

# Teachers' beliefs about child participation in Grade R

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The focus of this paper is to examine teachers' beliefs about child participation in Grade R. Five Grade R teachers working with children between the ages of five and six participated in this study. Participants were interviewed about their epistemological beliefs on teaching and learning in Grade R and specifically the role of child participation in development at this grade level. Data were analysed deductively using typologies by Perry and Rokeach. The findings of this study showed that these teachers' beliefs concerning child participation were complex, 'messy', context-bound and did not fall neatly into one category. Teachers' views were multidimensional: primitive, dualistic, derived, multiplistic or relative. Teachers drew from different sources of experience and their own knowing to shape their thinking about children's participatory roles in the Grade R experience and implementation of child participation. The findings show how teachers' beliefs were influenced by issues of background, tradition, power and voice.

## Introduction

A progressive body of research emphasises that early childhood teachers should think critically about the nature of knowing, knowledge and teaching. Walker *et al.* (2012) forwarded this view by arguing that teachers need to be reflective, lifelong learners who can adjust their views continuously. Although it is important that early childhood teachers think critically about the nature of children's knowing and knowledge and about their own teaching, it is equally important that they think critically about their beliefs about child *participation* in Grade R. I use the term *Grade R* to refer to its role as the entry grade of the Foundation Phase (FP) of primary schooling in South Africa.

There are many interpretations of *child participation*: most commonly, it is understood as 'taking part'. *Child participation* means that children are involved in, and enabled to take part in, joint decision-making, which enhances their understanding that their opinions are valued and acted upon by others (Venminen *et al.* 2014). The value of child participation lies in the fact that children become independent and resilient as they participate and become active social beings. Participation offers children valuable opportunities to improve their social and communication skills; learning skills are also enhanced (Willow 2002). Through participation, children reveal levels of active competence (Lansdown 2004).

Participation is one of the core principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989). Article 12 of the UNCRC recognises children's personalities and autonomy (Freeman 1996) and, as such, children should be regarded as people and not as objects of concern. The right of children to express their views in matters affecting them is highlighted in article 12 in accordance with age and maturity. Article 12 entitles children to determine their own lives (Lansdown 2004), accepting children as autonomous human beings is a principle underpinning this article (Pufall & Unsworth 2004). Children need to participate as individuals who take part in different aspects of their daily lives, including making decisions about their concerns (Lansdown 2004; Thomas 2007).

Both nationally and internationally, child participation is drawing considerable research interest. Nationally, Shaik and Ebrahim (2015) study how child participation is understood in Grade R through conceptualisation of agency rooted in a social model. The findings of this study show how, in a typical Grade R classroom, child participation features strongly: there should be a constructivist rather than instructivist emphasis. A study on child participation in Grade R (Shaik 2014) showed that, when teachers adopted constructivist approaches to teaching, higher demands were made on the children's cognitive, creative, imaginative and language skills. They were given opportunities to share their thoughts and ideas, which led to higher levels of child participation.

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In contrast, when teachers adopted more instructivist approaches to teaching, teacher telling was strong. This approach constrained participation, as the children lacked opportunities to interact, co-construct and make their voices heard. Schweinhart (1997) rang warning bells about early education programmes that overuse direct instruction. He argued that although they may contribute to children's short-term advantage in academic achievement, the long-term advantage of their social and emotional achievement may be compromised. Ebrahim (2011), in her study with 3- and 4-year-olds, showed how children have the capabilities to use influential strategies, which shows that children exercise and discover agency in early childhood centres. In the international arena, Formosinho and Araujo (2011) developed 'pedagogy in participation', which is at the heart of democratic practice and respects the diversity of young children and their families. Pedagogy in participation focuses on education as holistic and inclusive. Another international study carried out in Finnish childcare centres by Venninen *et al.* (2014) showed how childcare teachers face challenges when inviting child participation. Childcare teachers can work together to meet those challenges.

There is considerable research emphasis on tracing learners' development of academic knowledge and skills, whereby teaching is framed around a 'chalk and talk' method in the early years (Schweinhart 1997). It can be argued that child participation occurs only partially in Grade R practice. Although there are pedagogical opportunities for play, movement, choice and child autonomy in Grade R, such opportunities depend on teachers' attitudes, knowledge, and ability to understand children and relate to them. Child participation in the early years is a contentious issue for teachers, who have to step back and allow greater power to young children (Shaik & Ebrahim 2015). Currently, many South African schools employ a workforce that is under-qualified, as in the case of teachers in Grade R. The quality of relations and interactions with children vary amongst teachers depending on the pedagogical contexts in which they teach.

Understanding teachers' individual epistemology is important: the term *personal epistemology* refers to an individual's beliefs about the nature of knowledge and knowing (Hofer & Pintrich 1997; Sandoval 2005). Personal epistemology focuses on personal beliefs about knowledge, ways in which that knowledge is gained, the certainty of that knowledge and what limitations or conditions determine that knowledge (Perry 1970). *Personal epistemology* may refer to a teacher's beliefs about a child's participation in Grade R. The main research question for this study was: What are teachers' epistemological beliefs about child participation in Grade R?

## Conceptual framework: Types of epistemological beliefs

Unpacking teacher beliefs sheds light on how teachers understand child participation in Grade R. Research shows

that there is a strong link between teachers' personal epistemology (Cady, Meier & Lubinski 2006; Jordan, Schwartz & McGhie-Richmond 2009) and their teaching practices. A link has also been found between teachers' epistemological beliefs and their conceptions of learning (Spodek & Saracho 2003). Although there are studies documenting teacher beliefs about different aspects of teaching and learning (Berthelsen, Brownlee & Johnson 2009; Cinisomo *et al.* 1990), there is limited research on teacher beliefs about child participation in Grade R.

In this article, the work of Perry (1970) and Rokeach (1976) underpins the exploration of teacher beliefs. Perry's (1970) work with Harvard University students revealed that they progressed through increasingly complex and integrated beliefs about knowing and knowledge as they advanced through the course. Perry identified three epistemological positions. *Dualism* refers to the simplest set of beliefs. It portrays a division of meaning into two realms: for every problem, there are right answers and these right answers are known by authorities. Anything outside this ambit is wrong.

This duality means that appropriate behaviour includes committing to memory knowledge provided by authority and hard work; there will be correct responses and answers, since these procedures are assigned by authority. Authority requires obedience and self-control (Perry 1970). Authority pretends to know all as if there is no distinction between authority and the absolute truth.

Teachers who subscribe to a dualistic belief adopt more transmissive ways of teaching and learning. A dualistic belief limits learner participation, creating hierarchies between who is knowledgeable and who is not. Adults/teachers are placed in stronger positions compared with children.

The second epistemological belief position is multiplism: Individuals hold different opinions and values, which are recognised and considered to be valid in areas where the right answers are not yet known (Perry 1970). Individuals form their own opinions and question what those in authority have to say. Multiplism exhorts learners to find answers for themselves (Perry 1970). Individuals who hold multiplist views of thinking accept knowledge based on personal opinion.

Of importance to this study is the notion that teachers recognise that, although there might be some absolute truths, some things cannot be seen with certainty (Brownlee & Berthelsen 2005); the personal truth that individuals possess can be accepted until the 'actual' truth is discovered. For multiplist teachers, knowledge of child participation, for example, remains personal because teachers feel children have the need to interrogate their own beliefs.

Perry's final position is relativism. Within the position of relativism, there is a search for meaning and understanding based on evidence and facts. Knowledge is considered to be qualitative rather than quantitative. Relativism brings

about a major shift in epistemological thinking: individuals acknowledge that knowledge is actively and personally constructed and evaluated (Brownlee, Berthelsen & Boulton-Lewis 2007). Teachers who hold relativistic beliefs often subscribe to constructivist practices: they develop active teaching and learning (Brownlee *et al.* 2007). Partnerships are formed between teachers and children that involve the construction of meaning. Teachers who subscribe to relativistic beliefs conceive of teaching and learning as facilitating knowledge construction rather than transmitting knowledge.

Rokeach (1970; 1976) introduced a perspective on epistemological beliefs according to origin. He identified a set of beliefs, *primitive* beliefs, acquired during childhood that play an important role in the way an individual sees the world. According to Rivalland (2007), primitive beliefs are derived during childhood from family and social contexts and provide the individual with a sense of self and group identity. Primitive beliefs are considered to be an important type of belief that contributes to, and affects, other beliefs.

Rokeach (1976) defined absolutist beliefs as developing in situations where knowledge is understood to be in a domain where there can be no changes. Knowledge remains static and does not need to be examined; the source of knowledge is considered to be the 'right' knowledge. Absolutist beliefs tie in with assumptions about dualism (Perry 1970). These beliefs are surrounded by an underlying message that they need not be questioned: the source of these beliefs is reputable because it derives from authority.

### Changes in teachers' epistemological beliefs

There is limited evidence to show how teachers' beliefs are strengthened or weakened (Kagan 1992; Nespor 1987). Van Fleet (1979) emphasised the role of cultural transmission, claiming that culture plays a prominent role in shaping teachers' beliefs. Van Fleet (1979) proposed that individuals understand the events of their lives only within the context of cultural systems. As individuals engage in an activity that is part of their cultural system, they internalise it; a belief is formed and becomes meaningful. Teachers acquire knowledge and beliefs about teaching through the processes of enculturation, education and schooling.

Enculturation involves incidental learning; research shows that the way teachers experience their own school environments shapes their beliefs and later practices (Ayers 1989; Levin & Wadmany 2006). Lortie (2002) claimed that teachers' beliefs are formed during their schooling and function as a contextual filter that helps them to structure their teaching experiences and adapt their classroom practices.

Stipek and Byler (1997) found that teachers with strong beliefs in basic skill practices including highly structured, teacher-directed instruction were less likely to implement child-centred approaches. One of the main tasks of education is to align behaviour with cultural requirements (Pajares 1992).

School culture contributes to the formation of teachers' beliefs. McLaren (2003) showed that the beliefs of teachers impact on their fellow teachers. A shared belief held by all teachers at a school is more likely to be accepted by a new teacher. Teachers' beliefs, school culture and school climate intersect, since the school is a central point where ideas are shared and exchanged. As teachers engage, observe and interact with other individuals, they build their own beliefs about teaching and learning and about the school environment. They share their ideas as a common ideal (Spodek & Saracho 2003). These ideals come to represent a community. Aldemir and Sezer (2009) claimed that individuals' beliefs are influenced by cultures and traditions. Once teachers have acquired beliefs, it becomes difficult to alter them.

### Implications of teachers' epistemological beliefs for practice

Teachers' beliefs hold strong implications for practice because beliefs guide and direct the practice of teachers. Beliefs shape the way in which teachers design and carry out their classroom practices. Some studies show that because some teachers face challenging situations in their classrooms, these challenges may limit their ability to provide instruction that is congruent with their beliefs (Pajares 1992). The innovations that teachers utilise in their classrooms are determined by their beliefs, which act as a filter assisting teachers when they implement instructional activities and make curricular decisions (Pajares 1992; Prawat 1992).

There is not always a correlation between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practice. Beliefs serve as a strong indicator as to why and how teachers adopt new teaching approaches in the classroom (Golombek 1998). New teaching methods adopted in classrooms are influenced by the beliefs held by the teachers. The stronger the belief a teacher holds, the more likely it is that the belief will surface in practice. As Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) stated, the strength of a belief is measured by the probability that the teacher will manifest the behaviour in question. Compatibility between teachers' personal beliefs and educational reform often indicates a strong possibility that new ideas will be accepted and implemented in the classroom (Levin & Wadmany 2006).

As children progress from the preschool grades into the primary grades, there is less correlation between beliefs and practice (Spodek & Saracho 2003). There has been a focus on how developmentally appropriate beliefs affect practice. Teachers may claim to believe that their activities should meet the cognitive and age-specific needs of the children, but this claim is not always evidenced in FP practice (Charlesworth *et al.* 1990). When children's grade levels increase, beliefs about developmentally appropriate practice decrease (Spodek & Saracho 2003). Reasons for the mismatch between teachers' beliefs and their practices could be related to poor support from parents and colleagues, lack of resources or weak/poor administration. Such a mismatch can be observed from a perusal of the materials, classroom activities and behaviour of the teacher (Spodek & Saracho 2003).

A good example of how teachers' beliefs from early childhood affect their practice can be seen in MacNaughton's (2000) study of gender. She linked child participation and gender to particular ways of knowing. The biological view of the child provides the adult with an understanding of how to invite participation. She showed how the biological and post-structural views of the child affect the way in which classroom activities are planned (MacNaughton 2000). For example, a teacher may have the view that only girls can play in the fantasy area: she plans activities so that girls often go to this area. Some teachers may assume that boys play only with cars, trucks and guns, but in fact the teachers plan only these activities for boys.

Smith (1982) stated that children do not conform to adult stereotyped gender roles. Teachers who hold a constructivist view of children's learning feel that only when a child is cognitively able can the child form his or her own decisions about gender identity (MacNaughton 2003). Bearing this in mind, teachers adopt a 'business as usual' approach, where children's understanding of gender diversity is considered a cognitive and developmental phase. Children's understandings are natural for their stage of development: teachers need raise issues of gender diversity only when children are cognitively ready (MacNaughton 2003).

Teachers' beliefs hold serious implications for classroom practice. Teachers in Grade R subscribing to certain beliefs have varying consequences for child participation. Grade R teachers need to recognise their existing beliefs in order to change limiting ones.

## Methodology

The research approach adopted in this study was interpretivist, allowing an understanding of the subjective meanings the participants brought to the research process (De Vos *et al.* 2011). Five Grade R teachers who taught in private and public schools participated in this study. Because this study focused on teachers' beliefs about child participation, I decided to use semi-structured interviews. De Vos *et al.* (2011) stated that interviewing is the predominant mode of collecting information in qualitative research because it is considered to create a social relation between the participant and the researcher. The semi-structured interviews each lasted between 30 and 40 min, were audio recorded and were transcribed verbatim. The semi-structured interviews were designed with particular themes that related to Grade R teachers' beliefs about child participation. Adopting an interpretivist paradigm enabled me to define themes that emerged from the interview schedule. These themes included the roots of beliefs in child participation; teaching and learning; and factors affecting child participation.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the ethics committee of the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape Education Department. Consent was obtained from principals and teachers who participated in this study. The

nature of the research activities was explained to teachers. Participation was voluntary and those taking part were free to withdraw at any stage during the study.

Data were analysed deductively and coded according to the theoretical understandings of Perry (1970), Rokeach (1976) and Pajares (1992). I clustered the units of meaning around the subquestions that guided the semi-structured interviews. The subquestions functioned as subthemes, with expanded ideas to comprehend teacher beliefs.

There were several actions taken to secure validity and reliability for this study. At the outset I spent considerable time in the field and over a long period was able to get to know the teachers through interviews. Researcher reflexivity deepened the study. Reflexivity allows for ethical judgements that frame the research process and mark the limits of shared values and political interests. Moreover, reflexivity involves the accountability of the knowledge that is produced (Ramazanoglu & Holland 2002).

## Findings and discussion

Teachers' beliefs about child participation need to be contextualised for the purposes of the study. I asked teachers to explore their memories of childhood to gain insight into personal attitudes and experiences concerning child participation.

Teacher B came from a family of teachers and participated as a child. She had been brought up to 'stick to the rules' and believe that 'an adult is always right'. She equated this type of participation with raising a respectful child. This way of being brought up created boundaries but did allow for sharing of opinions. She lamented that today the boundaries between adults and children appear more blurred: children seem to control. She felt that teachers' authority was weakened by child disrespect:

'We were allowed to have opinions but just to have that respect and I find that today a lot of our little ones have lost respect because they see teachers as more of a friend. I even watch them with their own parents and there I'm also picking up that the child has actually got a little bit more control. I do feel that they do need boundaries. Like I said I've been teaching for about 15, 16 years and if I think back to my first grade R class and I compare it currently, there is a vast difference.'

Teacher C recalled how her childhood excluded her 'from being part of any decision making'. In her interactions with her grandmother, with whom she lived, she noted how 'I wouldn't dare question things. As a child you had to listen'. With regard to recognition by her grandmother she said, 'They don't really see you'. When she was asked about how her personal childhood influenced her thinking about child participation, she noted how restrictive participation in her personal upbringing motivated her to create a more enabling space for the children in her class:

'Well, I never went to crèche; I was reared by my grandmother. So I did not really participate in anything; you know when you

grow up with grandmother you just do that and that. You are looking after the grandmother. So I am trying to give the children an opportunity. That is why I try in my class to encourage them to participate ... Most children are reared by grandmothers but I try to open ways for participation.'

Teacher E was the younger of two children in the family. She felt that her parents were gender biased. Her participation in activities was restricted because she was a girl and needed to be protected by her older brother. As a child she believed that she was 'a quiet child'. She recalled being an unquestioning child, with the exception of one incident:

'We were told what to do without asking questions. I was not a rebellious child and I would not really question my mother. I did what I was told. It was only when during Matric when I wanted to do as my brother did I questioned them. When I would be told not to go clubbing I would say, "But I want to".'

She noted how her childhood experiences influenced her practice in Grade R, especially in relation to gender and affording children broad play experiences. At first she replicated the gender segregation that she was exposed to. Her questioning attitude allowed her to bring about changes in the way she allowed boys and girls to participate:

'When I started teaching Grade R I had girls only playing at the fantasy area and boys only in the block area. So I thought, wait a minute, I'm doing the same thing that my mother did to me ... Why am I separating these children by gender? So I stopped ... boys and girls are free to go where they like.'

Teacher A came from a big, extended family. She was brought up to embrace the Indian culture. She noted how she was 'separated from the adults'. She recalled that children had to know their place and 'didn't really interact with adults'. In this context she noted that 'there wasn't much interaction' and children had to 'keep quiet'. In raising her own children she encouraged them to ask questions 'respectfully'.

Teacher D was raised to be a quiet child. Adults noted her visible presence but did not encourage interactions with children. Listening to an adult was noted as essential for a child. Resistance meant corporal punishment:

'We grew up in a time when children were told to keep quiet and you know that saying (what's it ...) 'a child should be seen and not heard' ... I was not given a lot of opportunity, I think, to just say what was on my mind. At times I will think, 'No, I can't take this man' and you know I was a little girl, and obviously if you did not listen to what Daddy said, the belt came out, and you were given a hiding.'

The narration of teachers' primitive beliefs (Rokeach 1976) showed that the context in which they had grown up provided messages and experiences about how to be children and how adults treated children. The image of the *becoming* child – one who is quiet, obedient and respectful – was valued when the teachers were growing up. These traditional notions of who children were and how they should be treated restricted their participation as children.

The above tells us that teachers were exposed to dualistic beliefs. Perry (1970) contended that this type of belief creates binaries between those in authority and those who are not. The adult-child binary makes adults the authority that exercises control over children, whom they believe are in need of protection, care and socialisation.

This section draws attention to the dehumanising and humanising effects of power from a generational perspective (Freire 1970). The teachers were growing up in a time when children's rights were not strongly entrenched in South African society. The family was a private space where enforcement of children's rights was complicated. The teachers were subjected to constraining practices. As children, teachers had to stick to rules and had decisions made for them. Foucault (1977) drew attention to how power cannot only be negative: it produces knowledge where the subject displays active knowing. As children, teachers were building the contents of their beliefs through interpretive frames of reference, which circulated as the dominant discourse.

The study revealed that participating teachers' notions of child participation influenced their thinking and actions as Grade R teachers. Teacher A highlighted the importance of boundaries between adult and child and the need for adult control. Teacher E noted how she contested rigid gender ideas from her upbringing to create more enabling experiences for children in her class. Teacher C wanted to open opportunities for child participation, especially for those growing up with grandmothers. The latter finding is a key concern considering the number of children in South Africa raised by grandmothers, rather than the biological parent or parents.

### Teachers' beliefs on child participation

When teachers were asked if child participation was reflected in curriculum documents, various responses were received. Teacher A felt that some information on child participation appeared in the NCS:

'Look, I think in there, if I am not mistaken, they encourage the sharing and that of all cultures and informing ... Look, I really don't think so ...'

Teacher C referred to the literacy outcomes of listening and speaking to make a case for the reflection of child participation in curriculum documents:

'Most of my participation and things comes from speaking. Um, let's see, the other one [*learning outcome*] talks about listening, hey. I think there could be more ...'

Teacher D believed that the document affirmed child participation:

'I think in the policy document they actually want child participation. I think ... nowadays the policy moves away from you being the dominant person doing all the ... I think they want the children to participate more in the new policies.'

Teachers' responses were varied, which is understandable considering that at the time of the study the focus was on developing a structured and practical approach for the FP to counter the children's dismal performance in the systemic evaluation at the end of Grade 3. It could be argued that child participation was a priority specifically in terms of achievement.

Teacher B presented a tight control view of child participation. As the examples given above show, she recognised that participation is associated with active involvement. However, her reference to this involvement was in relation to the activities set out and not around activities where children controlled the agenda. She believed that children's attention span would not allow them to participate in a focused way. The developmental maturity of some children in relation to their concentration provided her with a framework to shape her practice. Her belief in child participation is shared below:

'They need to be actively involved in whichever activity you've set out. There are some that have a bit of a problem with concentrating for long periods of time, so with those children you just need to try and rein them in again.'

The above excerpt shows that Teacher B valued children's active involvement, but that she regarded herself as a figure of authority in the classroom; her expression of dominant power was evident.

From each teacher's response, it was evident that child participation was approached from the notion of a child participating in a teacher-initiated environment. The level and nature of child participation was judged by children's commitment and activity.

Teacher A held more affirming beliefs in children's capabilities. She noted that they were 'not sponges just absorbing' information. She viewed child participation as taking place through active cognitive and social involvement through interactions. In so doing, she valued children as thinking beings who can find a sense of belonging in the learning experience. She showed commitment to 'having them actually participate'. The excerpt below illustrates this:

'The child actively has to participate in whatever happens in the class. OK ... that they don't sit back and are like sponges just absorbing, because the best way for them to learn is actually through asking questions and by participating ...'

Teacher D believed that child participation referred to physical involvement and, after probing her views, cognitive involvement. The notion of the active child was brought to the fore in contrast to passive behaviour such as sitting and listening. Teacher A believed that child participation was opposite to 'sitting there and receiving'. She viewed this behaviour as counter-productive compared to taking part in learning activities. Child participation for her meant that children were doing something. Those with passive behaviour were interpreted as non-participatory children.

'To me, it [*child participation*] means the child being actually physically involved, you know, in something, not just merely sitting there and receiving but really being part.'

Teachers' beliefs about child participation show that there are multidimensional ways in which children take part. Teacher D held the belief that child participation is closely associated with a stimulus that enables a child to take part. She combined examples of cognitive, physical and behavioural postures to articulate her belief about child participation. For her, child participation in terms of passive behaviours does not necessarily preclude learning. This view was shared by Teacher C. The observant and sensitive teacher can pick up the many forms of child participation:

'To me, it means anything that makes children take part, anything that they participate in, listening or just observing. Sometimes a child is asking questions and being part of the learning process, some might just be sitting quietly, but you can tell they are part of the process, they are learning something.' (Teacher D)

'It's not always taking part, it's sometimes maybe just sitting and listening or um ... just to be, I mean if they [are] in a group and they look at you or they are aware of what is happening. Even if they are not really talking, but I feel then they are still participating.' (Teacher C)

There was evidence of child participation being associated with high energy, motivational drive and thoughtful behaviour. Teacher E believed that child participation is made up of both active and passive behaviours that children display. Her belief is captured in the excerpt below:

'To me, it means those children who are involved, they are interested, they are confident, they are eager to learn, they come to school, asking questions and participating in each activity. Yes, you get those who first observe and watch before they get started.' (Teacher E)

There was some recognition of beliefs that children should express themselves in a way that is different from mainstream views and as independent beings, which was in tension with the belief of young children's vulnerability. Teacher B noted this in relation to school rules and the need to regulate children's behaviour:

'I think they should be able to be free to have an opinion and to differ. The school rules, the way we've set it up is just so that it prevents them from getting hurt, because at this age they are very much into, um, the fighting games and what they're seeing on television and they [are] actually acting it out, and I don't think that they fully realise the impact of whatever they're going to be doing or how they're playing.'

The analysis of the teachers' beliefs on child participation showed that they did take into account active learning and taking part. Their beliefs were varied and aligned to the concept of multiplistic beliefs (Perry 1970). Their views were coloured by opinions and experiences. Children were given opportunities to participate in activities that affected them and they were given some opportunities for expression of their views.

What was missing in the teachers' beliefs was any type of involvement of children in decision-making processes. The evaluative part of their beliefs was missing. There was evidence that teachers did make attempts to tune in to the children's intention through recognising body language and motivation, but this was not consistent with the practice of high participation by the children. Listening as a skill was expected from the children but not from the teacher, for deeper engagement with the children's concerns. Listening to children only features as a priority if teachers develop a sense of consciousness. Freire (1970) believed that the latter was necessary to create awareness that something needs to be changed, which is important if classrooms are to be democratic and inclusive.

The teachers failed to focus on how children can be actively involved in planning and evaluating activities in Grade R. Children's intentions and actions need to be interpreted, trusted and developed with support. The consultative dimension of child participation as noted by Lansdown (2004) was not forthcoming, as teachers' ideas of joint involvement and joint ownership were weak. This stemmed from the purpose of the Grade R programme – as driven by the curriculum – to give thrust to learning that enhances knowledge and skills rather than participatory learning.

South African studies on the early years have shown that young children have capabilities that make them agents who can participate in more sophisticated ways than adults normally think that they can (Ebrahim 2011; Linington, Excell & Murriss 2011; Schneider 2013). Young children can and do give their own opinions and assumptions and share possibilities with other children and adults.

When I examined each of the teachers' beliefs about child participation, it was evident that teachers' beliefs allowed for participation of children at the lower rungs. However, within Hart's (1997) notion of participation, the teachers' beliefs fell more within the practice of manipulation: the teachers would use the children's voices more to carry the message they wanted and to confirm that curriculum learning was taking place than as a tool to actualise the child's world.

References were made to active involvement and expression of children's views, but this was tokenistic (Hart 1997). I noted that there were opportunities for children to participate and have a small voice, but such opportunities remained at the margins. In such situations the *deficit* rather than the *asset* image of the child is at play. The dualistic belief of child participation dominated in the sites under study.

### Teachers' beliefs about learning

How children participate depends on the learning environment that the teachers set up. The latter is influenced partly by teachers' beliefs and conceptions of how children learn. In this study, the teachers' beliefs about learning showed their acceptance of the constructivist views of learning. Play featured as a key approach to allow for

children's active participation in learning. Teacher A had a strong belief in the Piagetian view of learning by experience and by the senses. She believed that the stages of cognitive development (progressing from the concrete to the abstract) were important for children to learn. She believed that engagement of children with concrete stimuli could give children opportunities to participate actively in learning activities:

'They learn through concrete experiences. So if I want to teach them about a particular animal, OK, some of the animals [*are*] very difficult to bring in, but if we do something such as pets we are fortunate we've got things like a rabbit, we've got budgies and we've got tortoises, so we teach them through concrete things. Even in terms of shapes, when we do something like shapes ... You give them the concrete thing first, three-dimensional and then two-dimensional and then abstract. That is the most important way and the main way they learn anyway: It's through their senses, at this stage anyway.'

There are implications for child participation. The ages and stages paradigm for understanding children's capabilities in early childhood has come under critical scrutiny by the reconceptualists (Cannella 1997; Viruru 2001), those working within sociology of childhood (James & Prout 1997; Mayall 2002; Penn 2005), who work with issues of children. Piaget's theory casts children as lacking rationality and logical ways of doing things. The concrete is regarded as important to support children's learning and participation. Another criticism is that children's cognitive development is viewed as a linear and hierarchical process.

Critics of Piaget note that children's cognitive development is complex: it does not happen in a straight line. Children's social experiences of language, communication and instruction are more significant in the development of their thinking, learning and participation (Wood 2008). Children grow up in diverse settings that make different demands on their capabilities and how they participate in their lives. When teachers use the stage theory of children's cognitive development narrowly, they run the risk of limiting children's participation.

Teacher C believed that the senses were important in children's learning: children's exposure in home and school environments had a part to play in child participation. Asking children questions and communicating with them gave opportunities to participate. The way in which children observed their surroundings was valued in the learning process and related to child participation:

'I think children learn by seeing things and, um, being exposed to things at home and in the classroom, and by asking them questions and communicating with them then you get them to participate ... I think there is quite a few that just sometimes observe and sometimes there is those that love to participate.'

An analysis of Teacher C's belief on learning and participation showed recognition of how the environments shape what children know, think and do. The skill of observation was recognised as part of child participation. This aspect draws

attention to the importance of sensitive and responsive teachers who can connect with children's intentions and invite them to participate.

Play is as an important aspect of child participation. Teachers D and B saw play as arenas for learning. Teacher D noted that it was the entry point for learning. Children participated in terms of what they were exposed to. Teacher B viewed interactions in play as indicators of what teachers could expect when learning involved child participation:

'... they learn through play first, which is the most important thing right. Uhm, obviously they also learn through, obviously a lot of copying, imitating the adult, uhm, they ... through asking, I think asking, curious, I mean the more curious the child is, I think the more the child would actually learn because obviously he is gonna, he is asking much more questions and obviously in that way, he is broadening his horizons to explore and investigate because that is the only way that they are going to learn.' (Teacher D)

'Um, the way that they socialise as well. Whether it be verbally or just the normal type of interaction, playing together. OK, they learn through play, they need to experience things physically, um they also learn, well from what is known to the unknown. Um. Yeah.' (Teacher B)

Teacher E included a variety of activities associated with learning, which included the participation of children:

'Grade R children learn through interacting with others in the classroom, through taking and participating in class, they learn by discovering things, through basic playing in a non-structured way, I would say, they copy others and their teacher, repetition of rhymes and songs that helps children who have speech problems. They also learn with touch, feel, hearing, listening and speaking and role modelling.'

Teacher E drew on ideas from constructivism in both an individual and social sense in her beliefs. When she talked about interactions with others, she gave us an indication that learning involved a relation and involved taking part in the learning processes.

In examining all the teacher's beliefs on children's learning and participation, the notion of the active child became clearer. For these types of beliefs to become practical action means that teachers make 'physical and mental room' (Berthelsen *et al.* 2009) for participatory learning to take place. Perry (1970) argued for a more relativistic orientation to beliefs, which means that teachers themselves should acknowledge that they are constructors of meaning and should be co-constructors to facilitate children's meaning making.

The above includes making intersubjective agreements with the child and allowing for give and take. Being immersed in this perspective means that the Grade R teachers knew about participatory learning. It would require a mental shift to support participatory learning; the teachers' beliefs showed potential for this to take place. How much power should be accorded to children during participatory learning became an important issue. The teachers' beliefs showed that they

valued the idea of a constructivist curriculum where both teachers and children co-construct meaning through their learning. The power differentials that reside in the interplay between children's learning and the teachers' practices remain in question because of a prescriptive curriculum. The idea of children 'owning' activities supported by adults indicates a power transfer from teacher to children (Formosinho & Araujo 2011).

## Conclusion

This article shows that when examining teachers' beliefs about child participation, it is helpful to explore past experiences of being a child and childhood to make sense of where teachers draw their thinking.

Teachers' definitions of child participation were informed by the current context in which they worked. The findings showed how they referred to teacher-initiated opportunities to define child participation. Although active learning was evident and did afford opportunities for children to participate in activities, there was little reference to children participating in decision making. Ideas of co-construction and joint involvement were weak. This problem could be attributed to the demand for tight teacher control and notions stemming from the dualistic image of adults in power and children as objects. The interplay between teachers' classroom practices and children's actions showed that teachers held the dominant power: opportunities for greater participation by children were lost.

This study notes that child participation in a diverse country like South Africa is affected by categories of difference, expressed as language, race, culture, socio-economic circumstances, class, gender and physical infrastructure. These factors influence the nature of child participation. The implications of this study suggest that there should be more research into teacher beliefs, how beliefs change over a period of time, and whether those belief changes have an impact on child participation.

Venninen *et al.* (2014) alerted us to the understanding that when child participation is supported, children's skills and self-esteem are enhanced, children's decision making can be supported, and policies for children can be improved. The importance of this study is centred in the understanding that, if we want to organise Grade R around democracy, then children's participation needs to be high on the agenda, and child participation can be enhanced through progressive changes in teachers' beliefs.

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