hot lunch and two snacks are supplied by the school. The majority of the children remain in aftercare, being fetched between 3 and 5.30 pm when the school closes. A cloud is hanging over the school as the corporation does not see preschool education as part of their core business and is looking into closing the school.

The principal, Nandi, is a gentle, softly-spoken woman who has a Higher Diploma in Education (Pre-primary) as well as a Masters degree in education. During the interview (22 July) she admitted to having a demanding schedule as she is both a teacher of the younger group as well as the principal, a post which she has held for six years. She feels she is given little support by her employing body and that she is battling against overwhelming odds. Yet despite this, she remains passionate about preschool education and describes herself as 'raising a nation'. In response to the interview questions (22 July), *What does being a teacher (of young children) mean to you*? and *How*

[32]Nandi's dual role as teacher and principal necessitated that I schedule an interview with her separately. The only available time was in the late afternoon.

would you describe yourself as a teacher, she took time to explain that as a black person, she grew up in disadvantaged circumstances in Soweto during the *apartheid* era. Her parents, however, saw to it that she received an education that would allow her to further her studies after the completion of schooling. She explained that she sees preschool education as offering her a second chance at 'being young again and have opportunities I didn't have as a child.' She was referring to the opportunity to experience things that were not accessible to her during her childhood. Though she said she has a good understanding of early childhood education, she did not feel she had a handle on OBE and the demands of the NCS. Being a free-standing school and working in relative isolation she said the teachers have been given very little input on the new curriculum. She said that the education department (meaning the GDE[33]) had not included any of the independent free standing school staff in workshops that were held to introduce the NCS to teaching staff. This sentiment was expressed by many of the teachers working in other free-standing independent preschools participating in this study; Jacaranda Heights being the exception.

However, Nandi did say that Grade R has become much more pressurized and that there are different expectations for the Grade R year. 'There is pressure from the NCS to become more structured. For instance some schools expect the children to be reading by the time they commence Grade 1.' This has, she said, influenced the school's approach towards the Grade R year.

As a teacher, the principal described herself as patient and caring. She remarked 'I understand children's pain and frustrations.' She commented that young children are accepting and non-judgmental. 'Working with young children is serious; it is more than just being a teacher.' She described herself as a counsellor and psychologist. She viewed her role as a principal in a different light. As principal, Nandi saw herself in a managerial role and said, 'It is much more difficult to manage people…adults. They have a lot of baggage…and you have to work with it.' According to Nandi, the teaching staff are particularly resistant to change. But she did admit they worked under difficult conditions that were exacerbated by the unsupportive attitude of the employing body, the ongoing threat of closure, long working hours, working in relative isolation, having little contact with other ECD organizations and/or schools, and battling to adequately resource the school.

[33] The GDE refers to the Gauteng Department of Education.

The principal said she had a favourable relationship with the parents and described them as 'educated and middle class' and said that they provided a 'spirit of support.' She acknowledged that parents led hectic lives and worked very hard. Parents were either both working or were single and 'battling on their own'. In both cases the stress levels were high. She viewed the school as a 'home away from home … giving both parents and children support and care.'

The Grade R teacher, Ella, was a quietly-spoken person who often spoke in a monotone. During her interview (23 July) she admitted to feeling tired and overworked and said there was no time anymore to research topics or to make equipment. She stated that her workload was always increasing at the expense of her teaching. She also mentioned that she had little, if any, support from the school or the employing body. She was the only participating teacher in this study to admit to feeling despondent and unsure about her future in teaching.

Ella described herself as being patient but strict and she displayed a quiet calm manner when interacting with the children who were obviously fond of her. In the mornings most of them would rush up to greet her before beginning an activity.

A discussion ring with the educational toy area in the background

She said that she had never planned to be a teacher because of the very poor education she had received as a girl growing up in Rustenburg[34]. Her mother was employed by someone who had a handicapped daughter and Ella was drawn into the daughter's care. She was so impressed by the support given to this girl that she ultimately registered to do a level one ECD training through a

[34] Prior to 1994, Rustenburg was a town situated in the rural Northern Western Transvaal. It is now at the heart of the gold and platinum mining industry in the North West Province.

Montessori institution. She now has a level four ECD qualification and has attended elective courses on creative art and storytelling.

Ella had been teaching Grade R for five years and admitted that she found it less strenuous than teaching younger children. She commented that 'there are no routines and feeding is easier.' However, she stated that the curriculum had become very prescriptive:

> The NCS has led to a reshaping and a refocusing of how things are done. Children now have to be familiar with big school and learn specifically to become school ready. It is restricting and limiting and I am not happy about it but what can I do? It does not enhance imagination and creativity.

I was left with the sense that she had in essence captured what many other teachers participating in this study feel about the current education system but will not, or cannot, verbalize.

The LoLT of the school is English and all the staff, though it was not their mother tongue, spoke excellent English. Grade R was a multilingual classroom and though Ella had a working knowledge of some of the languages spoken in the classroom (Isizulu and Sesotho) there was little attempt to implement additive bilingualism in the programme. She rarely spoke to the children in another language other than English (observations 22-24 July). When she did it was to chastise them rather than to enhance meaning making. Children however, were allowed to converse to each other in their mother tongue. I heard no songs or rhymes being sung or recited in any of the other official languages. When asked (morning observation, 23 July) she said she was acquiescing to parents' requests that their children become proficient in English as they will be attending English speaking primary schools. This emphasis on children learning to speak English at the expense of their mother tongue point was mentioned by many teachers (Sally, Emily, Mary and Helena) and is an area of great concern, especially within Gauteng which is the most multilingual province in South Africa.

The daily programme was reflected on the wall and typified a conventional preschool/Grade R day including teacher-guided activities, routines and free play. However, the programme was not followed and children had chunks of time when they were not engaged in purposeful or meaningful learning. Observations over three days (22-24 July) showed there was, for example no morning language ring and art activities were not very challenging. Children were divided into groups. One group was asked to draw a picture, another group worked on small blackboards (doing number sums) or colour in worksheets which require little imagination. When these activities were finished the children could choose to play with the educational toys. Children

participated enthusiastically but as the photographs show there was little to extend or challenge them. Most of the activities did not appear to extend or challenge the children sufficiently and as a result they became restless.

Children doing 'creative' art

Observations showed (22-24 July) that there were sufficient resources for all the children to be actively engaged in some type of activity but the activity areas were not inviting. The educational toys were simply plonked on the shelves; puzzle pieces were lost, there were only a few books and these were not really appropriate. For example, most had no pictures and some were obviously written for older children. Many were in a state of disrepair. Children were given limited and unimaginative art work to do; there was no paint in the easel and there was a paltry selection of educational toys. Consequently, children became disruptive and rowdy and had to be chastised (observation 23 July). In addition, Ella found it difficult to spontaneously engage with the children through questioning them or by redirecting their attention. It seemed as if many potential learning opportunities were lost (see 1.7).

Easels with no paper or paint

During the time that I spent at the school children frequently arrived late (after 10am in the morning) and this caused further interruptions to the day. It was for this reason that Ella said she did not do an early morning ring with the children. I did, however, during the second day of observations, (23 July) witness an enjoyable 'baking ring' which she did with the children. Together with the children she made a cup cake dough. Children were asked to come and add ingredients to the dish and they were all given an opportunity to stir the batter. This was one of the few times that I observed teacher-guided activities where learning opportunities were co-constructed with the children.

Much better use could have been made of space. For instance, there is an alcove just to the side of the bathroom area that would have made a suitable fantasy area but it was empty apart from a few waste items that had been discarded there. Likewise, the private playground could have offered enriching additional activities but it was under utilized. In fact during the three days that I observed this classroom little use was made of this area, despite it having climbing equipment, swings and a sandpit. The only time I noticed children playing in this area was in the morning before the 'commencement' of class. They used it in the presence of their parents. No attempt was made to promote an indoor-outdoor flow that might have optimized children's learning opportunities, not to mention allowing the more energetic children a chance to release some pent-up energy. The children did however, have a fairly lengthy outdoor play time after snack time. They were taken to the large play area that was used by the rest of the school. It was well equipped with a variety of different climbing apparatus, swings and a sandpit. On two of the days when I was there wheel toys were meant to be taken out but the staff decided against this. Consequently no additional play equipment was provided for the children. On the other days no mention was made of additional play equipment being supplied to enrich outdoor play. Ella joined the other staff to supervise outdoor play but there was little adult-child interaction during this time.

During the interview (23 July), when asked what type of knowledge she thought young children should acquire Ella mentioned that there are topical issues she would like to cover with the children such as poverty and crime, 'issues that affect us all every day'. But she admitted that she would not do this as 'the parents would probably not like it'. When asked if she would talk to the parents about including these types of issues in the curriculum she shrugged her shoulders and said 'what can I do?' She said that the parents were busy people with high expectations for

their children but few became involved. 'They don't know what you are doing, they are not there to join in and make teaching fun, fun for me and the children.'

She commented that if the parents were interested, they would challenge her. She felt this type of limited parental response had affected her work negatively.

> I get so little feedback and I can't assess myself. I would like to see children receiving a much broader education…outings, bus trips, going to the theatre but parents don't seem to ask and the school doesn't seem to be keen… so…

She shrugged her shoulders and commented, 'parents need to be taught.' When asked by whom, she replied, 'us, the teachers. We need to make parents aware….Perhaps …I am too comfortable…it will be difficult to move [from my] the comfort zone'.

She appeared to be dispirited and did not feel that she could make a difference. She mentioned however, she would like to 'see the teachers, my colleagues, share ideas.' She feels 'everyone keeps everything to themselves'. She said she has tried to share but it is hard. 'I don't think I will do it again, they all look at you with criticism.' The possible closure of the school, coupled with the challenges of implementing the NCS, seem to have worn Ella down.

Ella was kind to the children and attempted to provide them with an appropriate learning environment that, she said, would prepare them for Grade 1. Perhaps her approach pointed to insufficient insight into how best to optimize children's learning, perhaps it showed too little understanding of the NCS or perhaps it just epitomised the state of ECD in many of South African preschools today and could be closely related to the teachers' personal and professional identities. Teachers seemingly have good intentions but lack the insight and vision to implement a high quality curriculum. This is in stark contrast to the previously-mentioned schools, Egret Park and Jacaranda Heights. Here the children are immersed in a rich, stimulating, in fact almost intense and coerced learning environment.

6.2.4 *The Fatima Meer Preschool*

Early Childhood Development is a fairly new concept for the Johannesburg Indian community. The first preschool for Indian children was introduced in Lenasia in 1974 (Webber ,1978). Lack of educational support and training for ECD teachers, as well as the entrenched extended family unit, were some of the reasons given by the principal for the slow start of preschools in this

community. More recently, changing social circumstances as well as an increasing awareness of the importance of early education has necessitated the opening of more preschools.

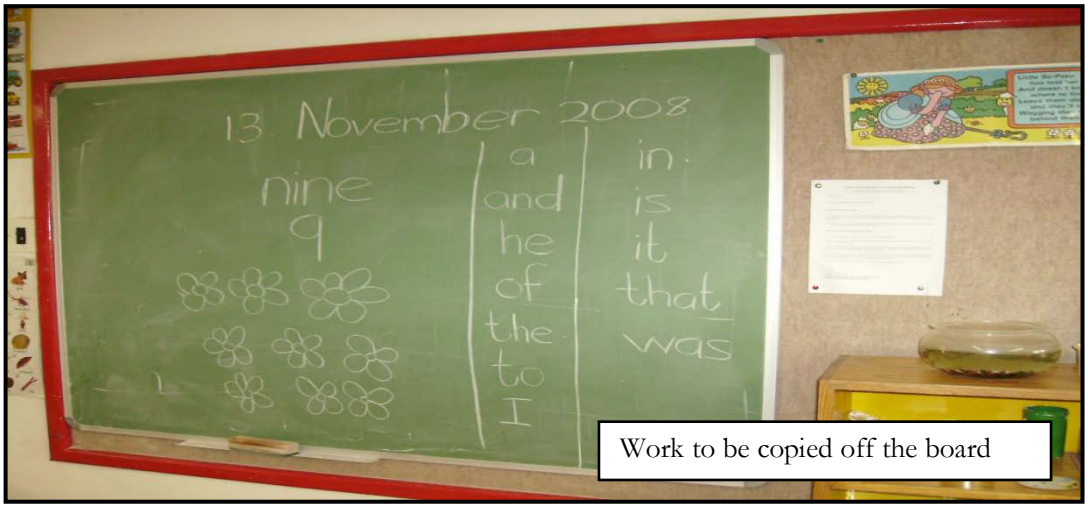
The staff (during the joint interview on 15 November) stated that a lack of appropriate training facilities has resulted in the majority of Indian teachers being trained through the non-formal route. Prior to 1994, many were trained by the then Child Care Services Unit of the Johannesburg Municipality and, since 1994, through community endeavours such as those of the Nur-el-al Islamic Association, which offered courses on outcomes-based education for their members. This is the type of training that the teachers of Fatima Meer had undergone.

This preschool is affiliated to the Fatima Meer School which is a GDE controlled school that offers both primary and secondary education. The school, which is pressed for space, is situated in a busy area on the edge of the city centre. The preschool focuses on Grade R and is housed in more spacious grounds in a quieter area a few kilometres away from the main school. The preschool comprises a younger and middle group and three Grade R classes. Attendance in Grade R affords automatic entrance to Grade 1 in the primary school.

The preschool is reasonably autonomous and is managed by Mrs Areff, the principal, a gracious, softly-spoken woman who has been both a teacher and principal of the school for 16 years. She is currently teaching a Grade R class but this was not the class that I observed. As with the other schools, it became apparent that Fatima Meer was struggling to find a balance between a high quality ECD Grade R programme, meeting the (perceived) requirements of the NCS and preparing the children for Grade 1. The principal (during my first morning of observations, 12 November) commented that the Grade R year has become extremely harried and that 'we are pushing the children to achieve so much.' She continued:

> Children need to enjoy, they need to be children. In this environment there is a certain amount of play but I think in terms of creativity… this is lacking. We also seem to do a lot more telling… it shouldn't be so formal. We no longer go out and explore, bring in things.

During the interview Mrs Fatima Basmilla, the forthright and proactive Grade R teacher whom I observed confirmed what she had mentioned to me more than once during the morning that today the Grade 1 curriculum was extremely demanding. 'All the children do is write, write and write.' She stated that the Grade R curriculum was driven by the expectations of Grade 1 teachers. She qualified this by adding 'the curriculum is also driven by what the children already know and what they need to know. For Fatima, this includes classroom rules and routines, discipline and respect.' But during my observations (12 & 15 November) it became apparent that these are subordinate to literacy and numeracy. Though Fatima said some kinaesthetic[35] and three dimensional activities (such as educational toys) are offered, (I saw evidence of art work on the walls and observed (12 November) Fatima reading the children a story where she showed them pictures) the activities that I predominately witnessed occurred through worksheets and



Work to be copied off the board

workbooks (observations 12 & 15 November). Fatima is highly computer literate and she acknowledged with pride that she had been instrumental in designing most of the worksheets which were used on a daily basis.

The classroom is spacious and comfortably accommodates 26 children. Children are seated at desks which are arranged in rows. When I arrived in the classroom (12 November) the children were busy copying letters off the green board that is attached to one wall. When they had completed this task, they were instructed to work in their workbooks while Fatima completed the assessments of three children who had been absent the day before. When children had completed the designated work in their workbooks, they were allowed to go and play on the carpet (see photographic evidence). This was an area in the front of the classroom which was

[35] I was told that the children can choose, as an extramural activity, to do play ball, monkeynastics (both movement programmes) karate and ballet. However, although these activities are offered during the school morning, parents have to pay extra for their children to participate in any of them.

used for discussions and story time. There was a book corner and some educational toys such as blocks and puzzles which were stored on easily accessible shelves. The choices of activities were somewhat limited. There was, for example, neither a theme table that would encourage hands-on, interactive learning nor was there a fantasy corner.

Educational toy area

A variety of posters were placed on the walls. Many of these were tatty and did not necessarily have anything to do with the theme or work being covered. Letter and number friezes were situated high up, near the ceiling, making it difficult for the children to see them. Some of the children's drawings were displayed on the wall. They were all very similar in appearance pointing to a structured art activity.

An example of the children's art work

There were also some posters in Arabic, a language which was introduced to the children during their Grade R year. These depict verses from the Koran and prayers related to mealtimes. They are recited by the children before and after snack time. The children also write Arabic letters in their workbooks. Fatima, (during a classroom conversation, 12 October) commented that not only were children being introduced to a second language in a way that integrated it into literacy but by making children copy the Arabic letters they were developing certain perceptual-motor skills such as visual matching. The LoLT was English and both the teachers and children were competent in this language.

Observations (12 & 15 November showed the classroom environment was structured and the programme driven by time constraints. Within this environment, the emphasis was on teacher-directed activities. Incidental learning and teaching moments were not optimized, neither was the learning value of routines promoted. Tidy up time was reinforced but a 'shame and blame' approach rather than one that promoted collaborative interaction was adopted, despite the teacher saying that she 'can negotiate anything... if you are naughty, you will not go out, you will not listen to my story. I negotiate it' (interview, 15 November). During my observations these threats were never carried out. However, the questions that need to be asked include, 'are children being taught to regulate their own behaviour? Are they learning to be respectful and thoughtful towards themselves and others?' and 'are issues related to equity and social justice being considered?' Children were meaningfully occupied with learning activities but greater learning support could have been provided for children, such as more scaffolding, more feedback and varied opportunities for children to practice and refine their knowledge and skills.

Though this is an Islamic school, the staff (during the interview, 15 November) said that children were also introduced to other cultures and religions. According to Fatima, one of the themes is 'other religions', where children are introduced to Judaism, Christianity and the Hindu religion. She stated, 'We are living in a more integrated society. They have maids at home. Kids have to be aware that you have to respect all people.' Likewise, she said, 'Social relationships are supported in the classroom. Children are encouraged to take turns and to be aware of the needs of others.' I did not, however, observe any explicit foregrounding of these issues.

During the interview both women agreed that caring is a strong trait. The principal believes that ECD teachers must have a love for children and be mothering, 'as a teacher ultimately has a huge impact on children's development.' In addition, Fatima said she was innovative and enjoyed a challenge. She would like to introduce more technology into the school. She said:

> We have everything at our disposal in terms of educational toys, but there is so much you can teach them [children] about and with technology. And the world is changing. Grade R must open the child's horizons and give them a thirst for education.

Yet she did not open up a space for explorative learning that could have been initiated by the children themselves.

Mrs Areff suggested, much like the Egret Park teachers, that the expectations of what children are supposed to know and learn are changing and that parents have become much more demanding. She observed:

> There is a new generation of parents who work in the corporate world, professionals…I might be generalizing but they look at the school environment and we must provide. They give material things but we must give the emotional care. Parents are sometimes just not aware of what their children need emotionally. There are no ground rules…and the value systems have changed. Parents have achieved a lot in terms of their professional development but there is a lack in their own contribution towards the development of their children.

She believes that children are more streetwise today probably because of their lifestyles but few have any idea of what is right or wrong and she says 'we have to teach values.' These values are based on Islamic principles.

She suggests that the emphasis should move away from the academic and instead concentrate on emotional and social development and creativity. Children should acquire the underpinning skills and concepts so that they have a good grounding on which to base their formal learning. Fatima would agree, but stated that, because of the demands of Grade 1, a far greater emphasis must be placed on school readiness.

6.2.5 *Young Beginnings Early Learning Centre*

This school was started in Riverlea, a previously coloured township, as a community outreach project 23 years ago. From humble beginnings in a church hall, this preschool has grown and now boasts a fine brick building comprising five classrooms. Recent additions include a large hall that accommodates all the children, a well-equipped kitchen, and a dining area for the children as

well as a staff lounge. The school offers an ECD programme in the morning as well as an aftercare facility. Children are provided with a hot lunch and two snacks.

Recent additions to the school - office and dining room

Amelia, the 'director' and administrator of the school, was one of the co-founders. Although she is not a qualified teacher, she has taken a keen interest in ECD and has joined a number of organizations over the years to become informed and to keep up to date. During the interview (which, to accommodate the participants, was held a couple of days after the observations on 23 October), Amelia said that she viewed her role as a managerial one. As such, she oversees the centre; she is in charge of the financial management of the centre and provides both training and support to the staff. She is also involved with community outreach; in particular, the implementation of level 4 ECD training within the community.

Amelia explained that the school, which is registered as a community trust school, does not receive any financial assistance from the Education Department. She felt that this was grossly unfair as there are many disadvantaged people in the community and the school has always had a policy of giving back to the community by sponsoring impoverished children. The school's main source of income remains fees (which are moderate in comparison to the fees of aforementioned schools), supplemented by fund raising activities which are an important part of her job description. She said with feeling 'I have given my life to this school…we have made many sacrifices because we earn peanuts. My next thing is to improve the salaries.'

The LoLT is English but this is not the mother tongue of most of the teachers or children. Many are Afrikaans speaking and other home languages include Sesotho and IsiZulu. Though I heard a smattering of Afrikaans being spoken, little attempt, apart from some songs sung in a number of

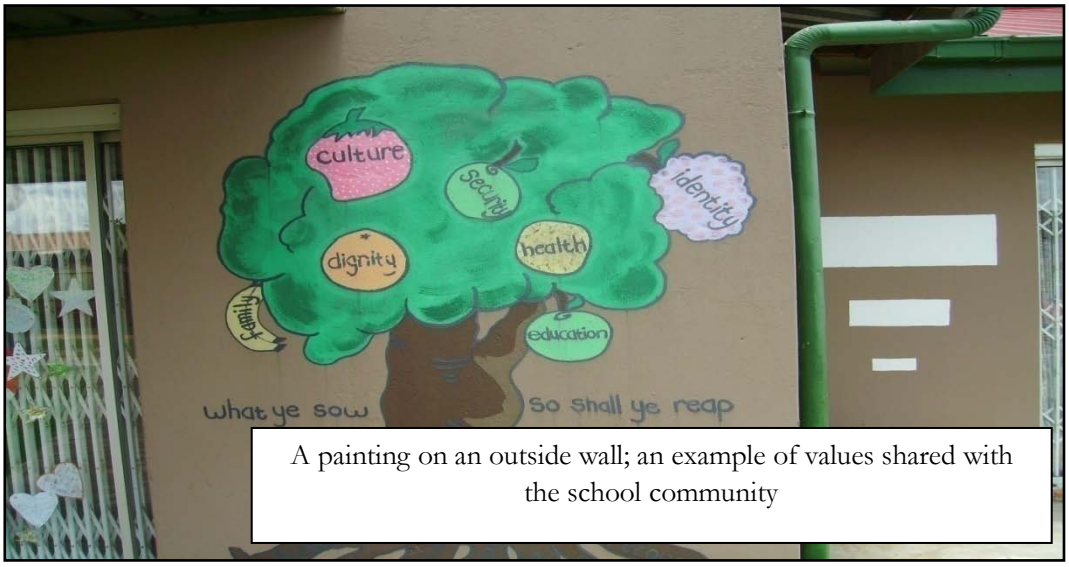
African languages, was made to embrace a model of additive bilingualism in the school. During the interview staff confirmed what had been expressed by, for example, Ella, Emily and Helena. There was a lot of parental pressure to teach through the medium of English.

Amelia noted that the majority of the teaching staff was initially employed as domestic workers at the school. Because of the limited training opportunities (see 2.2.1) for black and coloured ECD teachers, the school's policy has always been to offer assistance to people who have been connected to the school in some way. Today, the majority of teachers at the school have either a level one or four ECD qualification. Because the staff have come from disadvantaged backgrounds and have had limited educational opportunities, Amelia expressed the view that staff need life experiences that would broaden and extend them. She said, 'If you don't grow as a person, how can you teach?' She mentioned that many of the staff had limited general knowledge and found it difficult to implement effectively many aspects (such as the teacher-guided activities) which constitute a quality preschool programme (see 1.7.1). In an attempt to relieve some of these pressures and to afford teachers an opportunity to learn from each other, she has instituted a whole school morning discussion ring for children between the ages of two to six in the communal hall. Teachers take turns to set up the theme table (which only comprised a few pictures and did not encourage children to interact with them) and every day a different teacher led the discussion. On both mornings when I observed the discussions they were chaotic (20 & 21 October). It is impossible to hold the attention of over 100 children and to pitch the discussion at an appropriate level, especially when the teachers were unsure of the topic (water transport) and the children had very little prior knowledge or experience of it. (There are no large rivers in this geographical area and it is doubtful if the majority of the children have ever seen a rowing boat, yet alone a ship used for transporting goods.) When asked, for example, 'what is a container?' they stared blankly at the teacher. Children found it difficult to focus and pay attention. Consequently they became restless. Children were continually reprimanded by their teachers and it seemed as if little, if any learning took place. After the discussion the children also practised their songs for the end-of-year concert. This was marginally more successful with about half the group participating.

The Grade R teacher, Mary, appeared to have greater insight into the learning needs of the children. Mary (interview, 23 October) said she had been a registered nurse but found hospital hours too demanding when her family was growing up. She, with the support of her husband, trained as a Junior Primary teacher and worked in a primary school until her retirement. She accepted the Grade R post because of staff shortages at the school. Mary has no specific Grade

R/ECD qualification but said that she was well informed by her predecessor, who left her files and ideas which have been 'extremely helpful.' Mary appeared to be a natural teacher. Observations of her interaction with the children showed that she had established good rapport with them. During outdoor play for example, they would run up to her and say 'hello, come and play.' Like the other teachers in this study she described herself as caring and passionate about education, as well as being concerned about the community. She believed teachers need to be aware of a child's context, '...know what makes them tick and know something about their background and why they behave the way they do.'

She recalled a critical incident (during the interview) that reinforced this belief. While teaching at a particular school, a bright, yet naughty dare-devil child died after slipping off a railway bridge. She said she was traumatized and started asking the question, 'Why was he doing what he was doing?' Since then, she has always tried to find out more about the children and their particular circumstances; and she said this has helped her to become a better teacher and disciplinarian and to become more aware of the community's circumstances.



A painting on an outside wall; an example of values shared with the school community

Both Amelia and Mary agreed that the community surrounding the school was a rather violent and abusive one. Children, they felt, needed to learn manners and values, as well as the importance of discipline. They suggested that, in their community, discipline was seen as something that was punitive. Children were constantly being shouted at and parents were not averse to giving them a hiding or even to administering harsher corporal punishment.

They said that children themselves were aggressive but Mary acknowledged that it was 'a fight for survival.' She mentioned that children had to learn to defend themselves from a young age. 'It's not, 'I am sorry, it was an accident' …it is punch and protect.' During the interview (23 October) Amelia and Mary agreed that children needed to be introduced to alternative disciplining approaches 'to plant a seed that we can react differently'. Yet seemingly they themselves were not really aware of other options such as a social problem-solving approach to conflict resolution. When there was a misdemeanour, their first reaction was to shout and threaten the children with some form of punishment (observation, 21 October). For example, I observed two children playing on some outdoor apparatus. It appeared as if the one child pushed the other who began crying. The director who was in her office heard the fracas and screamed from her window, 'Stop that nonsense now or you will both be smacked.' Mary responded in a similar manner.

Mary believed that Grade R children needed to know 'the importance of learning ... not only about school things but it's learning how to... ride a scooter, to balance, it's the learning process.' She also believed children needed to learn about the importance of following a routine, as many of them had little structure at home and therefore adjusting to formal school was difficult for them. She agreed with the principal that parents did not really place any value on ECD. There appeared to be a belief in the community that learning only begins when children commence primary school. 'Parents often see us as a dumping ground. But parents often don't know, they have no idea how to stimulate their children appropriately but they do give them material things such as TV games…'

Mary and Amelia acknowledged that there was limited parental involvement in the school's activities. Parents did not see the necessity of sending children to school on a daily basis and rarely reinforced any learning in the home situation. Both Amelia and Mary stated that they have intensified parental education. They commented, 'Once parents start understanding what the programme is hoping to achieve they definitely give us more support.' To their delight, some parents have actually followed the teachers' suggestions and bought their children a pair of scissors to practise cutting out or crayons to allow them to draw. In some cases, they have reportedly even started buying books and have begun to read stories to their children. Amelia, who has placed an ever-increasing focus on parent education said, 'this type of parental response is very gratifying.'

The Grade R classroom is spacious and reasonably well resourced with both bought and homemade games. Brightly coloured posters are placed on the walls. These were however, not necessarily appropriate. For instance the alphabet was only in upper case. There was a weather chart which the teacher used but no birthday chart. The walls were not decorated with the children's own art activities. The layout of the physical space appeared to constrain learning. The room was divided into two sections by shelves which resulted in two smallish areas into which the children had to crowd. By placing the shelves alongside the wall, a more inviting teaching and learning space that allowed children to move freely and interact more readily with each other could have been created.

Both the daily programme and my observations revealed that there was a balance between teacher-guided activities, child-initiated activities and routines. However, there seemed to be little mediation of learning possibilities during transition or routine times. The morning followed a predictable structure. It commenced with a whole school discussion (previously mentioned). Thereafter children went to their specific classrooms and the Grade R children participated in a news ring. Initially, Mary attempted to extend the theme discussions that had taken place in the whole group discussion. She had brought a toy rowing boat as well as a yatch (that her husband had built from a kit) into the classroom. Even with these examples it was apparent that the children did not really understand the concept of water transport. The focus however, was on the news ring and then numeracy. Children first had to count and then were given unifix blocks and instructed to do simple addition and subtraction.

Mary stated that children should be taught and not simply left to find out information by themselves. Observation of the morning ring revealed that she was able to extend the children's learning through modelling, modifying and suggestion. She responded to children's questions but missed out on opportunities to extend and challenge them. She did not ask open-ended questions that would have encouraged the children to reason and apply problem-solving skills. Children were not allowed to choose their activities; these were allocated to them. Once children were settled, Mary proved to be a capable mediator of learning moving calmly between the groups encouraging, explaining, suggesting and praising the children's initiatives. More attention could have been paid to children of varying ability but nonetheless the teacher was certainly aware of the children's strengths and weaknesses.

During outdoor free play, all the children played together. Sufficient time was given to enable children to engage in meaningful play. There was a variety of activities from which to choose,

and wheel toys and a water trough provided additional challenges. The importance of gross motor movement in learning had certainly been grasped by the staff. As Amelia said, 'we stress the importance of outdoor play even though parents do not really understand why it is so important.'

The well kept outdoor play area

After free play, the Grade R children went indoors for a 'show and tell' ring (observation 20 October). This was somewhat protracted and the children became restless. Mary, reading the mood of the children said 'we will continue later' and took the children to the communal hall for a movement ring. It was more like a physical education lesson that would have been offered in a primary school. Children were divided into two groups and first told to do jumping jacks and to move to the right and then to the left. Mary assisted children to determine their left and right sides as many children appeared to be confused. Thereafter each group was given a ball and children had to stand in a straight line and pass the ball over and under carrying on until each child had had a chance. The group to finish first was declared the winner. Although children enjoyed themselves elements of choice and creative movement were lacking from this ring. However, it certainly incorporated the development and refinement of valuable spatial orientation skills such as directionality, laterality and crossing the midline.

This school is an example of how with encouragement from the staff communities can, and do, get involved, in preschool education. The staff appears to be developing an increasing awareness of contextual factors that influence learning. They are also becoming more aware of the important role that parents play in the education of their children. and the importance of teacher-parent partnerships in order to maximize the children's learning opportunities.

6.2.6 *Rissik Preparatory School*

The Grade R class was introduced four years ago at the insistence of the principal and school management team (SMT). It is attached to a well-established ex-model C primary school[36] situated in the eastern suburbs of Johannesburg that can trace its history to the days of the Johannesburg Rand Lords[37]. The school is strapped for space and the Grade R classroom has been built at the edge of a quadrangle next to the administrative block. As a result, the classroom is cramped and cannot satisfactorily accommodate the 32 Grade R children. Space constraints negate against the delivery of an interactive play-based programme. The children used the same toilets as the older children in the rest of the school on the opposite side of the quadrangle. There was a narrow fenced-off outdoor playing area next to the classroom that had one small sandpit, a swing and two rockers. This area was not large enough to accommodate all the children at the same time.

The children come from diverse cultural, language and social backgrounds. Some parents are refugees, others are unemployed. Even though the LoLT is English, it is not the home language of the majority of the children. Consequently it is a challenging teaching environment.

During the interview[38] (29 September) Mrs Ferreira, the principal, acknowledged that Grade R 'is different' from the rest of the Foundation Phase but says from a curriculum perspective, 'It is an integral part of this phase even if there are many problems related to the implementation of this year.' and she lists many of these problems. A major one is insufficient support from education departments, including issues relating to conditions of service, salary and qualifications for Grade R practitioners. As she commented:

> If they [the education department] want Grade R to be part of the Foundation Phase they need to treat it the same. What is the message to educators and even the children? You are not part of the school ….it is just by the way. If they don't take it seriously how can you expect principals to take it seriously?

She also acknowledged that:

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[36] During the *apartheid* era, schools were racially segregated. When a more integrated model was introduced in the late 1980s, a variety of options was made available to public schools. Many white-only schools chose the model C route, meaning that they became multiracial but opted for continued government subsidy and funding. With introduction of the new education dispensation (see 2.2.2), the different options were phased out and these schools became known as ex-model C schools.

[37] Rand Lords refer to the mining magnates and well-to-do who took up residence in this suburb.

[38] Because of her work commitments I interviewed the principal almost a week after I completed the observation visits.

> Most principals do not know much about this year...they don't see it as important. They don't understand play and they can't relate threading beads to developing handwriting skills.

Other problems relate to the lack of facilities such as an appropriate play area, but she believes these can be overcome by working around the timetable. 'Grade R children can play on the playing fields when other learners are in class.'

Because of these pitfalls, this school has chosen to implement a private Grade R. (They receive no GDE funding for this year.) The teacher, Helena, has a recognized formal ECD/Foundation Phase qualification, is employed by the governing body and enjoys a salary and conditions of service similar to the other teachers in the school. Both Helena and the principal emphatically stated (independently of each other during their respective interviews) that she (Helena) is an integral part of the school community. The children are included in many of the Foundation Phase activities such as the school concert, the literacy drive and sports day. The teacher participates in all staff functions be they meetings, grade planning or staff development. Helena commented that, when she first came to the school, neither the principal nor the other staff had a very good understanding of Grade R but, 'They were open to it.' She explained further:

> Educating the staff about Grade R was a challenge as teachers needed to know this was a real job with real children. But the principal gave me space, a forum to do this and now I think there is real respect for what I do.

According to the principal, the current HoD of FP is now seeking to become the Grade R teacher.

Like the other Grade R teachers participating in this study, Helena described herself as being caring and nurturing and, in fact, said, 'I think teaching chose me.' She finds it very satisfying and personally fulfilling. She stated that she enjoyed the children's sense of humour and enthusiasm. Because she had a large class of 32 children, she said:

> I have to be strict. We have rules but I like to do everything with fun. I want to give them a love for learning. I want to instill confidence in them. All children can do things. In this class 'I can't' is a swear word. [*I heard children testify to this during the morning activities]*.

Activity area and book corner

During her interview (24 October) Helena recognised the many challenges such as lack of space, overcrowding and multilingual children coming from diverse cultural backgrounds that impact, she said, often negatively, on the teaching day. She was referring to the challenges of trying to ensure that the learning needs of all children were being met. She also suggested that teaching has become much more political. 'There is so much focus on pleasing parents, pleasing the government, keeping everybody happy, it's not about the child actually, it's about everyone's experiences...' She, however, like Ella felt powerless to influence the situation. A strange irony when 'I can't' is a swear word in her classroom.

Interpreting and implementing the NCS appropriately was seemingly a challenge. Helena attempted to meet various LOs and ASs (see 3.4.2) as well as tailor the curriculum to meet the holistic learning and development needs of young children. Again, like the other teacher participating in this study she acknowledged that children learn best through play and this assertion was recognized in the daily programme or time table. Ample time was allocated in the timetable for both indoor and outdoor play but in reality very little play actually occurred.

Observations (23-24 September) revealed that outdoor free play was not viewed as a meaningful time for learning. An assistant accompanied the children to the main playing fields but there was not much equipment available. For example, ropes and balls were sometimes taken out but Helena said 'these children do not know how to play. They walk around and take a long time before doing anything.' This should have been an impetus to make outdoor free play as rich and as meaningful a learning opportunity as possible, to counter the excessive video games and TV

viewing that she said parents allowed. However, this time was Helena's 'free period', so she spent it in the staff room doing administrative work.

Although Helena acknowledged that children's learning is best supported through an interactive approach that provides opportunities for self discovery learning this was not very evident in the classroom. For example, a morning ring was held in which Helena discussed weather, news and acknowledged for example, if a child had a birthday. However, children were not asked to go out and look at the weather and report their findings to the class. Helena told them what it was like. I observed (24 September) a few children sharing their news but then other children became restless. Helena's attempts to refocus the children through song and rhyme (for instance she did the activity 'do this, do this, do that' with the children, but they were sitting so close to each other that any movement other than flicking or clicking of fingers was impossible) were not very successful. Children knocked each other, some started crying and the rather disorderly ring came to an abrupt end.

Whole group activities (and I only observed early morning rings; the other whole group activities were table top tasks) tended to be teacher-directed. Helena did a lot of telling and asked few questions which could extend the children's learning and encourage them to think about issues.

During my observations there were minimal opportunities for children to be innovative and imaginative, for example, either through art work or through problem-solving activities. Hence, the attempt at offering a more interactive concrete learning programme where choice was paramount was met with minimal success. This was in part due to the previously-mentioned constraints. The teaching and learning emphasis was placed on more formal, two dimensional paper and pencil activities such as completing work sheets, which children were expected to do in a prescriptive way. Children participated, but it was questionable if all followed the instructions, as many did not understand the LoLT.

In order to enhance communication, during the interviews, staff said they made use of peers, other teachers and perhaps auxiliary staff to help children make meaning, but I did not observe this. There were no real attempts at additive bilingualism. Helena attempted to implement a policy of inclusion. She was able to identify children with special learning needs but only able to take limited steps to address these. As a result, children became restless and disruptive. She attempted to regain attention but space constraints hampered the introduction of, for example, some gross motor activities that could have distracted the children and allowed them to release latent energy.

The Star Chart

Observations (23 & 24 October) revealed that the underlying disciplinary approach was behaviouristic with two types of star charts[39] on the wall. Some disruptive children were told to sit in the front near the teacher's desk and face the wall.

According to Helena and Mrs Ferreia (interviews held on 24 & 29 September respectively), parents appeared to be busy and so caught up in their own lives that they found it difficult to offer rich learning opportunities to their own children. Helena felt that it (educating the children) has become her responsibility. She commented:

> Some parents are as young as me [she is in her late twenties], they are selfish, caught up in their own careers…life is hectic. It is a mixed community, refugees, freedom fighters and they still think they are fighting ... they need to relax, children with HIV, poverty…

She, like many other teachers, admitted that her perceptions of the community have influenced her teaching. She is far more concerned about teaching children manners, for example, and certain values like tolerance and respect for others. Yet this was not apparent during the teaching day. The school community has also influenced other teaching decisions. Helena would not, for example, she said (during a morning conversation, 24 September) use food stuffs such as spaghetti or macaroni[40] for art work and her choice of outings were determined by price as well as suitability.

[39] Star charts are fairly commonly used in Grade R classrooms as one of the disciplinary strategies. It is a means of extrinsic positive reinforcement. If the child behaves in a certain way, for example, sits quietly or completes an activity to the teacher's satisfaction, s/he is rewarded by having a star placed alongside his/her name. After obtaining a specific number of stars, the child might receive yet another reward.

[40] In impoverished communities, food is precious and it is insensitive to use it for purposes other than eating.

This Grade R class highlighted many of the pitfalls and challenges that teachers encounter. These pitfalls are possibly historical. As an ex-model C school, Grade R is shaped by a model that succeeded under different circumstances to those which now prevail. These circumstances were determined by different demographics and greater support which was given to preschools. However, strong peer and collegial support coupled with appropriate training and constant affirmation by the children allowed Helena to engage enthusiastically with her teaching and learning task.

6.2.7 *Jabulani Preschool*

Over 50 years ago, in response to the need for better childcare services for black children, an organization that eventually opened over 40 preschools in Soweto was established. Help the Children (HC) has become a well known ECD NGO and continues to oversee and provide a strong support base for these preschools. Jabulani is one of the preschools controlled by HC. According to the area manager (conversation held on 11 August) all the preschools are constructed along a similar plan and attempt to follow a DAP approach (see 3.2). They have a similar morning programme; adopt a similar thematic approach towards choice of content (see 3.2.1); plan and prepare activities and lessons according to a prescribed format, and assess children and prepare the related progress reports according to the same format. However, each preschool is responsible for its day-to-day running under the auspices of a principal. The principals meet regularly to discuss issues relating to ECD in general and to the smooth running and management of their schools, in particular. HC has been responsible for training the majority of the staff employed by the preschools (and this includes the Jabulani staff) and most have a level 4 ECD qualification. Children between the ages of two to six attend these preschools that offer full day care for almost 12 months of the year. Parents pay a moderate fee towards their children's care and education. Where parents are not able to pay these fees and meet the stipulated criteria, the Department of Social Development pays a per capita subsidy for children.

Jabulani is situated in a well established Soweto suburb. The roads are now tarred and the sub-economic houses which were built years ago are well maintained and the yards are neat. There is however, evidence of makeshift homes, overcrowding and concomitant poverty. The location of the Jabulani Grade R is a good example of the creative and flexible thinking that is often found amongst ECD personnel. As mentioned in 2.2.2, one of the educational changes post-1994 was

the introduction of Grade R. It was envisaged that most children would attend Grade R at a public school. In reality, this meant that many of the children who attended preschools would leave to take up a Grade R place in a public school. This obviously had implications for preschools which could have lost a significant number of children to the public schooling sector. Hence, when the new curriculum (NCS) was implemented, HC heeded the call seriously and began to review and reposition itself to ensure it retained the Grade R cohort. In Jabulani, the Grade R group was moved out of the main school building and located in a caravan situated behind the school.

The Caravan

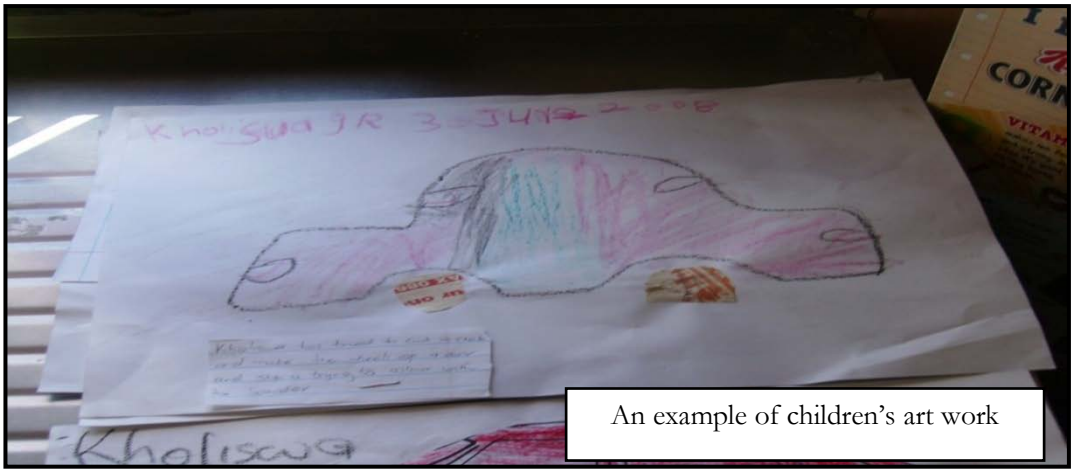
The caravan has been secured to a concrete slab. Though it was cramped, this classroom was totally self-contained and the children had their own, reasonably well equipped play area outside. Meals which included breakfast, lunch and two snacks were prepared and cooked in the main school kitchen but the serving and eating of meals and the washing of crockery and cutlery (which was done by the children) took place in the caravan.

Jabulani is reasonably well resourced. Observations (12-14 August) revealed that learning resources are both bought and made by the staff from waste materials and they reflect ingenuity and resourcefulness. Donor funding has ensured that Grade R classroom has at least one computer for the children to use. The computer is available during free play and the aim is to expose the children to modern technology. Observations (12 August) revealed that a theme tables, appropriate wall posters as well as book and fantasy corner are present in classroom.

There is an excellent support system for staff which enables them to concentrate on their teaching and learning role.

June had only very recently been appointed as the principal of this school. According to the area manager she was a highly competent Grade R teacher and her promotion was well deserved. During the interview held on 14 August, June said she has a Diploma in Educare from a local Technical College, a Level 4 ECD qualification through her employing NGO and she is currently studying for a NPDE (National Professional Diploma in Education) through UNISA. Busi, the Grade R teacher, has similar qualifications and is currently studying for a B.Ed degree through the same distance learning university. Both acknowledged that they love ECD, find it immensely fulfilling and would like to continue in this phase. However, they both admitted that when they completed their studies they would go and teach in the Foundation Phase. The reasons given for this decision were the poor conditions of service for ECD/Grade R teachers and the low pay. They were both adamant however, that they would not leave teaching, they had invested too much time and energy in their studies. During the interview (14 August) both of them said that they came from impoverished circumstances and ECD offered them a chance at a qualification. Though they acknowledged that the ECD teacher (including Grade R) has little status, I got the sense that they thought being a Grade R teacher had a higher status in the ECD world than teaching younger children.

From my observations (12-14 August) it became apparent that the morning was well structured and children were familiar with the flow of events. The programme (and this was confirmed by observations) indicated there was a balance between child-initiated activities (free play) routines and teacher-guided activities. However, the daily programme was strictly adhered to and there seemed to be little room for flexibility. Breakfast and snack times were strictly enforced and under no circumstances could these times be altered. The morning began with breakfast. After the children had eaten their porridge and washed the dishes they were allowed to engage in free indoor play. It was during this time that children were allowed to use some initiative and exercise some choice, even if these choices were limited. Children could choose to do the creative art activity which was offered every morning. Other choices included for example, play dough, puzzles, threading and playing on the computer.



An example of children's art work

Busi made some provision for differing ability levels and attempted to tailor the activities to meet individual children's needs. She could identify the 'brighter children' and tried to extend their learning opportunities, by for example, giving them more complex puzzles to complete. During these times Busi supervised the children's activities. She ensured that they did not become unruly; but she did not readily engage in the learning opportunities with the children. She answered questions if they were asked but did not support learning through suggestion or scaffolding.

In an attempt to enrich the learning environment and expose the children to English, the Grade R children tune into the OLSET radio programme that is broadcast every weekday morning at 9am. Children danced when the introductory tune was played and then sat down and listened carefully. The programme was on fire and fire safety. The announcer introduces a snippet of information and then pauses so that the teacher can support the learning process and help the children make meaning of what is being said. However, Busi merely repeated what had been said on air. She asked no further questions nor did she provide additional explanations; nor was there any concrete apparatus or illustrations that could have extended the children's understanding. Learning was decontextualized and appeared to have little meaning for them. They sat passively and answered closed questions in a rote fashion. For example, 'What colour is the fire engine'? They all chanted 'Red'.

After this broadcast the teacher then moved over to the theme table to hold a theme discussion. The theme of the week was 'Wild animals'. There was no link between this theme and the radio broadcast. There were some plastic wild animals on the table. The discussion was limited to asking the children the names of the animals. The teacher would pick up an animal, for example,

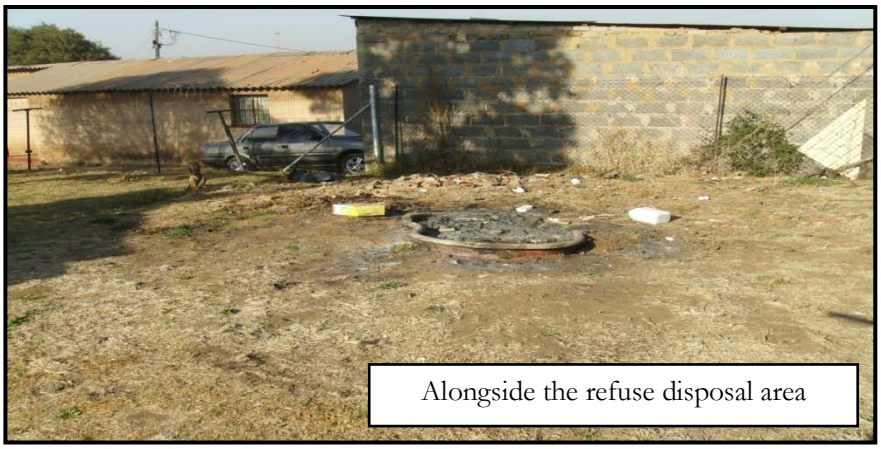
a zebra and say, 'what is this animal'. The children would chorus the name (those that knew it) and then the next animal would be picked up and the same procedure followed. There did not appear to be thoughtful learning opportunities that would assist children in their acquisition of new knowledge and skills. For the most part, rich and challenging learning opportunities were lacking, with little ability to make connections between the children's life world and the learning experiences under discussion. Questions were mostly closed and children responded in the typical 'mechanical chorus chant' that is common in previously disadvantaged schools.

Some of these challenges could be related to language. The LoLT in the classroom are English and IsiZulu, with IsiZulu being the home language of the majority of the children. The teacher, whose home language is also IsiZulu, is proficient in English. Most of the instructions and discussions appeared to take place through the medium of English but the teacher did code switch and there was some evidence of additive bilingualism. Both June and Busi (busi, interview 14 August) commented that the parents want their children to learn English. According to them the parents are saying that, 'the times are changing ...everyone needs to speak English.'

During the interview (14 August) June and Busi described the parents as being a challenge. On the one hand, they described them as being neglectful of their children, ignorant of the programme and judgmental and on the other, they said parents were eager to learn and were supportive. But both agreed that parents '...need to be educated to think differently about early childhood education.' Busi stated that 'if I give the children homework, they [the parents] do it. If I ask the children to do a drawing at home the parents do it. This doesn't help the child.' They stressed the importance of parent education relating to subjects such as child development and discipline. They acknowledged that they, the teachers, had an important role to play in educating parents but that this was difficult and very challenging.

Both Busi and June emphasised that teachers should have a good knowledge of child development and reiterated the importance of holistic development. They concurred that children learn through their senses and that experiential, concrete learning realised through play is the most valuable type of learning, where incidental learning opportunities can be maximized. They agreed that children need to learn about values, including respect both for themselves and others, as well as about other cultures. (However, this was not evident during the observation period.) Outdoor free play was also seen as being important and an appropriate amount of time was given to this during the morning after the more formal activities and mid-morning snack.

Outdoor play area …



Alongside the refuse disposal area

This outdoor play area had many possibilities of becoming an exciting and stimulating learning environment but learning was constrained because part of the play area had been turned into a dumping ground and another part into a refuse waste disposal area where the caretaker of the building burned refuse. Remains of a neglected vegetable garden could be seen in a corner.

These teachers have a long day and work hard under difficult circumstances. They also appeared to be struggling with the challenge of how to deliver an appropriately stimulating Grade R programme. Constraints included an incomplete understanding of the NCS as well as limited insights into what constitutes productive pedagogy. The challenge remains one of how to convert theory into meaningful practice that optimizes children's learning and development.

6.2.8 *FDB Primary School*

A harsh wind blows off the mine dumps and the air is filled with fine dust. The surrounding landscape is dotted with small houses, many of which are extended by a zinc 'lean-to'. A number of shacks are also visible as one drives towards this government-controlled school in the western part of Johannesburg.

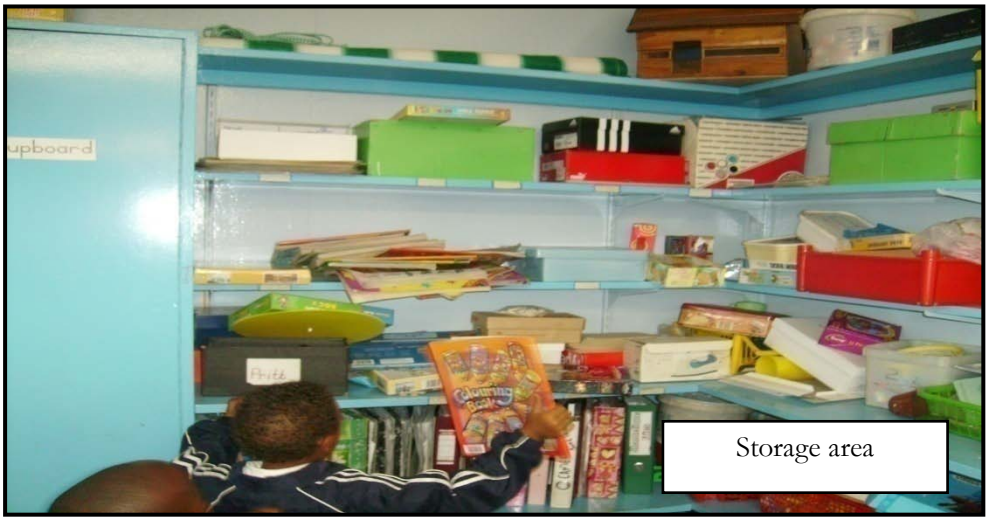
The school was surrounded by a tall fence and there was a security guard at the gate. The Foundation Phase block was situated next to the cloakrooms, near to the administrative offices and kitchen where meals are cooked, as this school benefits from the education department's feeding scheme for impoverished children. Most of the children in this school including the Grade Rs receive a hot meal daily that consists of dried beans, samp or other legumes.

Entrance to the school

When I walked into the school (26 August), it was apparent that it was in a reasonable state of repair. The concrete polished corridors were clean, as was the quadrangle. Beyond the school buildings were sparsely grassed playing fields. There was scant evidence of any ground maintenance. This school boasted two Grade R classes that were located in the middle of the Foundation Phase block next to the cloakroom. In public schools, the most frequent reason given for the positioning of the Grade R classroom(s) is that they should be near the cloakrooms or ablution blocks (WSoE, 2009).

Observations (26-28 August) revealed that the classrooms were spacious and each had a large storage area at the back. Some thought had been given to the arrangement of the classrooms.

There was sufficient carpet space in the front to comfortably seat all the children. The focal point of this carpeted area was the theme table and, to the left of it, a numeracy table. The classroom tables were arranged in such a way that six children could comfortably sit around two tables. Each child has his or her specific place which was clearly marked in big bold letters. Learning support material was positioned on low shelves around the classroom. Gloria, the teacher whom I observed, said that she had a reasonable number of resources that included educational toys such as pegboards, puzzles and logiblocks. But when I took a closer look, much of this equipment was inappropriate.



Storage area

For example, there were some 200-piece puzzles that were beyond the capabilities of the children while the four-piece puzzles offered them no challenge. Some of the equipment was broken and parts had been lost. These factors mitigated against optimizing learning through play, as children were not adequately challenged or possibly became frustrated. In the book corner, a few torn books and magazines were to be found but, again, these were not suitable and did not meet the children's learning needs. There was an appealing home corner but during the three days I spent at the school (26-28 August) I never observed children playing there. The walls were covered with a variety of display materials that included some posters (in English), a weather chart and some of the children's drawings.

There was no dedicated Grade R outdoor play area. A small wooden climbing frame (not an age appropriate size and in need of minor repairs) was poorly positioned on a narrow piece of ground that opened onto a rather steep bank situated opposite the Grade R classrooms. Consequently it was not used by the Grade R children. (I did see some of the older boys play on

it during their break.) This area was fenced off with a barbed wire fence. I did not see any other outdoor apparatus or equipment. It appeared that, when the other children went to break, the Grade Rs joined them. Despite verbal acknowledgement of the importance of play (interview 27 August) I saw no evidence of outdoor free play being perceived as having any learning value for the children and it was not mediated or even adequately supervised.

The climbing frame

Only one of the Grade R teachers, Gloria, was prepared to accommodate me in her classroom and she was most hospitable. The daily programme or timetable was displayed clearly on the wall as one entered the classroom. She also had a chart of all the children's names on a fridge in a corner of the classroom (in which the milk, etc. for staff tea was apparently kept). When the children arrived at school, they had to look for their name (all the names were placed on a table next to this chart) and place it in the correct position on the chart (a good emergent literacy exercise). The daily programme seemed to be suitable and indicated a balance between teacher-guided and child-initiated activities and routines. However, after 'feeding time' (which was at about 10 am) and the 10-minute 'break', very little of what was indicated on the programme was actually implemented. The remainder of the morning, during my observations at least, children appeared to have indoor) free play, which did not appear to be very exciting. They played with some of the educational toys, cut out of magazines (pictures of their choice) but for the most part wondered rather aimlessly around the classroom.

Gloria had an ECD level 4 qualification. Prior to being asked by the principal, Mr November, two years previously to come and open the Grade R at FDB Primary School, she worked in a

crèche. She has also attended a GDE course on OBE and is aware of the planning requirements. Gloria's situation is similar, I would suggest, (based on the findings of the FP research project (see 1.6, WSoE, 2009) to the circumstances faced by many Grade R teachers working in public schools. As mentioned in 1.7, Grade R classes have been included in the Foundation Phase because of the envisaged compulsory nature of this year (DoE, 2001a). However, as the FP research project revealed (and supported by Mrs Ferreira, the principal of Rissik), principals and HoDs frequently have little understanding of the demands of a Grade R year. During his interview Mr November, principal of FBD, was quick to admit that the Grade R year had, in his opinion, been poorly conceptualised. Hence, he said the implementation of Grade R is problematic. Grade R teachers receive limited support from the school community, and often work in isolation. But, during her interview (27 August) Gloria said that she was given a lot of assistance and support from the HoD, who had included her in Foundation Phase activities. Yet, she said, she still felt marginalised because of the conditions of service and the poor salary. Often, she said, Grade R teachers do not get paid because of GDE incompetence.

She commented that Grade R children learn though play but it became obvious that she was struggling to maintain a balance between the (perceived) demands of the NCS and an appropriate Grade R programme. Her planning, which she willing showed to me after the midmorning snack had been served appeared to meet GDE requirements. However, further scrutiny revealed that this planning was somewhat superficial as none of the teacher-guided activities were planned in detail. During the three mornings that I observed she always held a morning ring. This began with a greeting song, followed by the weather and then either a language discussion or a numeracy ring. She had items on the theme table such as a flower pot, a vase of flowers and a spade. During the discussion she referred to these. But there appeared to be no clear purpose to the discussions. Children were asked to name the items on the table (for example, a flower) and other questions required yes/no answers, for instance 'do you like flowers?' There was little attempt to encourage the use of language that would generate higher-order thinking skills. After talking briefly about the items on the table she moved on to the next activity what she later in the morning told me was story telling. Gloria took down the bible and read the children a bible story.

Once the bible story had been read Gloria asked the children to stand up. They then sang songs (sometimes for 40 minutes) in English, Afrikaans and a few in Isizulu. While they enjoyed the singing, it seemed to be good example of 'busy time' rather than 'learning time'. Valuable

learning opportunities were missed as the songs were decontextualized and in no way related to any other learning activity.

Likewise, routines were merely functional and there was no attempt to mediate any learning, incidental or otherwise during these times. When the singing was over children were told to go to the bathroom. However, there was no reminder to, for example, wash hands. Many of these children partake of the school's feeding scheme. The food appeared to be ready anytime between 9.15am and 10am. When cooked a message is sent to the classroom and those children who were eating were told by Gloria to go and fetch their food. They simply walked out while Gloria carried on with the morning activities. They returned to the classroom sat down on the floor and started to eat their food. When the other children had completed the 'singing marathon' they were told to take out their lunch boxes and to sit down and eat. That appeared to be the end of the 'learning day'.

There are many possible reasons, many of which have been mentioned already, for this somewhat haphazard learning day. Language was problematic. The majority of the children come from Afrikaans-speaking homes but a number of years ago the school community opted for English as the medium of instruction. Gloria admitted many of the children struggle to understand. She is, however, proficient in both English and Afrikaans and made attempts at additive bilingualism to help children make meaning through code switching. She would for instance translate words, 'blom' for 'flower' and would ask children 'verstaan julle'? (Do you understand?- observation, 26 August).

Within limits, Gloria attempted to offer children challenges appropriate to their level of development but she was hampered by a lack of resources. Perhaps this was one reason why children were not encouraged to make choices but to do what they were told to do. It was one of the few schools where art work was done on a regular bais. It did, however, afford Gloria an opportunity to offer some differentiation in the level of the activities. For example she gave certain children who appeared to have difficulty with their grip thicker crayons with which to draw their pictures. Though she allowed some free drawings children still had to colour in a worksheet (observation, 26 August). She appeared to be able to identify children with special learning needs (during the art activity she pointed out a couple of children whom she felt had difficulties) but found it difficult to take the appropriate steps to address these. In addition, she mentioned that it was difficult to refer children to support services (the structures were cumbersome) and parents were often not co-operative (field note entry 26 August).

Nonetheless, Gloria appeared to have the children's best interests at heart. During the interview she revealed that her own personal circumstances necessitated that she now lived in the area where she is currently teaching. She commented:

> I never realized that the people in this area were living in such terrible conditions. I now understand why most of the learners were behaving the way they were. …. It influenced my life and changed my outlook. …. I can't do enough for them.

This is seemingly a violent and abusive community. Parents do not see the value of Grade R and thus do not take it seriously. All this has influenced Gloria's choice of content.

> In this community of ours people have no moral values, no family values, no principles…we can instill these in the children in this area….Children need to learn life skills…related to safety... our children are not really safe here, when it comes to hygiene…I think this is why so many of our children are sickly… parents don't practice hygiene.

She stated that other important content was literacy and numeracy and related knowledge. It seemed as if the emphasis was on these two topics. Though in her conversations she evidenced concern with issues relating to social justice, this concern was seemingly not translated into classroom practice. For example, routines which could have offered daily opportunities to reinforce attitudes and practices relating to respectful living were not evident in this classroom.

Despite the challenges, children obviously enjoyed their morning at school and participated enthusiastically in all activities on offer. Gloria was willing and eager to do her best for these children. The question to be asked is: how can teachers be supported to implement a high quality Grade R programme that will maximise the learning opportunities for the children they are teaching?

6.2.9 *Little Stars Preschool*

What do abused women who are living in a shelter do with their children when they are trying to get back onto their feet? This was the question that prompted the opening of a play school in 2001. The school is located in the grounds of a church, which is situated in a racially-mixed area in the eastern suburbs of Johannesburg. Since this beginning, Little Stars has grown into a community-based school that offers baby and toddler care, as well as a full day preschool programme for children between the ages of three and six years.

According to Margie (interview 30 July), the founder and principal, the school started in a dirty hall with a donation from the state. Initially, the school was staffed by unskilled and untrained women from the shelter. Over the years, these women obtained various ECD qualifications. Margie, though not a trained teacher, appeared to be a dynamic leader with the ability to access funds and motivate people. Over the years, she has conjured up help and assistance in different forms from a number of more privileged preschools and private schools. She said of herself:

> I think it is a gift. You have to be alert to [the type of] people coming [to visit the school] …to whom you can connect. How to get them involved so that they feel like…you have to meet their needs as well as your needs.

Margie acknowledged that, with her background, it has been difficult to institute an appropriate preschool programme but said 'I pull it all together, I put the resources together...you have to push it. I check to see that teachers are doing their planning... It is not ideal but when Emily [the Grade R teacher] feels more confident she can do this.'

Emily is the preschool supervisor as well as Grade R teacher. She admitted during the interview (30 July) that she was in an abusive relationship, left her husband in East Africa and came to South Africa to find work. She had qualified as an ECD teacher in her home country and, while in South Africa, obtained a Grade R qualification. Like the Grade R teachers in other preschools, she described herself as being caring and passionate about her work. Again, like some of her colleagues (Ella and Busi), she finds teaching this age group less stressful than working with older children. She also finds positive feedback from parents and children affirming. She described herself as 'nurturing, patient and calm. I never shout... I put myself in their boots…children shrink if you shout.' When asked what she felt children needed to know, her first response was... 'life skills…interacting, realizing the rainbow nation …diversity.' And this notion was reinforced in the class song that the children sang entitled 'I am special' (observation, 29 July).

Emily was certainly aware of issues relating to anti-bias education and social justice (interview data). However, I gained the impression that she was overwhelmed, especially as she was trying

to come to terms with recent countrywide xenophobic[41] attacks that had also taken place within her school community. 'For the first time I am considering going home [back to Kenya].'

The Grade R classroom

All the preschool classes, including Grade R, were held in the hall. The hall is approximately 20x25m^2. On the one wall, there are four small rectangular windows located three quarters of the way up the wall. On the opposite side, the wall has been replaced with large French doors which open out into a long narrow dining area. The area is well lit with fluorescent lighting and, in winter, mounted heaters are used to heat the hall.

Emily said (during a conversation on 20 October) that the teachers attempted to stagger teacher-guided activities. But the ambient noise remained high (observation, 20 October) and this was very distracting. This was not an enabling environment as there were also space constraints.

The Grade R boys had to set out the tables and chairs before activities could begin (observation, 20 October). Storage space was limited so children could not readily help themselves to appropriate materials and tools. The school was also poorly resourced. Although there were some educational toys, these were insufficient and they did not necessarily provide rich and varied learning opportunities for the children. There were a few puzzles and some educational

[41] In May 2008, xenophobic attacks erupted in Alexandra Township situated in the north east of Johannesburg. These attacks spread to the Johannesburg central business district as well as to certain inner city suburbs. The clashes spread throughout Gauteng and spilt over into other provinces. The Forced Migration Studies Programme at Wits University found that the violence is rooted in the "micro politics" of South African townships and informal settlements. Sixty-two people, including 21 South Africans, were killed in the attacks and more than 150 000 were displaced (Karrim, 2009).

toys such as a memory game and what's in a square. But these were in poor condition. There were also some blocks but not enough to allow children to engage in expansive constructions. There were also very few books available for the children to look at.

There were some posters on the walls but generally these were tatty and dull. An effective weather chart was situated to the side of the theme table and Emily used it to discuss the weather with the children. There was a small theme table with one boat on it (the theme was transport) and a few pictures relating to the theme had been cut out of a magazine and placed on the wall above the table.

The theme table

The school morning began after breakfast. It commenced with register and the weather and was followed by a discussion or language ring (observation, 29 July). The children sat in a circle and first sang a number of songs. Emily referred to the table and asked a few direct knowledge-based questions. For example, she held up a boat and asked, 'do you know what this is called' and 'have you ever been in a boat'? Thereafter, the bulk of this discussion consisted of children sitting still and listening while Emily described how a boat can sail on the sea. Emily did take one of the posters off the wall and show the children the pictures.

The discussion ring appeared to be decontextualized and held little meaning for the children as most of them, according to Emily, have never even been near a river or even heard of the sea. When some children became restless, Emily was able to regain their attention through song and rhyme. She had obviously taught them the song 'The big boat sails through the holly holly ho' and the children all stood up placed the one arm akimbo, sang the song and pretended that the

other arm was the boat sailing though the opening made by the first arm. However, the discussion did not appear to offer the children a rich pedagogical experience. After the discussion, children were divided into two groups. One group waited sitting silently while the other was given paper and crayons and told to draw a boat.

The first group was then given workbooks and told to write numbers. Neither group appeared to be able to follow the instructions very well. At approximately 10 am the children were told to tidy up, go to the bathroom and come back for a snack. There was little evidence of children being actively engaged in their learning experiences and being offered appropriate opportunities to learn through exploration and discovery or to co-construct knowledge together with the teacher.

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The children's drawings

The day followed a structured that was informed by the daily programme. Routines were consistent and there was an attempt to turn these into productive learning experiences and to make use of incidental learning opportunities. For example, hygiene was reinforced during bathroom routines and counting and taking turns during snack time. After the midmorning snack, which was served outside, the children had an hour of outdoor free play. The playground was small but well equipped. Children had a choice of climbing frames, swings, and a sandpit. Wheel toys were on offer as was water play. There was a small area where children could just go and 'be'. Emily said of free play: 'I want the children to interact with each other. They need to talk, especially those learning English.'

As in many other schools, language remained a problem. The LoLT is English, yet for the majority of children, it was not their home language. Though Emily was proficient in English and occasionally spoke IsiZulu to some children, their understanding was poor. And again, as identified in other schools in this study, despite children's home language not being English, according to the staff, the parents want their children to be educated in English.

On both days I observed a high level of aggression and fighting among the children. Discipline was frequently based on negative reinforcement techniques; no star if children are disobedient or disruptive, or the staff would shout at the children. Discipline was also punitive, in that children were told to sit in a corner. But maintaining discipline was a challenge, as many of the children, (according to the staff), came from abusive and violent homes. Staff said that a large part of their day, especially at the beginning of the week, was devoted to 'calm the children and get them into a routine.' Possibly constraints relating to the classroom environment and the actual implementation of the programme exacerbated discipline problems.

As was the case with Nandi, the principal of Bertha Solomon, the administrative and managerial aspects of Emily's work were more challenging than the teaching. The staff was not always co-operative and the resultant conflict difficult to manage. Emily (interview, 30 July, said that the support given by Margie was invaluable. Like many of the less advantaged, free-standing schools, Emily said that the staff work long hours for low salaries. And, like Busi and June, though they liked their work situation, if they could improve their qualifications and get higher paying jobs as primary school teachers, they would move on.

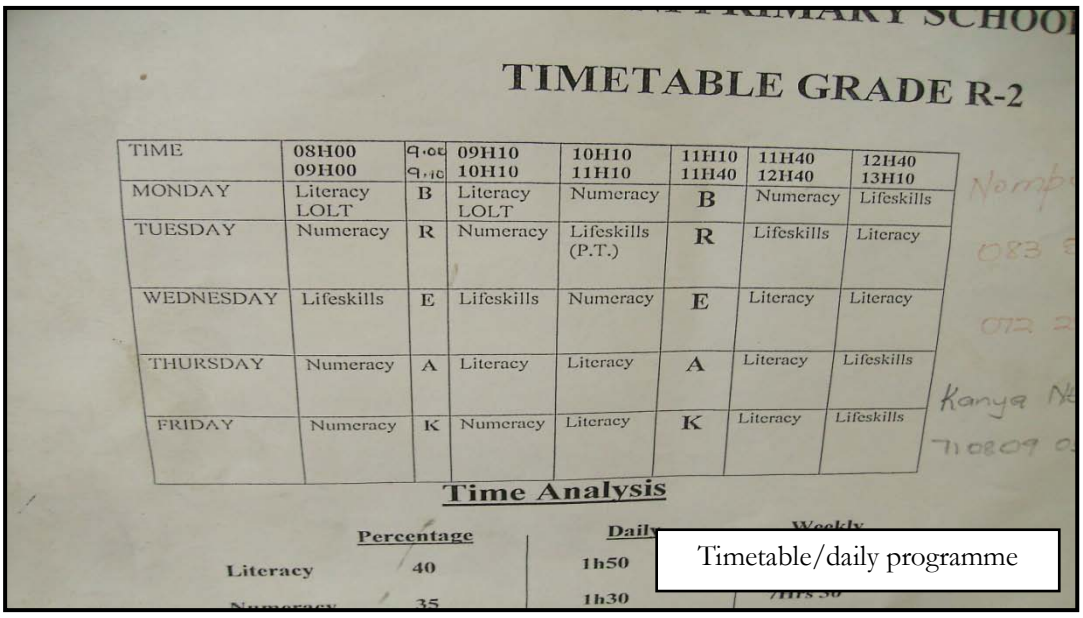
Yet this was a caring and nurturing environment. Children received two meals and two snacks (for some, the only food they would get all day). Many life skills were reinforced. There were the best of intentions, but the programme fell short of cultivating an appropriate and stimulating learning environment where ongoing meaningful engagement with each other and the learning content and context could be optimized by and for the children.

6.2.10 *Thembani Primary School*

Deep in Soweto, a face brick primary school houses two Grade R classes situated near to the other Foundation Phase classrooms. The school is surrounded by a high fence and the school gates were locked at 8am. However, this did not deter many learners from being late for school. The school buildings were neat, the courtyard paved and corridors were lightly polished. Beyond the school buildings were sandy playing fields that showed little evidence of grounds

maintenance.

I arrived at the school (8 October) just as morning assembly was drawing to a close. This was held outside on a grassy patch of lawn. The Grade R children attended this assembly. It was apparent that the Grade R programme is constrained by the position of the Grade R classrooms as well as the influence of the Foundation Phase timetable.



TIMETABLE GRADE R-2

TIME	08H00 09H00	09H10 10H10	10H10 11H10	11H10 11H40	11H40 12H40	12H40 13H10
MONDAY	Literacy LOLT	B	Literacy LOLT	Numeracy	B	Numeracy	Lifeskills
TUESDAY	Numeracy	R	Numeracy	Lifeskills (P.T.)	R	Lifeskills	Literacy
WEDNESDAY	Lifeskills	E	Lifeskills	Numeracy	E	Literacy	Literacy
THURSDAY	Numeracy	A	Literacy	Literacy	A	Literacy	Lifeskills
FRIDAY	Numeracy	K	Numeracy	Literacy	K	Literacy	Lifeskills

Time Analysis

	Percentage	Daily	Weekly
Literacy	40	1h50	
Numeracy	35	1h30	

Timetable/daily programme

During the interview (8 October) the principal, Mrs Nkosi, acknowledged, as did GDE principals, for example, Mrs Ferreira of Rissik and Mr November of FDB, that the Grade R classes were started 'to boost the Grade 1 year.' Mrs Nkosi also stated Grade R was introduced to the school 'because we had the space.' Each Grade R class had 48 children and this swells the number of learners in the school, and ensures a larger Grade 1 intake[42].

Though the principal was supportive of the two Grade R teachers and included them in all school activities, she appeared to have no in-depth understanding of what constituted a good Grade R programme. She recognized that Grade R was a specialized year and acknowledged the importance of learning through play. She agreed that there should be time for both classroom activities and play but in reality observations (8 & 9, October) showed little was done to facilitate meaningful play for these children. She said 'children should develop their hands…they should

[42] In many township schools, parents perceive the standard of education to be lower than that offered in suburban schools. Furthermore, in township schools children are more likely to be taught in English, which is often the parents' preferred LoLT. Therefore, Grade 1 intake in township schools is sometimes lower than anticipated. Offering a Grade R is seen by principals as one way of countering this problem.

go outside to play so they can balance… activities to develop their muscles.' Though she would not be drawn into a conversation relating to Grade R teachers' conditions of service, she did mention that 'Grade R teachers are demotivated' (they might not be paid for two or more months at a time) and that 'Grade R should be subsidized in the same way as all other grades.'

Sally, like many Grade R teachers in this study, said (interview, 9 October) that she chose this field of work because it presented her with an opportunity to better her circumstances. 'I came from a poor family with no prospects. I love children and caring is part of my nature.' Being a Grade R teacher gives her a certain amount of job security, as 'there is no redeployment' referring to the GDE policy of redeploying teachers to other grades or classes if the stipulated teacher: learner ratio is not met.

An effort had been made to brighten the Grade R classrooms. There were colourful curtains at the windows and a matching table cloth covered the teachers' desks. There was evidence that the day was structured and children were familiar with the daily routine. However, the number of children and limited resources constrained possibilities of teaching and learning in this classroom. Yet Sally did not seem to think that she could personally challenge these constraints. Like many of the teachers in this study (for example, Gloria, Ella, Emily, and June) she was accepting of her situation. She acknowledged that she would like more support but did not know how this would, or could happen.

Despite this, Sally attempted to introduce an appropriate programme (0bservations, 8 & October). Whole group activities such as discussion and story were evident but these activities were very teacher-directed and lacked richness and depth. The morning discussion followed a similar format to the one described in 5.2.8. The ring was followed by a number of songs and these were sung in a number of different languages. Though the classroom LoLt was Isizulu, which was the mother tongue of many of the children, some also spoke Sesotho or Venda. Sally was, she said, proficient in English, Isizulu and Sesotho. However, though she frequently spoke in English (saying that children had to learn this language as next year this would be the LoLT), she did not code switch, or use language in a way that acknowledged the different home languages spoken in the classroom, or in a way that would generate higher order thinking or mediate the learning content. Learning appeared to be decontextualized with little connection to the children's life worlds. The other ring I observed (9 October) was a 'story ring'. The children all sat on the carpet (which did not provide comfortable seating for all of them). Sally took a big book (more like a Grade 1 reader) and began the ring with what I have called 'book education'.

She pointed out the front and the back of the book; she described how to turn the pages. She then discussed the author and illustrator of the book with them. She turned to the first page and said, '*Inja'* and pointed to the dog. The children all repeated the word. She turned to the next page and pointed to the picture, a bowl of water and said, '*amanzi'*. Children all said the word. The following page showed the dog drinking the water. Sally pointed to the picture and said, '*Inja iphuza amanizi'*. The children repeated the words after her in rote fashion. She proceeded to page through the rest of the book in a similar manner. It was hot in the classroom (no windows were open) the children became bored and restless. Some started kicking and shoving the others. Some fell asleep (despite all the disruptions). Rich learning opportunities were not being realised and children were not developing a love for language and story.

Likewise, observations revealed (8 & 9 October) group work was more closely aligned to 'busy work' rather than offering substantial learning opportunities that presented both challenge, variety and encouraged imaginative or creative thinking. (The same five group activities were presented for the entire week and the groups were rotated each day.)

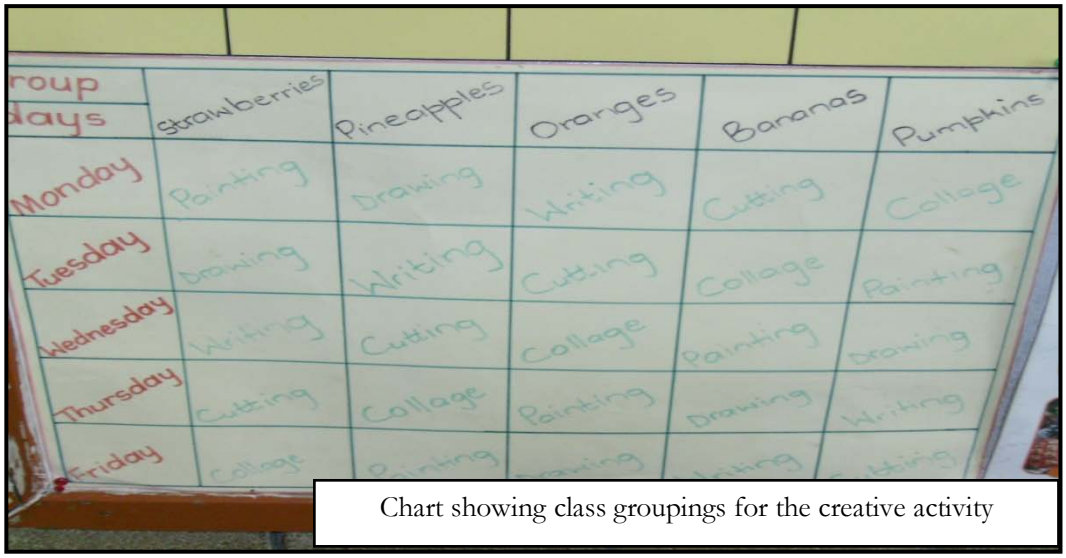
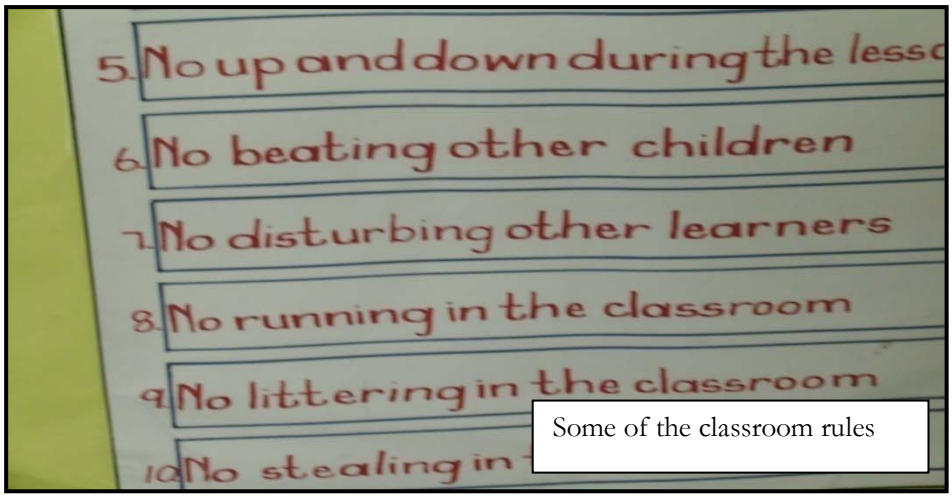


Chart showing class groupings for the creative activity

Once children's allocated activity was completed, they were allowed to occupy themselves elsewhere in the classroom. Additional choices included blocks, lego, drawing and playing in the home corner. As already mentioned, resources were not adequate and children became rowdy and disruptive. When this happened, Sally would shout, 'Rule number 7. What does it say?' After shouting this question, a couple of times most of the children would chant the rule 'no disturbing other learners' and then continued behaving in the same way. (A list of written classroom rules with no pictorial guidelines was placed on the wall and children had obviously learned these off by heart.)



Some of the classroom rules

This seemed to be an example of meaningless rote learning as children were not helped to think about their behaviour or encouraged to develop a sense of responsibility or consideration towards others. Sally stated that it was important for children to learn to share and said 'I want children to understand that they are unique, and they are not equal. Some come from poor homes, others… well….they must learn to share, to understand each other's circumstances'. Although she acknowledged the diversity (lingual, cultural and socio economic), there was little implicit or explicit evidence that diversity issues were taken into account within this classroom environment. There was scant evidence of awareness or differentiation of activities for learners with special education needs.

Despite Sally saying that children learn through play (interview 9 October), this classroom environment and the teaching practices were typical of what I observed in many school classrooms in the FP research project (see 1.5). The Grade R programme appeared to be driven by a superficial understanding of the NCS. Learning outcomes and assessment standards were rigorously followed with little insight into how these could be effectively implemented in an integrated and appropriate way that would optimize the children's development and learning. For example, Sally told me (during the observation on 9 October) that she had been to a training session where 'LO 4' had been 'workshopped with us [teachers].' She seemingly had no idea from which Learning Area this outcome had been taken or of its verbal description. (I later deduced it was from the Life Orientation Learning Area — Physical Development). She took the children outside (it was a hot morning) and for 45 minutes, they stood in a group (in the sun, wearing no hats) playing games, singing songs and doing finger rhymes.

While the individual activities were appropriate, she appeared to have little understanding of appropriate methodologies and how to incorporate the individual activities into a meaningful and challenging teacher-guided movement ring. She covered in one morning what could have formed the basis for a term's movement rings. Children participated but learning opportunities were not developed. Towards the end of this group activity, a number of children were in tears. They were hot and exhausted.

The movement ring

Sally certainly had the welfare of her learners at heart. But too large a class, inadequate resources, little overt support and seemingly scant expertise constrained the teaching and learning environment and limited the children's learning opportunities.

6.3 *CONCLUSION*

In this chapter, the findings have been presented in the form of ten vignettes, or case studies. Each case study offered a unique lens through which to gauge teachers' perceptions of their practice and reflected some of the diverging and diverse contexts which comprise South African society. In each vignette, I explored the specific school context, specific circumstances relating to that school and described some of the teaching and learning practices as well as the perceptions of Grade R teachers, principals, and, where appropriate, HoDs towards ECD in general and Grade R in particular. Some of the main patterns emerging across the ten cases studies are briefly described before the detailed analysis of findings in chapters 7, 8 and 9.

All the participants claimed to be kind, caring and loving teachers who placed the welfare of the children in their care ahead of academic progress. They described themselves as nurturing individuals who are passionate about their work. Most have always wanted to be teachers of young children but in the case of the non-formally qualified teachers, circumstances such as educational qualifications, lack of finances and training opportunities prevented them from becoming professional teachers. For these teachers, ECD was a way of improving their education qualifications and status.

All teachers agree that Grade R children are concrete, hands-on learners and intimate that they follow a constructive approach towards teaching and learning, which is realised in a DAP. They also acknowledged the importance of play, yet few could actually articulate a deep understanding of how to maximise children's learning through a play-based approach. Teachers also agreed that children who are socially and emotionally ready to face the challenges of Grade 1 will succeed in formal schooling and that it is these domains that need to be developed in the Grade R year. Yet reality tells a different story and revealed a gap between teachers' espoused theories and their theories-in-use. Most of the teachers adopted a didactic approach with an emphasis on academics, namely reading, writing and arithmetic.

Children were consequently viewed as helpless, dependent beings reliant upon the more knowledgeable teacher for their learning. Children were not afforded many opportunities of making choices and deciding what and how they would like to learn.

In all schools, there was a learning framework to guide the day but this was not necessarily adhered to. There was a great variance in the type of learning opportunities provided to children as well as the type of support that was given to the children. Consequently, children were exposed to different and varied learning opportunities. These differences can, in part, be related to the type of school that the children attend, as well as to the teachers' qualifications.

School leadership was also found to play a role in determining the efficacy of the teaching and learning programme. Where teachers felt supported and were made to feel an integral part of the school community, they expressed that they were better able to integrate the demands of the learning day and to meet the needs of the children.

However, all schools appeared to adopt an assimilation model based on a Eurocentric approach towards teaching and learning. Despite teachers' acknowledging the importance of children's different cultural and social contexts and how these might impact their learning, in practice these issues were neither implicitly nor explicitly addressed.

There is no doubt that teachers are faced with many challenges and they are struggling in some cases to implement perceived educational demands. For all teachers, their status as ECD/Grade R teachers was problematic and, for many, so were their conditions of service. Yet, despite these challenges they appear to love their work, find it extremely satisfying and would not readily leave teaching.

In the following three chapters, namely 7, 8 and 9, these findings are analysed according to a number of themes which have been identified from the literature review, the research questions and the initial data analysis.

CHAPTER 7: TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN

7.1 *INTRODUCTION*

The research results, described in ten case studies, were presented in the previous chapter. In this, and the subsequent two chapters, I present a thematic analysis of these results. The framework which comprises three broad themes was outlined in chapter 5 (see 5.5).

In theme one I explored teachers' perceptions of children. This theme answers most of the enquiries posed in question 1 and partly addresses questions 3 and 4. To facilitate clarity these research questions are reiterated. Question 1 asks *'What is high quality/effective ECD according to teachers? What are teachers' understandings of children? What do teachers think young children need to know and learn? How do teachers think that young children learn best'*? Question 3 explores *'What, according to teachers, is their role in a preschool context in supporting young children's growth, development, thinking and learning*? And Question 4 *'Is there a disjuncture between the teachers' espoused theories of high quality ECD programmes and their theory-in-use? What are the implications for classroom implementation'?* Question 4 is also informed by the teachers' understanding of critical reflection and how critical reflection impacts classroom practice.

7.2 *TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN AS 'LEARNING BEINGS'*

Traditionally, western ECD practice views children's development and learning through a developmental lens (Mac Naughton, 2003; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001 and Dahlberg et al., 1999). In addition, South Africa's ECD/Grade R policy documents support a developmentally appropriate approach (DoE, 2001) underpinned by holistic development and premised on a play-based, interactive approach that acknowledges that children are concrete, sensorimotor learners.

During the interviews *all* teachers in this study agreed that they followed a traditional ECD developmental approach. Thus a developmental lens, focusing of the different developmental domains that comprise the notion of holistic development, (see 3.2), provides a useful means through which to interrogate and analyse teachers' perceptions of children. In practice, however, developmental domains cannot be readily compartmentalised (3.2.2). This became evident during the data analysis phase of this study. Consequently, I have focused on two domains, the cognitive and the affective which dominated the research findings. I have located pertinent

findings relating to other developmental areas within these two dominant domains. The rationale for these inclusions will be explained where appropriate. The literature review also explored two alternative frameworks a sociocultural perspective and an instrumentalist approach (see 3.3 & 3.4). These perspectives also inform this analysis and the socio-cultural perspective, in particular, is used to identify gaps in current practice.

7.3 *TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN AS 'COGNITIVE BEINGS'*

In this section, I explore the cognitive concepts and skills that teachers deem important for young children to acquire. The perceptual-motor domain is included in this section (see 3.2.2) because it is an important building block underpinning the successful acquisition of emergent literacy and numeracy skills (Isbell & Isbell, 2007; Ayers, 2005; Gallahue & Donnelly, 2003; Gallahue et al., 1975). I have discussed language (which is normally classified as a cognitive domain) under the affective domain for reasons which will become apparent later on in this thesis. An understanding of what constitutes quality practices (see 1.7), an import component of this thesis is closely related to cognition. Yet, research evidence shows that learning and development in both cognitive and social spheres need to be equally supported (Sylva et al., 2004; Anning & Edwards 2006; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002) and that the promotion of critical thinking and problem-solving skills and sustained-shared thinking (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002) is best supported within a structured learning environment that considers the whole child and the mediating role of the teacher.

7.3.1 *'Children know nothing'*

Teachers appeared to have conflicting and contradictory understandings of children's cognitive capabilities. Despite the acknowledgement in interviews by Mary (YB, 23 October), Busi (TPS, 8 October), Maureen and Brenda (EP, 16 July)[43] that all children are unique and should learn at their own pace, in their own way, and that any special needs should be considered, most teachers did not construct children as capable, curious and competent cognitive beings, or heed Thomas's (2009:42) comments that:

> Children are actors in their own transition...and bring to kindergarten [Grade R] what they have learned at home...They are active in making sense of, responding and adapting to the new classroom in terms of play and learning, rules and routines and relationships.

[43] These abbreviations refer to the schools. See table 6.1 for the full name of each school as well as for the dates of the observations visits.

Fatima (FM, interview 15 November) stated, 'often children know nothing — we start from scratch'. Though Fatima's remark was not as strongly expressed by other participants there was tacit acceptance that their primary classroom function was to prepare children for Grade 1, and this meant literacy and numeracy. Comments ranged from Maureen, Liz and Brenda (EP, 16 July) who said 'The 3 Rs...but through play', to Helena (RPS, 24 September) who mentioned 'Grade 1 has lost the six week perceptual programme...we *have* to bridge this gap.' Ella (BS, 23 July) noted that, 'The focus is to get ready for Grade 1...it has become so demanding, the children are struggling' and Fatima stated, 'We must encourage them for Grade 1...tell them what they will learn. In Grade 1 to-day there is a much greater emphasis on literacy and numeracy.'

This perception of children as knowing nothing resonates with the construction of children as reproducers of knowledge, identity and culture (Dahlberg et al., 1999; 2007). Children are seen as 'empty vessels to be filled' by the more proficient teacher. The teacher is the provider of predetermined, socially sanctioned knowledge and skills which 'ignorant and incompetent' children should achieve by the end of their Grade R year. As Cannella and Viruru, 2004:94 assert, 'Diverse knowledges, different ways of thinking and being in the world and multiple human voices and possibilities are ignored'. For example, the acquisition of specific cognitive skills and concepts such as categorizing, colours, shapes, numbers and counting was stressed with little acknowledgement of what children actually know and bring to the learning environment. Noticeably missing from the majority of teachers' comments, (Mary (YB, 23 October) and Alison (JH, 30 September) being the exceptions) was an acknowledgment of social and cultural contexts and how these influence learning. Hence teachers rarely worked with children's strengths and existing knowledge base or acknowledged children as able beings who have something to offer to the learning process.

Furthermore, observation of group time was often teacher-directed (TPS, RPS, EP, JP, FDB, LS, FM, YB); she instructs, and the children listen. Opportunities for oral language, including discussions and story time, which were acknowledged by all teachers to be important language foci, were regularly sacrificed for more formal phonics lessons or 'book education' TPS (9 October), RPS (23 September), EP (14 July), JH, 30 September). Was this occurrence a failure of teachers to recognise the importance of oral learning for enhancing language development (Penn, 2009) or were they driven by perceived timetable demands determined by the Grade 1 curriculum? I suspect the latter.

It became apparent that teachers' perceptions of children's cognitive abilities (or lack of abilities) are strongly tied to, and determined by, policy documents, in particular the NCS (DoE, 2002) (see 2.2.2) and, more recently, the Foundations for Learning Document, where detailed and prescriptive milestones are outlined (DBE, 2010a). Furthermore, assessment policy in Gauteng (DoE, 2008b) has specifically focused on the Language and Mathematics Learning Areas and, to a lesser extent, Life Orientation. The assessment standards informing the other Learning Areas have been marginalised and this is evident in practice.

I would argue therefore that the majority of participants were driven by a top down, technocratic curriculum (see 3.4) that has little regard for children, what they already know and how they learn (Cornbleth, 1990). As Anning (1991) and Cornbleth (1990) note, a consequence of a more technocratic curriculum (see 1.7.2) is the changing demands on teachers (see 3.4.1). Ella (BS) confirmed this assertion. She noted 'The focus is on literacy and numeracy; the Grade 1 teachers expect more from Grade R children'. The notion of every child being a unique individual with a specific learning style is negated. This teaching to specific LOs and ASs has reinforced the notion of a more instrumentalist or didactic curriculum (see 3.4).

Only one teacher, Alison (JH, interview 30 September), acknowledged that children might bring existing knowledge into the classroom. She also mentioned the importance of children learning other types of knowledge. 'My observation is that a child with good general knowledge will do well in school.' Alison's comment is based on the premise that children with good general knowledge will have been exposed to many different learning opportunities and environments, including the opportunities to explore and discover their world. She further acknowledged that children should be:

> Spoken to, ask them what have they seen, the little things they notice, feed their brains, encourage entrepreneurial… Through interacting with peers and adults … expose children to many things, familiar and unfamiliar.

She opened a pedagogical space where, at times, children's everyday knowledge was both recognised and affirmed (Shulman, 2004). Children's ideas and suggestions were recognised; they were given a voice and allowed to determine some of their own learning. Alison not only recognises that children should actively participate in their own learning, she, in fact, recognised (observations and interviews 30 September -1 October) that children can become co-constructors rather than mere reproducers of knowledge (see 3.3.3).

Allowing children to become active participants in their own learning acknowledges that children learn in many different ways (Gardner, 1991) and that both incidental and formal learning have an important place in the Grade R curriculum (Geswicki, 2007; Gordon & Browne, 2008). In fact in the socio-cultural approach the teacher plays a very definite role in both structuring the learning environment and in teaching through learning (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002 see 3.3.3) This understanding of how children learn means that, apart from teacher-guided activities, children's cognitive capabilities can be enhanced through a myriad of other activities that should be part the daily programme, namely routines and child-guided activities (see 3.2). The teachers' perceptions' of how these activities inform (or not) learning are explored later in this study in 8.4.

A further advantage of perceiving children as co-constructors of knowledge is that this predisposes them to develop learning dispositions (see 1.7.1) such as curiosity, responsibility and perseverance (Carr, 2001) (see 3.2; 3.3.2 and 3.3.3) which appear to be essential for later academic success (Riley, 2003; Bruce, 2004) and are not as easily acquired in a didactic learning environment. Yet observations and interviews revealed that most teachers (Alison (JH), and perhaps Mary (YB) and Liz (EP) being the exceptions) did not appear to view the promotion of these dispositions as being an important foundation for (academic) learning. For other teachers though these dispositions were acknowledged. In observations and interviews the emphasis was on telling children what to do and how to do it (Helena, RPS; Maureen, EP; Brenda, EP; Sally, TPS and Busi, JP).

7.3.2 *'You need to know developmental milestones'*

Observations and interviews revealed that children were viewed through a narrow developmental lens and that the notion of the universal child and a 'one size fits all' (Mac Naughton, 2003) model underpins teachers' understandings of children's cognitive learning. Teachers all acknowledged the importance of meeting predetermined developmental norms. Busi (JP, interview 14 August) and Emily (LS, interview 29 July) concurred with Fatima (interview 15 November) who commented, 'If you know the developmental milestones, you can judge when a child is *not* up to par...' and Fatima also noted, 'If you are aware of children's concentration spans you know when to stop. At least half the teachers (for example, Helena (RPS, 24 September), Brenda (EP, 16 July), Ella (BS, 23 July), Mary (YB, 23 October), Fatima (FM, 15 November), June and Busi (JP, 8 October), Gloria (FDB, 27 August) and Sally (TPS, 8 October) admitted that their practice was being influenced by an *uncritical* emphasis on children achieving *specific* developmental norms.

This image of children having to meet specific developmental norms resonates with the description of the young child as nature…or as the scientific child of biological stages (Dahlberg et al. 1999). Children's development is perceived as an innate process following general laws of development (see 3.2.2) and children are constructed in terms of an age-related stage theory. According to Dahlberg et al. (1999:46), this view produces an understanding of children who are a 'natural, rather than social phenomenon, abstracted and decontextualised, essentialized and normalised.' In other words, teachers have an image of the universal child meeting predetermined norms at predetermined ages and stages of their development.

However, observations revealed that, despite acknowledging the importance of these norms, teachers do not necessarily adhere to them. Teacher-directed activities could be prolonged (up to one hour) with children becoming restive and distracted. This approach is more indicative, I would argue, of an instrumentalist approach with a specific focus on 'teaching the basics' (see 3.4) because 'children know nothing'. Neither did it occur to teachers that an overreliance on developmental norms constrains possibilities and can actually impede children's learning (see 3.2.3). There was scant appreciation of Walsh's (2005) assertion that knowledge of development is necessary, but not sufficient.

This view of children as normalised beings was also reflected in teachers' assessment practices. Though not overtly acknowledged by most of the teachers, observations of their assessment strategies revealed a strong developmental focus emphasising 'the basics'. Prescriptive assessment activities and materials, in particular worksheets, were in evidence in eight of the ten schools I observed. Perhaps Fatima's (FM, 15 November) remark 'worksheets are easy to evaluate' provides a possible explanation for why they are so widely used. Perhaps they are a way of keeping children busy, especially when teachers are not necessarily able to offer a challenging school morning (observations, at for example, RPS, LS, FBD, TPS - see 8.4). Worksheets provide concrete evidence of children being engaged in 'academic work'. Or perhaps the remark made by Ella (BS, 23 July), Sally (TPS, 8 October) and Emily (LS, 30 July) that 'children enjoy them' provided a rationale for their wide usage. But as Katz (1995) has noted, the fact that children enjoy doing something does not necessarily make it right or indicative of good practice and as Anning & Edwards (2006) and Hisch-Pasek et al. (2007) note, formal work should not be given at the expense of a good play-based programme where both learning and teaching happens through play (Wood, 2009).

Another possibility for the overemphasis on developmental norms could be the minimal support that most of the teachers receive and the fact that many are under qualified (see 2.2.6). As observations and interviews (see chapter 6) showed all the teachers are caring and concerned about the welfare and education of the children whom they are teaching (see 4.2.4). They are doing the best that they can under difficult circumstances. Many participants (Ella, Sally, Emily, Gloria, Amelia) acknowledged during the interviews that they themselves come from disadvantaged circumstances and have not had the privilege of attending good schools or being formally educated. Their social and cultural contexts must surely impact their teaching? As Pajares (1992) and Kagan (1992) comment, teachers teach as they were taught.

7.3.3 *'There are huge sensory motor integration problems'*

This understanding of children as nature…or, as the scientific child of biological stages, appears to have some alarming consequences for children. As Mac Naughton, 2003; Grieshaber and Cannella, 2001 argue, children who fail to meet these norms are 'othered' or marginalised and need to be 'fixed'. Children, it seems, are being expected to meet specific age-related, predetermined developmental norms in keeping with the notion of the universal child (see 3.2.3 & 3.3.3). And when teachers have adopted a more formal approach to Grade R they are guided by predetermined milestones with scant regard for children's social and cultural contexts. These norms include that children must have a correct pencil grip (EP, RPS, YB, LS, FDB), should have mastered the different perceptual-motor skills for example, crossing the midline, directionality and laterality, as well as the various visual and auditory perceptual-motor skills that underpin literacy and numeracy (field notes made during observations and interviews held with teachers).

Moira (EP interview, 14 July) emphasised, 'There are huge sensory-motor integration problems... poor muscle tone, decreased movement, more learning difficulties, more learning problems and clearly we need more therapy'. Maureen (EP) remarked, 'We need better [meaning more structured] observations and assessments' (field notes, 14 July). And other teachers concur with these assertions. Gloria (FDB) mentioned an increasing number of learning problems but indicated that she felt powerless to manage these effectively (interview, 27 August).

All teachers acknowledged the importance of physical growth and development (see 3.2.2), especially movement in underpinning all learning, especially perceptual–motor behaviours

(Ayers, 2005; Gallahue & Donnelly, 2003). Moira (EP- interview 16 July) bemoaned the fact that 'children are no longer moving sufficiently'. She commented, 'They play with play stations, watch TV, work on computers ... children are *not* moving.' She, together with Ella (BS), Helena (RPS), Busi (JP), Alison (JH), Naomi (JH), Brenda and Maureen (EP) attributed the increasing number of perceptual-motor problems that are being recognised in children to a lack of opportunities to move.

Alison (JH), Naomi (JH), Helena (RPS) and Moira (EP) all emphasised the importance of children developing essential perceptual-motor skills such as spatial orientation behaviours, auditory and visual perceptual-motor skills which are essential skills underpinning literacy and numeracy competencies (Hill, 2006). As Charlesworth (2005) and Tucker (2008) comment, paper and pencil representational activities should be the final, not the first or only step in the process of promoting the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills in young children. Yet in most schools, my observations showed that these skills were predominately developed through teacher-directed paper and pencil activities rather than through exposing children to appropriate (outdoor) play (see 3.2.1 and 3.3.3), movement, music and three dimensional learning opportunities (see 1.7.2 & 3.2.1). Children were given little time to play and move spontaneously during the school day and to engage in activities which would promote the development of literacy and numeracy concepts and skills (see 8.4). The notion of a play-based pedagogy (see 3.3.3) to promote the essential cognitive skills (1.7.2) was something to which few teachers (Alison being the exception) alluded. Despite talk of holistic development that was mentioned by all teachers during the interviews, observations revealed that children were viewed as discrete, cognitive beings with little cognizance taken of an integrated approach towards children's development and learning. There was little consideration of the children's social and cultural contexts and how these might influence learning.

There were of course exceptions. In some schools there were attempts to address the challenges. Sally (TPS, observation, 9 October) was aware of the importance of movement and did a movement ring with the children. However, possibly because of her own lack of training she appeared to lack insight into how to make this a meaningful learning experience for the children. Mary (LP, observation, 24 October) also did movement rings and at this school the importance of outdoor play was acknowledged. Moira (EP, interview, 14 July) introduced a rigorous movement programme in an attempt to counter learning problems, she said, stemmed from children's increased sedentary lifestyles. She said teachers presented organised movement rings at least twice a week at this school. But children were only allowed two, 20-minute breaks where

they could choose to play spontaneously in a well equipped outdoor play area. Furthermore, according to Maureen (EP interview, 16 July), music activities which would also encourage movement (and provide an excellent underpinning for the acquisition of cognitive skills (Grobler, 1990; De Kock, 1987) were frequently replaced with a more formal teacher–directed phonics programme. 'There is just not enough time in the day to do everything.' Does this approach reinforce the notion of children who know nothing and have no agency; incompetent children whose learning needs to be controlled by the more knowledgeable teacher and who have to be referred for therapy in order to correct perceived lags in development?

7.3.4 *'Creative activities are important … in this way, children will still be developing the skills that inform reading'*

According to Charlesworth (2004:438), creativity 'is an aspect of behaviour that reflects originality, imagination, experimentation and a spirit of exploration' and it is closely associated with cognitive development. Facilitating creativity is important within DAP (see 3.2.2). The espoused theory of all teachers acknowledged this tenet. They spoke for example, about the learning value of creative art activities. Moira, Maureen, Brenda, Liz (all EP) and Alison (JH) also mentioned the importance of music and movement activities as well as child-initiated activities in promoting creative dispositions. During interviews these sentiments were echoed by Sally (TPS, 8 October), Ella (BS, 23 July), Mary, YB, 23 October), Busi (JP, 14 August).

However, the reality in most schools in this study was very different. Creativity appeared to exist outside of social and cultural contexts; its purpose being to promote basic skills (see 8.4.2). Seemingly, the construction of children as reproducers of knowledge, identity and culture and of children as nature enables teachers to justify, for example, offering children creative art by stating, 'Through creative art children will still be developing the skills that inform reading' (Maureen, field notes, 15 July). (Dahlberg et al., 1999) argue that this construction of children has prevented them from being viewed as imaginative beings, possessing their own agency, being able to make choices and being accountable for these choices. Teachers often adopted a regulatory stance. Observations showed children were frequently told which table to go to (Sally, TPS, Helena, RPS, Mary, YB) or called upon to finish work not yet completed (Brenda, EP, Maureen, EP). Learning in a spontaneous way, encouraging children to use their own initiative and being able to do something for the sheer enjoyment of it was appeared to be low on the list of priorities.

7.3.5 *Concluding remarks*

Many teachers in this study adopted a narrow and constraining view of children's cognitive development. Grade R children were constructed as knowing little and essential learning focused on having to acquire predetermined 'basics'. Children were viewed through a prescriptive and rigid lens which does not take sufficient cognisance of how an integrated approach drawing on other developmental domains would also inform and support cognitive development and learning.

It is therefore germane to ask 'What are teachers *not* acknowledging about children's cognitive development?' Why are teachers viewing children through a deficit lens — where the focus is not on what children know, but rather on what they are not yet able to do or on what they do not yet know? Why has the achievement of specific predetermined developmental milestones become so entrenched? Children are seen as reproducers of knowledge and valued for what they will become; the teachers' role being to transform the 'poor' child into a capable, autonomous adult (Dahlberg et al., 1999; 2007). This question will be addressed in chapter 10, when teachers' perceptions are viewed through an alternative lens.

7.4 *TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN AS 'AFFECTIVE BEINGS'*

Affective development includes the area that 'centres on the self-concept and the development of social, emotional and personality characteristics' (Charlesworth, 2004:451). According to a developmental perspective, affective development is the bedrock supporting all other aspects of development (Nutbrown, 2006). David (2009) notes that it is during the early years that children develop a growing sense of self and develop self- and social awareness in conjunction with their own agency. Hence many curricula focus on personal and social development (see 1.7.1). Supporting a sense of self and social awareness necessitates a particular learning environment and a particular understanding of children; one where teachers allow children to make choices and to assert some power and control over their own lives (David, 2009). In this way, they become what Erikson (1977) and Piaget (1964) described as self-regulating and autonomous beings (see 3. 2.2).

The two other constructions of childhood articulated by Dahlberg et al. (1999), namely the child as an innocent, in the golden age of life and the child as labour market supply factor (see 3.3.2), provide a useful lens through which to probe teachers' perceptions of children's affective development. Tensions arising from the different perceptions of children by mothers, care givers (including teachers) and schools might have competing and different understandings of

their role in relation to young children and of the perceived needs of young children. These tensions became evident when the findings were analysed.

All participants agreed that the current emphasis on a more formal approach (see 3.4.1) foregrounded in Brenda (EP, interview 16 July) and Alison's (JH, field notes 30 September) words as 'academics' is pervasive and needs to be halted. They acknowledged that emotional and social development should be prioritised and stressed the importance of play (3.2.1) and creative activities in the programme. Yet all participants revealed that their perceptions of children's affective development have been influenced by both these as well as the other previously mentioned constructions of childhood and children (see 3.3.2).

7.4.1 *Teacher perceptions of children as 'emotional beings'*

Attachment, a theory formulated by Bowlby (1965) and supported by Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall (1978) and Brazelton (1981) is thought to be basic to children's later successful socialisation (Charlesworth, 1987; 2004; David, 2009). Today, according to David (2009:80) research is showing that babies can have 'a network of attachments' made up of different people with whom the child is familiar, supporting the notion of shared child care. Within the ECD/Grade R setting, the teacher becomes one of these familiar figures. A strong attachment relationship is one of the more important factors that promote a resilient personality; a personality that will enable children to cope with change as well as adverse circumstances in later life (David, 2009).

In all the classrooms, I observed a loving, nurturing relationship between teachers and children. There is a relationship of trust and respect between the teachers and the majority of children and an obvious display of mutual affection. Children would spontaneously hug the teacher (Mary, observation, 21 October), an act which many teachers acknowledged to be affirming. As Brenda (EP) mentioned (field notes, 15 July), 'When you are feeling down and children give you a hug…your world is suddenly a whole lot better'. The teachers are likewise responsive, they have developed a strong attachment relationship with the children (see 9.3.1) and it is apparent that an 'ethic of care' (Mac Naughton, 2003) abounds. Yet this care did not readily extend to children being viewed as 'beings' with their own agency, on their way to increasing independence.

'Children are needy and helpless'

Participants perceived the children as being emotionally vulnerable and described them as 'needy' and 'helpless.' Mary (YB), for example, stated 'our children have no confidence; they don't think they can do anything.' Yet observations showed in many schools (for example, EP (Brenda and Maureen), RPS, YB, LS, TPS, FM) children were given limited opportunities to develop, for example, independence which is an important factor in promoting positive self-esteem (Charlesworth, 1987; David; 2009). Particularly in relation to indoor activities, children were told what to do, when and often where to do it.

I would argue that this view of children as needy, helpless beings prevented teachers from providing opportunities that could boost emotional (as well as social) development and enable children to regulate their own behaviours, to make appropriate choices and to interact collaboratively with each other during the learning process. Furthermore, failure to provide such learning opportunities results in children not being encouraged to develop learning dispositions (see 1.7.1; 3.2; 3.3.2; 3.3.3), including independence, perseverance and responsibility. These are important aspects of emotional well-being and are crucial to success in formal schooling (Bruce, 2004; Riley, 2003).

Observations showed that in only a few classrooms EP (Liz, 15 July), JH (30 September), JP (8 October) were children encouraged to partake in behaviours that promoted a sense of responsibility and self-regulation by, for example, being reminded to look after their own belongings by placing them in their lockers and being expected to tidy up after activities. This perception of children as helpless beings resulted in one school, for example, prioritising a specific focus of responsibility.

> How to look after things — we have chosen a ruler this year. This is something children will need in Grade 1 and no one teaches them to look after their possessions any more.

Two aspects are noteworthy in this description. Firstly, the picture of needy, helpless children who have to be shown how to take responsibility for trivial items is reinforced through what could be construed as an example of a limited imagination on the part of the school. Secondly, the values are predetermined and socially sanctioned; children are being trained to conform to the fixed demands of compulsory schooling.

'Children are deprived'

In some instances, children were also described as 'deprived.' Teachers were not referring to deprivation in a physical or socioeconomic sense. Maureen and Moira (EP), for example, alluded to emotional deprivation and described parents (see 4.2.4) whom they felt did not give their children sufficient time and attention (see 9.5.2). Parents, they said during the interview (16 July), were too immersed in their careers. Maureen (EP) and Helena (RPS) said of them 'they [parents] are selfish'. 'We must do everything for them [the children].' Is this a construction of vulnerable children because children are perceived as labour market supply factor, deprived of sufficient maternal time and attention often due to parents pursuing their careers?

During their interviews Mary (YB, 23 October)), Emily (LS, 30 July,) and Gloria (FDB, 27 August) also referred to children who suffer from emotional deprivation, but for different reasons, including abuse, neglect and domestic violence. Is this possibly a construction of innocent children needing to be protected by the more able adult or is it an appropriate reaction to what is perceived to be a violent society? Emily (LS), for example commented (field notes 30 July), 'We do little on Mondays, children are restless and can't concentrate; they have often had a very disturbed weekend.' She was referring to the many restive and aggressive children whose parents had, she claimed, neglected their children over the weekend. She further said, 'I don't like to shout or threaten,' yet this is what she (and a number of other teachers) did if children became rowdy. Perhaps it is a case of you teach as you were taught (Pajares, 1992; Kagan, 1992) (see 4.2.1). Teachers, it seems, were not able to put strategies in place to allow them to deal more purposefully with disruptive children or to suggest strategies to the children to help them regulate their own behaviour (see 8.4.2).

Perceptions of children as regulators of their own behaviour: 'We don't hurt each other'

Mary (YB, interview 23 October) emphasised that 'Children need help to control their anger, violence, lashing out, ways of reducing it.' Anger was one emotion that many teachers (EP, LS, RPS, FDB, BS, and TPS) admitted (during interviews and during morning conversations) children required help to express in an appropriate way. Anger underlies aggressive behaviour and according to Charlesworth (2004) is one of the emotions that teachers find most difficult to manage. Teachers mentioned that they try to counter aggression. Mary said, 'We plant a seed but …' As Charlesworth (2004) notes, most teachers are neither able to model nor suggest alternative ways of managing conflict.

The idea of positive discipline strategies encouraging children to self-regulate their own behaviour and to develop self control was not given much credence by the teachers. Few

teachers made the correlation between possible adjustments to the programme and more effective management of behaviour (see 7.3.2 and 8.4). There was little realisation of Alexander's (2007, cited in Anning et al, 2009) contention that an increasing didactic approach results in children experiencing greater stress levels which are often expressed through anger (see 3.4). Adapting teacher-directed/guided activities or making use of appropriate finger plays, songs or rhymes were not commonly witnessed techniques of refocusing children's attention to enable then to gain greater self-control.

There are many probable explanations which could be related to teachers' perceptions of children. The possibility exists that because teachers viewed children as helpless, passive beings, they [children] were not expected to take any responsibility for their own behaviour. This then shifts the onus onto the teacher. Being the sole disciplinarian must indeed be an onerous task.

Another possible explanation could be related to the construction of children as potentially evil (see 3.3.2.-Dahlberg et al., 1999) who can be corrupted by society. Viewed from this perspective, discipline, which according to Charlesworth (2004) is a much broader term for behaviour regulation strategies, becomes a form of punishment aimed at correcting behaviour. This includes common disciplinary approaches such as inhibiting children's behaviour through power assertive or psychosocial techniques. Another approach entails directing children's behaviour. This is based on behaviourist principles of modelling and (often negative) reinforcement (see 3.2.2). Both of these approaches were frequently observed in the classroom.

Observations showed that in many schools (FDB, LS, RPS, BS, TPS, YB, FM), an inhibitory model based on a manifestation of power was enforced. Frequently observed strategies included shouting at children, sometimes across the playground, threatening, and in some instances telling children to leave the classroom or to sit facing the wall. These strategies were sometimes associated with psychosocial techniques such as shaming and blaming. Another frequently observed strategy was teacher intervention. The cause of the conflict would, if possible, be identified and the children told to say sorry to each other. There were very few attempts at providing children with social problem-solving skills to enable them to solve their own conflicts.

This view of helpless, possibly bad children, requiring regulation to control their behaviour was apparent in many schools, as was an emphasis on rules. In most classrooms, as observations showed the rules were visible and formed part of the wall displays (RPS, TPS, YB, LS, FM, JP). Grade R children are unlikely to be able to read these rules, yet no thought has been given to pictorial representation. Despite this, it seemed apparent that the rules had been rote taught to

the children and attempts (however unsuccessful) were made to observe and reinforce them during the day.

Two teachers, Sally (TPS, 8 October) and Fatima (FM, 15 November), mentioned that the rules had been negotiated with the children at the beginning of the year. Fatima said, 'I negotiate everything with the children… everything is negotiated.' This type of negotiation should be an interactive process where children are given a voice and their ideas are listened to. It is an affirming action implying that children have something worthwhile to contribute. Yet when children (three boys) were disruptive in class (they were not copying words into their workbooks), Fatima shouted, 'You will not go out and play' (observation 12 November). During the interview (15 November), she said to me, 'They know this will happen; we have negotiated it.' Despite this threat, all three boys were on the playground at playtime. I would suggest that, rather than instilling any life skills in the children, this was more of an attempt at regulating behaviour. Children were not viewed as capable beings (Mac Naughton, 2003; Dahlberg et al., 1999) able to develop their own locus of control and to take responsibility for their actions. Nor were they viewed as exercising agency where they can learn from their behaviours and anticipate possible consequences.

7.4.2 *'Children are losing their innocence': views of personality development*

Viewed through a developmental lens (see 3.2.2), early childhood is a critical period for the development of the self-concept (Charlesworth, 2004) and teachers concurred (interviews and field notes). According to Charlesworth (2004), self-concept comprises various dimensions. These include body image (how child views themselves in relation to their physical body); the social self comprising racial, cultural, ethical and religious (and I would add language) dimensions; the cognitive self (mental abilities and aptitudes) and self-esteem (how children evaluate their self-concept and the respect they have for themselves).

Two of these dimensions are worth exploring, not because they were obvious developmental foci but because of teachers' *lack* of awareness of the significance of these dimensions, both within the framework of DAP (see 3.2.1) as well as from a contemporary ECD perspective (see 3.3).

The cognitive self

The first dimension is teachers' insights (or lack thereof) into development of the cognitive self. As Brenda (EP) commented, 'Boosting children is more important than academics'. Yet, as described in section 7.3.1, this was not the observed reality. Teachers viewed children as reproducers of knowledge, identity and culture and as children of nature who were expected to meet predetermined milestones (see 7.2). If children 'failed' to meet these predetermined outcomes, therapy appears to be the obvious answer for most teachers (see 7.3.3). Children were viewed as being in deficit, abnormal and needing correction (Dahlberg et al., 2007). Little thought was given to possible alternative approaches within the programme. Despite the acknowledgment of, for example, the importance of play in the daily programme (see 3.2.1), teachers did not view children as playing-learning beings who were able to take some responsibility for their own learning.

The social and cultural self

The second dimension is related to the social and cultural self. Contemporary ECD literature contends that aspects related to culture and to the social self do not readily fall within a DAP framework (see 2.2.3). According to the reconceptualist movement (Mac Naughton, 2003 and Grieshaber and Cannella, 2001), social and cultural contexts of children and families and issues related to gender, racial and social class are subsumed by the dominant ECD discourse, DAP (see 3.3.2). According to Burman (2010:14), these 'discourses serve to eradicate the experiences and identities of children.' In this study, the silences surrounding aspects related to race, language, gender and culture, for example, were disquieting, considering that in the past 15 years, South Africa has embraced a new Constitution and a democratic way of life (see 2.2.2). In this regard, the developmental discourse articulated by teachers appeared to reinforce (however unintentionally) the value systems of the dominant, white middle class culture. As Diaz Soto, Hixon & Hite (2010:222) remark, 'The developmental discourse is the truth; it defines the normative ways of thinking, acting and being.' Therefore, though children adapt to this type of school community, the silencing is detrimental to their self-esteem (Diaz Soto et al., 2010). As Woodhead (1990) asserts, in a homogenous society, cultural values can be easily overlooked (see 3.3.2) and as teachers frequently fail to recognise the diverse contexts in their classrooms, generalisations regarding culture appear to be entrenched.

i. An assimilation model

In most schools, I observed an assimilation model[44] based on a dominant middle class world view (see 4.4.1). Regardless of children's race, culture, language or perceived home circumstances I noticed little actual differentiation in teachers' expectations of children or how they were treated.

It appeared as if teachers did not meaningfully engage with a range of alternative contexts. Within the South African context, there are many contrasting cultures. The dominant white culture would, for example, expect children to look at the teacher when asking for something and to say please and thank you. Other cultures might expect children to remain silent, only talk if invited to do so, and to look down — never directly into the teacher's face. Consequently, children from less dominant cultural groups can easily become marginalised, even ignored, in the classroom environment as they might appear to be, for example, less assertive than other children in the class (evidenced by the observation (30 October) of the music ring at JH). Being more outspoken might even be construed as being rude, within certain cultures. Even when teachers came from similar cultural backgrounds to the children, the more reticent children (possibly less linguistically fluent) tended to be ignored as teachers appeared to adopt 'a one size fits all' approach. In some instances (TPS), large class numbers might have contributed to this approach. Despite the best of intentions it remains difficult for a single teacher to acknowledge the unique learning needs of over 40 children. Teachers appeared to shape the world for children according to a normative understanding of children based on a universal developmental discourse.

There were exceptions. Sally (TPS interview 9 October), for example, saw children's futures as being rich with possibility. She said:

> Children need to know they can do anything their hearts desire, count, draw, play, be in parliament, be employed, have any friend they want, are as good as the next child.

She worked in an impoverished environment and realised the importance of promoting an equitable and socially-just environment that would be enabling for all the children in her class. In this conversation, she was referring in particular to issues relating to race, social class and poverty. Yet, in reality she was unable to explore alternative and diverse possibilities for

[44] Assimilation is the process by which a new group becomes part of the dominant culture. Acculturation, when the patterns of the dominant culture are adopted by the new groups is the first step in this process (Klein & Chen, 2001).

children's learning within her classroom environment. Her understanding and implementation of practice (see 8.4.2) constrained rather than opened up pedagogical possibilities for growth. For example, exciting stories could have provided rich opportunities for extending children's imaginations and exploring possibilities. But, instead, story time was no more than 'book education' (observation, 8 October) and the reinforcement of letter recognition which entrenched a more didactic approach (see 3.4).

Ella (BS) (interview, 23 July) acknowledged that children live in a very precarious world and that there were many contemporary issues which should be addressed. She admitted that children (or family members) had already been victims of violence, abuse and crime. Yet, when asked why she did not engage in these issues she replied, 'The parents would not like it.' There are possibly other reasons, ones that she does not even realise, for her attitude. One reason could be a perception of children as innocent and helpless beings who need to be sheltered from an evil world; she does not want to be the person to rupture this innocence (despite the fact it has already been ruptured). Another reason could be related to notions of what constitutes traditional developmental discourse. As Fleer (2008) argues, teachers appropriate the conceptual tools and discourses available to them. And in South Africa these are informed by the dominant discourse. It becomes difficult to address contested and controversial ideas within this normative and regulatory framework. A third possible reason is that the developmental discourse has been replaced by a more instrumentalist approach or performance discourse promoting 'academics', not broader life skills issues (see 3.4). As social and cultural contexts are already marginalized within this discourse it becomes very easy to adopt a 'one size fits all' approach. Therefore, there is no curricula demand to address potentially controversial topics.

In interviews Amelia (YB, 23 October) and Alison (JH, 30 September) also agreed that children are living in a rapidly changing world and should be prepared for present and future realities as well as challenges that might impact their development (see 9.5.1). Amelia commented, 'It is their future, not ours. We need to think what they will be up against — one child, for example, was mugged for a cell [mobile] phone.' And Alison highlighted the need to seek new forms of knowledge. 'Technology has changed — my daughter doesn't know life without a cell phone... I would like to rework the theme on communication. There is so much more that we should do.'

These remarks point to new images of children — possibly (even if not realized by these teachers) a view which is beginning to acknowledge children as co-constructors of knowledge, identity and culture (Dahlberg et al's., 2007) (see 3.3.2). Alison and Amelia are acknowledging children are entering a different social reality and will experience very different challenges.

Yelland, Lee, O'Rourke and Harrison (2008) contend that these are capable and confident children able to use a variety of media options. Yet all teachers have given little thought to how media can be successfully and innovatively incorporated into Grade R programmes. Nor have they considered including the children's ideas in this planning. Children remain voiceless, needy beings who have to be taught to, for example, seriate and sequence on the computer. Opportunities for imaginative pedagogy have been constrained. As Yelland et al. (2008) observe, new technologies have changed ways in which things are done, yet teachers are seemingly resistant to change.

Likewise, Mrs Areff (FM, interview 15 November) commented on changing life circumstances which impact children's social self. She commented:

> At home children are having different experiences, children are growing up too quickly, they have lost their innocence... they worry about being cute, sexy, yet they are preschoolers. They are streetwise at an earlier and earlier age. There is little control. The influence of technology, the media is disturbing, what they see at home … they are preschoolers.

She displayed a sense of unease but did not appear to be able to address the tensions that she articulated between her belief that children should engage in more childlike activities (her notion of innocent, helpless children needing to be protected by the capable adult) and the reality of children being socially pressured to watch, for example, more TV. Perhaps, as Saavedra and Camicia (2010) posit, it is difficult to escape the dominant ideas of childhood, especially when the media portray normalised models of childhood which have been legitimated by experts (Burman, 2010).

ii. Language

The acquisition of language is crucial for both thought and learning. Without a good foundation in their home language, children become increasingly unsuccessful academically as they encounter more complex academic language (Cummins, cited in Diaz Soto et al., 2010). Language also reflects culture and is a way of maintaining group identity and passing on cultural heritage. Suppression of the home language therefore separates children from their cultural traditions and from parents' abilities to pass on those values and traditions (Diaz Soto, 2010). It is because of this link between language and culture that I have positioned teachers' understandings of children's language acquisition in the affective domain.

Teachers' lack of insight into the importance of appropriate language acquisition, how to consolidate children's literacy skills as well as the social and cultural factors that impact on children's acquisition of language and literacy is disturbing. During the interviews Gloria (FDB, 27 August), Helena (RPS, 24 September), Busi (JP, 8 October) and Mary (YB, 23 October), said many parents have expressly requested that their children be educated in English, even if it is not the home language. Ideological rather than pedagogical issues control the choice of the LoLT. As Diaz Soto et al. (2010:222) comment, 'English is viewed as the necessary means to education, economic and technological advancement.' This perhaps explains why teachers teach through the medium of English, even when they are not proficient in it.

Helena (RPS) and Gloria (FDB) alluded to language difficulties that are experienced in their classrooms when the LoLT is not the same as the children's home language. Helena remarked field notes, 23 September), 'Most children do not speak English yet the LoLT is English ... [I] am teaching language as well as everything else…' This is, I would suggest, a strange remark from a teacher who purports to believe in holistic child development.

For most participants, language teaching and learning equates with meeting prescriptive LOs and ASs for the Language Learning Area (DoE, 2002). Observations showed book education at TPS (8 October) and the emphasis on phonics programmes witnessed at EP (14-16 July) and JH (30 September) is evidence of this claim. Helena (interview, 24 September) and Gloria (field notes 26 August) mentioned strategies that their schools have adopted to assist non English-speaking children. These included the help of an assistant or other staff member proficient in the home language of the children, peer support and translation, 'the buddy system', and code switching. However, during my observations such strategies were not often evident during the school morning, supporting the contention that teachers adopted an assimilation model where children were expected to conform to dominant classroom norms.

In more advantaged schools (EP, JH), teachers appeared to brush over language challenges. Non English-speaking children were in the minority and there appeared to be a taken-for-granted assumption that children follow classroom conversations. This was evidenced during observations of teacher-guided activities in EP (Maureen's morning

ring (observation 14 July) and Alison's music ring (observation, 30 September). Again, an assimilation model, which ignores cultural diversity and assumes that all children have similar language competences, was adopted. Observations showed teachers, for example, Ella (BS), Sally (TPS) and Emily (LS) appeared to have minimal insights into how to assist children (especially children who are not English first language speakers) in this vital area of learning. Their rings were very teacher-directed and even though they could often speak the home language of the children few attempts were made to enhance meaning-making for children.

As evidenced by the interviews, teachers appeared to have little awareness of current debates around literacy. This was another example of what was *not* said. Contemporary debates are not only concerned with the traditional skills of learning to read and write but also with newer skills associated with contemporary life (Rowan & Honan, 2005). These include engagement with operational (the skills to read and write), cultural (to construct a text in a culturally appropriate way) and critical literacy skills — the ability to reflect and critique the 'ways in which literacy practices in various contexts reflect wider social patterns and influence the operation of power, and norms of various cultures' (Rowan & Honan, 2005:198-199). Teachers in this study were seemingly only engaging with operational literacy skills. There was a strong emphasis on particular LOs and ASs, especially those related to phonics teaching (for example, EP, RPS, JH, TPS). Various phonics programmes were used, especially in the more advantaged schools. Yet in many schools teachers paid superficial attention to the actual acquisition of vocabulary; be it the home language, the LoLT or an additional language. As observations at TPS, FBD, YB, JP, LS showed there were few language rich discussions, few opportunities to 'play with language' and, as previously mentioned, stories were no longer a primary focus of the day. Observations also revealed that environmental print in the form of posters and charts was only in English regardless of the LoLT of the school or the children's home languages (TPS, LS, BS, FBD, and JP).

Consequently, what was *not* said in relation to children as communicating and literacy beings is revealing. There was scant awareness of the importance of new and emerging literacies that have been highlighted within contemporary literacy discourses. According to Rowan and Honan (2005), this includes academic literacy, which emphasises multiliteracies and critical thinking; the promotion of the basic skills in reading and writing; multiliteracies which prepare children to become good citizens and who can

successfully negotiate complex, unstable and culturally diverse worlds, and the ways in which cultural diversity should be responsibly managed 'in a world where attention to difference seems less palatable than an insistence on sameness' (p.202). All these forms of literacy can be nurtured in a myriad of ways in the Grade R classroom; creative art activities, movement and music activities, and storytelling to name a few. Yet in most classrooms creative art was not highly valued. Alison, (JH) was the exception. Yet Busi (JP) and Gloria (FDB) were aware of the importance of creative art (interviews 8 October and 27 August) but faced many constraints in implementing a successful creative art programme (observations 8-9 October and 26-28 August).

Teachers' perceptions of universal children having to meet predetermined norms (see 3.2.3 and 7.3.2) coupled with their own professional and personal challenges (see 8.4 and 9.2.1) provides a possible explanation for why teachers do not engage with these rich forms of literacy practices. One way of effecting change is through critical reflection on practice (Brookfield, 2005). Unless teachers reflect on their understandings of children, and the future for which they believe they are helping to prepare the children they are teaching, it will be difficult for them to engage and implement new ways of knowing and doing.

7.4.3 *Teachers' perceptions of children as 'social beings'*

From a DAP perspective, the major social task of preschool children is to develop their relationships with others (Charlesworth, 1987). Play, with its image of the naturally-developing child (Dahlberg et al., 1999; Wood, 2008), is an important vehicle to enable children to realise this social task. In a developmental approach, both indoor and outdoor free play (child-initiated activities) becomes an important part of the daily programme (see 3.2.1).

'Children need to play'

By giving children options, they are able to exercise a choice; they chose where and with whom they would like to play. Free play structured in this way affords children the opportunity to regulate their own behaviour and so minimize behavioural problems. It is through free play that children explore concepts such as sharing, making choices and learn about autonomy and control and explore their understandings of growing up (Thomas, 2009). Lack of opportunities for free play constrains children's ability to explore socially related issues and to build their own emotional and social competencies. Yet observations showed only some teachers Alison (JH),

Liz, Brenda (EP) and sometimes Mary (YB), Ella (BS), Emily (LS) and Busi (JP) structured the environment in a way that actively supported social interaction.

In interviews teachers all agreed that free play was important but observations revealed that it was not necessarily a focal point of the programme. As Wood (2008) notes, the commitment to play is strong on ideology and rhetoric but weak and problematic in practice (see 8.5.1). Perhaps teachers lack sufficient understanding of how to become involved in children's play (see 3.3.3 and 8.4.1). It is also possible that, because they perceive children as having no agency and as being reproducers of knowledge, it is their duty as the more competent adult to teach 'the basics' to the children. In both scenarios, opportunities for meaningful play become limited.

Because teachers adopted an assimilation model (see 7.4.2) little attention was given to different perceptions of play as well as to the role of cultural difference in play. As Howard (2010) notes, all children play, but there are cultural difference in how play is perceived. According Ryan (2005:100), 'the conceptions of power and agency on which child-centred play approaches are based do not adequately address the complex ways classroom social relations are embedded and interconnected to other social meanings and practice.' Children from different cultural groups might interact differently with the play materials. Yet the same opportunities, resources and approach were provided for all children. Neither was thought given to gender, class or racial differences. Who will be privileged by the play and who will be marginalised? Play was not viewed as a social practice that is distributed across a wide range of contexts and co-participants.

'Children have to learn manners and values': socialising children

During interviews Mary (YB, 23 October), Maureen (EP, 16 July), Mrs Areff (FM, 15 November), Gloria (FDB, 27 August) and Sally (TPS, 8 October), for example, suggested, 'Children have to learn manners and values.' They were talking about reinforcing traditional values such as courtesy and consideration, saying please and thank you, taking turns, not pushing, listening when others talk, etc. Teachers also mentioned that children needed to learn respect — respect for themselves and for others. This included not stealing, learning to share, and being honest.

From an affective perspective, the educational emphasis, it appears, was on socialising the children and helping them to behave correctly. As Burman (2010:30) notes, 'Because children are positioned as undeveloped and outside socio-political historical and economic contexts we feel compelled to teach them how to live.' How teachers respond to, think about, and plan the activities offered to the children is shaped by their perspectives of children. As the analysis has

shown the participants' perceptions of children are not always clear cut. They state that they believe in a developmental discourse but many of their practices are more didactic. They therefore (perhaps subconsciously) hold dual notions of the child. One possible notion could be the child as knowledge, identity and culture reproducer (Dahlberg et al., 1999). In this notion the child is seen as an empty vessel to be filled by the more knowledgeable teacher who is able and has a duty to impart manners, morals and values to the child. The other notion could be the notion of the romantic, innocent child who must be moulded to society's ways (see 2.3.2); ways that are often determined by the dominant discourse and which might serve as controlling and regulatory functions (Dahlberg et al., 1999)

There appeared to be a close connection between values and underpinning religious beliefs. For example, Brenda (EP, 16 July) and Mary (YB, 23 October) mentioned the underpinning Christian ethos that promotes tolerance and acceptance of each other. Mrs Areff (FM) commented, 'We reinforce values, from a religious perspective you can't confuse religion and culture. We teach basic Islamic principles from day one — both implicitly and explicitly.' Religious beliefs also shaped particular perceptions of children as needing to be moulded in the ways of the Lord, for example. Again, the image of docile, passive children who will do as they are told comes to mind. There were predetermined, fixed codes of behaviour from which children should not transgress and good teachers (see 4.4) teach and reinforce these behavioural codes.

'Telling right from wrong': perceptions of children as moral beings

Morality, an important facet of development, is related to being able to tell the difference between right and wrong. Moral values include standards of acceptable behaviour and principles such as honesty, justice, obedience, generosity, self-control and meekness (Charlesworth, 2004). In contemporary literature, these characteristics are closely related to social justice issues and education for democracy.

Moral development is closely intertwined with all developmental domains. For example, moral reasoning, which underpins moral judgment, is a cognitive aspect while emotions related to moral decisions are an emotive one. In DAP, a primary focus is on 'correct' behaviour and discipline, therefore I have positioned this discussion within the affective domain.

Again during interviews all teachers acknowledged that children ought to acquire prosocial behaviours such as caring, helpfulness and generosity. I certainly observed many incidents of

such behaviours being modelled by the teachers (EP, JH, JP, TPS, LS, BS, FDB) and demonstrated by the children. I did not, however, observe any instances where teachers positively affirmed these types of behaviour in the children. Intervention happened when children did not exhibit the correct behaviour. Does this suggest a (possibly subconscious) construction of children as inherently bad, children who have to be moulded into the right way of knowing, doing and behaving by the more knowledgeable teacher (3.3.2 and 7.2)?

Children were frequently viewed as needing guidance to 'learn the correct ways of behaving' and not as capable and competent beings, able, with assistance, to regulate their own behaviours. The result was a hegemonic relationship between the teacher and children with the more powerful adult having the regulatory control. According to Aries (1962 as cited in Burman, 2010), the management and constant surveillance of children is a modern western invention so it is feasible that teachers were only fulfilling their perceptions of modern day practice emanating from a mismatch between a developmental and didactic approach.

In addition, children were not given a voice. There was no suggestion that children could have an opinion about what constitutes right and wrong behaviour. Little, if any consideration, was given to the explicit recognition of children's rights, and to issues related to diversity or anti-bias education.

What was *not* said by the teachers, especially in the light of contemporary ECD theory and practice (Anning et al., 2009; Wood, 2008; Mac Naughton, 2003; Dahlberg et al., 1999), is cause for concern. Greater awareness of, and insight into, their practice (see 4.4) could be one way of addressing these challenges (Brookfield, 1995).

Concluding remarks

Despite teachers acknowledging the importance of social and emotional development underpinning all other learning, there was not much evidence of teachers supporting children to become autonomous learners who are able to regulate their own behaviour. Children were viewed as needy, helpless beings requiring regulation. Teachers, it appears, are teaching 'learned helplessness' through stringent controls that structure the learning day. However**,** the extent to which these perceptions of needy and helpless children are exacerbated by teachers' own dispositions which they described as 'nurturing and mothering' also needs to be considered. Teachers see themselves as 'mother figures'; they nurture, support and teach children. Observations of teachers concur with Argyris and Schön's (1974) findings that teachers'

espoused theories are not necessarily supported by their theory-in-use (see 4.4.2). Muthukrishna, Hall and Ebrahim's (2005:1) comment that 'we are challenged to question the perceptions we have of children and childhood, and how these influence and shape our assumptions and choices concerning children has yet to be realized.

7.5 *CONCLUSION*

In this chapter, I explored teachers' perceptions of children through a developmental lens as all teachers acknowledged that they follow a traditional play-based ECD approach. Teachers viewed children as needy and helpless beings, and shape and control the children's world to ensure that they will achieve predetermined norms in keeping with prescriptive milestones. Teachers' perceptions of children appeared to be informed by their taken-for-granted assumptions about children and childhood and partial understandings of developmental theories. Most of the teachers have adopted a didactic approach towards classroom practice. It is apparent that teachers are more concerned with what will become of the child rather than how the child exists as a child.

There was little awareness of contemporary ECD discourse which positions children as competent social actors (Wood, 2008) capable of engaging responsibly with their own learning. Nor was there awareness of the shifts in developmental discourse to include children's diverse contexts and settings, recognising the disparities in children's lives and childhood.

However, it is important to consider a counter-balance, and to offer some ameliorating suggestions about why the teachers are the way they are. Most teachers do not have a university education and they work in relative isolation without easy access to a professional group or community. Therefore they have little epistemological access and (because of other constraints) physical means of engaging with the new theories and debates in the field.

The difficulties surrounding the LoLT in a diverse classroom magnify all other difficulties. If communication between teacher and children (and vice versa) cannot take place, how can learning?

Furthermore, life in Gauteng is violent and tough — getting the foundation for a formal education which may enable children to escape or rise above, the fate of many (unemployed and unemployable) may make teachers feel compelled to emphasise the reproduction knowledge and

skills which they perceive to be key to later social and economic success (their own and the children's). They are not indifferent people, merely social realists.

In the following chapter I interrogate teachers' perceptions of themselves as 'learning beings'. I investigate their understandings of the ECD curriculum and how these understandings inform practice and consider what they think will enable them to improve their practice.

CHAPTER 8: TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEMSELVES AS 'LEARNING BEINGS'

8.1 *INTRODUCTION*

In this chapter, I explore the second theme, namely teachers' understandings of themselves as 'learning beings'. I examine teachers' perceptions of their practice and consider how their perceptions of ECD/Grade R curricula and pedagogy inform classroom implementation. This theme answers questions 2. *What type of [subject] knowledge do teachers of young children think they [the teachers] need to have in order to support the learning process?;* 3. *What, according to the teacher, is her role in a preschool context in supporting young children's growth, development, thinking and learning?;* and 5. *What alternative strategies could be identified by teachers for improving practice?* Research question 4 on espoused theories versus theories-in-use is addressed when answering the other questions.

8.2 *TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF ECD/GRADE R PRACTICE*

Practice is informed by many different facets, including understanding and implementation of the curriculum. The role of the teacher is pivotal in ensuring high quality practice (see 1.7 and 4.2). This in turn suggests well informed teachers who have deep insight into their practice; pedagogues who are, in fact, learned people. Because teachers' perception of their practice is informed by their understandings of children (see chapter 7) and their understandings of themselves as professional beings (see chapter 9), findings emanating from these themes also impact on the analysis of this chapter.

I first explore teachers' understandings of the ECD curriculum (see 1.7.2). This is followed by an investigation of curriculum implementation and an examination of what teachers consider they need to know and do to ensure effective teaching and learning happens in the classroom (see 1.7.1)

8.3 *TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CURRICULUM*

Curricular issues are never straightforward and cannot be addressed in a linear manner (see 1.7.2). Curriculum development is an intricate process, a complex, multifaceted web. This is especially true for ECD/Grade R, where curriculum and pedagogy are closely related (Siraj-Blatchford, 2002) and what children learn is an important as how children learn (Riley, 2003) (see 1.7.1 &1.7.2).

There is no exact agreement on curriculum. According to Mac Naughton (2003:113), 'curriculum is a politically engaged process in which the educator's intention and the children's involvement interact to produce a lived curriculum of a specific service.' Curriculum development and implementation are underpinned by the teachers' philosophy of education and may be informed by curricular outcomes. In ECD, the planning of the teaching and learning environment, including the use of space and time, the availability of appropriate resources and use of assessment strategies all impact on the quality of the programme. The ways in which these processes are realised by teachers vary and this realisation is influenced by their capacity to think about their practice (Brookfield, 1995) (see 4.4).

8.3.1 *Teachers' perceptions of curricular outcomes*

Teachers expressed varying understandings of what constitutes desirable curricular outcomes for Grade R. Moira's comment (interview, 14 July), 'But we have always been outcomes-based' highlights some of the confusion relating to the implementation of the NCS, and as a consequence, Grade R. She was referring to a more traditional ECD approach (Reilly, 1983) which could be aligned to DAP (see 3.1.2) and which teachers intimated they followed. This approach refers to the holistic development of children, preparing them for life and life-long learning (Reilly, 1983). Achieving success in formal school is implicit in this approach which reflects a much deeper understanding of school preparedness than the isolated concept of school readiness (see 3.4). As interviews showed, this understanding of outcomes appeared to be the espoused theory of all participants.

Reality, however, sketches a different picture. Curricular outcomes have not been influenced by teachers' espoused beliefs of how children learn but rather by a singular interpretation of the NCS (see 7.3.1). For example, Fatima's remark (interview 15 November) that children's 'concentration span increases — children work for five minutes in June and by August they can concentrate for 15 minutes' shows little understanding of DAP, children's cognitive development or the NCS.

A consequence of this lack of insight has, in most schools, led to the endorsement of traditional academic knowledge (i.e. that which overtly teaches the acquisition of reading, writing and arithmetic) supported by the concomitant LOs and ASs. The end result is that many of the developmental norms and LOs and ASs that collectively support the notion of holistic development have been overlooked (see 3.2.1).

For example, not a single participant alluded to the fundamental democratic principles underpinning the NCS and the constitutional imperatives of working towards a just and equitable society. Likewise, few teachers referred to outcomes supporting Life Orientation.
During the interview (27 August) Gloria commented, 'Life skills, we need to teach safety, the environment is not safe. People live in terrible conditions; the children are sick and its basic things like hand washing and good hygiene that children need to learn'. Yet, during my observations (26-28 August), no attempt was made to meet these outcomes either through teacher-guided activities or through making use of incidental learning opportunities that occur during, for example, routines (see 8.4.2).

There are many possible explanations for this narrow interpretation of the NCS. One explanation attributes the problem to conflicting policy documents (see 2.2.2). On the one hand, White Paper no. 5 (DoE, 2001a) (see 2.2.3) articulates a traditional developmental approach concomitant with DAP. Yet, on the other hand, the interpretation of NCS and directives emanating from the Foundation Phase assessment documents (DoE. 2008b) reinforce the perception of a singular Grade R aim, namely school readiness. Another possible explanation could be that teachers feel increasing pressure to conform to the NCS. Research results (see chapter 6) validate Anning's (1991) and Goldstein's (2006) findings, (see 4.2.4) which showed that pressure to conform emanates from the Education Department, school principals, HoDs, Grade 1 teachers and parents (see 9.4 and 9.5). A third possibility could be teachers' constructions of children as needy and helpless reproducers of a fixed, predetermined body of knowledge that is taught to them by the more competent teacher (see 7.3). Furthermore, during interviews a number of participants (for example, Nandi (BS, 22 July), Ella (BS, 23 July), Mrs Areff (FM, 15 November), Fatima (FM, 15 November), Amelia (YB, 23 October) and Emily (LS, 30 July) acknowledged that they have had limited, if any, training in the implementation of the NCS. They admitted that they lack a deep understanding of this document and found its implementation challenging. This could result in prescriptive, teacher-directed programmes. Helena (RPS, 24 September), on the other hand, admitted that she had attended many workshops and there had been many opportunities to become familiar with the document. Despite this deeper understanding, however, the NCS remained narrowly interpreted.

In short, despite teachers' acknowledging the importance of goals relating to holistic development and lifelong learning, these have been subsumed by the implementation of a technocratic curriculum (Cornbleth, 1990) (see 1.7.2) which reinforces mainstream middle class

norms and ideals and an assimilation model of education (see 4.3.1 and 7.3.2) where the notion of a universal child (however unwittingly) applies (3.2.3). Furthermore, international research findings that Grade R outcomes should have a specific focus on social and personal development (Ramey & Ramey, 1998); Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; QSA, 2006) were not considered (see 3.3.2).

8.3.2 *Choosing curricular content*

As previously mentioned, teachers in this study agreed that they followed a developmentally appropriate approach. From a DAP perspective the idea of an emergent curriculum based on the children's interests is desirable (Vander Wilt & Monroe, 1998). It is an educationally sound way of implementing the daily programme and of choosing content. This approach based on the children's interests provides a familiar context for them, and children's interests become a useful point of departure (see 4.3.2) enabling the class to explore new and exciting ideas within a coherent, integrated framework. An alternative is to adopt a thematic approach towards content selection. Themes, if thoughtfully and collaboratively chosen are also able to offer exciting learning opportunities which can be appropriately contextualised for children.

To be successful, both approaches are dependent upon teachers who have a clear idea of what they want to achieve, are familiar with the curriculum content as well as preschool methodologies and know how to implement a high quality integrated daily programme (3.2). Taking cognisance of children's individual contexts is also essential. In other words, teachers ought to have a rich and deep understanding of practice as well as of the theory that drives practice (Christie, 2008). And, according to McLaren (2003:85), an 'understanding of the power/knowledge relationship raises important issues regarding the types of theories educators should work with and what knowledge they can provide in order to empower students'.

A thematic approach to curriculum implementation

In this study, all schools adopted a thematic approach. However, there are vast differences in the efficacy of implementation and these differences could be aligned in part with the economic status of the school and/or the qualifications of the teachers. In many schools according to the teachers (for example, BS FDB, LS and YB), themes are sometimes decided upon a year in advance or the same themes appear to be regurgitated year after year with little thought to changing either content or teaching approach. As Mac Naughton (2003:177) notes, teachers act

as 'cultural gatekeepers of what children should know'. The teachers' approach to choosing themes was similar to Anning's (1998:305) findings in the UK that:

> Early childhood educators' espoused views of child-centred education… has often been an idealised, teacherly version of what interests and motivates young children… Common themes include topics such as 'People who help us' and 'Animals in Spring'.

Little cognisance was taken of topics that might indicate the consuming interests of children. When I probed (interviews) how theme topics were chosen and then unpacked to provide an underpinning framework, many teachers were vague and hard-pressed to give an answer. There appeared to be little awareness of how to deal with thematic content and integrate it into the learning day. Most of the teachers did not appear to reflect too deeply on issues relating to curriculum planning. Only a few participants, Alison (JH), Naomi (JH) Liz (EP) and Moira (EP) engaged with Jordan's (2009) notion that they should be willing to find out more about the content and develop excellent dialogue skills (see 3.3.3).

During interviews Alison (JH, 30 September), Liz (EP, 16 July) and Maureen (EP, 16 July) mentioned that if schools adopted a thematic approach teachers needed to have in-depth knowledge relating to the theme in order to ensure appropriate choice and delivery of content. But Alison noted, 'One can always research theme content, you just have to do it.' These teachers also agreed that they needed knowledge that enabled them to mediate relevant content and to offer a meaningful, integrated learning programme to the children. Busi and June (JP, 14 August) suggested that it was important to interrogate the theme and consider questions like 'what am I to do' and 'how am I to do it'?

However, there was no indications that choice of content was examined for ways in which social realities might be (mis) represented nor did it attempt to deepen understandings of how the world is constructed (McLaren, 2003). The assumption was that knowledge was value free and dominant knowledge was taught without being questioned (Giroux, 1988) (see 4.3.1).

Alison, in particular, said (field notes, 30 September) she wanted more input on science. She said, 'Teachers need to be reading up, going to workshops, having in-service training.' The others concurred. Apart from theme content knowledge, Alison (JH), Busi (JP), June (JP), Mary (YB), Liz, Brenda and Maureen (EP) stated that a broad general knowledge was essential for any teacher of young children because, within the course of a day, children asked any number of

questions and teachers had to be able to respond correctly. As Alison commented, 'teachers cannot be ignorant'.

During interviews teachers agreed that content knowledge could be obtained through books and the internet. Yet few schools, certainly not those which are disadvantaged, have well equipped libraries that are especially suited to meet the needs of a Grade R teacher. Few Grade R teachers have access to the internet. At Jabulani (interview 14 August), staff suggested a way of increasing their own knowledge base would be through reading newspapers and watching television programmes such as current affairs and National Geographic. But faced with current constraints (see 2.2.6), teachers rarely have adequate content knowledge. Under these circumstances it is difficult for teachers to engage with the notion of empowerment where they would not only help children to engage with the world around them but also create the necessary conditions to enable children to strive for 'self-determination in the larger society' (McLaren, 2003:86).

8.3.3 *Planning the curriculum*

Only a few teachers, mainly those from the more advantaged schools, (EP, JH, RPS) mentioned that knowledge of ECD, being aware of what they were doing in the classroom and knowing what influenced their learning outcomes enabled them to deliver high quality programmes (see 8.3.2). Alison suggested 'being creative… this is a higher order thinking skill.' She went on, 'The Grade R teacher needs to be sensitive to parents, staff, children, to be able to pick up what is going on around you, academics are not so important… the teacher needs to be prepared, needs to juggle, integrate.' Alison's remarks resonate with what is known about DAP (see 3.2.1) and the importance of the teacher in implementing high quality programmes (see 1.7.1).

Written planning enables teachers to clarify their ideas and plot a possible learning pathway for children. It also enables the teachers to draw out the type of knowledge and skills they would like to share with children. Teachers have an opportunity to ensure they are familiar with the (theme) content and they have the opportunity to plan an integrated learning programme incorporating many different learning strategies (1.7.1 &3.2.1). Evidence of planning was variable. Teachers in more advantaged schools provided evidence of in-depth planning for the week, showing coherent planning for all teacher-guided activities. The day had an anticipated structure and sequencing of activities. In fact teachers at EP, JH and RPS said their principals checked their planning once a week. This was not viewed as a regulatory or limiting practice by these teachers but rather as an affirming, collaborative practice through which ideas and challenges could be

addressed (see 9.3.4). As Nias et al. (1992) assert, heads of schools play a vital role in promoting collaborative curriculum development amongst their staff.

During the interview (14 August) Busi and June (JP) confirmed the importance of planning and being aware of how and what is happening during the day. Ironically it is their new found knowledge of OBE and the NCS that they feel has had a positive impact on their practice. They, in response to questions about *how would they describe themselves as teachers* and *has this changed in any way over the last decade* said, 'How we use LOs and ASs. The NCS has made us put things in order. Before it was okay but now we have more order. We have a much better idea of what we are teaching.' And the Director of their NGO attested to this fact (conversation held on 12 August). In this school there was improved lesson planning and play opportunities were being presented with greater insight than before the implementation of the NCS. Though more order meant a tighter structuring of the daily programme and a greater emphasis on measurable assessment standards, it negated the 'anything goes' approach that is often visible in so-called play-based approaches towards teaching and learning (see 3.2.1).

In fact, this situation highlights the current South African challenge of implementing the NCS within an appropriate play-based paradigm. A possible solution to this impasse is to empower teachers. According to Ayers (1987), the notion of empowerment entails having a voice and recognising the richness and diversity of heritage and being informed about the subject or discipline. Ayers (1987) views empowerment as an antidote to the notion of a single narrow excellence in education that is measured by standardized tests and assessment standards.

Perhaps it was this drive to measure excellence that led to Fatima's (FM) planning consisting predominately of worksheets which were given to the children to complete on a daily basis. She commented that her insights into technology had been helpful and motivating and that she would like to introduce more technology into the classroom. However, during the interview (15 November), she was not able to expand on how this would happen. She had designed the worksheets that the children were currently using so I was left with the impression that technology would be used along these lines. Yet technology does not have to be prescriptive. As Yelland et al. (2008:1) comment, children's 'lives are digital and they communicate in a variety of modes with myriad materials that are made of bits and bytes.' The technological era requires teachers to reconceptualise forms of communication that are essential for effective learning in today's world. Apart from Fatima, embracing technology is another dimension of practice that was rarely mentioned by teachers.

The teachers also mentioned the importance of some type of collaboration, the need to confer with other ECD teachers (EP, FM, JP) to ensure that 'you are on the right track.' These attitudes resonate with Nias's (1987) findings of teachers wanting support to affirm their practice (see 4.2.3).

There were also teachers who did almost no planning. Ella openly said (interview, 23 July) that with all the new curriculum demands 'there is no time for planning'. Sally and Gloria were involved in the yearly planning of work schedules[45] but there was little evidence of daily lesson planning. Planning appeared to be based on ad hoc information and assumptions. In these circumstances, when teachers themselves have little idea of what they are doing it is difficult to engage children in purposeful learning Jordan, 2009) (see 3.3.2).

There are, of course, many reasons for some teachers' apparent inability to plan a theme. In part, this could be due to the *apartheid s*ystem of education (previously discussed in 2.2) that disadvantaged the majority of the current adult population and the majority of Grade R teachers (DoE, 2001 – see 2.2 and 2.2.3). As one community-orientated principal, Amelia, (during the interview, 23 October), suggested teachers themselves need to have many experiences that fall outside the gamut of the classroom if they are to be empowered to implement exciting and contextually relevant learning programmes for the children they teach. This is a challenge for Departments of Education. Teachers require more than a quick-fix methodology course or a workshop on implementing LOs and ASs if they are to make a difference in the classroom.

8.3.4 *HOW TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CURRICULUM INFORM PRACTICE*

DAP outlines a particular approach towards teaching and learning which suggests a specific role for teachers (see 3.2.1) as facilitators and sometimes mediators of the learning process (Gordon & Browne, 2008). This role is informed by a keen understanding of children, the selection of content (see 8.3.2), and choice of methodologies and resources.

[45] Work schedules were introduced by the GDE to outline the work to be covered during the term. In the FP a work schedule is written for each of the three Learning Programmes. Work schedules comprise LOs, ASs, brief outlines of the topic(s), methodologies and resources to be used. Teachers appeared to be using these as lesson plans (WSoE, 2009). They did not, however, give a detailed outline of particular activities or lessons; rather they provided an overview of what work should be covered during the day, the week and the term.

In this section I explore how teachers' understandings of curriculum impact on their practice. I first consider how these insights influence their management of the learning environment and then how these insights influence the implementation of the programme. This analysis is informed by the six dimensions of effective pedagogy that have been identified in the Australian study, *In Teachers' Hands* and framed the research instrument (see 5.4.1).

8.3.5 *Managing the learning environment*

It is never easy to classify or compartmentalise data, especially not within an ECD context which promotes an integrated approach towards teaching and learning (see 3.2). However, for the purpose of clarity I have categorised inanimate factors such as position, size and arrangement of classroom and resources as having the greatest impact on teachers' successful management of the learning environment. As with any classification system there will be aspects that do not fit neatly into any particular category. At the same time I am aware that this is a rather modernist approach to the classification of data based on a dominant western view of ECD practice.

In DAP, both the indoor and outdoor environment should provide positive learning experiences for the children (Gordon & Brown, 2008) and each will be considered separately. Adherence to the published daily programme and the children's responses to classroom activities and routines suggested that the learning environment was predictable and that the day progressed in an orderly manner. However, in many instances it became evident that learning possibilities and constraints were linked to the teachers' management of the learning environment.

Use of space: positioning, size and layout of classrooms

There were glaring differences in how classrooms were positioned, in classroom size and use of space. These differences could be related to three factors, whether these schools were free standing or public schools, the socioeconomic contexts of the school and the teachers' qualifications.

Free-standing schools[46]

Observations showed that in these schools the Grade R classroom(s) were generally favourably positioned. Children had easy access to both bathroom facilities and the outdoor play areas. Yet,

[46] Free-standing schools are community-based stand-alone schools and included Jacaranda Heights, Bertha Solomon, Little Stars, Young Beginnings and Jabulani. Though Witwatersrand Islamic School and Egret Park are not stand-alone schools (they are part of a wider school infrastructure), their position in relation to the 'parent school' supports their inclusion into this category.

despite this position, the indoor/outdoor flow was strictly regulated by the teachers. Jacaranda Heights was the only school where children were afforded the option of choosing between inside and outside play. Apart from encouraging active learning, this is also one way of supporting children to regulate their own behaviour (see 7.4.3).

Indoor environments

Observations showed that classrooms were spacious (the exceptions being Jabulani (8 October), where children were housed in a caravan and Little Stars (29 July), where the church hall was used by three groups of children). Thought had been given to the classroom layout so that the use of space was maximised. Children were able to move easily around the classrooms and during child-initiated activities they could choose from a variety of learning materials. These learning materials — educational toys, puzzles, blocks etc. (see table 6.2) were positioned in such a way that they were readily accessible to the children and supported a more informal approach towards teaching and learning.

Most of the indoor learning environments had the potential to offer rich learning opportunities but these opportunities were not always realised. Observations (22 July) showed Bertha Solomon, for example, had ample space and resources. Despite attempts at painting the walls a bright colour (pink) the classroom remained somewhat uninviting. The interest table did not encourage interactive learning, the book corner was untidy. Books were torn and broken with no attempt made to repair them.

An example of a theme table

Books were not always suitable for the children. A book with no illustrations does not encourage Grade R children to 'read'. The shelves which housed the educational toys were cluttered; games were not packed away and consequently pieces were broken or lost. This type of environment does not encourage purposeful, interactive learning. Children soon become distracted and begin, for example, to play roughly with each other. Inevitably children hurt each other, discipline problems arise and the teacher adopts an even greater regulatory stance. Similar situations were observed at Little Stars (29-30 July), FDB 26-28 August) and Jabulani (12-14 August) where, in addition, space was a constraining factor. Despite the best efforts of the teachers, learning opportunities were restricted in these environments. Teachers did little to mediate or even facilitate play opportunities. Teachers viewed themselves as supervisors rather than facilitators of play (see 3.3.3). Play was seen as 'busy' time. Consequently many valuable opportunities for holistic development and learning were lost.

In the advantaged schools (EP, 14-16 July) & JH, 30 September -1 October), observations showed that children were given more opportunities to select activities and to play cooperatively with each other. Resources were plentiful and in a good state of repair. The learning environments were much more enticing and there is no doubt that children were engaged in meaningful learning.

Child–initiated play

In this type of environment, teachers could perhaps have played a greater mediatory role in helping children to co-construct meaning (Jordan, 2009) (see 3.3). This was not really evident, with the exception of Alison (JH, observation 30 September) and, at times, Liz (EP, observation,

15 July) who asked open-ended questions and mediated learning through appropriate suggestions. For example, 'What do you think will happen if you place that large block on top of this rather wobbly structure'?

Outdoor environments

All free-standing schools had access to reasonably spacious and well equipped outdoor play areas (see table 6.2). In some schools (JH, EP, JP and YB), additional play resources were added daily to extend learning opportunities. For example, water play was varied (YB, observation 20 October), different toys were added to the sandpit (JH,observation 1 October) or a soccer ball, or cricket bat and ball was offered to the boys (EP, 16 July). In the other three free-standing schools, standard outdoor play opportunities were offered daily during free play, but few additional activities were provided. At Bertha Solomon, for example, Ella said, 'We are meant to put out the wheel toys today but….' As mentioned in chapter 6, Ella was working under difficult circumstances and was the least motivated of all the participants in the study. This is perhaps one explanation for being unable to maximise outdoor play opportunities for the children.

Public schools

In the public schools, learning was constrained by the classroom size (Rissik) or the positioning of the Grade R classrooms[47], usually in the middle of the FP block, close to the ablution blocks. This location seemingly necessitated that the Grade R programme followed the FP timetable closely. This meant two short breaks (10 -15 minutes) in the mornings which limited opportunities for free play and resulted in a structured programme based on the primary school timetable. Another disadvantage of this positioning was that playgrounds were not easily accessible and play resources were limited.

Indoor environment

Grade R classrooms were a reasonable size (WSoE, 2009) and could accommodate the children, provided there was no overcrowding. Rissik was an exception, being a smaller prefabricated classroom built especially to accommodate the Grade R year (see 6.2.6). In most classrooms there were sufficient tables and chairs to accommodate children and where these were insufficient, for example, Thembani, Sally made use of alternative strategies to alleviate possible problems. Children were, for example, placed in groups and each group had to take a turn to sit on the floor. However, this becomes a rather teacher-regulated strategy instead of allowing

[47] Though this applied to only two schools in this study (FDB and Thembani), positioning the Grade R classrooms next to an ablution block is common in public schools (WSoE, 2009).

children to make some of their own choices. Having, for example, free choice multilevel activities or encouraging an indoor-outdoor flow could have been another way of managing the situation while at the same time allowing children to make some of their own decisions.

Good use was made of indoor space and independent learning became a possibility. Classrooms were adequately resourced and there were a variety of learning areas. The choice of learning areas was based on the NCS (see 2.2.2) so there were always literacy, numeracy and life skills learning corners. In addition, other learning activity areas such as an educational toy area and a fantasy corner were evident with resources placed within easy reach of the children.

However, despite there being adequate resources, observations showed that classrooms had a suitably-sized storeroom in which many learning materials were stored, the possibilities of rich play-based learning opportunities that could promote active learning and provide opportunities for children to make their own choices were often negated. Either the resources offered were frequently not sufficiently challenging or insufficient learning resources were offered to the children. There were simply not enough stimulating activities to purposefully engage all children in the learning process.

Outdoor environment

Observations showed that neither did outdoor free play provide children with rich learning opportunities. Despite teachers (Sally (JP), Gloria (FDB) and Helena (RP) and principals (Mrs Nkosi (JP), Mr November (FDB) and Mrs Ferreira (RP) acknowledging, during the interviews, the importance of play, meaningful outdoor play was not a reality in the public schools participating in this study. Time and place determined how free play was implemented. The playgrounds were not easily accessible and at times were untidy and unkempt. In FDB and Thembani, Grade R children joined the rest of the school for break. There was little supervision and Grade R children's play was restricted by the presence of older primary school children who dominated the available outdoor space. Break was tea time for teachers and a time when children did not have lessons. No purposeful learning took place during the school breaks, reinforcing the notion of a didactic, primary school curriculum (see 3.4).

Minimal outdoor play equipment was available. At Rissik, observations of the time table revealed sufficient time was allocated to play but because play was not viewed as a rich learning experience it was no more than a break from the classroom activities. Few additional resources were provided. Play was supervised by an assistant, as this time was Helena's 'free period'; – or

time to catch up on administrative and other duties. Play was left to chance (Wood, 2008 see 2.3.1).

Concluding remarks

Managing the learning environment is an important indicator of effective practice (see 1.7.1). Yet observations showed that few teachers provided evidence that they were able to manage this environment effectively, in a way that maximised children's learning. The most striking observation emanating from the analysis of the learning environment was teachers' understandings of play. Despite teachers agreeing that children were not moving enough (see 7.3.3) and stressing the importance of learning though play (field notes), outdoor free play in particular did not appear to be valued by teachers and it was not supported in practice. Play was something that was offered to children with little consideration of how to entice or challenge them to play meaningfully and little thought was given to the appropriateness of learning resources or contexts (see 3.3.3). This finding concurs with those of Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) and Christmas (2005), who note that play remains misunderstood and poorly implemented in early years' education. This rich resource was not viewed as a valuable learning opportunity for children. Most teachers lacked rich insights into their roles as mediators of play and were challenged in some instances to provide meaningful play opportunities for the children. Neither was play viewed as a means of helping active or restive children regulate their own behaviour or as a helpful discipline strategy (see 7.4.3). Furthermore, observations showed that teachers demonstrated a minimal appreciation of how to use play to promote issues relating to equity and social justice (see 7.4 and 8.3.1). And certainly no consideration was given to which children might be privileged by play opportunities and which children silenced (2.2.1). In short, the espoused theories are not the same as the theories-in-use (see 4.4 and teachers showed little insight into contemporary understandings of play (3.3.3).

8.3.6 *Teachers' perceptions of their practice: Implementing the programme*

All participants claimed to follow a developmental approach. Therefore assumptions underpinning DAP informed the analysis of teachers' perceptions of their practice. I examine teachers' insights into planning and implementing the day. I explore their understanding in relation to actively engaging the children in learning opportunities and in supporting the children's learning during the Grade R day. This analysis is informed by data collected during observations and interviews. It is also worth considering what was *not* observed or mentioned

and therefore did not appear to be significant to teachers. During the analysis it became apparent that factors relating to high quality practice were more visible in the more advantaged schools. This could be attributed in part to teacher qualifications (see 2.2.6) and to informed leadership (in that the principals were trained in ECD - see 9.3.4)

Planning and implementing the day: orderly and predictable

During the interviews teachers said they followed a planned structure which was displayed in all classrooms as a timetable or daily programme (see 3.2.1). Though all written programmes indicated a balanced and flexible school day, observations revealed that this was not always the case. It was clear that there were structures in place making provision for teacher-guided/directed activities, routines and free play. There were, however, vast individual differences in how the programmes were realised. I suggest that these differences can be explained by teachers' perceptions of children (see chapter 7), demands from other school personnel (see 9.3) and an understanding (or lack thereof) of why teachers are doing what they are doing; in other words, understanding the theory behind their practice.

Active participation: engaging the children in learning opportunities

Children all participated in learning, at least for part of the morning. The extent to which children remained engaged appeared to reflect how the teacher managed the learning environment (see 8.4.1), the type of resources on offer and how different activities were facilitated and/or mediated.

Teacher-guided/directed activities

Whole group activities were offered by all teachers but many of these activities were more teacher-directed (RPS, JPS, TPS, LS, than guided (EP- Liz, JH, BS). Teachers were able to gain children's attention at the onset of an activity, but in particular instances (often in the more disadvantaged schools) (LS, TPS, FDB, JPS) it proved difficult to engage the children for the duration of the activity. Learning activities did not appear to be sufficiently stimulating. Possibilities of creating rich, stimulating, interactive teacher-children learning opportunities were often glossed over or ignored altogether by the teachers. Discussions, for example, were decontextualised (no connection was made between the children's interests, life world and the topic being discussed – see for example, JPS 6.2.7) and some teachers were seemingly not able to maximise the learning potential of the available resources. This perhaps confirms what Amelia said about needing to grow the teachers themselves (see 6.2.4). Opportunities for sustained

shared thinking (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009) were absent. In Freier's (2003:57) words, 'education becomes an act of deposition, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher the depositors.'

In one school the theme was 'Wild Animals'. There were a few plastic wild animals on the interest table[48]. The teacher spoke about the stripes on the zebra, yet no attempt was made to pick up the plastic toy zebra and initiate a discussion with children. There were no visual aids such as pictures to support the teacher's description of animals living in the wild. Children, some of whom did not speak the LoLT, became bored and restive, and little, if any, learning took place.

At another school, the teacher had a protracted whole group activity (field notes). It began with a bible story (there was no consideration of alternative beliefs), was followed by a language ring (the teacher did most of the talking) and then a numeracy activity. Little attempt was made to place these activities into a meaningful context for the children or to actively engage children through suggestions or open-ended questioning. In addition, the LoLT was not the home language of the majority of children. Though the teacher tried to support children who were clearly not following the discussion, this was unsuccessful. After the completion of the teacher-directed activities, children stood and sang songs for about 30 minutes. The children certainly knew many songs in different languages but the learning value of any of the activities I observed was questionable. During the singing, children who were part of the school feeding scheme were told to go and fetch their 'lunch'. They returned to the classroom, sat on the floor and ate. The other children continued singing. Once the singing was completed, the remaining children were told to take out their lunch boxes, sit down and eat. No thought was given to a hand washing routine (yet this was a school where the teacher mentioned illness and lack of good hygiene as being problematic). No further teacher-directed/guided activities were offered during the day. When I queried if children would be told a story before home time the reply was that the story had been read during the morning ring. The remainder of the day was allocated to indoor free play, after a ten- minute break. In reality, this was nothing more than 'busy' time'. Many children appeared to be bored and disinterested in the activities. Necessary conditions for the implementation of effective pedagogy (see 1.7.1) such as participation, in-depth teacher

[48] An interest or theme table is a display of items illustrating the theme. It promotes interactive learning and helps to contextualize the learning content for the child. Pictures and posters depicting related theme content should also be displayed.

knowledge, learning support and differentiation reflecting different levels of challenge were absent from many classrooms.

Yet in other schools, discussions were rich and lively. Teachers appeared to gain and hold the children's attention and offered children exciting learning opportunities. Teachers working in the more advantaged schools, appeared to be more familiar with relevant content knowledge and were able, for example, to provide exciting and stimulating resources relating to the themes, integrate and extend a theme discussion by linking it to a broader learning context and answer questions that were asked by the children. I observed some excellent language rings as well as perception, movement and music rings. Alison (JH) did a superb music ring and Mary's (YB) movement ring offered alternative learning experiences. Ella (BS) facilitated a discussion ring that opened possibilities for learning.

Yet some teachers, (Brenda and Maureen (EP), still adopted a teacher-directed approach, telling rather than discussing, and asking predominately close-ended questions suggesting a questionable understanding and implementation of appropriate ECD methodologies and perhaps, as suggested by Anning, 1991; 2006 (see 4.2.4), a poor understanding of theoretical constructs.

I witnessed few story rings. In some schools, for example, Thembani, this ring appears to have been replaced by 'book education' which seemingly teaches children how to look after books. This is necessary but surely not every day and it should not be the focus of the story ring. In some of the more advantaged schools, phonics lessons have eroded story time (EP, JH). Teachers did lots of telling but very few managed to hold the children's attention with a well told, appropriate story. As Freier (2003:63) comments, 'In the name of preservation of culture and knowledge... the system achieves neither true knowledge nor true culture.'

Creative art activities

Creativity is seen as a broad characteristic that pervades many areas of child development (see 7.3.4). Within a developmental approach, creativity in young children is often associated with artistic expression, possibly because children's art products are tangible; they reflect planning, perceptual and conceptual development and communication skills (Charlesworth, 1987). There is an increasing recognition of the close relationship between art and the development of early literacy and numeracy skills. Pictures, for example, inspire verbal descriptions, drawing develops alongside writing and mathematical concepts such as patterns and shapes can be promoted

through creative art activities (Carruthers & Worthington, 2006; Saracho & Spodek, 2008). Children usually enjoy creative art activities immensely as they provide an opportunity for experimenting, exploring and self-expression in a safe environment.

Creative art activities should take place every day in a developmentally appropriate programme (see 3.2.1). The rationale is that every child should be purposefully engaged with some activity either by themselves or cooperatively with other children. In other words, there is an inviting play space for all children in the class. No children (unless they so chose) should be left sitting, waiting for their turn to participate in a particular activity. In this type of environment, children are engaged and unruly behaviour is minimised (see 7.4.3.).

However, in practice, it seems as if few teachers were able to offer creative activities in this way. Creative art activities were often not stimulating or challenging and did not engage the children's interest for any length of time. Art activities often included the completion of worksheets or workbooks (RPS, TPS, YB, Ls, BS, FM) which encouraged neither choice nor creativity.

Colouring in their workbook

Children were viewed as adaptable, manageable beings whose creative bent was minimized. Children were often told what activity they must do and frequently how to do it. Opportunities for choice and creativity were limited. As Freier (2003) notes, this is a teaching approach which dichotomizes the teacher-child relationship, inhibits creative power, fails to challenge children and results in 'docile listeners' (p.64).

In keeping with a child-centred pedagogical approach during or after completion of art activities, children should be able to play in a learning corner/area of their choice, for example, the book or fantasy corner or with blocks or other educational toys (see 7.4 and 8.4.1). Observations showed that in the more disadvantaged schools (for example, Young Beginnings, Little Stars and Thembani), these corners were not sufficiently inviting, the resources were limited or inappropriate (for example, the choice was between a four- or 200-piece puzzle). Consequently children became bored and restless. It became evident that some teachers were not able to optimise the many and varied learning opportunities that presented themselves during the day or to make use of teachable moments. Children were being 'kept busy' rather than afforded rich learning opportunities to explore and expand their knowledge. Seemingly, many teachers had little insight into what constitutes effective teaching practices (see 3.3.2 - Newman et.al, 1996; Commonwealth of Australia, 2005; WSoE, 2009).

Routine times

Viewed from a psychosocial orientation, routines become everyday activities happening at more or less regular times and provide children with a sense of safety and security (Hendrick, 1992). Within this consistent environment, children feel emotionally more secure and are therefore more able to reach out, explore and take some responsibility for their own learning (Hildebrand, 1993). Other social conventions, for example, table manners and behaviours that lead to independence could also be reinforced during routine times (Gordon & Browne, 2008; Spodek et al., 1991). In fact, routine times are part of the learning day and should offer both incidental and planned learning opportunities.

During interviews teachers emphasised the importance of routine in children's lives both at home and at school with Gloria (FDB), Mrs Areff (FM), Helena (RPS) and Mary (YB) openly stating 'they need routines.' Helena said, 'Children no longer have routines. *We* are expected to teach these'.

In most schools, however, routines, such as toilet and snack routines, were not used as productive teaching time where for example, health, hygiene, nutrition as well as literacy and numeracy concepts could be actively promoted in a more informal learning context. Spontaneous opportunities for 'intellectual stretch' — which refers to teachers spontaneously identifying a teachable moment and using it to extend children's learning, have been constrained or at least under-utilised. These lost opportunities are distressing, as many of the teachers remarked that children come from homes where routines of this nature are neither taught nor

reinforced (see 8.3.1). Alison was the only teacher who maximised the learning opportunities presented by routines (observations 30 September & 1 October).

Furthermore, teachers acknowledged the value of routines for supporting social and emotional development. They become another way of encouraging characteristics such as independence, cooperation and turn taking as well as learning dispositions (see 1.7.1; 7.3.1 & 7.4.1) such as courage and confidence (Riley, 2003; Bruce, 2006). Yet as Ayers, 1987:91) comments, 'A teacher cannot convey and model courage with timidity and confidence with diffidence'. If the teachers don't model these dispositions, how are children expected to acquire them? Perhaps teachers' inability to implement routines effectively is because they do not perceive themselves as having sufficient voice and agency (Nias, 1985; Anning, 1991) (see 4.2.4) and therefore are not able to foreground what they deem to be important learning and ways of learning in Grade R.

8.3.7 *Supporting children's learning: methodologies, discipline and social justice*

Supporting children's learning refers to the ways in which teachers structure children's learning to assist children in their learning endeavours (see 3.3.2). Many of the factors supporting learning have already been discussed, such as managing the learning environment (8.4.1) and encouraging interactive learning (see 8.4.2).

During my observations only two teachers, Alison (JH) and Liz (EP) demonstrated the ability to mediate learning content, rather than teach content. They tended to ask more probing questions that encouraged children to reason and to solve problems and provided for 'intellectual stretch' or possibly what Siraj-Blatchford (2009) refers to as sustained shared thinking Most teachers mentioned that they had a good understanding of appropriate methodologies and were able to support interactive learning. Yet all teachers suggested they would like practical, hands-on workshops to give them more ideas on how to implement various teacher-guided activities (rings) such as art, music and science. During interviews teachers recognised the importance of creative arts, music and movement in the programme which, again, suggests a more holistic, open-ended approach towards learning. However, as observations showed, at most schools these activities did not appear to be an integral part of the Grade R day. Brenda captured this sentiment well when she stated, 'With all the curricula demands, there is little time for these [traditional preschool rings] activities' (field notes, 15 July).

Many teachers especially those who implemented less stimulating programmes, expressed the desire for more training on alternative discipline strategies to implement better classroom control. They acknowledged that the children's behaviour was often challenging and that they reverted to inhibitory disciplining strategies (see 7.4.3). Yet few considered that programmes lacking in rich learning opportunities were the source of the problem. A didactic model (see 3.4.1) appears to be replacing 'hands-on' learning, despite the fact that there were plenty of opportunities for children to engage with concrete (three dimensional) learning materials, which could have supported their learning. Furthermore, few teachers considered that good classroom practice is underpinned by a rich understanding of children's social, cultural and language context (see 7.4.3). Seemingly, teachers did not consider issues relating to diversity and social justice (see 8.5.2).

Teachers' perceptions of observation and assessment

I did not specifically focus on observation and assessment strategies during this research study but given the current emphasis on assessment strategies (Anning et al. (2009) no discussion of classroom practice would be complete without a consideration of these. In addition, in response to research questions three and five namely, '*What, according to the teacher, is her role in a preschool context in supporting young children's growth, development, thinking and learning*? and '*What alternative strategies could be identified by teachers for improving practice?*' teachers mentioned assessment standards and many participants, for example, EP, RPS, TPs, JP and BS indicated that assessment pressures were influencing pedagogical practices and decisions. Furthermore, from my observations and interviews (LS, TPS, JP, FDB) it became clear that many teachers, especially those working in the more disadvantaged schools, were struggling with observation and assessment.

As current approaches to early childhood education have moved towards a sociocultural approach to assessment Fleer & Richardson (2009) remark that assessment practices have tended to stay within a " Piagetian framework' (p.130). This appeared to be the case in this research project. Teachers appeared to show little awareness of the shift in current assessment practices to move the lens away from the individual to the group (Fleer & Richardson, 2009).

In most schools, the workbook (LS, TPS, RPS, BS, FDB, FM, YB) appeared to be the most frequent assessment tool used by teachers (see 7.3.2). There was an over-emphasis on workbook assessments and consequently on assessing cognitive ability (and concomitant LOs and ASs

informing the literacy and numeracy Learning Programmes) rather than a holistic focus on all areas of development. Egret Park and Jacaranda Heights were the exceptions.

There was minimal evidence (based on observations) that assessment is continuous and that children are assessed in a number of different contexts, not only during teacher-guided/directed activities. Free play, for example, can provide a teacher with excellent opportunities for observing social and emotional development (Fleer & Richardson, 2009). Behavioural aspects such as 'turn taking' or 'being able to share' can be informally assessed in a 'true-to-life' context.

In a traditional preschool and, I would argue, in the Grade R context assessment would be ongoing; a number of developmental aspects relating to the total child would be observed and different types of assessment strategies would be utilised (Anning et al., 2009). Insightful teachers would realise that it was not possible to be totally objective and recognise their own biases. This requires that teachers reflect constantly upon their practice (Brookfield, 1995) and ask themselves probing questions about what they are doing and why they are doing it (see 4.4). In this study there was scant evidence apart from Busi (JP), Alison (JH) and Mary (YB), that teachers reflected upon their teaching practices and made appropriate and relevant adjustments to activities (see 9.3.2).

In part, this absence of reflection-on-practice could be related to the context in which teachers worked. Many of them work alone with little support from school principals and heads of department (FDB, LS, FM, BS) (see 9.3.4). For example, Gloria (FDB) said, 'I receive minimal support from the School Management Team' and further commented 'The Principal and the HoD see Grade R as part of a crèche.' Many Grade R teachers also appeared to work in relative isolation. As Sally said, 'We would like to interact more with other Grade R teachers for ideas.' These conditions are not conducive to, nor supportive of, ongoing critical reflection, an important part of teacher development (see 4.4). As Nias, (1987); Brookfield, (1995) and Mac Naughton, (2003) contend, critical collaboration can bring different perspectives to bear on crucial issues relating to the development of teaching and learning.

8.4 *SOME CONSEQUENCES OF AN UNCRITICAL ACCEPTANCE OF PRACTICE*

Teachers' espoused theory centres on the adoption and implementation of DAP which is underpinned by a play-based informal approach towards teaching and learning. Analysis of data tells a different story.

8.4.1 *Superficial understandings of how theory informs practice*

Despite all participants agreeing that teachers need an in-depth understanding of holistic child development, many teachers in this study appeared to have a superficial understanding of young children and how they learn best. They found it difficult to support their practice in terms of specific (developmental) theories or theorists; in many instances the boundaries between theory and practice had become blurred. Without distinct understandings of the 'why' behind the 'how', they found it challenging to implement the developmentally appropriate child-centred pedagogy which they all said they practiced. And without a deep insight into theory it is difficult to embrace a pedagogical style that promotes broader pedagogical issues (McLaren, 2003). A performance discourse based on predetermined LOs and ASs dominated and certain child-centred practices appeared to be embedded in their intuitive understandings of teaching and learning (3.2.1 and 3.2.3). DAP therefore unwittingly perpetuates the views of the dominant culture (Yelland, 2005) and privileges certain ways of being and knowing that do not recognise the diverse qualities of children and their families in the global context.

Furthermore, as previously mentioned (see 8.4.1), teachers found it difficult to articulate in depth their understandings about play. This rich resource was not viewed as a valuable learning opportunity for children. The learning value of play was poorly understood and the notion of teaching through play was not considered. Play activities were often trivialised or play was often seen as 'busy time'. There was little awareness of contemporary, sometimes unsettling discourses around the notions of play (see 3.3.3) — ideas such as play being detrimental to certain children, marginalising others or reinforcing modernist perspectives of, for example, race or gender (Blaise & Yarrow, 2005). Nor did teachers reflect on their role in play and engage with such questions as 'What role should the teacher play?' and 'Should play be used for education purposes and if so whose purposes?' (Wood, 2008). Teachers have not begun to engage with these types of reflective questions.

8.4.2 *Lack of awareness of contemporary ECD issues*

Grieshaber and Cannella (2001) maintain that teachers rely on one way of thinking and understanding; this is the dominant way, namely, DAP (see 3.2). Child-centred pedagogies restrict possibilities and lead to greater oppression of children and greater reinforcement of traditional and uncritical ECD practices (Ryan, 2005). Therefore, Grieshaber and Cannella (2001) argue for teachers to rethink relationships with children in ways that recognise voice and agency, complex identities, and the struggle for social justice. This entails reconceptualising how teachers think about children and childhood and associated practices of education and care. It challenges some of the taken-for-granted ways of interpreting and practicing education. This includes work on changing notions of childhood, gender, sexuality, and identities; the commitment is to improve the lives of young children by recognising and managing early childhood practices that mirror inequalities found in the broader society (Ryan, Oshner & Genishi, 2001).

Teachers manifested little awareness of broader global issues and how new and different understandings of terms and practices have impacted ECD. These issues include different constructions of children and childhood, different understandings of culture and different approaches towards and regulation of practice.

In developed countries, institutional arrangements for young children have become increasingly important and governments are offering more overt support in the form of funding and regulations (Penn, 2009). Both infrastructure and provisioning is far more effective than in South Africa (Penn, 2009). The reality in South Africa is that provisioning is mainly in the hands of the private sector (Garcia, Pence & Evans, 2008). The models that are offered are based on practices emanating from Europe (see 2.9) and take little cognisance of local traditions and contexts that suggest these practices might be inappropriate (Penn, 2009). Penn (2009) contends issues of knowledge transfer in education and the export and import of ideas from the western world to developing countries is an area that is under researched, especially within the ECD context. Research relating to these issues is vital within the diverse South African contexts. For example, Penn (2009:57) asks 'how do ideas about child-centred practice sit alongside ideas about learning self-restraint and respect?'

As Penn (2009) suggests, the African concept of *ubuntu*[49] implies there are very different ways of bringing up children and very different values which underpin child-rearing practices. Either due

[49] *Ubuntu* favours a different understanding of childhood. Penn (2009) claims that the notion of *ubuntu* suggests that how children should act is built into the very language they speak. *Ubuntu* embraces many different concepts and prioritizes 'collective obligations over personal concerns; rootedness in a particular community rather than within a

to ignorance, or because teachers do not feel empowered to fight for alternative practices (see 3.3), dominant discourses prevail (see 3.2 and 3.4). Participants in this study did not acknowledge the concept of *ubuntu.*

Contemporary ECD discourse suggests that notions of democracy and social justice frame all ECD curricula (see 3.3 & 1.7.2). Teachers were seemingly struggling to unpack the link between the concept of democracy and its realisation in classroom practice. The promotion of 'democracy' includes an awareness of, and ability to, accommodate children's individual social, cultural, economic and historical contexts within the learning day. It would also consider factors such as fairness, tolerance and an awareness of the needs of others (Reardon, 1995). This awareness was not obvious. It seemed apparent that in most classroom environments, the teacher was very much in control, and a didactic or authoritarian management style was observed reinforcing the notion of the universal child and 'one size fits all' (see 3.2.3). Supporting behaviour through offering choices, encouraging children to take responsibility for their own behaviour and choices, as well as the promotion of social problem-solving skills and conflict resolution was not common practice. The notion of giving children a voice and agency in their own lives has seemingly not yet been embraced by the teachers (see 7.3 and 7.4).

I would argue that, if education through democracy is to be realised in the classroom, it must be both explicitly and implicitly promoted throughout the day, and it should permeate all learning activities and opportunities. Promoting social justice and diversity in everyday interactions of the classroom would support the development in children of certain learning dispositions such as respect, trust, and self confidence (1.7.`). This ability to embrace issues related to social justice calls for self-reflective teachers who are prepared to interrogate their own philosophies of education and their pedagogical practices (see 4.4).

8.4.3 *Implementation of a technocratic curriculum*

Technical demands were prioritised, despite teachers admitting to the adoption of a traditional teaching approach. These included perceived curriculum imperatives and predetermined goals which are instrumental in nature (see 3.4). In part, this was driven by the DoE, and in part by teachers' inability to think more critically about curricula issues.

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nuclear family; independence within a community rather than dependency in an isolated family setting' (Penn, 2009:51). Furthermore, issues relating to spirituality, gender, patriarchy and gerontocracy are influenced by this concept.

Given the shift (often unwittingly) to a more instrumental practice, it was not surprising that some teachers (Brenda and Maureen (EP) stressed 'there are more learning problems than ten years ago'. Ella (BS), Busi (JP), Helena (RP) and Alison (JH) concurred. Teachers hinted that they need more insights into 'how to pick up problems'. Children were viewed through a deficit lens (see 7.3.1); deviations from the perceived norm (Dahlberg et al., 1999); and were viewed as 'problems' (see 7.3.3). Teachers proposed that 'therapy is the way to manage these learning difficulties' (Maureen, Brenda, Moira (EP). However, for some teachers, especially those working with the more socially disadvantaged groups, referrals of children for further assessment and possibly therapy were problematic (Gloria, FDB, Emil, LS). They cited lack of appropriate facilities and prohibitive costs as factors which mitigated referral.

No teachers alluded to the possibility that it might be the teaching environment or learning programme that needed adjustment (see 8.4.3), rather than the children. Though mention was made of the importance of understanding and being able to implement a flexible programme that optimised children's learning, this was not observed in most classrooms. This finding was somewhat alarming, given that White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education (DoE, 2001d) foregrounds the provisioning of differentiated learning opportunities in an attempt to accommodate all children in the classroom. Perhaps this situation is aggravated by teachers' perceptions of a normalised childhood and children who have to meet predetermined milestones (see 3.3.2).

Participants referred to demands by Grade 1 teachers to ensure that children were ready for Grade 1. Seemingly, these demands included children being able to stand in lines and in some cases being able to read and write. Ella (BS) commented 'the Grade 1 teachers expect children to be reading and Fatima (FM) asserted that 'all children do in Grade 1 is write, write, write'. The teachers at Egret Park commented that 'Grade 1 teachers like getting our children. They are prepared for 'big' school.' This comment confirms the assertions by Nias, (1985) that teachers seek positive affirmation (see 4.2.3 & 4.2.4).

Demands from primary school teachers have seemingly fuelled a more technocratic curriculum (see 3.4.1). In the cases of Fatima (FM) and Helena (RPS), the lack of communication between the Grade R and Grade 1 teachers appears to have exacerbated more formal Grade R practices. Teachers (for example, Gloria (FDB) and Sally (JP) agreed that principals' and HoDs' poor understanding of the aims of Grade R and how best to implement the Grade R programme also fuelled this more technocratic approach (see 9.3.4). In most of the disadvantaged schools, teachers were doing the best they could under (often) difficult circumstances. Research shows

that appropriately qualified teachers can and do improve the quality of the programme (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009) (see 1.7.1).

A further factor mitigating the adoption of a more informal interactive approach towards teaching and learning is, I believe, the change of nomenclature. Traditional preschools terms have been replaced with those used in the primary school. For example, my observations showed the written daily programme was labelled and referred to as the timetable and free play as break. These are small (and perhaps to most people) insignificant changes, but I would suggest that they reinforce the notion of a more structured Grade R year that adheres to the formal approach adopted by the primary school. This is of concern, as principals (Mrs Ferreira, Mr November and Mrs Nkosi) acknowledged that they have a limited understanding of both the purpose and implementation of Grade R. If they are not forced to think differently about implementation, Grade R stands the risk of becoming nothing more than a watered-down Grade 1, where the fragile goals of holistic child development and preparing the child for lifelong learning become more distant, and an instrumentalist curriculum becomes more deeply entrenched.

8.5 *CONCLUSION*

In this chapter I explored teacher's perceptions of their practice. I examined their understandings of curriculum planning and implementation. Findings revealed that teachers adopted an uncritical approach towards their practice. Their espoused theory supported a child-centred developmentally appropriate pedagogy but in reality, practice appeared to be informed by a range of taken-for-granted assumptions about practice and an instrumentalist approach towards teaching and learning. Furthermore, it was governed by a narrow understanding of developmental discourse which did not encourage teachers to reflect upon their practice and explore alternative approaches or perspectives.

In the next chapter I explore teachers' perceptions of themselves as 'professional beings'. I examine how they perceive themselves both as individuals and as teachers. I also interrogate their perceptions of parents and the community with whom they work as well as their understanding of the current Grade R situation.

CHAPTER 9: TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEMSELVES AS 'PROFESSIONAL BEINGS'

9.1 *INTRODUCTION*

In this chapter I interrogate the third theme, namely teachers' understanding of themselves as professional beings. I examine their perceptions of themselves as people and teachers and their relationships with the children, parents and the school community. I consider their understandings of, and attitudes towards, the current Grade R context. Finally, I explore those factors that teachers think would enable them to improve practice. The findings answer research questions 1, 3 and 5, namely *What is high quality/effective ECD/Grade R according to teachers?; What, according to the teacher, is her role in a preschool context in supporting young children's growth, development, thinking and learning?,* and *What alternative strategies could be identified by teachers for improving practice?*

9.2 *WHO ARE ECD/GRADE R TEACHERS?*

Being professional includes an exploration of how teachers view and understand themselves (in other words issues relating to the personal and social self (see 4.2.2) and these aspects address in particular, research questions 1 and 3; what and how children learn (see chapter 7), their practice (see chapter 8), their perceived challenges as well as identifying what helps them cope in the classroom environment which address research question 5 (see 9.3). As mentioned in 4.2.1, these core beliefs and values should not remain static but should change over time as teachers gain new perspectives from their engagement with children, their families and colleagues. They should network with various bodies such as professional associations, and other relevant organisations. And these aspects will be influenced by, and influence how, teachers perceive themselves.

According to Giddens (1991), Dahlberg et al. (1999; 2009) and Mac Naughton, (2003), the humanistic movement gave rise to the notion of a unified caring person who embraces a child-centred approach to education and sees children in terms of holistic development (see 3.2 and 7.3). Such people have what Ball and Goodson (1985) would term enduring and sustainable identities. However, Giddens (1991) and Woods and Jeffrey (2002) have questioned the notion of a single, unitary identity (see 4.2.2). They suggest that various global and education changes have forced teachers to 'reconsider their beliefs, values, roles, biographies and ambitions in ways they had not anticipated' (Woods & Jeffrey, 2002:90). Based on work done with primary teachers in the UK, Woods and Jeffrey (2002) contend that teachers' unitary identity is beginning

to become fragmented and is being replaced by multiple identities which take time and effort to reconstruct (see 4.2.2). These identities change and shift according to different discourses. And as Day and Kington (2008) note, if teachers are to stay in teaching, it is imperative to have a close connection between personal and professional identities. Yet, in the face of these challenges, primary teachers appear to have maintained a more substantial identity than their higher phase counterparts (see 4.2.3).

9.2.1 *Perceptions of their personal and professional selves*

During the interviews teachers in all the ten schools studied presented with a strong unitary identity. They agreed that their behaviour and way of being is similar both in and out of the school environment. They identified strongly with the image of 'being a good teacher' (Broadfoot,1993), even though there are aspects relating to practice (see 9.4.1), conditions of service and their status as a teacher (see 2.2.6 and 4.2.2) that are contradictory to this image. Most of the participants acknowledged, 'We are always teachers.' As Brenda (EP, interview 16 July) said, 'People can see you coming a mile away' and Liz (EP) mentioned:

> I try to have a home hat but it is difficult; my family keep on telling me to stop being a teacher. Even my children say to me 'you are not in the preschool now.'

Helena (RPS, interview 24 September) commented, 'When I go out and see, for example, children throwing litter on the floor, I stop and tell them to pick it up, always a teacher. I correct bad behaviour.' In their interview (14 August), June and Busi (JP) confessed to similar actions. They are always good teachers.

The discourse of a 'good teacher' assumes homogeneity and lends itself to stereotypes; in this case, a good, caring and nurturing individual (Cannella & Viruru, 2004), which Hargreaves (2003) equates with a paternalistic approach and suggests that it is no longer sufficient in a knowledge society (see 4.2.3). Ryan et al. (2001) contend that this nurturing discourse gives little recognition to the intellectual work required on the part of the teacher. 'Sensitive caregivers… facilitate children's development by being warm and caring, but they do not necessarily reflect on their interactions and practices' (Ryan et al., 2001:50). This supports Anning's (1991) findings (see 4.2.4), and perhaps provides an alternative explanation for teachers' inability to engage in critical dialogue (see 8.5.1).

Is this lack of intellectual acknowledgement reflected in their perceived status of themselves as Grade R teachers? All participants acknowledged the low status of the Grade R teacher (see 2.2.6). The teachers from the more advantaged schools agreed that, in certain social situations, they do not admit to being Grade R teachers. Liz (EP, interview 16 July) said, 'I merely say I am a teacher. The opinion [status] of Grade R teachers is lower than in any other phase.' Alison (JH, interview 30 September) commented, 'Not many people want to do our job. It is hard work and very little recognition.' Teachers in the more disadvantaged schools (YB, LS, BS, FDB & TPS) concurred with this sentiment, saying, 'There is no status attached to being a teacher of young children.' Though this lack of status is coupled with low salaries, a different qualification framework from that of other teachers and in (public) schools alternative conditions of service (see 2.2.5 and 9.4), I was left with the sense that, even though early years' teaching has little status, Grade R teachers today have an edge over their ECD counterparts, possibly because of the impending universal status of Grade R.

9.2.2 *Reasons for becoming an ECD/Grade R teacher*

During interviews all the participants expressed a passion for teaching younger children. Most of them (unlike Ball and Goodson's (1985) assertion that many teachers choose to become teachers by default — see 4.2.2) said that it had been a lifelong desire to become a teacher, and specifically a teacher of young children. But for many, political, economic, education and social circumstances initially prevented them from achieving this goal (see 2.2) and the discussion on critical incidents — 4.2.2.). They have had to struggle to achieve the positions they hold today.

This drive to become a teacher of younger children might in part be explained by the one set of common characteristics that was expressed by all participants; they viewed themselves as kind, caring, supportive and compassionate (Nias, 1985; Ryan & Lobman, 2007; Goodfellow, 2008) (see 4.2.2.). Nurturing was a word frequently mentioned. They suggested that these characteristics strongly underpin their practice and helped define who they are. Maureen (EP) said, 'You go the extra mile for children' and Ella (BS) commented, 'You need to give children time and attention.' Emily (LS) confirmed that she is, 'patient and a good listener.' One remark which confirmed how strongly teachers feel about this point was made by Maureen, who said 'I see myself as a nurturer first and then an educator.' And this strong drive to be a nurturer, results in teachers achieving high levels of personal fulfilment (Sikes, 1985, Nias, 1985; Anning, 1991 (see 4.2.2).

The time spent with the children is affirming, and seemingly satisfies some deep-seated needs within the teachers. 'I love what I do... I feel safe with the children, I feel needed and affirmed.' 'Children are not judgemental. When you are down and children give you a hug …' 'Children are less stressful to handle, they make me feel safe.'

Cannella and Viruru (2004:75) contend that:

> People who fear change, … those (like women) who have learned well to perpetuate the oppression and disqualification of members of their groups; people who use scholarly or religious 'truths' to ground their identities and are unconsciously threatened when their life truths are questioned; and even those concerned about oppression, equity and voice, yet because of the complexities of their own material, daily survival accept the discourses.

They are referring to discourses that negate women; discourses that treat women with disrespect and contempt, and possible discourses that reflect teachers as caring and sensitive beings, discourses which present women as 'heterosexual, mothers and hearth angel martyr,' Cannella and Viruru, (2004:74). These discourses encourage teachers to perpetuate their image of caring, nurturing beings and reinforce the sense of personal fulfillment. By being 'good teachers', they reinforce narrow and prescriptive discourses which deny teachers their own voice and agency. Gloria (FDB, interview 27 August) acknowledged 'I am achieving something with the children…. I have become a better person.' For her, ECD is seen as a calling from God. In Gloria's words 'I made a vow to God… A lot can teach but few can reach.'

Nandi (BS), who comes from a disadvantaged background, remarked during her interview (22 July)'I can be a child …. It is an opportunity to make up for lost opportunities. This job provides a space to be young and enthusiastic the way no other job allows.' These remarks perhaps support Measor's (1985) contention relating to the importance of critical incidents in influencing the choices that teachers make. Nandi also admitted to lofty aspirations. She stated that she was 'raising a nation'. This comment resonate with Nias's (1985) finding that teachers' practice is motivated by a set of beliefs related to service and to changing society for the better (see 4.2.3).

In short, teaching children of this age provided an acceptable, indeed an admirable, way of expressing strong nurturing feelings, while at the same time being able to achieve an inner sense of fulfilment. This balance between having a nurturing nature and in turn being nurtured appears to reinforce the espoused theory of a child-centred programme (Dahlberg et al., 1999; 2007). In this context, perceived helpless children (see 7.3 and 7.4) are immersed in secure, loving learning environments which purport to enhance their holistic development. They are being taught

predetermined socially acceptable knowledge by the more knowledgeable adults. The possible tensions that could arise from the adoption of a narrow, prescriptive, goal-driven curriculum are negated by the notion of a 'good teacher' based on personal qualities (Broadfoot et al., 1993).

9.2.3 *Teachers of young children are persistent and tenacious*

Like the teachers in Nias's (1985) study, participants were tenacious and stubborn and passionate about early childhood education (see 4.2.3). All participants acknowledged their resilient personality characteristics. This was perhaps best described by Alison who during the interview (30 September) stated 'I am an in-your-face girl… I fight passionately for what I believe in.' Liz (EP, interview, 16 July) laughingly mentioned, '… [I am] a work in progress.' And Brenda (EP, interview 16 July) said one of her colleagues had suggested that she was 'firm, friendly and flexible.' These are all qualities that support the notion of a resilient and good teacher (see 4.2.3). Teachers expressed the opinion that they were expected to be many things to many people. You have to be 'a counsellor, a marriage guidance expert, a mother….' Again, this reinforces the image of the good teacher; a teacher who is sensitive and caring, meeting the perceived demands made of the early childhood educator.

Naomi (JH, interview 30 September) suggested that 'not just anybody can or should be a teacher.' She advised that '… you have to have a teacher who understands… an intelligent teacher …, one who understands the difference between formal and informal.' She was the only participant who suggested that Grade R teachers require some unique additional characteristics that might enhance their ability to become excellent Grade R teachers. And this quality was perceptiveness. Perceptiveness will enable the teacher to reflect on who is being taught, how practice is being implemented and what changes should be considered. In other words, perceptiveness is an important quality of a critical self-reflecting teacher (see 4. 5).

Teachers expressed a degree of frustration and at times disillusionment at being Grade R teachers. Some teachers were beginning to show cracks. Alison remarked, 'I am tired'. Helena (RPS, interview 24 September) alluded to being drained, and said, 'when you lose your compassion, you must get out of teaching.' Teachers expressed the opinion that they are pushed to the limits. They all agree that it is an exhausting job. Alison commented (interview 30 September), 'If you teach well all morning you are exhausted by 1pm. I need time out, I need a break.' And Brenda (EP, interview 16 July) felt that 'we are doing the job of five people.' Perhaps their stubborn and tenacious natures added a further stress to their lives. Brenda mentioned that

controlling one's emotions is one of the biggest challenges. 'It is not like a desk job. You can't close your door; you always have to be on your best behaviour.' The image of being a good teacher must be retained at all costs (Broadfoot et al., 1993) (see 1.7). Perhaps subconsciously, however, as noted by Woods and Jeffery (2002), cracks begin to appear in what is seemingly a sustainable unitary identity. More research is necessary to explore this contention.

Many suggested (YB, FDB, EP, JH, RPS) that the ability to multitask 'is an essential characteristic' as is 'the ability to think on your feet.' Given their multiple and sometimes demanding roles, perhaps conforming to curriculum demands provides a means of surviving, especially when many teachers have had limited training (2.2.6) and minimal support (see 9.3 and 9.4).

Possibly their stubborn and tenacious characters coupled with their deep-seated mothering/nurturing instincts prevents teachers from adopting an advocacy discourse; a discourse that would enable them to more forcibly voice their stated disagreement about implementing a didactic curriculum as well as being able to challenge the education authorities about the current status quo regarding Grade R (see 2.2.6 and 9.4). Cannella and Viruru (2004) suggest that there is a range of identities that go beyond, for example, the adult/child or the good teacher/bad teacher (see 4.2.4). The question remains how do teachers rupture these dominant discourses and begin to construct different discourses, ones that will enable them to challenge domination and social injustice, yet at the same time enable them to retain their caring natures (see 10.5.2)?

9.2.4 *Concluding remarks*

Teachers appeared to be nurturing and caring and the discourses reinforcing these notions were deeply embedded within them. These discourses seemingly inhibit teachers' voice and agency and this is perhaps the reason why they do not challenge those aspects of their practice that appear to make them uncomfortable, such as a prescriptive, didactic approach. As long as they are mothering and caring, they are still 'good teachers' meeting their specific classroom mandate in whatever way is prescribed for them. Furthermore, I would suggest, this discourse unwittingly reinforces hegemonic practices (see 4.4.1) which prevent teachers from critically engaging with their practice (Brookfield, 1995).

9.3 *TEACHERS' SUPPORT STRUCTURES*

Teachers identified a number of different aspects which enabled them to cope more effectively with their teaching day. These findings inform research question 5. When analysing the results, however, these identified support structures are also in many cases their perceived challenges. Hence I present these two aspects together.

9.3.1 *Being recognised and affirmed*

Not only did teachers see themselves as nurturers and carers, they also (perhaps unsurprisingly) expressed the need for being affirmed (Mary, Brenda, Alison, Liz, Helena, Busi, Sally, Ella, Emily) both by the school community and within their personal lives, supporting Webb's (1985) and Lobman & Ryan's (2007) assertion that teachers thrive on positive affirmation (see 4.2.2). This included parents, children and other teachers. As Brenda (EP, interview 16 July) stated, 'Parents, when they give you positive feedback — like tell you what [their] child is telling them.' Yet interacting with parents was also identified as one of the teachers' greatest challenges (see 9.5.2). Brenda further commented 'Feedback from children, you hear them sing a song on the playground or seeing how children progress — they come so far in the space of a year … or when children grasp concepts.'

This type of affirmation is closely associated with the nurturing and mothering needs expressed by all teachers (see 9.2.1). They both need to nurture and to be nurtured. But as Nias (1985) notes, classroom interactions are often invisible; the classroom is the teachers' private sanctuary. She queries the extent to which teachers' teaching is informed by their need to be affirmed (see 4.2.3), as this type of teaching will influence the type of interactions that teachers encourage in children. These interactions will possibly be of a nature that will reinforce the image of teachers being good and caring.

Likewise, acknowledgement from other teachers, especially Grade 1 teachers, was a key factor in keeping the participants focused and motivated. 'They [Grade 1 teachers] like getting our children… they know how to sit still, stand in line, etc... teachers feel they are prepared for Grade 1.' This description supports a specific construction of a good teacher (see 4.2.4). A good teacher is one who prepares children for subsequent learning and meeting fixed predetermined learning outcomes (see 7.3.2). This in turn reinforces and is reinforced by a particular construction of children who are needy, helpless and reproducers of socially determined

knowledge (see 7.4.1). Under these circumstances, it is difficult to perceive children as learning without explicitly being taught by a good teacher. And to retain these constructions, teachers will compromise their curricula ideals and conform to a specific narrow and prescriptive discourse relating to teaching and learning (see 3.4).

Yet teachers expressed the view that the curriculum is 'very full' and also said that teaching today is, 'Less satisfying from a curriculum perspective, less creative, more formal. It seems like Grade R is the Grade 1 of yesteryear.' In particular, they expressed concern over assessment procedures and the use of workbooks (yet neither is prescribed and teachers are free to utilise a number of assessment standards and methodologies — see 8.3.4 and 8.4.2). As Campbell (2005) notes, teachers appear to constitute themselves as subjects of discourses that have institutional and personal support. Within these discourses, they do not appear to be able to challenge aspects of practice that they find disquieting and argue for what they believe is pedagogically sound. The recurring dilemma in which teachers find themselves (Anning, 1991) does not seem to have disappeared (see 4.2.2).

9.3.2 *Collaboration with like-minded people*

Many participants (Gloria, Nandi, Ella, Emily, Sally, Busi) admitted during interviews to working in relative isolation. They stated there are few opportunities for networking, sharing ideas and learning from each other or for liaising with other ECD/Grade R teachers or organisations. And as Nias (1985) remarks, when there are minimal opportunities to interact and share ideas, prescriptive practices in keeping with formal schooling can more easily become entrenched (see 4.2.3).

It became obvious that the teachers in free-standing schools (LS, YB, JPS and FM) or schools where there was only one Grade R teacher (TPS, BS and FDB) felt very isolated and had no easy way of collaborating with other ECD/Grade R teachers.

However, teachers working in GDE schools acknowledged that support from their principals (Rissik and Thembani) and HoDs (FDB) who insisted that they, for example, attended FP meetings, helped them to feel part of the school, but not necessarily to deepen their understandings of Grade R practice. Helena (RPS), for example, persevered until she received the recognition she felt she deserved:

> I worked with other teachers. I invited the principal into my class to see what I do — they need to know what I am doing. It was a challenge. But now principal includes us — we are part of the school.

Yet, when asked about their perceptions of current Grade R practices (see 9.4), their ambivalence and discontent became obvious and reaffirmed findings from the GDE research project (WSoE, 2009). Within the public schooling sector, not many Grade R teachers felt that they were sufficiently included in the school's activities. They feel marginalised and sidelined; 'orphaned practitioners teaching orphaned children'. Addressing this situation is vital, as working closely with at least one like-minded person can sustain enthusiasm and motivation (see 4.2.3).

But, as previously mentioned (see 9.2.3), teachers are tenacious and many of the participants have found a way around their relative isolation. Planning together, sharing ideas and working as a team (EP) were mentioned as sources of valuable support. These responses are in keeping with Nias's (1985) findings (see 4.2.3) that working closely with even one other like-minded person is enough to sustain current approaches to practice.

During interviews Moira (EP, 16 July) and Naomi (JH, 30 September), two ECD principals from the more advantaged schools, commented that they were proactive and have established contact with other principals and teachers; in other words established reference groups (see 4.2.3). As Moira said 'I had to find my own mentor, worked with counsellors, got support from other organizations'. Both stated, 'Being on a pre-primary committee, talking to other heads and receiving support from other teaching colleagues is helpful. Through this collaboration, we test ideas, discuss problems and plot a way forward.' Sadly however, these were the only two schools in this study belonging to any ECD/Grade R organisation.

Mary (YB, interview 23 October) commented 'I had no experience of Grade R when I started. But I was prepared to learn and shared ideas with other teachers.' Fatima (FM) remarked (during a tea break, field notes 15 November) that her chief source of support came from a Grade R colleague working at another school who also had an interest in technology. Together they shared and supported each other's stance towards technology – designing worksheets.

Because collaboration is both satisfying and fulfilling, it is mutually affirming and neither party might want to nor see the need for change (Nias, 1985; Nias et al, 1992). This negates the need for critical reflection-on-practice and, as a consequence, existing practices are reinforced, making

them difficult to change. When such practices are based on a child-centred pedagogy and embrace DAP, a specific understanding of what it is to be a good teacher as well as good teaching is strengthened. Perhaps for these reasons teachers have not engaged with contemporary ECD discourses (see 7.5.2; 7.6; 8.5.2 and 8.5.3).

Furthermore, despite teachers admitting that they want to work as part of a team, this did not necessarily happen even if the opportunities arose. As Ella (BS, interview 23 July) said, 'I would like to work as a team but it is hard... others will criticise. I would like to see us share ideas more but we don't.' Ella, perhaps because of her own feelings of despondency (see 6.2.3), was not willing, or, it seems, able, to engage with other teachers. She felt isolated but was seemingly unable to break this impasse. The extent to which this reluctance is coupled with her need for affirmation (see 9.3.1) and her perceived lack of support should also be questioned. Working with others involves professional self-exposure which lays 'teachers open to the judgments of others who might have dissimilar values and methods' (Nias et al., 1992:235). Nias (1985) contends that, when teachers feel they have no support, they become demotivated and often leave the profession (see 4.2.3).

Other forms of collaboration

For some schools, community interaction was an important source of support. Little Stars benefited from donations, workshops and outreach programmes such as those organised by more affluent high schools. Margie (LS, 30 July) mentioned, 'High school learners, as part of their Life Orientation courses, come and work with our children; they organise sports days or play games with the children.' This provides additional enrichment for children and similar programmes could be introduced at other schools, yet no other school appears to have put such networking in place. However, though this type of networking is commendable and helps to sustain the school financially, it did not provide direct support for teachers who want opportunities to collaborate on issues relating to practice (see 9.3.2).

9.3.3 *Availability of resources*

Teachers from well resourced schools all mentioned how grateful they were for their abundant, current resources and some admitted they were possibly over resourced. As Brenda said (interview, 16 July) 'We can get anything we ask for.' However, they all agreed they would not do without these resources, including teaching assistants to help with children who were struggling. Sufficient and appropriate resources underpin a child-centred pedagogy, support the learning

process and allow all children to participate actively in their learning (see 8.4.1 and 8.4.2). Yet observations showed (14-16 July) little thought was given to resources that might reflect diversity issues, including different religions, race or culture. Resources appeared to reinforce the dominant ideology, serving to normalise children and childhood. As Johnson (2005) comments, this gives credence to the idea that simplistic resource materials (for example, a black doll) support the idea of a multicultural classroom.

Surprisingly, teachers from less well equipped schools (interviews with Gloria (27 August), Sally (8 October), Busi, &June (14 August), Ella (23 July) and Emily (30 July) also suggested that they had reasonable resources and that these have improved over the years. However, despite teachers recognising the importance of adequate resources in DAP, they did not always appear to make the best possible use of those they had (see tables 6.2 and 6.3 and 8.4.1 and 8.4.2). In some schools the resources were thinly stretched and children were not adequately challenged. Teachers, it seems, did not always appear to realise that resources were inadequate or that improving resources was something for which they should lobby, for example, better outdoor play equipment.

There are many possible explanations for this stance. Possibly because many teachers do not have a sufficiently rich understanding of their practice (see 8.4.2 and 8.4.3) or an in-depth understanding of the importance of play in early learning (see 3.2.1), they are unable to articulate the need for better resources. Different cultural expectations of how learning occurs (Penn 2009), possibly through children listening and the teacher teaching reinforced by a construction of children who are reproducers of knowledge, further entrenches the view that learning only occurs when the more knowledgeable adult is at the helm. This perception reinforces a more didactic curriculum where concrete learning resources are not prioritised (see 3.4). A further possibility is that teachers themselves do not always know how to use the equipment or play the games. Hence resources are left in the storerooms. A final reason could be related to the perceived lack of status and lack of support for ECD/Grade R (see 2.2.1, 2.2.2 and 9.4). Given that teachers' understandings of themselves and their practice is embedded in a nurturing discourse that inhibits teachers' agency and voice (see 9.2.1). They do not feel sufficiently empowered to challenge the principal, HoD or education department officials for better resources.

9.3.4 *School leadership*

The role of good school leadership was acknowledged as being important in enabling the teachers to thrive. The principal was identified as having many roles, from helping with training to setting up classrooms. In other words, both developing practice and developing teachers (Ball & Cohen, 1999). Ball and Cohen comment (1999:6) that:

> Professional learning must be grounded in the cornerstone of education: what needs to be learned (content), the nature of that content and what that implies about how it might be learned (theories of learning), curriculum and pedagogy (with what materials and in what ways the learners can be helped to learn that content) given who they are, the nature of what there is to be learned, and theories of how it is best learned.

Professional learning is thus an important key to the development of the curriculum (Nias et al., 1992). It also speaks to a very specific role for the principal and HoD, and, I would suggest, requires that they have insight into the particular phase of schooling with which they are dealing. Nias et al. (1992) comment that, if properly implemented, appropriate professional learning opportunities are available to staff who are motivated to learn both inside and outside of the school. (However, within the South African context appropriate learning opportunities are not necessarily available.) Liz and Maureen (EP interview, 16 July) commented that 'It is the principal who pulls everything together' and Alison stated (interview, 30 September) 'The principal must be passionate, if not, the school won't be any good.' As Nias et al. (1992:234) assert, it is the principal who develops a 'sense of whole school.'

Furthermore, as Nias et al., (1992) state, it is the principal who articulates the set of educational beliefs around which the school should cohere. Where these beliefs were strongly articulated (Egret Park, Jacaranda Heights and Rissik), there was a greater sense of collaboration and harmony within the school. The teachers at these schools knew that the principals were observing them and 'saw this as a legitimate part of their leadership' (Nias et al., 1992). In fact, they welcomed the support and advice, as well as the opportunity to share ideas and expand their knowledge.

Some teachers like Busi (JP, interview 14 August) viewed the principal's role in a more authoritarian way. 'Principals — she checks files, looks at planning, says we need to have an observation book.' However, she agreed that this input was supportive.

Yet at other schools, according to the principals, teachers resented their (the principal's) interest in their work. Both Emily (LS, interview 30 July) and Nandi (BS, interview 22 July) commented that supervising the staff was difficult; there was resentment and sometime defiance. Principal-

staff relationships were, they suggested, a stressful aspect of their job. These principals both admitted that they had a poor understanding of the NCS (see 2.2.2 &2.2.3). Perhaps it was this uncertainty that fuelled their sense of insecurity. They were also both teaching principals working in full day schools. Perhaps their workload was just too demanding.

9.3.5 *Concluding remarks*

Teachers' identified support structures are also, it seems, some of their greatest challenges. In particular, they present some of the barriers which at times prevent teachers from implementing high quality, effective Grade R practice (see 1.7.1, 3.2, 3.3 & chapter 8). Teachers admitted to having a strong need for positive affirmation. To ensure that affirmation is ongoing, it seems as if they will (perhaps unconsciously) modify their classroom practices and acquiesce to the perceived demands of the NCS, Grade 1 teachers as well as parents. In this way, their image of being a good teacher is reinforced. This need for affirmation, it seems, is sufficient reason for teachers to persist in implementing a more didactic classroom practice where 'academics' rather than an interactive, play-based learning and teaching programme is foregrounded.

Furthermore, during interviews teachers confessed to working in relative isolation (Ella, Emily, Sally, Busi, Gloria, Mary, Fatima). Yet when opportunities for collaboration arose, they did not always participate. When they did work collaboratively, they seemingly chose reference groups that supported their embedded practices (Fatima, interview 15 November –see 6.2.4). In these situations, practice is unlikely to be transformed; in fact the collaboration is very likely to reinforce existing practices. There were, in fact, few opportunities for teachers to enter into rigorous debates about classroom practice or appropriate resources. Teachers were generally complacent; they gratefully accepted what was given to them but those coming from less advantaged schools appeared to find it difficult to argue for improved resources and conditions that might enhance classroom practices.

Finally, though they acknowledged the importance of good school leadership, most schools were challenged in this regard. This was exacerbated in some cases by principals'/supervisors' and teachers' lack of insight into what constitutes good Grade R practice.

9.4 *TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CURRENT ECD/GRADE R PRACTICE*

Responses to research questions, *What is high quality/effective ECD/Grade R according to teachers?; What, according to the teacher, is her role in a preschool context in supporting young children's growth, development, thinking and learning?;* and *What alternative strategies could be identified by teachers for improving*

practice?, informed this section of the analysis. Identifying participants' perceptions of current practice is necessary before conclusion can be drawn about their perceptions of quality ECD practice. Furthermore teachers' understandings of current practice will influence how they perceive their role in supporting young children's learning and the strategies they identify for improving practice.

All participants, teachers and principals alike were deeply concerned with the current perceived state of ECD in general and Grade R, in particular. These concerns varied. All participants stressed that neither the government nor the public recognises the importance of education in the early years. As Moira (EP, interview 14 July) said, 'Generally, teaching is an undermined profession but more so, pre-primary.' She added, 'I have always held teaching and teachers on a pedestal but I am becoming disillusioned, ideals are becoming quashed….' And Helena (RPS, interview 24 September) said 'People look down on preschool teaching … they think there is less prep but wow... when children grasp concepts it is so rewarding.'

9.4.1 *Qualifications*

International research (see 1.7.2) points to the correlation between enhancing practice and improving teachers' qualifications (Anning et al., 2009). This research supports Naomi's (JH, interview 30 September) and Moira's (EP, interview 14 July) concerns about finding suitably qualified teachers, which they considered to be one of their greatest challenges. Naomi asked:

> Who wants to work for these salaries? We need well qualified staff and more importantly, teachers who understand the unique demands of ECD and the Grade R year. We need skilled teachers to teach... most people could not think of a worse job. We need skilled teachers... can you imagine life without a teacher… you can imagine life without a rubbish collector but a teacher … You need a particular mindset to become a pre-primary teacher. It is difficult to achieve, it is a specific philosophy... a mind shift …

These principals also linked qualifications with parental demands and respect. They concurred, 'Parents expect something special from our teachers. We have worked hard to earn parents' respect and that of the larger school community.'

Mrs Ferreira, the Rissik Primary School principal, agreed (interview 29 September) and said, 'I feel strongly all teachers should be qualified — they should know what to do and be given the status — Grade R is not Mickey Mouse.'

Sally (TPS, interview 8 October) who has non-formal qualifications said:

> I don't feel part of school… salaries, status, conditions of service. If I had a FP qualification I would teach Grades 1-3. Not because I prefer this phase, but because of the salary.

And Gloria (FDB, interview 27 August) stated:

> We are paid by the SGB [school governing body], it is difficult as we are expected to do the same as other teachers. The government has spoiled Grade R by saying we don't need the same qualifications as other teachers.

These remarks are worrying because, as teacher qualifications improve, many Grade R teachers could be lost to the higher grades (a fact attested to by Busi and June (interview, 14 August – see 6.2. 7 & see 9.4.2). As Porteus (2004) notes, amongst other challenges there remains a lack of political will to effectively address many of these Grade R issues (see 1.2). Yet if these issues are not addressed, mediocrity will be reinforced. Unreflective teachers will continue to teach to prescriptive outcomes, not necessarily embrace appropriate pedagogies. Pressing diversity and anti-bias issues that are present in all classrooms, and are a Constitutional imperative, will continue to be ignored.

9.4.2 *Conditions of service*

All teachers agreed that teaching Grade R is exhausting. As Alison said (interview 30 September), 'School holidays, we need time to recuperate... a long weekend.' Teachers working in more advantaged schools and within the GDE context only have to teach in the mornings. In the other schools, participants are responsible for both aftercare and holiday care.

The teachers working in less advantaged schools, for example, June, Busi (JP), Ella (BS) and Emily (LS) found the working day to be very long and the remuneration pitiful. They all commented that they would love to continue as Grade R teachers but if other, better paying opportunities presented, they would take them, confirming Lortie's (1975) observation that through teaching people can achieve upward mobility (see 4.2.2). Busi and June, for example, are continuing their studies. They readily admitted that once they have obtained a recognised formal teaching qualification they will move into the Foundation Phase because 'the pay and status is better'. In addition, teachers working in the less advantaged free-standing schools were not afforded the more generous holiday opportunities that their other colleagues received. They only have one holiday a year, in December.

Given the long working hours, these teachers suggested that there was no time to source materials and to plan activities or lessons (see 8.4.2). These teachers had the added stress of minimal available funds to support their educational endeavours and often taught larger classes. They were expected to cut costs and to work within a paltry budget.

9.4.3 *Other factors impacting practice*

For some teachers, class size remains a huge issue and there is no doubt that large class sizes can have a negative impact on quality (Frede, 1995; Cohen & Rudolph, 1977). During interviews teachers such as Sally (TPS, 8 October) and Helena (RPS, 24 September) suggested they need, 'Smaller classes; ideally 15 - 20 children but no more than 25, especially because of the language and different cultures it is hard to have over 30 plus children in a classroom with no assistance.' Helena blamed the Gauteng Education Department. She said:

> There is so much nonsense from the education department – so much paper work. You have to make an effort to focus on teaching and the children.

Another factor impacting practice is the location of the Grade R phase. Participants working within a formal schooling system argued for the continued placement of Grade R within this system but stressed that Grade R needed to be included in the school's activities. Both Helena (RP) and Sally (TPS) commented that Grade R children have to be included in other school activities, such as, for example, the cultural day, concert or literacy week. Grade R, they say, is less formal than Grade 1 but it is part of the school community. Yet none of these teachers would concede that their programmes were already becoming more formal, following the structure of the grade 1 timetable and minimising the importance of free play (see 8.4.1 and 8.4.2).

The teachers and principals working in free-standing schools thought differently to teachers in public schools. Grade R was definitely seen as the final year of the preschool phase. Alison (JH, interview 30 September) said, 'Grade R is part of a cycle, start in preschool, end as king pin, then off to primary school grade 1 -7, again king pin, then off to high school and so the cycle continues. She went on:

> Grade R has to be here [at pre-primary school]. We don't have parents who say 'I can't get my child out of the car' or who are so stressed that the child has developed a tic… or who are on Ritalin… kids are happy to come to school. If Grade R child is in primary school this child is pushed around by the older children, doesn't yet have the skills.

These comments are supported by research in the UK (Sylva et al., 2004), which concluded that infant classes attached to primary schools are more formal and children have not reached the same level of proficiency as those children who have attended the equivalent of a Grade R in a nursery school (see 1.7.1 & 3.3.2).

9.4.4 *Concluding remarks*

Many of these concerns are not unique to South Africa. They have been echoed in many western countries as tensions have arisen between teachers and education departments concerning where classrooms should be situated, the type of early years curricula that would best benefit learning and how these curricula are implemented (Anning, 1991; Anning et al, 2009); Maynard, 2009). However, given that South Africa is in the beginning phase of this implementation, it would be expedient to heed some of the cautions that have been expressed over the implementation of a formal Grade R curriculum.

9.5 *PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTS*

As mentioned in 5.5 there is no specific research question on the teachers' perception of parents. Research questions three, *What, according to the teacher, is her role in a preschool context in supporting young children's growth, development, thinking and learning,* and five, *What alternative strategies could be identified by teachers for improving practice*?, however, are informed by these perceptions. Thus there was an alignment between this category and the abovementioned research questions. Being able to identify improved ways of collaborating with parents becomes an important strategy in supporting learning in the early learning environment. The literature review (see 4.2.4) also points to the importance of the parents in early learning (Anning & Edwards, 2006).

The important role that parents play in the education of their children has long been recognised (Spodek & Saracho, 1994; Alexander, 1997, Mac Naughton, 2003; Gordon & Browne, 2008). Family scenarios that depict privilege, disadvantage and/or change, can be found in all South African classrooms (see 2.2.2 & 4.2.4). It is important for Grade R teachers to heed these different family contexts if positive school/ parent interactions are to be fostered.

Many children come from disadvantaged and deprived households where the parents/caregivers themselves are illiterate (DoE, 2001c), and for many of these children, Grade R is the first year of conscious educational stimulation. For others, Grade R is a continuation of what has already

been a stimulating preschool period. Regardless of the contexts, most parents have expectations and parent-teacher interactions need to be managed sensitively to ensure that children are afforded the very best learning opportunities both at home and at school.

Research from various continents (Europe, Asia, Australia and Africa) confirms that building positive relations with parents is widely viewed as being difficult (Mac Naughton, 2003; Burke-Ramsey, 2004; Kostelnik, Soderman & Whiren, 2007; Gonzalez-Mena, 2008). On the one hand, parents are not necessarily confident about their role as parents (Alexander, 1997) and on the other hand, often believe that they have expert knowledge about their child. This can set them up as opponents to teachers who also believe that they know what it best for the children they teach (Mac Naughton, 2003). Each side sees itself as 'the one who knows best' and this can result in a knowledge-power struggle that can lead to misunderstandings about the nature and purpose of early childhood education as well as about the nature and purpose of parent involvement.

During the interviews all teachers acknowledged the importance of positive teacher-parent relationships and their (the teacher's) role in building these relationships. However, all teachers concurred with identified research findings (Mac Naughton, 2003, Alexander, 1997) that these relationships are difficult to establish and require an ongoing commitment and hard work if they are going to be successful.

9.5.1 *Recognition of changing life styles*

Teachers acknowledged that lifestyles and communities were changing, or have changed, and that these changes have impacted classroom environments, especially because parental expectations and demands were also changing.

Fatima's (FM, interview 15 November) comments are echoed by many other teachers:

> Behaviour patterns have changed from 20 years ago… expectations are different, parents are in the corporate world, their demands are so much more, parents want a lot from the school and the environment.

And Mrs Areff (FM, interview 15 November) acknowledged:

> Society has changed... outlooks have changed, marriage, values, job etiquette; there is no loyalty, respect. There are more social problems, single parents – for

> example the Pakistanis and Egyptians marry girls just to get citizenship – then divorce them ...different problems.

Helena (RPS, interview 24 September) mentioned how much the community in the area serving Rissik Primary has changed. She remarked:

> Things have changed over the last five years, it is more political. More focus on pleasing people, the school. We serve a very mixed community – some were freedom fighters, they still think they are fighting ... who knows what? It's a very diverse community; Chinese, Muslim, refugees, HIV and on and on. Most children do not speak English yet the LoLT is English...

Emily (LS) worked with a similar community. In the interview (30 July) she said that in an effort to manage some of these problems, a counselling service is offered to parents. Margie (LS, interview, 30 September) said, 'We work with a violent community, drink, violence against women.'

Gloria (FDB, interview, 27 August) alluded to comparable social problems, 'A mother has four children ... four different fathers… drunk, drugs, no condoms … There is a lot of child neglect.' Amelia concurred and acknowledged (interview, 23 October) that, 'many parents are poor and there is a high rate of unemployment. Parents are reluctant to buy things for school for their children, yet they will squander money on drink.' Yet teachers appeared to have difficulty in addressing these issues.

Sally (TPS, interview 8 October) was more positive, and said, 'We have the best community, they speak Venda, Xhosa and Sotho, whatever, they attend meetings, are very supportive. For example, when we had a cultural day to celebrate heritage day they supported.' But these perceptions of community did not appear to have influenced her practice. Observations revealed that she was teaching in a decontextualized way, paying little, if any attention, to the different language or cultural contexts within the classroom environment.

Teachers working in the more advantaged schools (EP & JH) agreed that school communities are rich and elite but suggested that parents work hard and some struggle to send their children to these schools. They stated that parents are often competitive, wanting the very best for their children but were very demanding. Liz remarked (during the interview, 14 July):

> They pay high fees, the more they pay the more they demand. We need to do everything. Parents are pressurised, there are huge social pressures; children

> must go to the right school. And they have tremendous expectations for their children.

Yet, despite these acknowledgements, programme and content adjustments that might possibly have accommodated some of these changes do not appear to have happened (see 8.5). Rather, for the majority of teachers, their perceptions of parents and the perceived lack of parenting has confirmed their view of needy, dependent children (see 7.4.1) and reinforced the teachers' nurturing and regulatory roles, closing down opportunities for engaging with contemporary ECD issues and for giving both parents and children voice and agency and to establish what Hargreaves (2003:17) refers to as a 'professional learning community.' It becomes important to interrogate what types of teachers are required for a rapidly changing profession and how are teachers to be given the skills to cope with a changing society. As bell hooks (1994) notes, before teachers can be expected to shift their current paradigms, their existing fears relating to emotionally and socially charged issues need to be addressed.

9.5.2 *The parent-teacher relationship*

There was no doubt that all teachers recognised the demands on parents that emanated from lifestyles, economic conditions as well as changing social circumstances. As Amelia (YB, interview 23 October) observed, 'We need to understand the community and family problems.' And Helena (RPS, interview 24 September) agreed that:

> The community has influenced how I do things, I try and do things on the cheap, choose outings with cost in mind, don't use food for art work, try and expose children to what they do not see – animals, farm animals ... so I choose themes carefully.

Helena, to some extent, was compensating for children's perceived home circumstances. However, according to Helena, the parents were selfish and too busy with other commitments.

> I know parents have to work, my mom worked but she put so much into us. Now so many children are neglected…It is ignorance and selfishness … I see parents my age, no experience, the women are so worried about their careers, making money, children have to take a back seat. It is selfish, so self-centred.

She felt strongly that this lack of parental interaction results in children not being sufficiently spoken to and Busi agrees with this sentiment. Both teachers suggested that, because of poor communication between parents and children, children are not getting enough language reinforcement at home (see 7.4.2). And this problem is aggravated because at many of the more

disadvantaged schools, the acknowledged medium of instruction is English. 'Parents want children to speak English, yet they do not necessarily speak it well themselves.'

Mary (YB, interview 23 October) commented:

> 'There is no stimulation at home, children are exposed to drugs and abuse, so many children are neglected' and these thoughts were echoed by Emily (LS).

It is apparent that tension exists between teachers' professional outlook which reinforces the importance of parental involvement and teachers' perceptions of parents and their ability to parent. Brenda made remarks such as 'There is less parenting, less family time, parenting is not happening — for example, telling stories at home.' Liz and Maureen (EP, interview 16 July) commented:

> Parents give materially but have no time for their children; they don't set limits, there are no boundaries. They can't say no. We need to make up for the deficit.

Busi and June (JP, interview 8 October) had a similar view but articulated different reasons. Busi said:

> Parenting is changing. Parents are ignorant, they do what they can but there is not much knowledge. They don't understand how learning happens.

The notion that children are being neglected (albeit for different reasons) came through strongly. The prevailing view in the more advantaged schools was stated by Maureen (interview, 16 July):

> Parents are competitive … they only want to know how much has my child achieved. But it has to be done at school. Don't say extra lessons or therapy. It must all be done here. We are expected to do it all…

The teachers also agreed that many parents have unrealistic aspirations for their children. As Fatima (FM, interview 15 November) remarked 'they [the children] are all geniuses here by us. Parents get upset if children write upside down …' Mrs Areff (FM, interview 15 November) reinforced this perception:

> Parents expect a lot... kids go for computer lessons, extra maths, there are problems with burn out later on. Children go for extra maths but they can't yet manipulate numbers they don't have the basics.

And the teachers at Egret Park mentioned 'Parents put a lot of emphasis on academics, for example the child needs basic [literacy, perceptual-motor] skills but parents are saying my child can't read.'

These remarks, I would argue, suggest that curriculum rollout, even though most teachers denied this possibility, is strongly influenced by parental expectations (see 4.2.4) and demands which, in turn, reinforce a more instrumental curriculum (see 3.4). Do teachers' perceptions of children (see 7.3 and 7.4) and understandings of practice which are embedded in a nurturing and performance discourse prevent them from arguing more volubly for the type of Grade R that they believe they should be offering?

Furthermore, many teachers appeared to view parents as demanding and judgmental. As teachers at Egret Park suggested, 'Parents can knock your self-esteem, especially if the child has learning difficulties.' And Brenda (interview, 16 July) stated:

> We need to keep parents happy…Parents are so ungrateful; they complain a lot and children get lost in all this. Parents always take the side of the children. Whatever they say... it is always right. I have problems about the way parents speak to teachers. We have to keep parents informed… it is very demanding. It is your responsibility to raise their children.

Fatima (FM, field notes, 15 November) said, 'Some parents give money to school in order to influence how you the teacher will relate to the child. Parents try and bribe you so that their children will be privileged. For example, last year a mother, a doctor, tried to force me to give her child the lead role …'

There is no doubt that in many schools these conflicting tensions impact negatively on the parent-teacher relationship. As much as teachers acknowledged the importance of these relationships they found interaction with parents demanding. Some teachers suggested that parents undermine their approach towards teaching and learning. Again, it is germane to ask if these feelings of disquiet are fuelled by teachers' understanding of what constitutes a good teacher, coupled with their particular constructions of children. If teachers do not believe that they have both voice and agency, how can they contribute to meaningful teacher-parent interactions? Or are there too few support systems in place for teachers — with their perceived low status, and (sometimes) inadequate qualifications, do they feel they are not able to open up a space for meaningful dialogue, especially given the demands of parents, and in some cases HoDs and principals?

Yet, regardless of these somewhat negative perceptions, most teachers acknowledged that, however misguided (in teachers' opinions) parents appeared to be, they love their children and want the best for them. As the teachers at Egret Park said 'They will give anything if you say it is for their children. Don't say it's for the school.' And despite the tensions, many teachers

admitted to having constant interaction with parents and acknowledged their ongoing professional commitment towards them. The following remark made by Moira succinctly summed up the teacher-parent relationship, 'We need to maintain a strong positive relationship with parents but parents are not our friends at the end of the day.'

9.5.3 *Parent education*

Teachers also expressed the view that parents are reluctant to show an active interest in their children's learning. Yet as Kostelnik et al. (2007) and Gonzalez-Mena (2008) have noted, mutual misinterpretations between teachers and parents become a powerful barrier to family involvement.

Amelia (YB, interview 23 October) remarked:

> We asked them to send things to school, to listen to their children, to read to them. This year we asked parents to buy children a pair of scissors and some kokhis. We are trying to encourage parents to become involved in the children's learning. Some parents have listened. It is a slow process … but we are going to get there.

In some schools, especially those that served more economically disadvantaged communities, the staff suggest that parents have, in actual fact, very little understanding of the value and role of Grade R and 'don't take it seriously'. In fact, according to Amelia, parents themselves have little understanding of a culture of learning. She commented:

> Parents have no understanding of the value of Grade R. Parents think learning only starts at 'big school'. But it starts in the womb. There is suddenly such an interest in Grade R because parents have heard it makes Grade 1 easier… Parents believe that Grade R is a magic word, it will fix everything. Even though Grade R is not free, parents talk amongst themselves, hear the child will struggle in Grade 1 if no Grade R so they think the child needs some preparation. But then they do not pay fees or they try to enrol children in February and take them out in November to avoid paying fees for January and December which are half months. Parents need to be taught the value of Grade R [preschool in fact]. We are NOT a babysitting service.

And Sally (TPS, interview 8 October) said, 'We need to educate the parents – they bring children late after assembly, think Grade R is only play, so it doesn't matter if they don't come to school. Sometimes children do not come for a week.' And Gloria (FDB, interview 27 August), 'Parents have high unemployment, can't afford the fees of the crèches so come to Grade R at school — it is cheaper.'

Many teachers concurred with the sentiment that parents ought to be better informed about the aims and value of the Grade R year. Yet few schools, despite staff agreeing that parental education focusing on the value of Grade R is essential, actually provided such input. There were a few exceptions. Sally mentioned 'This year we did some parent education about Grade R — what it is, what we aim to achieve, how it works, it helped a bit. But we need to do more…'

These problems were not restricted to the less advantaged schools. Staff working in more advantaged schools also believed parents should be made more aware of what constitutes an appropriate Grade R programme. Two principals who have introduced strong parental programmes were Naomi (JH) and Moira (EP). Naomi for example, said (interview 30 September):

> Yes we talk a lot about behaviours and expectations of the school. There is an ongoing need for parental education ... we do it at meetings, open days, motivational speakers, we need to change their mind set. We start at the beginning of the year …

The principals of Egret Park (interview 14 July), Jacaranda Heights (interview 30 September) and Bertha Solomon (22 July) confirmed that parent-staff relationships required ongoing hard work that commenced at the beginning of the year and needed to be constantly reinforced if these relationships were to be successful.

Most schools seemingly tried (to a greater or lesser extent) to promote parental involvement and offered some parental education but the issues they address appeared to be far removed from the perceived educational challenges presented by parental interactions. For example, in certain schools, issues relating to discipline appear to be problematic. Amelia (YB, interview 23 October) remarked, 'Discipline for parents is shouting and yelling or even hitting the child (punitive), but it is more than that.' But topics relating to appropriate discipline do not appear on the school's agenda.

Likewise Mary (YB) stated:

> Parents are edgy about this multicultural thing. We did different cultures and one child's dad was very upset … I said read the book and listen to what we are saying ... I am not indoctrinating your child. I am teaching values ... there is no culture that teaches children to steal … I teach what children need to know... values, respect, tolerance …

Yet again, observations of classroom practice and interviews suggested that these issues were not strongly foregrounded in the parent education programme or in the curriculum.

Fatima and Mrs Areff (FM, interview 15 November)) also spoke at length about issues relating to parental involvement, yet their planned communication with parents centres around 'softer issues' such as talks on nutrition and dealing with foot problems, Attention Deficit Disorder and diet. Little is related to the stated parental challenges. Ella (BS, interview 23 July) admitted, 'We need to address topical issues — but I won't, because parents will not like it.' She went on to say, 'Parents need to be taught.' When asked by whom, the answer was, 'By us, the teachers, but… perhaps I am just too comfortable.'

Seemingly, teachers are reluctant to enter into provocative conversations with parents, even though they have identified these as the topics which should be addressed. Once again, is it because 'good teachers' do not open a space for possible controversy with parents or is it because they feel they do not have sufficient agency? Advocacy discourses which argue for the inclusion of contemporary and possibly contentious topics are yet to be placed on teachers' agendas.

Only Alison (interview 30 September) admitted 'This is a lovely, fulfilling, satisfying school to work in. Parents are supportive, they contribute, are complimentary… and that is how your confidence grows as a teacher. Parents have pushed me … they are educated and I need to come across as an educated teacher. And she recited an incident where parents complained about her teaching as they did not think she was sufficiently informed to teach their children. She admits that she has had to learn more and that she has learnt to communicate with parents. 'Now I always inform them about what we are doing and why.'

Perhaps it takes the successful resolution of a conflict situation to force teachers to reflect more deeply on their practice (see 4.4). But, as Alison states, this type of reflection is 'very hard work' and requires support from the school community. She comments further:

> No, we are not formal. The principal has been wonderful here. She constantly pushes a creative, integrated approach – balance between physical, social, emotional and cognitive. Leadership is important, it makes the school. You can't run a school like this in … Barberton, for example. You have to look at the community and adapt.

Naomi confirms that they are a strong school community.

> I have worked hard, very hard to achieve this. They [parents] support our programme, our approach towards teaching, our talks. It makes a huge difference. At the beginning of the year we share our teaching philosophies with the parents. We are sensitive to the community, their social standing, levels of education, kind of family background. If there are family problems, we work

> from a particular view of what is in the child's best interests. This has enabled us to work more easily for example, with parents who are fighting [with each other].

Yet my observations revealed that this school does not really heed alternative cultural contexts. The programme is educationally sound, children are afforded many opportunities to make decisions 'to become self-governing' but practice is strongly grounded in an assimilation model. The importance of parental involvement is acknowledged (see 4.3.2), but parents are not involved as true partners (Mac Naughton, 2003).

9.6 *CONCLUSION*

Teacher effectiveness is a crucial factor in ensuring high quality programmes (see 17.1 and 4.2). To be effective, teachers have to consider many aspects related to professionalism. Spodek and Saraccho (1994) call for teachers to know the history and traditions of the field along with the theory, but also stress the need to know 'the cultural, social and political contexts in which early education functions.' I would add, be able to engage in critical reflection on practice, to this description. Teachers appeared to have little insight into differing contexts and did not readily engage with parents in a collaborative manner. They were reluctant to negotiate ways of interacting that would be respectful to both parties, accepting of alternative contexts and embrace parents as true partners and equals in the educational endeavour.

In the final chapter, I reflect on the research design and revisit the research questions that have framed the results presented in the preceding three chapters. I reflect on the key issues and the major findings that have emerged through an alternative lens based on three epistemological positions outlined by Mac Naughton (2003). Some conclusions are presented and recommendations for further research are offered.

CHAPTER 10: REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

10.1 *INTRODUCTION*

In this chapter, I present a brief summary of the thesis and reflect on the research results and conclusions through an alternative lens based on the three epistemological (or knowledge) positions outlined by Mac Naughton, 2003 (see 4.3). I also consider the research design and examine what could have been done differently. I conclude by outlining recommendations emanating from this study and identifying possibilities for further research.

10.2 *BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE THESIS*

The main thrust of this thesis was to explore, through a qualitative research paradigm, teachers' perceptions of ECD and how these impact on their practice. An overview of education within the South African context shows that implementation of high quality ECD/Grade R practice is fraught with difficulties. From the outset, practice has been plagued by conceptual and pedagogical constraints which continue to be influenced by historical, political and pedagogical factors.

Analysing ECD/Grade R teachers' perceptions of their practice necessitated an overview of a wide range of literature drawing from developmental theories, pedagogy in general and ECD/Grade R practices, in particular. Within the South African context the acknowledged ECD/Grade R approach is developmental (DoE, 2001a; Pence & Marfo, 2008). Therefore, using a predominantly developmental framework I traced understandings of what constitutes quality ECD/Grade R practice. However, the developmental perspective is a contested notion. I therefore explored two alternative approaches that are impacting current practice. The first is an instrumentalist approach, which despite having limited learning value for children, remains pervasive and appears to be increasing in dominance in ECD/Grade R classrooms. The third perspective, viewing practice through a sociocultural lens, suggests new possibilities for viewing children, learning and teaching. In this perspective the focus shifts from viewing learning and teaching from a universal perspective to acknowledging the individual's social and cultural contexts.

Teachers' perceptions of their practice are influenced by both external and internal factors. These were explored in chapters 1 and 4 of this thesis and information in these chapters foreground issues that are important for understanding the research results.

These findings were analysed in depth according to three themes, namely *teachers' perceptions of children as learning beings*; *teachers' perceptions of themselves as learning beings* and *teachers' perceptions of themselves as professional beings*. Findings relating to these themes are presented and further interrogated in 10.3 when I reflect on the research results using Mac Naughton's (2003) framework.

Key findings included that teachers intimated they followed a constructivist orientation but few could actually articulate a deep understanding of their practice. A gap was revealed between teachers' espoused theories and their theories-in-use. Most of the teachers adopted a didactic approach with an emphasis on academics; namely reading, writing and arithmetic. Children were mainly viewed as knowing little, and as helpless, dependent beings reliant upon the more knowledgeable teacher for their learning. Neither were children afforded many opportunities of making choices and deciding what and how they would like to learn.

The participants in this study represented some of the diverging and diverse contexts which comprise South African schools and teachers in the greater Johannesburg area. Each context provided a unique lens through which to gauge teachers' perceptions of their practice. The findings were presented in ten case studies. In each vignette I explored the specific school context, specific circumstances relating to that school, and described some teaching and learning practices as well as the perceptions of Grade R teachers, principals, and, where appropriate, HoDs towards ECD in general and Grade R, in particular. Some of the key patterns to emerge were first outlined. These were then followed by an in-depth analysis exploring each research question. These results were presented in chapters 7, 8 and 9.

In all schools, a learning framework which guided the day was evident but not necessarily adhered to. There was a great variance in learning opportunities and support provided to children. These differences can, in part, be related to school factors as well as to teachers' qualifications. Despite all participants agreeing that play was a crucial underpinning element of early learning, findings revealed that teachers did not embrace play as an integral part of the learning and teaching programme. The notion of a 'pedagogy of play' was not evident in schools.

All participants admitted to being kind, caring and loving teachers who placed the welfare of children in their care ahead of academic considerations. They described themselves as nurturing individuals who were passionate about their work. Most have always wanted to be teachers of young children, but, in the case of the non-formally qualified teachers, circumstances such as educational qualifications, lack of finances and training opportunities prevented them from becoming teachers. For these teachers, ECD was a way of fulfilling their career desires, as well as improving their education qualifications and status.

School leadership was also found to play an important role in determining the efficacy of the teaching and learning programme. Where teachers felt supported and were made to feel an integral part of the school community, they indicated that they were better able to integrate the demands of the learning day and to meet the needs of the children. However, all schools appeared to adopt an assimilation model based on a Eurocentric approach towards teaching and learning. Despite teachers' acknowledging the importance of children's different cultural and social contexts and appreciating how these contexts might impact on learning, in practice these issues were rarely addressed.

Furthermore, relationships with parents were problematic with most teachers revealing ambivalent and sometimes hostile attitudes towards parents. These findings will be further explored in 10.3.3.

There is no doubt that teachers are faced with many challenges and they are struggling in some cases to implement perceived demands made by the NCS, education departments and parents. For all teachers, their status as ECD/Grade R teachers was problematic, and for many, so were their conditions of service. Yet, despite these challenges, they appeared to love their work, found it extremely satisfying and would not readily leave teaching.

10.3 *REFLECTION ON TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS THROUGH AN ALTERNATIVE LENS*

Mac Naughton (2003) contends that if teachers are going to privilege all children and families whom they teach, they should give careful consideration to their [teachers'] knowledge position(s). This requires that teachers embrace an increasingly critically reflective outlook that considers how their values relating to children and their families, as well as teaching, have been, and are, continuing to be adapted over time to reflect changing and alternative contexts and practices. In the early childhood phase, critical reflection could focus on social justice;

appropriate teaching and learning strategies; who are privileged; who are disadvantaged and what will lead to action that will create change. In so doing, early childhood practices become redefined and can further advocacy.

As mentioned in 4.3, Mac Naughton (2003) has identified and described three knowledge positions; conforming, reforming and transforming approaches through which to view ECD practice. According to Mac Naughton (2003:4), these approaches to knowledge have 'shaped and continue to shape the curriculum landscape of early childhood education.' These knowledge positions can, in part, be aligned with the three different perspectives which inform and influence ECD pedagogy which were explored in chapter 3. The conforming position resonates with the instrumentalist approach, the reforming position with DAP and the transforming position can be likened to the historical-sociocultural approach. I used these knowledge positions as a lens through which to further critique teachers' perceptions of their practice.

In addition, using the knowledge positions as a framework, Mac Naughton (2003), analyses teachers' understandings of practice according to three categories namely, understandings of children, the early childhood curriculum and the early childhood context (see 4.3) These categories, I argue, could be likened to the three themes used in this study to analyse teachers' perceptions of their practice (see 5.5).

Using Mac Naughton's framework as a grid I positioned teachers in each of the categories according to their espoused and actual knowledge position as indicated by the research findings.

Positioning the teachers in this way provided an alternative lens through which to reflect on their perceptions of their practice according to the three themes which informed the analysis of the research findings, namely *'children as learning beings' (*understandings of children*)*; *their perceptions of themselves as learning beings* (including what they think young children ought to know and learn - the curriculum) and *their perceptions of themselves as professional beings (*this includes their own practice as well as how they view themselves, the communities with which they work and the related Grade R contexts - curriculum context).

I have chosen to reflect upon the findings from this thesis in this way because analysing findings through an alternative lens provides a 'conceptual framework for recognising, reflecting on and choosing between different perspectives' (Mac Naughton, 2003:viii) and readily exposes the gaps

in the participating teachers' espoused theories and their theories-in-use. In so doing, the answers to research question four are elucidated.

To commence this reflection, in table 10.1, I present an overview of the research findings according to Mac Naughton's (2003) epistemological framework (conforming, reforming or transforming knowledge positions). Based on the research findings I categorise teachers according to their knowledge position(s) in relation to the three themes, namely, *teachers' understanding of children as learning beings, teachers' perceptions of themselves as learning beings* and *their perceptions of themselves as professional beings* mentioned above.

I then plot the teachers' perceptions according to the three identified themes (see tables 10.2, 10.3 and 10.4) which as mentioned previously, these themes are similar to the categories described by Mac Naughton.

10.3.1 *A Reflection of the research results according to the three knowledge positions*

Table 10.1 provides an overview of how the teachers could be positioned using Mac Naughton's (2003) framework. Both theories-in-use and espoused theories are acknowledged in this table. A study of table 10.1 shows that the majority of participants have adopted a conforming position. Children are constructed through a deficit lens and 'a one size fits all' curriculum approach has been adopted. In most instances children are viewed as being needy, helpless and as knowing nothing; most teachers do not acknowledge that children come with a wealth of knowledge upon which an emergent curriculum could be based.

Though teachers say they follow a developmental model, practice is driven by a more didactic approach with the emphasis on school readiness. Curriculum is tightly controlled by the teacher who directs many of the activities. The emphasis is on teaching children knowledge which is perceived to be essential for Grade 1. Creativity and play, though acknowledged to be important has been sacrificed to ensure 'appropriate school learning takes place.' In this scenario, the teacher perceives herself as a nurturing and caring individual who has the best interests of the children she is teaching at heart. This more knowledgeable teacher is the expert who knows best. Though she acknowledged the importance of parental involvement this should happen on her terms. There is a reluctance to engage in contemporary or controversial educational issues such as the ant-bias curriculum. There is in fact little acknowledgement of alternate contexts and practice is driven by an assimilation model. There is little if any reflection-on-practice.

It becomes apparent that most teachers have adopted a conforming position. Some of the participants at times show elements of a reforming position. However, this more obvious in their espoused theories rather than in their theories-in-use (see the discussion on early childhood curriculum –reforming position). They are marked with an asterisk on the table. Only one participant, Alison adopted a predominately reforming position but at times she too reverted to a more conforming position placing emphasis on phonics rather than storytelling, for example). No teachers could be said to have adopted a transforming position. Alison showed elements of this position, when she mentioned the importance of including children's ideas.

Table 10.1: A Reflection on the Research Results according to the Three Knowledge Positions.

*Teachers showing reforming elements.

Knowledge positions	Theme 1: Teachers' understanding of children as learning beings	Theme 2: Teachers' positions of themselves as learning beings	Theme 3: Teachers' perceptions of themselves as professional beings
Conforming Research results showed that this was the dominant position adopted by most schools and teachers. ***Conforming schools and participants*** included: Egret Park (Moira*, Liz*, Maureen, Brenda*) Bertha Solomon (Nandi, Ella*) Fatima Meer (Mrs Areef, Fatima) Young Beginnings (Amelia and Mary* Rissik (Mrs Ferreria, Helena)	Children were viewed through a deficit lens; seen as helpless, needy and passive learners dependent upon the more competent adult. Practice was largely driven by predetermined developmental norms. Many children, especially from advantaged schools, were deemed to need therapy. Though not acknowledged by teachers, informing theories were predominately maturational and behaviourist. Behaviour modification strategies – reward and punishment, emphasis on regulatory discipline were evident.	Curriculum was driven by predetermined outcomes (NCS) with an emphasis on reading, writing and numeracy. Despite acknowledgement to the contrary, table top tasks predominated. Play, though acknowledged to be important, was frequently marginalised. Creativity not foregrounded. Time and space generally tightly regulated by teacher. Teacher directed activities – few open-ended learning opportunities. Free play marginalised (especially outdoor free play). Content outcomes driven – determined by LOs and ASs. Teachers acknowledged the: *importance of teaching a traditional body of knowledge.	**Teacher as a professional:** Teachers see themselves as mothering, nurturing, loving and caring. This discourse blocked/inhibited alternative discourses, which might have challenge the current status quo. Teachers seek support from like-minded colleagues, thus reinforcing their existing practice. Little reflection on practice evidenced in most teachers. **Relationship with parents:** Teachers believed they [teachers] know what was best for children to learn. Little parental involvement. Ambivalent feelings towards parents, bordering on resentment.

FDB (Mr November, Gloria) Jabulani Preschool (June, Busi*) Little Stars (Margie, Emily) Thembani Primary School (Mrs Nkosi, Sally*)		*importance of preparing children for Grade 1. *importance of developing perceptual-motor skills (yet predominance of table top tasks).	Parents viewed as demanding. Reluctance to engage with pertinent issues relating to parent education. Parents perceived as being unable to parent well.
Reforming Only one school could be said to be reforming - Jacaranda Heights; Naomi, Alison	There were exceptions to conforming behaviour. Alison, for example, demonstrated a substantial understanding of holistic development as did Mary (YB) and Liz (EP), to a lesser extent. Children were given choices and opportunities were provided for them to regulate their own behaviours. Elements of constructivism were apparent, where for example, children were given opportunities to explore and discover	Theme-driven curriculum predetermined by teachers. Few teacher-guided activities. Only Alison mentioned the importance of general knowledge and, together with Mary and Amelia, showed an awareness of rethinking topics through contemporary perspectives, e.g. incorporating technological advances such as cellphones and social networking sites into a communication theme. For some teachers/ principals (Moira, Liz, Maureen, Mary, Ella, Busi), play was seen as 'free play' with some acknowledgement of learning through play but little acknowledgement of	**Teacher as a professional** Three teachers demonstrated some evidence of reflection on practice (Alison, Liz and Mary). Critical incidents forced some reflection and altered practice **Relationship with parents** Parents were seen as being vital to the education process but not viewed as true education partners. An active parent education programme but school decides on topics. Collaboration on schools' terms.

		teaching through play.	(Naomi, Moira, Amelia, Nandi, Alison, Liz, Maureen, Mary, Sally.)
		Espoused theories: All supported holistic development and free play but there was little evidence in practice. Espoused informing theory was constructivism.	
Transforming	Not evident. Only Alison hinted at sometimes including children's ideas.	Not really evident. Teachers lacked insight into their role as mediators of learning, lacked insight into social contexts. Teachers unable to challenge discrimination in the curriculum. Unable to deal effectively with diversity. Acknowledgement of contemporary issues such as multicultural education and differing language contexts but no meaningful attempt to address these issues.	Little realisation of anti-bias issues and social justice. No attempt to address issues related to contemporary ECD issues. Despite some suggestions to the contrary, teachers did not appear to include issues relating to social justice, diversity.

10.3.2 *A reflection on teachers' understanding of children as learning beings according to the three identified knowledge positions*

This theme explored teachers' perceptions of children, their constructions of childhood, how they believe children learn and what they think motivates children to learn (see chapter 7) and addressed research questions 1, 3 and 4. Table 10.2 presents an overview of the key ideas underpinning each position in this theme. It outlines possible constructions of children according to each knowledge position. I then plot the participants' perceptions onto this table and categorise their understanding of children according to their predominant knowledge position. I consider both their espoused theories as well as their theories-in-use. Their final position on this table is determined by their theory-in-use. Theories-in-use are indicated by an asterisk(*) sign and espoused theories by the hash (#) symbol.

The data presented in Table 10.2 reveals that most of the teachers have adopted a narrow and constraining view of children's cognitive and affective development. Grade R children are constructed as knowing little, being reproducers of knowledge with the emphasis on acquiring the predetermined 'basics'. Children are viewed through a prescriptive and rigid lens which does not take sufficient cognisance of how an integrated approach, drawing on other developmental domains, would also inform and support cognitive development and learning. Clearly-articulated goals based on predetermined norms and traditional values predominate. Their views of children are predominantly maturational and behaviourist.

There is some distance between teachers' espoused theories and their observed practice. Using Mac Naughton's framework, teachers displayed a number of beliefs and characteristics that could clearly be aligned with the conforming approach. Yet, in some instances, this conforming position was modified by attitudes and practices that were indicative of a more reforming knowledge position (see table 10.2). Alison was the teacher who most clearly demonstrated a reforming position. Brenda, Liz, Mary, Ella and Sally alluded to broader understandings of children but, in reality, their practices reinforced a more conforming position.

Likewise, despite acknowledging the importance of social and emotional development underpinning all other learning, there was not much evidence of teachers supporting children to become autonomous learners able to regulate their own behaviour. Children were viewed as needy, helpless beings requiring regulation. Teachers, it appears, are teaching 'learned helplessness' through stringent controls that structure the learning day.

There were very few instances to indicate that teachers' understandings of childhood and how children learn supported a more transforming position. A hegemonic relationship that privileges the dominant western culture was evident in all schools, even when this culture was not representative of the teacher or the children's culture. Alternative constructions of children appeared to be negated by these dominant

ideologies. However**,** the extent to which these perceptions of needy and helpless children are exacerbated by teachers' own dispositions which could be described as 'nurturing and mothering' also needs to be considered. Teachers see themselves as 'mother figures'; they nurture, support and teach children. Observations of practice concur with Argyris and Schön's (1974) findings that teachers' espoused theories are not necessarily supported by their theory-in-use.

Table 10.2: A Summary of the Constructions of Childhood and Understandings of How Children Learn according to the Three Knowledge Positions (Adapted from Mac Naughton, 2003)

	CONFORMING POSITION	REFORMING POSITION	TRANSFORMING POSITION
Key ideas	**Maturational:** Nature leads learning. Learning is innate - genetics and development drives learning. **Behaviourism:** Learning driven by physical and social environment. Culture (environment) controls learning. Learning happens through reinforcing all aspects of behaviour. **Social learning** Culture controls learning. Basic behaviourist principles but learning (in particular socialisation) happens through imitating role models. Routines planned to encourage habits.	Learning occurs through an interaction between nature and nurture/culture. **Constructivism** Children learn best when experiences are matched to and extend their current level of understandings. Highly individualised learning. **Social constructivism** Children are co-constructors of knowledge. Learning leads development (ZPD). **Psychodynamics** Children: develop a sense of autonomy through play. Learn by resolving inner conflicts positively. **Neuroscience** Interconnectivity of neural pathways is important to enhance learning.	Development of childhood is a cultural construct, not a fact. Differences in children are therefore culturally constructed, not natural. Development is culturally and historically bounded. Development is a problematic term – results in oppressive practices. Power suffuses relationships between children and between children and adults.
	Understandings of child grounded in science. Notion of a universal child. Modern ways of thinking about children.		No single truth – many different truths. Post-modern way of thinking about children.
Con-structions of childhood and under-standings of how young children learn	**Maturational perspective**: *Children are*: dependent and innocent.* passive learners.* reproducers of knowledge.* dependent upon adults for knowledge.* follow predetermined pathways.*	**Constructivist perspective** Children are: • active participants in their own learning.# • experiential learners using concrete objects# • learning through exploration and discovery.# • viewed as self-regulating beings.# • sensorimotor learners.# • learn through play.#	No single truth regarding children and childhood. Rather many different truths. Differences between adults and children are cultural constructions. Historical, social, political and cultural contexts are important – understandings of children are messy, context bound and culturally specific.

	Nature prompts learning Growth and development: • is internally driven. • is determined through developmental norms.* *Children develop at their own pace* • developmental norms influence learning activities and outcomes **Behaviourist perspective:** *Children are* *needy and dependent, passive.* *told what to learn.* *complying with rules set by adult.* *Environment/culture influences learning* Environment structured to meet children's learning needs. All children learn the same way.* Reinforcement (rewards/punishment) supports learning.* Adult regulated learning.* Goal-driven learning.* **Social learning:** Modelling and imitation drives socialisation and learning. Behaviour modification strategies use disciplinarian tools.* Children's learning is directed and controlled by adult.*	Individual development and learning is prioritised. **Social constructivism** Children are: • active participants in their own learning.# • experiential learners using concrete objects.# • learning through exploration and discovery.# • viewed as self-regulating beings.#* (Alison, sometimes Mary & Ella) • sensorimotor learners.# • learn through play.# • co-constructors of knowledge. Social environment influences learning. Language is a key tool for learning. Adults mediate learning content. **Psychodynamics** Environment must be safe and secure.#* Trusting relationships with adults are essential.#* Children need opportunities for independence, making choices and self expression.#* Alison, (sometimes Busi & Ella) **Brain research** Children learn through stimulation of neural pathways. Critical periods of learning related to brain growth. Learning occurs best in non-stressful environments. Children need: • nurturing,stimulating environments.#* Liz, Alison (sometimes Mary, Busi, Ella & Sally). • specific appropriate learning experiences to enhance learning at critical times.	Children: • are viewed as unique, capable beings. • make own meanings and influence the world. • contribute to social riches. No one universal theory can explain how children learn and develop. Multiple learning styles. Constructivist principles will inform learning but contexts are important. Children able to relate to multiple contexts, and issues such as social justice and diversity. *Theories-in-use #Espoused theories #*Congruence between espoused and theories-in-use

10.3.3 *A reflection on teachers' positions of themselves as learning beings according to the three identified knowledge positions*

Table 10.3 presents an overview of the teachers' positions according to their perceptions of themselves as learning beings. Issues relating to participants' understandings of themselves as teachers were interrogated in chapter 8. Their understandings of curriculum and pedagogy(ies) were investigated. How do they understand practice and what enables them to improve their practice? This theme addressed research questions 2, 3, 4 and 5. Participants are categorised according to the knowledge position they have adopted relating to both espoused theories and theories-in-use. Their espoused theory is indicated by the hash (#) symbol and their theories-in-use by an asterisk (*).

Interviews with teachers revealed their espoused theories where they placed themselves in a reforming position. They stated that they supported holistic development through a play-based approach to teaching and learning. While some of these elements such as time to play, open-ended play materials, and appropriate use of space might have been incorporated into the daily programme, the focus on predetermined assessment standards and learning outcomes, in particular relating to literacy and numeracy learning located most of the teachers in a more conforming knowledge position. As Mac Naughton (2003:49) comments, 'Children make their own meaning but not under conditions of their own choosing.' Only a few teachers namely, Alison and sometimes Liz, Mary and Ella demonstrated that some of these elements have been incorporated into their theories-in-use.

A striking observation emanating from the analysis of the learning environment was teachers' understandings of play. Despite teachers agreeing that children are not moving enough and stressing the importance of learning though play, outdoor free play, in particular, did not appear to be valued by teachers and it was not well supported in practice. Most teachers lacked rich insights into their roles as mediators of play and were challenged in some instances to provide meaningful play opportunities for the children. Neither was play viewed as a means of helping active or restive children regulate their own behaviour or as a helpful discipline strategy.

Furthermore, teachers had a minimal appreciation of how to use play to promote issues relating to equity and social justice. And certainly no consideration was given to which children might be privileged by play opportunities and which silenced. Most teachers' theories-in-use were driven by a formal understanding and implementation of the curriculum. Alison was the exception and

occasionally Mary (Young Beginnings had a good outdoor play area as did Bertrha Solomon and Egret Park). However, in these schools outdoor play times were strictly regulated.

Results indicate that many of the teachers did not have a deep and rich understanding of relevant Grade R pedagogical practices. For these teachers, therefore, Grade R teaching might present them with a challenge that drains their confidence and pushes them into 'survival mode'. This may be particularly so when they are striving to unpack and meet the exact requirements of the NCS. Survival mode prompts teachers to respond more assertively to what they perceive as inappropriate behaviour on the part of the children. Further research is undoubtedly needed in this area.

As Mac Naughton (2003) contends, the degree to which teachers consciously think about their practice will influence the knowledge position(s) that they ultimately, explicitly or implicitly, adopt. Teachers who reflect critically on all aspects of their practice are better situated to adopt a transforming knowledge position. In this study, few teachers intimated that they reflected (critically) on their practice. The two teachers, Alison and Mary, who recalled critical incidents which they admitted, had positively influenced their practice were also the two teachers who demonstrated elements of a reforming position. The disjuncture between espoused theories and theories-in-use was evident in all participants.

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*Theories-in-use

#Espoused theories

#*Congruence between espoused and theories-in-use

Table 10.3: A Summary of Teachers' Perceptions of Themselves as Learning Beings according to the Three Knowledge Positions (Adapted from Mac Naughton, 2003)

	Conforming Position	**Reforming Position**	**Transforming Position**
Key ideas	Education prepares child to conform to society and to meet its needs. *Technocratic curriculum* • promotes school readiness.* • prevents social pathologies.*	Reform child from dependent and developing to self-realised, autonomous 'free thinker'.# Develop a self-regulating child.#	Curriculum focus - the development of a more just society. Transform possibilities for individuals, society and its values to create greater social justice and equity.
Shaping the curriculum			
Philosophical underpinning	ECE prepares child to conform to society. Reinforces the status quo. Values traditions.	ECE aims to reform the status quo. Values individual and independent thought.# Child reforms society.	Aims to transform society by challenging discrimination and promoting social justice.
Outcomes	*Goals are:* • clearly articulated. • often based on developmental norms or skills.* • formulated to emphasise	*Goals emphasise*: • self-regulating child.# • holistic development of child.#	*Goals:* • collaboratively constructed with child. • chosen to link with children's issues and experiences.

	traditional (academic) knowledge.* • formulated in strict adherence to national goals.*		• also include the voice of the marginalised. • seeking to produce social activists.
Teaching and learning – *understandings of practice* *Managing the learning environment* *Knowledge:* *What teacher needs to know* *What children need to know* *Supporting children's*	Tightly-structured teacher-controlled curriculum.* *Time* is tightly organised - strict adherence to time constraints.* *Space* - structured to ensure it meets key objectives. *Knowledge focus:* • privileges the dominant culture.* • carefully packaged to make sense to educators - e.g. predetermined themes and subject areas.* *Teacher-directed* programme.	Practical, child-centred holistic developmental approach.# *Time* flexible - accommodates play.# *Space* structured to support curricular approach and free play.# Open-ended environment.# Play - important focus.# *Knowledge focus* – holistic, should make sense to child, notion of emergent curriculum. *Teacher- guided programme*	Collaborative, open-ended curriculum. Curriculum challenges discrimination and oppression. Adopts an anti-bias approach.# (*Alison, Liz, Mary, Ella)* Emphasis on social justice and equity. *Knowledge focus::* • generated through interaction with children. • teaches children how to think and act. Recognition that knowledge is socially constructed, therefore problematic –

learning *Participation – active involvement of children in learning* *NCS values – social context of the classroom* *Resource materials*	Activities often prescriptive.* Pedagogy based on behaviouristic principles.* Extrinsic motivation.* *Resource materials* carefully chosen to promote learning (often close-ended and prescriptive and regulatory.	Activities open-ended, promote choice, independence, self-discipline and problem solving.# (a few teachers) Emphasis on individual.*# Pedagogies based on constructivist principles.# *Resources* – varied, open-ended, allow for choice, multipurpose.#*	ask whose interests does it serve? *Methodologies* - similar to DAP, but teachers challenge stereotypes and identify silences and inaccuracies about marginalised groups of people. Critical reflection on all aspects of the curriculum and teachers' practice. *Resources* – varied, open-ended, allow for choice, multi purpose. Actively counters stereotypes, etc.

Observation and assessment	Teachers' observations determined by norms.* Observation and assessment based on predetermined outcomes.* Outcomes can be measured*	Observation and assessment based on developmental theories.# Teachers' observations and dialogue with child important assessment tools. Techniques vary – aim to capture children's development over time.	Realisation that it is not possible to be totally objective regarding assessment. Teachers recognise their own bias. Assessing how and by whom power is exercised. Techniques allow for revisiting

10.3.4 *A reflection on teachers' perceptions of themselves as professional beings according to the three identified knowledge positions*

Thirdly, the findings were interrogated through the gaze of the early learning context which includes the role of the teacher as a professional, her relationship with herself, the parents, community and children and the current Grade R context and informs research questions 1,3, 4 and 5. Table 10.4 present a summary of the possible knowledge positions within this framework that teachers could adopt. Though this section can be closely correlated with theme three, it is also informed by themes one and two.

Teachers appeared to be nurturing and caring and the discourses reinforcing these attributes are deeply embedded within them. These discourses seemingly inhibit the teachers' voice and agency, and this is perhaps the reason why they do not challenge those aspects of their practice that they said made them uncomfortable, such as a prescriptive, didactic approach. As long as they are mothering and caring, they are still 'good teachers', meeting their specific classroom mandate in whatever way is prescribed for them.

Furthermore, their identified support structures such as the need for positive affirmation and collaboration with like-minded colleagues became some of their greatest challenges and reinforced their predominately conforming position. In order to ensure continual affirmation, it seems as if they will (perhaps unconsciously) modify their classroom practices and acquiesce to the perceived demands of the NCS, Grade 1 teachers, as well as parents and so reinforce their image of being a good teacher.

Likewise, when opportunities for collaboration arise, teachers seemingly chose reference groups such as close colleagues who support their embedded practices. There are, in fact, few opportunities for teachers to enter into rigorous debates about classroom practice or appropriate resources. Teachers were generally complacent; they gratefully accepted what is given to them but appeared to find it difficult to argue for improved resources and conditions that might enhance classroom practices. They appeared to adopt a discourse of acceptance rather than of advocacy and were unable to embrace a group of teaching practices that considers cultural and social contexts and is concerned with the relationships between teacher, parents and children as well as the relationship between

children and their peers. As such, participants predominately positioned themselves in a conforming knowledge position. This knowledge position affords little space for reconceptualising any ideas or approaches and opens few possibilities for resolving the tensions that existed between their perceptions and actual implementation of practice, and their relationship with parents. Continuing global challenges have highlighted the need to reconceptualise accepted ways of knowing and doing. Cannella, (2001); Yelland, (2005); and Mac Naughton (2005) claim that there is a need to expand beyond dichotomous, truth-orientated thought, to take on new complex issues and to widen the arena of possible discourse(s).

Some teachers (Alison, (JH) Mary (YB), Sally (TPS), Ella (BS), and at times Liz (EP) and two principals (Naomi (EP) and (Amelia (YB), showed a penchant for a more transforming knowledge position and mentioned the importance of becoming aware of present and future realities and challenges that might impact children's learning and development. Yet, in reality, participants were unable or unwilling to explore alternative and diverse possibilities for children's 'becoming' within their classroom environment.

As previously mentioned (see 9.5), the participants' negative attitudes towards parents was unexpected. As much as teachers recognise the importance of parental involvement they were not able to involve parents as true partners, advocates and decision makers in the curriculum. In most instances, parents were viewed as being demanding, having unreasonable expectations and/or not supporting the teaching and learning process. Teachers expressed the view that they were expected 'to do everything for the children'. Most schools and teachers have adopted a conforming position in that they deem to know what is best for children, while parents, though expected to support the schools' programmes, are not given opportunities to voice their opinions in relation to the programme.

In only a few instances was there evidence of schools and teachers having adopted a more reforming position. Naomi (JH), for example, had achieved a good collaborative relationship with the parents but she acknowledged that this had been hard work. Alison also viewed parents as partners, rather than subordinates, in the education process. But she admitted that her attitude had come at a price. Previous negative parental interactions had forced her to think long and hard about elements of her practice. Moira (EP) attempted to have an open-ended relationship with parents but found this to be

extremely challenging. Nandi (BS) viewed parents as her partners but, in reality, parents were not true educational partners as evidenced by Ella's (BS) remarks. Parents were involved in non-educational issues and this can subordinate them to teachers' expertise in curriculum decisions.

No participants acknowledged that parent-teacher relationships could be reconceptualised and that parents and teachers could negotiate shared meanings around children, teaching and learning contexts and content and that a collaborative approach where the agency of all people is recognised and affirmed could be a possibility. Such an approach is underpinned by the notion of democratic education, 'inviting parents and others to form policies, manage resources and evaluate services; and by devolving decisions about what and how children should learn' (Mac Naughton, 2003:269).

However, as Mac Naughton (2003) notes, in order to negotiate shared meanings, teachers have to articulate their views with others who do not necessarily share the same views. This requires teachers to hold themselves up for scrutiny. If teachers are confronted with alternative views there is a of lack common ground, and this can result in dissention, or even ridicule, which can negatively influence perceptions of self. Hence teachers are in a difficult position because, as Nias (1985) has shown, teachers prefer to collaborate with like-minded people; colleagues who have similar understandings of the world, as this affirms who they are and strengthens their position. Furthermore, teachers are not by choice confrontational.

Fostering a collaborative approach in the face of contested and competing ideas therefore means that teachers have to create 'strong' professional identities that will not be threatened by other colleagues (teachers and principals, for example), parents' questions or by parents challenging teachers' knowledge of the child or teaching practices. This includes recognising and negotiating different, and perhaps competing, knowledges of the child and of teaching and learning. This I suggest requires critical insight into the theoretical underpinnings informing practice. As Mac Naughton (2003:270) writes:

> Teachers need to see themselves not as experts marshalling the (scientific) facts about the child [and their practice], but as collaborators

> with parents and the wider community in the task of building shared understandings of who the child is and what the child is capable of.

In order to negotiate these understandings with parents, teachers require time, space and support from educational institutions and departments. But, as Mac Naughton (2003) asserts, it is in education departments' interests to promote a conforming knowledge position. So who then becomes responsible for foregrounding those issues which research reveals are essential to ensure ongoing high quality practice? Does this become the role of the academy?

Table 10.4: A Summary of Positions on Teachers' Perceptions of Themselves as Professional Beings according to the Three Knowledge Positions (adapted from Mac Naughton, 2003)

*****Theories-in-use

#Espoused theories

#*Congruence between espoused and theories-in-use

Early childhood contexts			
	Conforming Position	**Reforming Position**	**Transforming Position**
The teacher as a professional	Narrow theoretical constructs.* Underpinned by beliefs of children as static (passive) learners.* Ignores issues relating to diversity.* Authoritarian approach.* (sometimes) Prescriptive curriculum.* Practices privilege dominant group.* Adopts an assimilation model.* Nurturing and caring – but curriculum not appropriate* Collaborate with like-minded people.* Discourse of acceptance.*	Emergent curriculum based on children's interests and perceived needs.# Practices acknowledge differences but minimal explicit or implicit addressing of diversity issues.*# Reflects on daily practice - not deeper issues relating to diversity.*# (a few teachers) Nurturing and caring –children's best interests at heart. *# Collaborate with colleagues.*	Dynamic beliefs of how children learn. Continually reviewing teaching and learning contexts. Collaborative approach to teaching and learning (all stakeholders). Diversity and anti-bias issues emphasised. Addressing of broader social and political issues# (Naomi, Ella, Sally, Alison) Critically reflective practitioner. Achieve a balance between personal-professional agency.
The teachers' relationships with	Teacher is professional who understands best how learning	Parents and teachers collaborate to	Negotiated, shared meanings between

parents and community	happens.* Hierarchical relationship between parents and teacher.* Parent's knowledge is subordinate.* Parents expected to conform to the dominant discourse.* Parental involvement voluntary. Privilege the parents from the dominant culture over others.* Reinforces class-based divisions. State is major beneficiary.	produce the self-governing child.# They each bring specific, unique knowledge about the particular child, children in general and about teaching and learning. They work together for the good of the child in a collaborative mutual way.# But teachers do not involve parents as true partners.* Parental involvement is in non-educational issues.* (Nandi, Naomi, Amelia, Mary, Moira).	parents and teachers. No fixed body of knowledge. Open-ended framework. Agency of all recognised. Democratic education emphasized. Parental involvement core of children's learning. Communication channels open. Alternative views respected and acknowledged.

10.3.5 *Concluding remarks*

*Teache*rs could not be neatly categorised into any particular position. Overall they could be said to have adopted a predominately conforming knowledge position but at times appeared to vacillate between a conforming and reforming knowledge position, which varied according to the learning context. No teachers, however, consistently adopted a transforming knowledge position that is informed by a mediatory stance, actively engaging with issues relating to anti-bias and social justice or embracing an advocacy discourse. Making this transition is not easy. It will require teachers to first embrace the notion of reflection-on-practice and then to critically reflect on this practice. This will require ongoing support.

10.4 *REFLECTION ON METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH RESULTS*

This qualitative research study was grounded in a philosophical assumption that aimed to explore, understand and interpret a specific phenomenon or social reality, namely ECD/Grade R teachers' perceptions of ECD and how these impact on classroom practice. I begin by reflecting on the findings in relation to question five, which has not yet been specifically interrogated.

10.4.1 *Reflection on research question five*

The question: '*What alternative strategies could be identified by teachers for improving practice?'* has been alluded to throughout the analysis of the research findings, especially in relation to research questions one, two and three. However, it has not yet been definitively answered. Given that teachers have adopted a predominately conforming model with elements of a reforming position, it is not surprising that strategies mentioned for improving practice reinforce these positions.

Consequently, strategies identified by teachers centred around classroom practice and included more input on methodologies in the form of 'practical hands-on workshops', alternative disciplining techniques and more information relating to inclusive education and how to deal with problems. These strategies would strengthen their existing developmental approach but if teachers are to be encouraged to adopt a transformative stance, this approach will have to be underpinned by a critically reflective element.

There was no mention of alternative approaches where the distinguishing feature is a move away from binary or dualistic concepts, such as: contrasting developmentally

appropriate against inappropriate; normal against abnormal; and good against bad teacher (Yelland, 2005; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001). Neither was there any suggestion of exploring what Yelland (2005) describes as multifaceted, multicultural, multifocal and diverse educational contexts.

Cannella (2005:20) suggests that there is a space for reconceptualists and developmentalists to work together:

> To generate new discourses and to construct actions that actually challenge the power that has been created over children which has led to them as being constricted and labelled as ignorant, innocent, and without agency beyond their own developmental explorations.

I would concur with this suggestion. South Africa is a diverse country struggling to address numerous educational challenges and imperatives stemming from the *apartheid* era. Rethinking traditional practices through alternative lenses would provide new and creative spaces for ECD teachers to reconstruct their ECD/Grade R work in a way that would acknowledge diversity, difference and the agency of children (see 2.3.2).

Mac Naughton (2003) contends that it can be an uncomfortable journey to adopt a less conventional position, such as a transforming knowledge view. It requires a commitment to an ideal and much hard work. Adopting this position necessitates teachers who are goal orientated in their communication with parents and steadfast in adopting anti-bias practises when communicating with children and parents. If Amelia's suggestion that 'we need to grow teachers' is to have any credence, teachers' assumptions about children and their learning as well as the teachers' practice should be interrogated 'to unearth the rationale behind its implementation in practice' (Yelland, 2005:4). This entails that ECD/Grade R teachers critically engage with and reflect on their specific ECD/Grade R practice (see 4.4).

10.4.2 *Concerns relating to quality practice*

The notion of quality is, of course, a loaded term and, as has been recognized in this thesis, there is no single enduring notion of quality. However, a wide range of research has identified the important role of the teacher in enhancing teaching and learning opportunities, and includes appropriate management of the learning environment, encouraging participation and supporting learning by promoting opportunities for

sustained shared thinking. These attributes should be underpinned by teachers' insights of contextual factors and issues relating to social justice.

These concerns relating to quality become increasingly relevant, as South Africa is once again at an educational crossroad. Curricular changes (the proposed CAPS draft documents, which appear to be prescriptive and milestone bound, are imminent (DBE, 2010b). One way to counter increasingly prescriptive policies is through encouraging teachers to become critically reflective practitioners. Research continues to emphasize the importance of teachers in ensuring quality teaching and learning, especially within developing countries. I would argue that, within the diverse South African context, ECD/Grade R is very much a developing field. I suggest, therefore, that teachers' reflective insights into the realization of their practice should inform not only curriculum development but also the envisaged expansion of service delivery in an attempt to ensure quality practice.

Research into a cross section of the ECD/Grade R community in Gauteng province has highlighted some common threads which are applicable to ECD/Grade R teachers more widely. Research results have illuminated the deep concerns that *all* teachers, regardless of context, have in relation to practice. These mutual concerns could become an important factor in any attempt to unify the field, to give teachers voice and agency and to nullify hegemonic practices emanating from particular curriculum approaches (see 2.4). These concerns include the status of the Grade R teachers, conditions of service and the expressed disquiet about implementing too formal a curriculum.

Espoused theories indicate that teachers believe they have adopted a reforming position, but the reality on the ground is that many of the practices are conforming in nature. What is of further concern is that most teachers have no awareness of the transforming possibilities that alternative understandings can bring to their practice.

Furthermore, two findings, in particular, deserve further exploration. These are teachers' understandings of play and their understandings of children and, in particular, how children learn. If, as this research has highlighted, their understandings of practice are closely aligned with the conforming position then any expectations of teachers implementing a rich play-based, interactive learning programme where children are

afforded agency and voice will not be realised. These issues will be addressed in 10.5.2 when I explore suggestions for further research.

Quality practice is undoubtedly influenced by parent-teacher interactions. An unexpected research finding was the degree of ambivalence, if not antagonism and resentment, that was expressed by many of the participants towards parents. These feelings might, in part, be triggered by teachers' frustrations related to work contexts, the tensions teachers experience between their ideal curriculum and the one which they are compelled to implement, and to education challenges in general. Establishing and implementing collaborative parent-teacher relationships is another area for further research.

10.4.3 *Reflection on the research design*

This was a broad study, perhaps too broad for a PhD thesis. In the ECD/Grade R contest, curriculum and pedagogy are closely interrelated and each discipline by itself constitutes a huge knowledge field. Each had to be explained before common threads informing ECD practice could be extracted and expounded upon. In addition, traditional western ECD/Grade R practice is informed by a number of theoretical perspectives which in turn are underpinned by numerous theories. Consideration therefore had to be given to a number of different theories (each which constitutes an enormous body of knowledge). The contested and fragmented nature of early childhood education added a further dimension which had to be considered. ECD/Grade R is an under theorised field in South Africa and this added to the complexity of the study. Finally perceptions are informed by many different factors all of which had to be taken into account. This was perhaps a study for a team of people as many different areas of both teachers' practice and Grade R practice had to be investigated. However, given the paucity of research within the South African context relating to ECD/Grade R issues and in particular to teachers' perceptions of their practice, I believe that this study is an important first step in interrogating what, according to teachers, constitutes high quality practice within the South African context. I would also argue that it is difficult to interrogate teachers' perceptions of their practice without delving into their understandings of themselves, the children they teach as well as the specific ECD context(s). This did mean however, that many important factors were not interrogated as deeply as they might have been had the study been narrowed to explore a specific aspect of, for example, practice.

Teachers' perceptions of their practice are informed by many different factors, many of which were addressed in this study. The importance of the teacher-parent relationship in ensuring quality teaching and learning for young children was never in question. However, I did not anticipate that I might have to explore facets of this relationship in depth, and therefore, did not formulate any specific research questions around this issue. As I mentioned in chapter 9, I was surprised by the depth of feeling that teachers expressed towards parents and the possible impact these perceptions have on practice. Consequently, the absence of a specific research question exploring the teacher-parent relationship could be viewed as a limitation of this study. Stemming from this limitation however is the recommendation that an exploration of the teacher-parent relationship could be a worthwhile research topic.

The concept of play and teachers' understandings of play is another area that warranted greater investigation. Despite all teachers acknowledging its importance and agreeing that they teach through play, the absence of meaningful play to promote teaching and learning in the Grade R environment was disquieting. Different social and cultural understandings of play and teachers conceptualisations of play as a medium through which both teaching and learning can take place deserve to be further investigated.

One way of narrowing the study would have been to limit participants; both the number and their diverse contexts. However, in addition to the reasons presented above, I deemed it important to explore the opinions of as many diverse groups as possible in order to work with a fairly representative sample of ECD practice in Gauteng. This was also one way of giving teachers voice and agency and acknowledging their contributions to the ECD/Grade R field. However, it becomes impossible to be totally inclusive and I need to acknowledge that, despite the attempt at inclusivity, not all groups of people or types of centres were included in this study.

Through the research design I attempted to counter researcher bias by employing multiple methods of data collection and by adopting an open-ended approach towards data analysis. Participants were invited to comment on the initial findings. Photographs were an important way of verifying data, and during data analysis became important triggers enabling me to place data in a particular context and to recall specific incidents. During the process of data analysis I discussed findings with colleagues in an attempt to clarify my own understandings, avoid researcher bias and to ascertain their

understandings of the collected data. I believe that the participants' opinions have been accurately represented throughout this study.

The research instrument (see appendix 1) was adapted from a research study in which I had participated (see 1.5). It was designed in order to standardise Grade R classroom observations that were carried out by a number of different researchers (see 5.4.1). This instrument, I suggest, reflects elements of high quality ECD/Grade R practice as perceived in the English-speaking world. It also reflects the current South African understanding of DAP. However, with hindsight I am acutely aware that this understanding is based on a Eurocentric model and western understandings of ECD. A challenge stemming from this study is how to adapt South African ECD/Grade R practices to ensure that they reflect global imperatives of what constitutes high quality practice but at the same time reflect a uniquely South African context. A transforming position underpinned by an historical socio-cultural approach is one alternative because of the emphasis on diverse contexts, the co-construction of knowledge and a pedagogy of play.

A possible design limitation of this study relates to the Eurocentric limitations of the researcher. I am not proficient in any of the African languages and thus almost all communications with teachers took place through the medium of English. I have a working knowledge of Afrikaans and occasionally teachers used this language to bring home a point. It is therefore likely that I missed nuances and complexities that a mother-tongue researcher might have noticed and pursued. For example, I might have overlooked aspects relating to indigenous knowledge and specific cultural practices inherent in the notion of *ubuntu*. In this regard I have already addressed limitations relating to the research tool.

The shift in my own epistemological position has become evident. At the commencement of this study my epistemological position was predominately reforming, particularly in relation to curriculum contexts. I did, however, take cognisance of issues relating to democracy and social justice but I can't say that my practice was strongly anti-bias. I was very aware of, for example, issues relating to language diversity, religion and certain cultural differences. However, prior to this study, I did not think critically about issues focusing on, for example, play — such as how play can privilege or marginalise children. Nor did I consider viable alternatives to the notion of 'traditional free play'. Neither had I thought about the concept of 'a pedagogy of play' and the value of

teaching through play, as opposed to learning through play. And I did not think critically about the various hegemonic practices that abound in relation to ECD/Grade R implementation.

A final comment is given to the theoretical underpinning. Current understandings of ECD/Grade R practice are based on many different perspectives. Consequently each one required some theoretical foundation. Exploring an alternative approach opened possibilities for many other theoretical orientations including post-Vygotskian, post-modern, post-structural, and critical theories. Space limitations prevented an overview of all these theories. I chose to focus on the developmental theorists as this thesis explored teachers' perceptions of their practice and traditional practice is underpinned by developmental orientations. What, however, did become clear during this thesis was that teachers have a poor understanding of many of the traditional theoretical underpinnings and this has resulted in them blurring theory and practice. Furthermore, there is minimal insight into alternative theories and perspectives related to teaching and learning.

10.5 *CONCLUSION*

This chapter has offered an overview of the thesis and reflected on the findings through an alternative lens. By way of concluding this study, I reflect briefly on the overall contributions of this study and offer suggestions for further research.

10.5.1 *Contributions of this study*

This study has provided new insights into South African teachers' perceptions of their practice as well as considered teachers' identified alternative strategies for improving practice. Many of the findings echo what has been found by other research studies (Nias, 1985; Anning, 1991); in particular, findings related to teachers' perceptions of themselves as nurturing loving beings, their need for a referential group which supports their embedded practices, their ambivalent understandings of play and tensions between their espoused theories, and their theories-in-use relating to their teaching approaches and understandings of children and childhood. This study has, however, revealed the extent of this ambivalence within the South African context and the extent to which most teachers have adopted a conforming approach towards the education of young children. I would argue that this conforming approach has been exacerbated because, as research

findings revealed, teachers do not have a deep understanding of the theoretical perspectives which inform their practice. Consequently, practice is underpinned by taken-for-granted understandings of children and of a play-based approach towards teaching and learning.

Coherent theories of curriculum and pedagogy need to be made more explicit. If Grade R teachers are not able to clearly articulate the reasons behind their practice, they will continue to be pressurized into adopting a more formal Grade R approach. One way to give teachers a voice would be for them to engage in critical dialogue and reflection about issues relating to their practice, both within local and international arenas. The findings reveal that teachers have adopted an uncritical stance towards their practice. Critical reflection would also help to empower ECD/Grade R teachers who do not appear to have either voice or agency. They are submerged in hegemonic practices that advantage the school and the Department(s) of Education.

A surprising finding was the ambivalent attitude, in fact, sometimes unsympathetic and antagonistic attitudes, of Grade R teachers towards parents. Given the importance of parent-teacher relationships, especially in early childhood education, ways of constructing collaborative relationships with parents that enable them to become true partners in the education journey of their children need to be interrogated.

This study has further revealed that teachers have not yet begun to engage with contemporary issues informing early childhood learning. These include new insights into technology, understanding the diverse contexts of children and their families, as well as issues relating to social justice and anti-bias education. In fact, regardless of their or the children's contexts, teachers still adopt an assimilation model based on a white, middle class perspective of teaching and learning.

The study reiterated the impact of current constraints of the Education Department relating to qualifications, conditions of service and service delivery, and highlighted teachers' increasing frustrations in this regard. Given these constraints, this study also pointed to a definite role for South African universities — to deepen both theoretical and practical insights into early years pedagogy through appropriate teacher-focused interventions. However, universities will need to become more committed to the notion of quality early years teaching

This study also offers some cautionary warnings. It appears as if South African ECD/Grade R teachers, unlike some of their overseas colleagues (Woods & Jeffery, 2002) still find their chief source of job satisfaction through classroom interactions with the children they teach. Ways of supporting teachers that will ensure high quality practice need to be explored without rupturing this teacher-child bond, which could result in disassociation with the teaching and learning process. In the search for high quality Grade R implementation, we need to heed international findings and open pedagogical spaces for teachers to reconceptualise their practice in a way that will privilege all the children whom they teach.

10.5.2 *Suggestions for further research*

Further research is needed into determining what teachers understand by and about early learning, their views on play and to elucidate from them how cultural variations and understandings can be accommodated within a high quality programme that meets the learning needs of all children and at the same time prepares children for the challenges of a changing world. A first step could be to explore teachers' understandings of some of the taken-for-granted aspects of ECD/Grade R programme. In particular, their understandings of how children learn and what constitutes indigenous knowledge within the ECD/Grade R context should be investigated. This could include teachers' understandings of play and their cultural understandings of an interactive learning programme and what constitutes a high quality programme within the South African context.

Given the finding that teachers do not collaborate readily with each other and when they do they tend to find referential groups that support their current understandings of practice an important imperative is to encourage teachers to engage in critical dialogue and to reflect critically on their practice. This could include reflecting on their role as a teacher, how they construct children and constitute the learning programme, and how to promote collaboration with each other and parents. It is through such a critically reflective process that the 'deafening gaps and silences' relating to contemporary issues and ECD approaches could be examined. One possibility is an action research study

where collaborative interaction between teachers, children and parents is explored through a critically reflective process.

10.5.3 *Recommendations for practice*

This was a qualitative study in which I explored, investigated and interrogated teachers' perceptions of their practice. Given the personal nature of perceptions it is unwarranted to make recommendations for future practice. Recommendations are always subjective and I acknowledge that they will be tainted by my perspectives and understandings of current ECD/Grade R practice in South Africa.

Generally teachers were enthusiastic about their work and they cared deeply for the children they were teaching. Ways to sustain this motivation need to be sought so that teachers can be supported to improve their classroom practice and to extend and deepen their understanding of and insight into early childhood curriculum and pedagogy that considers the social and culturally contexts of the children whom they are teaching.

There is some evidence of good practice. These strengths ought to be identified and used as the platform from which to improve practice. Teachers need ongoing support but of a different kind. The type of inservice training and workshops which are currently being offered to teachers do not appear to impact classroom practice (see TPS). A mentor, who goes into the classrooms and works collaboratively with teachers, to assist them in implementing an appropriate play-based, culturally appropriate pedagogy is a possible way forward. This will take time but would enable teachers to participate in their own personal and professional growth, and enable them to develop voice and agency. Coupled with this type of support opportunities to come together as a group to discuss and debate issues of common interest and concern should be created. In this way a possible community of inquiry could be established where teachers become developers and not simply reproducers of knowledge.

Of course, this requires political will - will to ensure that the Grade R environment is suitable, the resources are adequate and that the teachers have the necessary support from education officials, principals and HoDs to implement a thoughtful and caring programme. But importantly, the political will to ensure that every child has the best possible education.

10.5.4 *Concluding remarks*

This study offered me a unique opportunity to explore a wide range of issues relating to ECD/Grade R classroom practice and teachers' understandings thereof. It has allowed me to deepen my understanding of ECD/Grade R practice and, I believe, to gain a much clearer insight into the myriad of complex issues that drives this practice. It has been both a privilege and a rewarding experience to work with so many dedicated teachers.

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LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Grade R classroom observation schedule

Background information

School code: ……. Teacher code: ……. Date: ……..

No. of children on the register: ……

	Date	Duration of Observation	No of children present
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			

All three learning ptogrammes (Literacy, numeracy and life skills) are covered in an integrated way. There is evidence for this throughout the daily programme.

Comment:

Indicate whether or not the following items were made available for observation.

Item	Yes/No	Observer's comment
Grade work schedule (Daily programme)		
Class assessment portfolio		
Lesson plan(s)		
Relevant TSMs		
Relevant LSMs		
Sample of learners' activities		

Comment:

Language policy and practice

No.	Indicator	Yes/No	Guidelines for the observer
3.1.1	*The school's LoLT represents the home language of the class*.*		
3.1.2	*The practitioner's own language competence meets the needs of the children.*		
3.1.3	*The practitioner uses languages other than LoLT to enhance meaning.*		

3.1.4	*The practitioner uses a variety of strategies to enhance communication- e.g. re-phrases, code-switches, uses peer mediation.*		
3.1.5	*There is clear evidence at attempts of additive bilingualism in the daily programme*		
3.1.6	*The practitioner uses language appropriate to the generation of higher order thinking.*		
3.1.7	*The practitioner uses appropriate terminology for concept development (e.g. talks about sounds and words, explains meanings of words and concepts, uses then in the correct context to foster emergent literacy and numeracy e.g. bigger than, more than etc.*		• *Mediates learning during free play – e.g. children in sandpit dealing with different concepts such as texture, quantity etc.* • *Mediates learning during routines – one-to-one correspondence during snack time; cardinal numbers etc.*
3.1.8	*The practitioner makes use of alternative strategies such as rhyme and song to reinforce emergent literacy.*		• *Rhymes and songs are used to regain attention.* • *Rhymes and songs form part of 'incidental learning opportunities.*
3.1.9	*Language is taught in communicative ways, rather than through rules and rote learning (decontextualised ways).*		• *Telling stories, Show and tell, asking of appropriate questions. dramatization of stories.* • *Emphasis is on incidental learning and using teachable moments.*
3.1.10	*The practitioner demonstrates awareness of the underpinning perceptual-motor skills and concepts that children should acquire if they are to become successful readers and writers*.*		• *Activities include gross motor, fine motor movements, spatial orientation behaviour, visual and auditory perceptual-motor skills.*
3.1.11	*LTSM is available in the LoLT.*		• *Story books are available in LoLT.* • *Posters and environmental print is displayed in the LoLT.*
3.1.12	*LTSM is available where applicable in home language*		• *Story books are available in home language.* • *Posters and environmental print is displayed in home language.*

Comment:

Inclusion Policy

Focus: Differentiation - The ways in which the practitioner tailors the curriculum and pedagogic practices to the unique cognitive and sociocultural understandings and practices that each child brings to the classroom, while at the same time maintaining group cohesion.

No.	Indicator	Yes/No	Guidelines for the observer
3.2.1	*Individualisation: Practitioner offers individual children challenges appropriate to their level and sociocultural context.*		• *Activities and resources are tailored to meet individual child's current ability level e.g. practitioner offers puzzles with differing numbers of pieces and varies complexity of questions asked to facilitate participation of all children.* • *Specific strategies are introduced to ensure that each child's unique needs are met.*
3.2.2	Inclusion: *Practitioner ensures that all children are participating meaningfully in the particular teaching and learning context*		• *Practitioner ensures through her choice of material and teaching strategies that all children are included in her teaching and learning day.* • *Additional support is given to children in need.*
3.2.3	*Variation: Practitioner uses different strategies to optimize engagement by all children.*		*Practitioner uses a variety of teaching strategies, e.g. whole group, small group, individuals as a means of responding to children's needs and abilities.*
3.2.4	*Connection: Practitioner makes explicit the links between the child's life world and the learning experience under discussion.*		• *Placing story in a context that relates to the child.* • *Starting theme discussion from the children's 'known' before moving to the 'unknown'.*
3.2.5	*The practitioner appears to be able to identify children with special learning needs.*		• *Practitioner demonstrates insight into children's ages and stages of development.*
3.2.6	*Having identified special needs, the practitioner takes steps to address them.*		• *Differentiated teaching strategies.* • *One on one checking of understanding in relation to the activity.*
Comment:			

Teaching and learning

Focus: Orchestration - Managing the learning environment (a)

No.	Indicator	Yes/No	Guidelines for the observer
4.2.1.1	*Structure: The environment is predictable and orderly and a daily programme is adhered to.*		*A balance between routines, child initiated activities (free play) as well as practitioner guided activities. In other words, a clear daily programme that structures the learning environment.*
4.2.1.2	*Flexibility: The daily programme is flexible according to incidental needs*		• *Practitioner's practice reflects spontaneous adaptation to programme in order to maximize incidental learning opportunities.* *Practitioner is able to deviate from teaching plan in response to children's needs and interest without losing the focus of the activity.*
4.2.1.3	*Time: Appropriate time is given to particular aspects of the daily programme*		• *Routines - these could include arrival, snack, toilet, tidying up and departure. Routines are an integral aspect of the learning programmes.* • *Daily creative art activity which has elements of structure and free choice.* • *Practitioner-guided activities - there are approximately three practitioner guided activities per day of about 25 -30 minutes each in length.* • *Child-initiated activities – these are opportunities for free play where children's choice of activity is paramount. This type of activity should be available in the early morning before the morning ring, during and after creative art activities and should feature strongly during the mid morning where they ought to occupy a solid chunk of time i.e. 45 minutes to an hour in the school day.*
4.2.1.4	▪ *Transition: Productive use is made of transitions.*		• *These transitions in the Grade R context will often be routines such as toilet, snack and tidy up time. These have learning value – promote could promote emergent literacy - all children whose name begins with S go to the toilet as opposed to everyone lining up.* • *Tidy up time is a team effort that promotes cooperation.*
Comment:			

Teaching and learning

Focus: Support - The ways in which effective practitioners structure children's learning so that they are expertly assisted in their acquisition of appropriate knowledge, skills, attitudes and values (b).

No.	Indicator	Yes/No	Guidelines for the observer
4.2.1.5.	*Scaffolding: Practitioner extends children's learning of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values through modeling, modifying and suggestion.*		• *Asking open ended questions* • *Promoting thinking skills by probing for reasons.* • *Suggesting alternative ways of approaching problems.* • *Providing opportunities for kinesthetic learning experiences, e.g. write the letter 'a' in the sand.* • *Providing appropriate concrete (3D) learning material*
4.2.1.6	*Feedback: The practitioner responds appropriately to children's questions and concerns.*		• *Clarifying concepts.* *Guiding children towards appropriate ways to deal with peer conflict and attain resolution.*
4.2.1.7	*Responsiveness: Practitioner interacts proactively with children*		• *The practitioner shares and builds on children's contributions.*
4.2.1.8	*Explicitness: The practitioner supports children's active learning processes.*		• *Encouraging children to explore the environment and investigate ideas related to this.* • *Establishing links between the children's ideas and appropriate concepts.*

Comment:

Teaching and learning

Focus: Knowledge: A group of teaching practices related to a deep understanding of what and how young children learn (a)

No.	Indicator	Yes/No	Guidelines for the observer
4.2.3.1	*Environment (indoor): This provides a rich teaching and learning resource*		• *Physical environment supports learning e.g. acceptable room temperature, appropriate use of space e.g. there is a carpet big enough for a ring, sufficient tables and chairs at an appropriate height,* • *A variety of play areas, e.g. book corner etc.* • *All resources are accessible to children e.g. the materials are at a suitable height.* • *Children are allowed to make choices about the materials with which they chose to play.* • *There are sufficient resources and sufficient/adequate storage space for LTSM?*
4.2.3.2	*Environment (outdoor): This provides a rich teaching and learning resource.* (2006-2008 GDE plan states that classrooms are resourced.)*		• *It is separate from the other Grades.* • *There is adequate supervision.* • *There is sufficient outdoor equipment e.g. climbing apparatus, swings, balancing apparatus, sand play,.* • *Equipment is in an adequate state of repair, properly erected and safe for children to use etc.* • *Adequate storage space for the equipment.* • *The practitioner makes use of the available resources.*
4.2.3.3	*Purpose: Learning contexts provide for a variety of learning opportunities*		▪ *Providing opportunities for the children to explore and discover.* ▪ *Practitioner appropriately mediating children's learning rather than simply directing the learning experiences.* ▪ *Providing resources and using teaching strategies that allow for and in fact encourage the child to make choices**.* ▪ *Using open-ended questions to open up learning opportunities.* ▪ *Using language to enhance all children's understanding. This could include, where necessary, meeting their current level of competence in the LOLT***. (Link to Language Policy.)* ▪ *Using code switching to enhance understanding.* • *Using gestures and other non verbal cues to enhance understanding.* • *The three learning programmes of the Foundation Phase (NCS)* are integrated*

			into all aspects of the daily programme, so that for example, children are able to link washing hands with a healthy lifestyle (life skills).
4.2.3.4	*Substance: Learning activities present opportunities for meaningful engagement informed by a play –based approach to teaching and learning*		• *Providing opportunities for kinesthetic learning (learning through movement).* • *Providing concrete (3D) learning opportunities rather than worksheet based learning experiences.* • *Creating opportunities for the enhancement of learning dispositions, e.g. courage, perseverance, self confidence, participation, responsibility (Carr: 2001).*
4.2.3.5	*Explanations: These are clear and at an appropriate level, and relate to the acquisition of concepts and skill.*		• *Providing opportunities for problem solving and creative thinking, through, for example, the practitioner's choice of activities and resources made available to the children.* • *Mediating learning through the use of appropriate questions and suggestions.*
4.2.3.6	*Modelling: Practitioner demonstrates appropriate behaviour and encourages children to align, through reflection, their behaviour with hers.*		• *Modelling appropriate behaviour, e.g. respect.* • *Encouraging children to reflect on and self regulate their behaviour.*
4.2.3.7	*Metalanguage: Children are provided with language to talk about their learning experiences.*		• *Providing children with relevant vocabulary to talk about an issue under review.* • *Providing them opportunities to develop the skills, attitudes and confidence to participate in a discussion.*
4.2.3.8	*Practitioner demonstrates an understanding of subject knowledge.*		• *Practitioner appears to have researched appropriate content knowledge and is therefore able to extend children's learning in e.g. a theme discusiion.*

Comment:

Teaching and learning

Focus: Participation: Active involvement of children in learning (b)

No.	Indicator	Yes/No	Guidelines for the observer
4.2.3.8	*Attention: The practitioner focuses children's attention on the learning activity.*		• *Bringing children together with song, rhyme, use of appropriate instrument like a tambourine, clapping, etc.*
4.2.3.9	*Engagement: Children are explicitly engaged in the learning activities.*		• *Allowing the children to make choices about what they do.* • *Explaining that some activities, e.g. the creative activity for the day, should be attempted.* • *The giving of simple instructions.* • *Directing attention to the envisaged outcome of each activity.* • *Acknowledging children who have ' bought in' to the learning experience on offer.*
4.2.3.10	*Stimulation: The practitioner motivates and maintains interest in the learning activities.*		• *Placing learning activity in context and drawing on children's previous knowledge of the teaching/ learning activity.* • *Ensuring that children have access to sufficient and varied resources, e.g. educational toys, blocks, puzzles, threading.* • *Ensuring book corner and other play areas 'invite' children to participate.*
4.2.3.12	*Pleasure: Learning is clearly enjoyed by all involved in the daily programme.**		• *Practitioner creates enthusiasm among the children by showing enthusiasm herself.* • *Children demonstrate they are having fun.* • *Practitioner acknowledges the children's pleasure.*
4.2.3.13	*Consistency: Practitioner's daily programme* reflects cohesion and coherence.*		• *Children demonstrate an awareness of a familiar schedule.* • *There's an overall predictability about how the day' flows'.*

Comment:

NCS Values (Social justice, healthy environment, human rights and inclusivity)

Focus: Respect: This encompasses a group of teaching practices concerned with the social context of the classroom. It explores the relationships between practitioner and children and children and their peers.

No.	Indicator	Yes/No	Guidelines for the observer
4.2.4.1	*Warmth: The classroom is welcoming, positive and inviting and there is a focus on interactive learning.*		• *Use of posters, interactive theme tables.* • *Appropriate displays of children's own work, e.g. art activities.* • *Encouraging sensory motor exploration of these resources.*
4.2.4.2	*Rapport: Relationships with the children support their individual learning initiatives.*		• *Practitioner consistently enhances a child's confidence and self esteem.* • *Children are reprimanded in a positive way with an emphasis that it is the behaviour that is unacceptable and not the child.*
4.2.4.3	*Credibility: Discipline is based on a respectful and trusting relationship between the practitioner and the children.*		• *There is firm but friendly control.* • *Classroom rules are few in number, easy to understand and consistently reinforced in a way that encourages self discipline.*
4.2.4.4	*'Lived democracy': Fairness, tolerance and an awareness of the needs of others are promoted.*		• *Encouraging children to share, take turns etc.* • *Practitioner models a democratic approach by, for example, encouraging children to have a voice.* • *Conflict is handled constructively with an emphasis on helping children acquire the skills to solve conflict themselves.* • *Valuing children's ideas and including these, where possible, in the daily programme.*

4.2.4.5	*Independence: Children are encouraged to start taking responsibility for their own actions.*		• *Children are encouraged to look after their belongings.* • *Children are asked to think about their behaviour towards others.* • *Children are expected to tidy up after activities.*

Comment:

Learning and teaching support materials

Focus: This refers to the availability and appropriateness of LTSM and the practitioner's ability to utilize them effectively in the learning process.

No.	Indicator	Yes/No	Guidelines for the observer
4.3.1	*The practitioner makes active use of LTSMs*		• *There is a variety of materials on offer e.g. blocks, lego etc.* • *LTSM materials encourage children to develop independence and decision making.*
4.3.2	*Practitioner demonstrates the ability to maximize the learning potential of the material available*		• *LTSM are available and if necessary demonstrate how to use them appropriately and imaginatively.*
4.3.3	*There is a sufficient amount of LTSMs to cater for all children.*		• *At any one time there are sufficient LTSMs for all children to be involved with doing something (not necessarily the same thing).*
4.3.4	*Some of the LTSMs are produced by the practitioner*		• *Posters (theme and parent and supporting parent literature.* • *Theme tables with a variety of items.* • *Items for rings* • *Appropriate, varied and culturally appropriate story aids*
4.3.5	*The classrooms is well resourced in terms of appropriate display materials*		• *Birthday chart, weather chart.* • *Appropriate posters to support theme displays* • *Children's own work is displayed.*
4.3.6	*The classroom is well resourced in terms of space.*		• *There is sufficient space for children to work at different levels e.g. some might be standing up and working at an easel, others might be sitting down and using play dough and some might be doing floor work e.g. reading a book.*
4.3.7	*There are enough table and chairs for all of the children*		• *All children should have a chair but they might be grouped around a table e.g. four to a table.*
4.3.8	*There are resources for outdoor play*		• *Climbing apparatus e.g. jungle gym., sandpit, waterplay.* • *Anti-waste resources are utilized to provide play opportunities e.g. cardboard boxes can become a make believe train or car.*

4.3.9	*There is sufficient space for outdoor play.*		• *A safe (fenced off area) where children can run around freely.*
Comment			

Observation and assessment

Focus: Assessment and observation: This refers to a group of teaching practices that assesses the children and the efficacy of the practitioners teaching and learning approach.

No.	Indicator	Yes/No	Guidelines for the observer
5.1	*The observation instruments including the lesson plan clearly indicate a strategy for the assessment of the children.*		• *Children should be assessed in a number of different situations.*
5.2	*There is evidence that assessment is based on the holistic development of the child.*		• *The practitioner is familiar with the 'norms of development' but is also aware of 'the wide range of normal'.*
5.3	*There is evidence of ongoing/ continuous assessment.*		• *Children are assessed in a number of different contexts – teacher guided activities, routines and free play.* • *The 'Workbook' evidence should not be a key feature of Grade R assessment.*
5.4	*A variety of different observation and assessment tools are used to accurately assess children.*		• *There are for example, observation check lists, an observation note book/ record sheets to record daily observations.* • *Children's activities such as drawings are used as assessment criterion.*
5.5	*A sample of the children's activities was made available for observation.*		• *These could be, for example, the pictures on the wall.* • *The children's portfolios could be made available for perusal.*
5.6	*If workbooks* are used, there is evidence that assessment is formative and encouraging.*		•
5.7	*There is evidence that the practitioner reflects upon her teaching activities and makes appropriate and relevant adjustments to her activities.*		•

5.8	*Assessment opportunities should make provision for 'diagnostic assessment.*		• *This may need to be observed in a written form or perhaps the children's files.*
5.9	*Observations and assessments should be transcribed into appropriate reports that meet the GDE specifications. (This relates both to the NCS* and the child's progress report.)*		• *This will need to be observed in its written form.*
Comment:			

Appendix 2: Possible interview questions

Thank you very much for agreeing to allow me to observe your practice and for participating in this interview Thanks for the time I appreciate it.

I have prepared a series of questions to guide the interviews but please add what ever information you feel is relevant. Your confidentiality will be assured.

1. Why did you decide to become a teacher of young children?
2. Why are you still teaching Grade R?
3. What does being a teacher (of young children) mean to you?
4. How would you describe yourself as a teacher?
5. Has this changed in any way over the last decade? Please elaborate. Do you think there is any difference between your teaching identity and your out of school (personal identity). Please elaborate.
6. What do you think young children need to know and learn during the preschool phase?
7. Do you think this knowledge and learning will/ should be different in the Grade R year?
8. What type of (subject knowledge) do you think you need to have to be a successful ECD/ Grade R teacher?
9. How do you think young children (including Grade R children) learn best?
10. What do you think assists you in providing quality teaching? What aspects of the teaching day give you the most satisfaction?
11. What are your biggest teaching challenges/difficulties? How have you coped with these?
12. How would you describe the community which your school serves?
13. Has your perceptions of the community and your understanding of parental expectations in any way influenced your teaching approach? Please elaborate.
14. What type of support do you receive (or not) that enables you to deliver a high quality service?
15. Could you suggest any alternative/additional strategies that you think could improve your practice or Grade R practice in general?

Appendix 3: Ethics clearance certificate

Wits School of Education

27 St Andrews Road, Parktown, Johannesburg, 2193 • Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, South Africa

Tel: +27 11 717-3007 • Fax: +27 11 717-3009 • E-mail: enquiries@educ.wits.ac.za • Website: www.wits.ac.za

STUDENT NUMBER:

Protocol: 2008ECE73

16 July 2008

Ms. Lorayne Excell

WSoE

Dear Ms.

Application for Ethics Clearance: Doctor of Philosophy

I have pleasure of advising you that the Ethics Committee in Education of the Faculty of Humanities, acting on behalf of the Senate has agreed to approve your application for ethics clearance submitted for your proposal entitled:

Preschool teachers' perceptions of early childhood development and how these impact on classroom practice

Recommendation:

Ethics clearance is granted

Yours sincerely

Matsie Mabeta

Wits School of Education

Cc Supervisor: Prof. J. Castle (via email)

Appendix 4: Obtaining informed written consent

CONSENT FORM FOR GRADE R TEACHERS.

25 July 2008

Dear Colleague

I am currently completing a PhD that is focusing on ECD, the Grade R year in particular. As you are probably aware very little research has been done in the ECD field in South Africa and so there is minimal evidence to support a specific ECD/Grade R practice.

This consent form invites you to take part in a research project that is exploring the Grade R teacher's understandings of ECD and how these understandings influence your classroom practice. It is hoped that the findings will contribute to a greater insight into Grade R service delivery and inform our understanding of a high quality Grade R programme.

Participation in this research project will entail the following:

1. Classroom observation – I would like to observe the Grade R programme for a few days at a time convenient to you so that I can obtain a detailed picture of the daily programme or timetable. I will take field notes during these observations.
2. Taking some photographs of the teaching and learning environment (not the children). If you are in agreement I will give you a camera so that you can photograph images that you feel best depict the Grade R environment.
3. An interview where you would have an opportunity to describe your understandings of your practice. This will take about 45 minutes of your time and will be done at a time convenient to you.
4. I will also ask you to describe (orally or in writing) one or more incidents or happenings (critical incidents) that have influenced your teaching practice.
5. An opportunity to examine the data analysis and make any further contribution or amendments before the report is completed.

Participation in this research project is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. Your confidentiality will be ensured as no participant or the school where you are working will be mentioned by name without your written consent. Pseudonyms will ensure you remain anonymous.

This research will have no direct benefits to you but I hope that the findings will make a positive contribution to ECD/ Grade R programme delivery.

If you have read and understood this information sheet and agree to participate in this research study please would you complete the following consent form? Your cooperation is greatly appreciated.

I _____ have read

and understood everything in this information sheet and agree to participate in the research as outlined above.

Signed : _____

Date: _____

Thank you

Lorayne Excell

CONSENT FORM FOR PRINCIPALS

25 July 2008

Dear colleague

I am currently completing a PhD that is focusing on ECD, the Grade R year in particular. As you are probably aware very little research has been done in the ECD field in South Africa and so there is minimal evidence to support any specific ECD/Grade R practice.

This consent form invites you and your school to take part in a research project that is exploring the Grade R teacher's understandings of ECD and how these understandings influence your classroom practice. It is hoped that the findings will contribute to a greater insight into Grade R service delivery and inform our understanding of a high quality Grade R programme.

Participation in this research project will entail the following:

1. Classroom observation – I would like to observe the Grade R programme for a few days at a time convenient to the school so that I can obtain a detailed picture of the daily programme or timetable. I will take field notes during these observations.
2. Taking some photographs of the teaching and learning environment (not the children). If the teacher is in agreement I will give her the camera so that she can photograph images that she feels best depicts the Grade R environment.
3. An interview with you where you will be invited to outline the school's approach towards Grade R. This will take about 45 minutes of your time and will be done at a time convenient to you.
4. An opportunity if you so desire to examine the data analysis and to make any further contribution or amendments before the report has been completed.

Participation in this research project is voluntary and the school is free to withdraw at any time. Your confidentiality will be ensured as no participant or the school where you are working will be mentioned by name without your written consent. Pseudonyms will ensure you remain anonymous.

This research will have no direct benefits to you or your school but I hope that the findings will make a positive contribution to ECD/ Grade R programme delivery. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated.

If you have read and understood this information sheet and agree to participate in this research study please would you complete the following consent form?

I _____principal of _____

preschool have read and understood everything in this information sheet and agree to participate in the research project as outlined above.

Signed : _____

Date: _____

Thank you

Lorayne Excell

LETTER REQUESTING PERMISSION FROM THE GAUTENG DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

25 May 2008

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

RE: PHD RESEARCH PROJECT: PRESCHOOL TEACHERS'PERCEPTIONS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AND HOW THESE IMPACT ON CLASSROOM PRACTICE

I am currently completing a PhD that is focusing on ECD, the Grade R year in particular. As you are probably aware very little research has been done in the ECD field in South Africa and so there is minimal evidence to support any specific ECD/Grade R practice.

I herby request permission to make use of a number of GDE schools to observe the Grade R programmes. In particular I am hoping to explore Grade R teacher's understandings of ECD and how these understandings influence their classroom practice. It is hoped that the findings will contribute to a greater insight into Grade R service delivery and inform our understanding of a high quality Grade R programme.

Participation in this research project will entail the following:

1. Classroom observation – I would like to observe the Grade R programme for a few days at a time convenient to the school so that I can obtain a detailed picture of the daily programme or timetable. I will take field notes during these observations.
2. Taking some photographs of the teaching and learning environment (not the children). If the teacher is in agreement I will give her the camera so that she can photograph images that she feels best depicts the Grade R environment.
3. An interview with the teacher and the principal where they will be invited to outline their and the school's approach towards Grade R. This will take about 45 minutes of their time and will be done at time convenient the school.

Participation in this research project is voluntary and the school is free to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality will be ensured as no participant or the school where they are working will be mentioned by name without written consent. Pseudonyms will ensure that the names of all participants and the relevant schools remain anonymous.

This research will have no direct benefits to the GDE but I hope that the findings will make a positive contribution to ECD/ Grade R programme delivery.

The required GDE consent forms are attached. A copy of the relevant sections of the project will be made available to you should you so wish.

Your cooperation is greatly appreciated.

Yours sincerely

Lorayne Excell

LETTER REQUESTING PERMISSION FROM THE NGO/SCHOOL GOVERNING BODY

25 May 2008

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

RE: PHD RESEARCH PROJECT: PRESCHOOL TEACHERS'PERCEPTIONS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AND HOW THESE IMPACT ON CLASSROOM PRACTICE

I am currently completing a PhD that is focusing on ECD, the Grade R year in particular. As you are probably aware very little research has been done in the ECD field in South Africa and so there is minimal evidence to support any specific ECD/Grade R practice.

I herby request permission to make use of *name of school* to observe the Grade R programme. In particular I am hoping to explore Grade R teacher's understandings of ECD and how these understandings influence their classroom practice. It is hoped that the findings will contribute to a greater insight into Grade R service delivery and inform our understanding of a high quality Grade R programme.

Participation in this research project will entail the following:

4. Classroom observation – I would like to observe the Grade R programme for a few days at a time convenient to the school so that I can obtain a detailed picture of the daily programme or timetable. I will take field notes during these observations.
5. Taking some photographs of the teaching and learning environment (not the children). If the teacher is in agreement I will give her the camera so that she can photograph images that she feels best depicts the Grade R environment.
6. An interview with the teacher and the principal where they will be invited to outline their and the school's approach towards Grade R. This will take about 45 minutes of their time and will be done at time convenient the school.

Participation in this research project is voluntary and the school and staff are free to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality will be ensured as no participant or the school where they are working will be mentioned by name without written consent. Pseudonyms will ensure that all participants and the name of the school remain anonymous.

This research will have no direct benefits to your NGO/ school but I hope that the findings will make a positive contribution to ECD/ Grade R programme delivery.

A copy of the relevant sections of the project will be made available to you should you so wish.

Your cooperation is greatly appreciated.

Yours sincerely

Lorayne Excell

CONSENT FORM FOR 'ECD EXPERTS'

5 July 2008

Dear

I am currently completing a PhD that is focusing on ECD, the Grade R year in particular. As you are probably aware very little research has been done in the ECD field in South Africa and so there is minimal evidence to support any specific ECD/Grade R practice.

This consent form invites you and your school/institution to take part in a research project that is exploring the Grade R teacher's understandings of ECD and how these understandings influence your classroom practice. It is hoped that the findings will contribute to a greater insight into Grade R service delivery and inform our understanding of a high quality Grade R programme.

Participation in this research project will entail the following:

1. An interview with you where you will be invited to outline the school's approach towards Grade R. This will take about 45 minutes of your time and will be done at a time convenient to you.
2. An opportunity if you so desire to examine the data analysis and to make any further contribution or amendments before the completion of the report.

Participation in this research project is voluntary and the school is free to withdraw at any time. Your confidentiality will be ensured as no participant or the school where you are working will be mentioned by name without your written consent. Pseudonyms will ensure you remain anonymous.

This research will have no direct benefits to you or your school but I hope that the findings will make a positive contribution to ECD/ Grade R programme delivery. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated.

If you have read and understood this information sheet and agree to participate in this research study please would you complete the following consent form?

I _____principal of _____

preschool have read and understood everything in this information sheet and agree to participate in the research project as outlined above.

Signed : _____

Date: _____

Thank you

Lorayne Excell

Appendix 5: An example of how data were coded.

Reading across the case studies data informing certain aspects of the research questions could be clustered together. This example is taken from the third analysis 27 September, 2009. For example, in response to the questions, *How do teachers think children learn best*?, and *How teachers view children*, the codes or following units of meaning were extracted.

How do teachers think children learn best?	**What was missed/not said (my thoughts)**	**How teachers view children**.	**What was missed/not said (my thoughts)**
Hands on, concrete learners.	Difficulty in articulating their meanings.	Children need routines	But these are not often practiced in schools.
Holistically.	All alluded to the different developmental domains (emotional, social, physical and cognitive- yet no mention of language), Emotional and social were stressed but were not emphasised in practice.	They are concrete learners.	But why then are so many worksheets given?
Build on what they see and hear.		Children know nothing.	Deficit model. All children know something.
Formally and informally.	Participants had difficulty in describing what these terms meant to them.	Children are needy.	Deficit model, why do teachers see children this way?
Incidentally, exploration and discovery, doing things, touching.	Yet programmes offer little choice and space for exploration.	Children need to meet developmental norms.	All teachers emphasise norms. Why?
Most five year olds are not ready for formal learning.		Our children have no confidence	Yet do we offer choices, build self-esteem?
Play, it is very important. Children do not know how to play.	It was hard for teachers to describe play, little in depth understanding of types of play or of teaching through play.	Children need more therapy.	Yet teaching is so formal.
Free play is important.	Yet not offered in many schools, especially outdoor play.	There are more and more problems.	Yet practice is so formal.