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## Children's agency in Grade R: A case for a child participation focus

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This article addresses a theme that is slipping from the early childhood education agenda in South Africa, namely, child participation. It foregrounds different forms of agency as children participate in teacher-created learning spaces. This view is important to consider in the context of young children as active participants in learning, concerns about improving academic performance, working within the confines of a standardised curriculum, and high teacher control. A qualitative approach was undertaken with observations collected through video recordings as the main method of data collection. Fifteen children between the ages of five and six at three Grade R sites in urban Western Cape participated in the study. The findings suggest that the children function as agents in social processes, where teaching offers many possibilities for engagement with them. This often eludes teachers, who are pressurised to focus on indicators of learning in a prescriptive curriculum. The article concludes with a brief discussion on the development of the professional role of Grade R teachers.

**Keywords:** agency; children; Grade R; participation; South Africa; teachers

### Introduction

Since the advent of democracy in South Africa, early childhood development (ECD) has become an important area for reconstruction and development. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the South African Constitution, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the National Programme of Action for Children in South Africa, as well as legislation and national policies, were adopted as tools to create an environment that would promote the delivery of rights for children in South Africa (Williams, Samuels, Mouton, Ratele, Shabalala, Shefer & Strebel, 2001). One arena for debate in the continual reconstruction process is the recognition of participatory rights of children, as presented in Articles 12 and 13 in the UNCRC. Article 12 is the lynchpin of the Convention, as it recognises children's personality and autonomy (Freeman, 1996). Children should be regarded as people, and not as objects of concern. They must be listened to. Article 12 states that children have a right to express their views in matters affecting them. This is done in accordance with age and maturity. Lansdown (2004) states that Article 12 is a substantive right which entitles children to be actors in their own lives.

These authors express the importance of accepting children as full human beings, who are agents, or influential social actors (Pufall & Unsworth, 2004). They also highlight the idea that children should not merely be treated as passive recipients of adult care and protection. When children are given opportunities, they can actively participate as people who take part in different aspects of their daily lives, including making decisions about their concerns (Lansdown, 2004; Thomas, 2007). Article 12 paves the way for respectful dialogue between adults and children. Adults, furthermore, need to be mindful of the fact that they cannot accord children full responsibility without considering their capacities (Lansdown, 2004).

The images of children portrayed in Articles 12 and 13 resonate with the early childhood education tradition and child-centred practices that is more consistent with children's lives in the western world. Bearing this in mind, Valentine (2011), in her efforts to account for agency in Childhood Studies, calls for critical social perspectives to inform the conceptualisation of children's agency. She argues that this thrust is needed to create sensitivity to categories of difference, namely, race, class, gender, disabilities and culture, and the way in which they shape children's agency. For example, it is highly likely that children whose mother tongue is different from the language of learning and teaching in school will lack the linguistic capital to fully exercise their agency.

In South Africa, there is growing literature on child participation as an important area of focus. Moses (2008:327), in her examination of policy and practice around child participation in South Africa, argues that the theorisation of children's participation needs to take a critical stance through asking questions such as "who gets to participate and why, what (is) the purpose of the participation, and under what conditions is (it) possible?" Bray and Moses (2011) revealed the ways in which children participated in public matters prior to and since the advent of democracy. Additionally, Viviers and Lombard (2013) strengthened the case for establishing an ethical framework for meaningful child participation that is consistent with global and local commitments to children's rights. On the empirical front, Ebrahim (2011) conducted a study with three and four year olds, which illuminated the influential strategies that children as agents used to participate in the social practices in early childhood centres.

This study speaks to the concern raised by Woodhead (2005). He argues that the implementation of children's participatory rights has implications for practical application. In this study, these implications arise

from an analysis of forms of agency that are enacted by the children in teacher-created learning spaces. The study sheds light on the processes of child participation and new responsibilities for Grade R teachers.

The above is particularly important, taking into account that the current curriculum in South Africa affords opportunities for children's positioning as agents, and their active participation. Whilst this is the case, the uptake of opportunities is problematic. Teachers' attitudes, knowledge, and ability to understand children as agents influences what they do in practice. Child participation in the early years is a risky project for teachers, as they are required to step back so as to afford greater power to young children (Wood, 2014). This is even more daunting to a work force that is under-qualified as is the case of teachers in Grade R in South Africa.

Instructivist approaches are likely to be implemented when teachers are under-qualified (Anning, 1991). When such approaches are used uncritically, then there is too much structure. Child participation is most likely to be unevenly distributed in practice, with distant and controlling attitudes from teachers. Bae (2009) contends that the emphasis on rules and procedures in early childhood settings can limit children's capacity to act as interactional beings. Nyland (2008) identified routines and schedules as impediments to participatory practices in early education. In the same vein, Bennett (2007) states that in education, the balance of power is rarely in favour of the child. Most of the teacher's attention is directed towards organising the environment and preparing children for school, rather than focusing on children's active participation towards lifelong goals.

In light of the above, this article explores forms of agency of Grade R children in order to shed light on some processes of child participation at a micro-level. This exploration is undertaken to determine the possibilities for understanding child participation from an agency perspective.

#### Conceptualisation of Agency

As gleaned from the discussion thusfar, the concept of agency is important to the argument for child participation. This view is reinforced by Valentine (2011), who advocates for a social model of agency. In this study, the conceptualisation of agency is developed from the social model. The perspectives from the sociology of childhood are combined with sociocultural and post-structural perspectives. The sociology of childhood casts young children as agents, who are knowledgeable and capable of functioning in effective ways (Corsaro, 1997; Mayall, 2002). Children's capacities are shaped by the practices in places like Grade R classes. They can also shape and influence these practices by using their knowledge and skills. It is

through active participation with others, and in their environments, that children advance in their learning and development (W Corsaro, 1997; WA Corsaro, 2003). Acknowledged as agents, children can be observed to challenge, reflect, negotiate and participate in social interactions with adults and other children (Mayall, 2002).

The sociocultural perspective of agency is complementary to the sociology of childhood. It highlights the capabilities of agents to learn, to teach themselves, and to take a reflexive stance (Vygotsky, 1978). The extension of ideas comes from Wertsch (1998:24), who draws attention to the material and relational aspects of agency, through the concept of "agents-acting-with-meditational-means." In mediated action, Wertsch (1998) contends that the agent is the person who is doing the acting, and that the tools are the meditational means used by the agent to accomplish an action. Artefacts and tools are not just physical objects (things), but are also psychological (language, mental models). When children are involved in activities, they will use the resources available, and possibly create their own to guide their actions, and influence what happens in practice.

Poststructural theories extend the idea of mediated action through a focus on the way in which institutional and social structures shape the agency of individuals. These theories highlight the way in which agency is tied to power relations, and the use of strategies. Foucault (1977) has alerted us to the fact that power is ever present and everywhere. It surrounds people and is exercised by them. This means that even though young children are subjected to the authoritative power of discourses exercised through thinking and through the actions of more able peers and/or teachers, they are still capable of exercising power. Power is embedded in relations between subjects. These relations are unstable and can shift and change as people continue to seek to gain power in situations in novel ways.

These perspectives lend credence to the idea that a child's agency is contingent on a high level of participation, namely, a quest to be skilful, motivated to make sense of their surroundings, and a display of competence in handling the dynamics that characterises their lives in a particular context. These ideas of agency are explored in this study through a focus on imaginative play in group situations, negotiation, and the invocation of adult authority.

#### Methodology

This article is part of a doctoral (PhD) study, which examined the nature of child participation in Grade R in the Western Cape. Taking into account that child participation is socially constructed, it was most appropriate to use a qualitative research approach. This study took place in three Grade R sites.

All Grade R sites were overseen by the Provincial Department of Education. Data was collected from two Grade R sites that formed part of the foundation phase of a public primary school. Data was also collected from a Grade R class at a community-based site, which catered for children from three to six years. Fifteen children (eight boys and seven girls) between the ages five and six participated in the study. The children were selected based on the advice from teachers and permission from parents.

The data was produced through video recording of different sessions of the day for three days. Before the recordings were undertaken, it was necessary to build a relationship with the children and to practice skills in observing them. During this time, children shared stories, personal experiences, trials and tribulations. These developments helped in creating a deeper understanding of children as participants in activities in their daily lives in Grade R.

Consent for the study was obtained via the ethics committee from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Consent was obtained from principals, teachers, and parents. The teachers were briefed regularly on the nature of the research activities. They provided information on the daily programme, and on occasion, the emotional state of the children.

Assent was sought from the children as the research activities unfolded. According to Cocks (2006), assent refers to gaining children's agreement in concrete situations in which they are directly involved. Ebrahim (2010) draws attention to the need to pay special attention to both children's verbal and non-verbal behaviour when seeking assent from young children. In the study, the children were given a brief explanation of the video recording process. They were allowed to ask questions. The camera was positioned in a way that least interfered with the natural activities of the children. During the recording, the children were able to interact freely with the researcher and thereby concerns they might have had.

The data was analysed using an adaptation of Miles and Huberman's (1984) approach for qualitative research. The video recordings were viewed, and the selected clips were transcribed. The transcriptions were used to identify units of meaning related to children's agency. These were then developed into a cluster of ideas around a theme. The theoretical perspectives also afforded greater reflection on a selection of examples in the themes.

### Findings and Discussion

In order to shed light on the forms of agency that invited active child participation, the first theme focuses on exploring the role of imagination in group play situations. This is followed by children's negotiations in spaces of control. The final

theme discusses the way in which teacher power is implicated in child participation.

#### Imaginative Play in Group Situations

Vygotsky (1978:102) contends that "action in the imagination sphere and in an imaginary situation [...] all appear in play." Imaginative play in group situations is a powerful form of agency. In Wertsch's (1998) terms, the agents gain access to artefacts, tools and relationships in order to construct their ideas and carry out their actions. Children deliberately select aspects of life and place them in situations where they have a greater degree of control (Henricks, 2011). Corsaro (2003) relates this control to children gaining dramatic license so as to project into the future, and to act in realms outside the ordinary.

Imaginative play in group situations is also valuable for other reasons. As children engage, possibilities arise for enhancing or troubling understandings from their life worlds. Children use imaginative play to communicate in creative ways. It is through group play that children are able to construct social networks and to enhance collective goals (Wood & Hall, 2011). Group play is an appropriate arena in which to allow children to access not only physical objects, but also relationships and language, to communicate and share thoughts. Through group play that privileges the imagination, platforms are created for social, physical, cognitive, emotional and relational processes to develop.

In the study, there were several episodes which attested to pretence as a form of agency. The opportunities in free group play allowed the children to create imaginary situations where they devised their own procedures and internal logic. For example, they cohered around gendered teams of superheroes in combat, and teams dedicated to beautification, using Barbie dolls as the interpretive frame of reference. These avenues helped the children to exercise and affirm their agency, according to their own definitions and parameters for group cohesion. The excerpt below shows how the children used the physical objects available, the birthday theme, and the language and actions associated with it, to exercise their imaginary power as a form of agency.

*Kathy: The baby's clothes, please. I must iron the child's clothes.*

*Sepho: And this one. Iron this one. [sic]*

*Kathy: Sepho it's your baby's birthday today.*

*Sepho: No, [it's] Lucky's baby's birthday today.<sup>1</sup>*

*Kathy: Lucky, today is your child's birthday, neh. [sic]*

*Lucky: Okay, it's my child's birthday today.*

*Kathy: No, it's fine, you don't...it's her birthday. No! [sic]*

*Kathy: I am going to put a dress on. I bought a new dress for today. Lucky, where is that klopse jacket*

*that I told you for Lucky's baby today. I mos told her that I bought a dress for her still. I'm making it nice, man. Today is her birthday. Sepho, Sepho keep here. I want to put it in her arms. This is now her child's dress. Sepho come. It's her child's birthday today. [sic]*

*Aisha: It's my baby's birthday. We are going to the party.*

*Kathy: Yes, I'm just dressing her now.*

In the scenario above, the children use their meditational means and activities to bring alive their individual input into enacting getting ready for a birthday party. It can be noted that Kathy, Sepho, Lucky and Aisha have developed internal navigational markers to meet the main goal of being prepared for the birthday party. Wertsch (1998) contends that in most cases, mediated action cannot be adequately interpreted if we assume that it is cohered neatly around a single goal. In the scenario above, there are mini goals – each playing their own part in getting ready for the birthday party. The ironing of the clothes, the conflict around identifying whose birthday it is, and the dressing up, are each served by mediated actions to reach the main goal.

The conflict around who would be 'birthday child' shows the degree to which meditational actions are associated with power and authority. As an authoritative agent, Kathy takes the lead in identifying Sepho's child as the "birthday child" when she says, "*Sepho it's your baby's birthday today*". Sepho disputes this and identifies Lucky's baby as the 'birthday child'. Lucky agrees. Kathy becomes energetic in the birthday preparation. Aisha then announces that it is her baby's birthday. This remains uncontested by Kathy. The power dynamics in group resonates with Foucault's (1977) idea that power relations are mobile, unstable, and can be reversed. Kathy is initially in control, but the others in the group also have a degree of freedom to take the action in another direction, and to resist. Hence, power is exercised by different individuals, based on their changing interpretations and concerns.

The discussion in this theme suggests that Grade R teachers need to develop sensitivity to the processes in group play, where children affirm themselves as agents. The imaginative dimension of group play allows the children to participate in choices that afford opportunities to act individually, relationally, and in a collective. In this way, possibilities are created for children, as agents, to advance their learning and development. The pedagogic challenge for Grade R teachers is to think about how they might use the capabilities that children display to deepen their understanding of their own pedagogic roles and strategies to advance learning.

### Negotiation in Spaces of Control

One of the critical ways in which children display agency is through their efforts to be skilful negotiators. Even when teachers are present, children will find the space in which to make their agendas matter to others (Ebrahim, 2011). In the study, the most notable places where the children showed their skill as negotiators was during the times when teacher control was weak. This was during free play. The children showed superior levels of self-control. This was mostly in the fantasy corner, the art area, the block corner and the outdoor area. Through the study of the video recordings it became evident that children as negotiators were wielding power and control. They were able to attain varying degrees of participation in their learning. This was prompted by, but not limited to, the priorities that the children set for themselves in the environments freely available to them.

In examining children's use of negotiation as a form of agency, it was clear that they were displaying characteristics that were superior to what had been observed as capabilities during teacher-directed practices. When the children played, they were attentive to aspects related to the goals they wanted to achieve. They were watchful of each other. This type of observation helped them to participate in reciprocal/unequal engagements, to make their concerns known, and to take decisions to influence their agendas. The example below illustrates the characteristics mentioned in a game with rules negotiated by two boys.

*Nazeer: Come, it's not throwing, not kicking, only in the basketball net, because it's basketball. Bounce, and we throw it in there, but we are not on sides, we are not in teams, nothing. [sic]*

*Jayden: We are just practising. I want to do it like practising. [sic]*

*Nazeer: Uh...practising. We just pass and one throws it in the net. I will throw in the net. Listen here, listen here, I want to tell you something. If you [...] fall or trip, you are out of the game. If you [...] fall or trip, neh, then you out of the game, neh. [sic]*

*Jayden: Okay, then I will do it like how you practice. [sic]*

The example above shows the way in which the issue of practising for a basket ball game is negotiated. Nazeer has insight into how the game is played – not as a team, but with some co-ordinated actions. In guiding Jayden, he shows the eliminations for correct actions: "*not throwing, not kicking...not on-sides*" [sic]. Jayden recognises the guidance as practising. He asserts himself, and wants to perform according to his concept of practising. Nazeer identifies with Jayden's concept of practising, and gives more rules to guide Jayden. Nazeer wields power over Jayden, when using the

injunction “*listen here*”, and when sanctioning that “*if you fall or trip you are out of the game*”. Jayden, meanwhile, aligns himself to Nazeer’s concept of practising.

The negotiation of the game’s rules operationalises Foucault’s (1977) notion of power as mobile relations. It also contextualises Halperin’s (1995) notion of power as a dynamic situation. The strategies adopted by Nazeer and accepted by Jayden is productive of a reality that is intrinsically bound up with concerns for self interest, status and identity maintenance. Wertsch (1998) argues that the degree of control in situations is dependent upon how an agent is able to make sense of the tools that are available to him. He contends that the agent’s actions will largely be devoted to taking processes that belong to others, or which are the domains of others, in order to make these their own. This requires a high degree of mastery. Nazeer shows greater leaning towards this mastery than Jayden, where Nazeer’s powerful position gains legitimation from Jayden’s willingness to follow his advice.

The richness of the form of agency described thus far often eludes teachers in a prescriptive curriculum environment, where free play is not appreciated as a space where teachers can observe and learn from children. Teachers are often occupied with authoritarian roles that resonate with their duties to accommodate curriculum priorities (Eisenbach, 2012). What is all too often absent in this context, is teachers’ drive to become negotiators of the curriculum, where there is a quest to finding a balance between what is prescribed, and what they believe works best for children’s need to participate in their learning (Eisenbach, 2012).

The study also showed that children’s negotiations made different demands on their social skills. The conditions created in the Grade R classes did afford children some opportunities to expand their repertoire of social behaviours. During small group and free play time, the children had exposure to materials such as playdough, construction materials and some manipulatives. The children used these opportunities to relate to each other in different ways. The example below shows the social performance of the children in a flurry of activities in the work areas.

*Sepho: Where is the other dough?*

*Alicia: There is yours. Here is mine. I close my stuff. Huh-uh, Amaan don’t go so on. Amaan no! Raihaan can’t sit next to you. The chair is going to break. [sic]*

*Alicia: Tamia do you want to play? Here Tamia. I must still work by the...*

[Alicia walks over to another work area concerned about not finishing her robot. Alicia is making a robot.]

*Alicia: Is there still more black?*

*Margie: What black?*

*Alicia: That that ... give me just a scissor. Give me also one for Tamia. Thank you. Excuse me Amaan! [sic]*

*Amaan: Sorry.*

In the example, the children as agents make deliberate choices, and use their interactional competence to connect with one another. Wertsch (1998) contends meditational means to be materials that can enable or constrain action. The material meditational means (playdough, scissors, crayons, and language) play an important role in this interactional context. The children use the meditational means to make their own agendas matter. The interactions with peers allow them to further their goals. Context, tools, agents “know how” and territorial guarding are important dimensions that help the children to function as agents.

In the study, the games the children played also provided a context for them to be competitive. This challenged their positions as negotiators. Those with strong personalities were able to use strategies to achieve certain outcomes. In the example below, both Toby and Nazeer take on dominant positions in a volleyball game. Nazeer and Toby position themselves as *better* than Damion. In the unequal power relations that ensue, Damion becomes the target for instructions.

*Toby: Okay, I score. [sic]*

*Nazeer: Wait, we show them how better we are than them. We are going to show you how better we are than you’s. Throw! Throw! [sic]*

*Toby: Teacher, Damion don’t want to pass the ball to me. Yoh! I play volleyball. I hit so hard ... But I don’t score. Damion! Go fetch it. [sic]*

In the quest to assert himself, Nazeer creates a hierarchy which positions Toby and himself as superior to Damion. Toby is complicit in Nazeer’s mission to secure superiority in this way. Damion, however, is resisting Nazeer’s request to throw the ball, and Toby thus appeals on the teacher’s authority to have his need for control met. Foucault (1977) notes that power relations can change very quickly with resistance. He further argues that resistance is a form of oppositional politics, which is inevitable in power relations. When a person resists, then this mobilises an individual, or groups of individuals, in definitive ways. Certain behaviours come to the fore when this happens. Damion’s resistance was inevitable, when taking into account his domination by Nazeer and Toby in this instance.

#### Invoking the Teacher’s Authority

In the study, the presence of the teacher in the children’s play spaces resulted in them taking an instructive role. The teachers were close to children during free play but they failed to take advantage of the rich meanings emanating from children’s participation in activities. The teachers, however, were active in communicating with the children when they needed to correct behaviour and/or reinforce

procedures. This could be attributed to the fact that teachers' concerns regarding children's play are more related to the expectations of 'schoolification' on the part of the children. Children's play efforts are interpreted only in the light of progress, achievement in terms of preparatory skills, and behaviours for early education outcomes.

Ghirotto and Mazzone (2013) advocate that adult/teacher interventions serve as a valuable resource for children. In free play situations, they can offer children new knowledge and insight. Adult power is thus an enabling force rather than a tool for inhibiting children's concerns and imagination. The example below shows how the teacher fails to connect with the children's concerns. The children's negotiation of meaning is interspersed with the teacher's concern for discipline, and a specific form of play. In the presence of the teacher, the boys continue to interact, and to negotiate meaning around getting their aeroplane together.

Noor: *We must make an aeroplane.*

Waseem: *Can I build with you?* [sic]

Waseem: *Yes, but ... yeah, but you must copy us.* [sic]

Teacher: *Right, quiet play.* [sic]

Noor: *Quiet play.*

Teacher: *It's quiet play.*

Waseem: *Come, we make a car.* [sic]

Noor: *Come, we make something else like a jet, neh.* [sic]

Teacher: *Noor and Luke, it's quiet play.*

Both Noor and Waseem together: *Yes, teacher.*

Noor: *I got one for you Waseem. Look here! How much bolts I got.* [sic]

Waseem: *Here's more, here's more. Come let me put this one in also for you.* [sic]

Noor: *No it's fine. Wait, it's fine. I need this jet thing. I need this only.* [sic]

Waseem: *You want the jet, neh.* [sic]

Noor: *I like these jets.*

Waseem: *Can you make me one also?* [sic]

Noor: *Teacher is gonna say, 'what is wrong with you?'* [sic]

Waseem: *See, I'm going to make a double race car like a champion race car. Look here!* [sic]

Noor: *I think that it is a little bit small for an aeroplane, Waseem...*

The example shows that, as agents, the children assert themselves in the presence of the teacher, deciding on which modes of transport to make. The teacher misses the opportunities to position herself as a learner, who is sensitive to children's meaning making. The children's efforts to create shared meanings and representations are ignored as the teacher controls the activity within the framework of quiet play. Wood (2010) argues that the national curricula policies in the early years dictate certain ways in which teachers should behave. Teachers look out for desirable normative practices, and this discounts the role they can play, to inspire children and to learn from them. Additionally, the teachers also have a dichotomous understanding of work

and play. In play, what children do must reflect an adult's plans and purposes for them to be accepted as authentic. Teachers will be vigilant regarding deviations from acceptable practice. However, it ought to be acknowledged that children are not passive or without recourse, since they may indeed assert themselves in agentic ways. It is maintained here that teachers in Grade R should make use of opportunities to build dialogue and practice that enhances their capacities to function as agents.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to provide a snapshot of child participation in Grade R, using a conceptualisation of agency rooted in the social model. This small scale study shows that children use different forms of agency to actively participate in teacher-created spaces in Grade R. The children used what was available in order to construct practices driven by their own concerns.

Specifically, the study highlighted how children used pretence as form of agency in order to understand and control reality. They were able to use negotiation a form of agency to assert themselves. They related to their peers in reciprocal, unequal and relational ways in order to develop their agendas. It was also evident that the children could have benefitted from greater responsiveness from teachers. Teachers' concerns with discipline and finding evidence of learning that resonates with the official curriculum, created blind spots to children's powerful agentic behaviour.

In order to make a child participation agenda in Grade R salient from an agency perspective, a reform agenda is necessary. Harcourt and Hägglund (2013) favour a bottom up approach for reform in practice. Greater understanding is required as to how particular contexts of children's lives shape their participation and the forms of agency that are possible in these types of contexts, especially in plural societies like South Africa (Moses, 2008). Additionally, due attention needs to be given to practices that suppress children's agency, and to those that support it.

The above has implications for the development of the professional role of Grade R teachers. Alderson and Morrow (2011:21) state that if strong child participation is to come to the fore in terms of pedagogy and curriculum in early childhood education, then teachers need to have "new attitudes towards their knowledge and status." Attention needs to be drawn to the preparation of teachers who are skilled and flexible enough to understand children's perspectives. Bae (2009:395) deepens the point by articulating that:

*if children's right to participate on their own terms are to be realised in practice, it is essential that they meet teachers/staff who are responsive: teachers who recognise their competencies and urge to develop and learn, and who at the same time are*

*open to aspects of vulnerability and dependence.*

Teachers need to be exposed to child development courses, which helps them to understand different views of children, such as: the child becoming an adult; the child as a competent social actor with vulnerabilities; and the child with socio-cultural roots. They need to interrogate their own position regarding images of children, and how they use this to invite or disable child participation in the Grade R programme.

MacNaughton, Hughes and Smith (2007) propose several roles of the teacher which are adapted and helpful to consider for active child participation where children function as agents. The teacher roles are adapted as follows: the *translator* who 'translates' and interprets children's meaning making, and acts upon it, the *intermediary* who is a go-between the child and content to be learned, and the *advocate*, who advocates for practices that are child-focused. The roles challenge the notion of teachers as merely those who deliver the prescribed curriculum. Teachers are recast as professionals, who position themselves as creative agents in a flexible and transformative learning space.

Teachers also need to analyse curriculum documents in order to identify the possibilities for child participation in practice. They should be trained to develop their skills in a reflective model of practice. This will create sensitivity to what child participation looks like in the classroom, and on the playground. It could also lead to discussions on the relational space that is given to children to allow them to contribute towards their learning. In this way, Grade R teachers stand to benefit from deepening their responsibilities, namely caring for children, supporting them, respecting their perspectives, and taking the lead when necessary.

## Notes

- i. The quotations are mostly verbatim in order to privilege children's meaning making.

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