

Inaugural Lecture: Prof NC Phatudi

CONSTRUCTS OF CHILDHOOD: IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSITIONS AND LEARNING IN THE EARLY YEARS.

INTRODUCTION

It would be prudent that I start this inaugural speech by defining the space I have been involved in and studied- the ECE/ECD field. I became an ECE academic and researcher by default after training as a High School teacher in the early 1980's. I happened to be at a right place and the right time when in the early 80's ECD became entrenched in the country with NGO's spearheading the advancement of the phase and education of the young amongst black South African. These were the dark days of Apartheid when in 1981- the De-Lange Commission recommended that ECD in black communities should be funded- a spark of light within darkness that a change of heart is about to dawn. However, the government of the day ignored the recommendations under the pretence that it had no funding. It was only at the dawn of a new democratic era that Early Childhood Education was acknowledged, recognised, and supported as an important phase in the lives of children.

What is Early Childhood Education?

Early childhood education (ECE) is an interdisciplinary field of study cutting across most disciplines that deal with human development and behaviour. It also focuses on the learning that takes place between birth and 9 years of age. We cannot talk about ECE – a specialised field that studies the development of young children and their education – without referring to who these children are. We need to explain what characterises early childhood as a unique phase of development that is always associated with 'laying the foundation for a successful school career'. In South Africa, early childhood development (ECD) is the period between birth and 9 years, from a child's birth up to Grade 3.

My paper today is based on different studies I conducted in the early childhood field. Two major themes, *childhood* as a socially constructed concept and *transitions* as critical intersectional periods, permeate my work. Undergirding these studies, which were conducted amongst young children and their teachers, was my understanding of

childhood, which was not and still is not neutral. These concepts influenced my interpretation of what I saw and gathered in studies conducted about the development of children. I struggled at times to detach myself from what I saw and sometimes became constricted by my own experience of childhood back when I started my schooling. I was placed in a class called Dom A, which can loosely be translated as 'Class A for Dummies'. This already gives a perspective of how society viewed children then: with the belief that children knew nothing, that they were empty vessels to be filled up with information and experience. The influence this had on children's self-esteem can never be dismissed and the negative association this had on them can never be discounted. I am going to interrogate *childhood* from different perspectives spanning the years, showing how these perspectives have influenced our relationships as teachers, parents, and other stakeholders with children. I will also refer to studies I conducted in the teaching and learning arena.

EVOLUTION OF THE CONSTRUCT OF CHILDHOOD.

The history of childhood has been a subject of interdisciplinary research, which has scrutinised the subject through multiple lenses and contributed to our knowledge of the concept. These multiple lenses that have been applied to studies of childhood are not value-free but raise many ethical issues emanating from society's view of early childhood. Let me start by giving a brief account of the meaning of childhood from a historical perspective and its evolution and meaning over time.

Over the centuries, childhood has been viewed in different ways. The child was initially regarded as invisible. Eventually the modern construct of childhood emerged, as voiced and formed at the intersection of different cultural, social and economic systems, natural and man-made physical environments. According to James and Prout (2015), 'different positions in the society produce different experiences- meaning that children and childhood is impacted upon by the context in which they find themselves. Children are therefore now seen as social actors who through their own agency are participants in their own development and identities. Furthermore, children have their own culture, which has been marginalised and dismissed as childish. In Ethiopia, for instance, the word *hitsan*, a synonym of *child*, is used to denote the immaturity of the stage and that children are incapable of working alone; they must

always be under the watchful eye of an adult. In some cultures, children are there to be seen and not to be heard, thus reducing them to voiceless beings incapable of expressing their own opinions.

There is a dominant and influential conception of childhood framed by the Western sociocultural context and often used as a true and only lens for understanding childhood. However, this conception of childhood excludes other experiences of childhood, especially in marginalised and minority communities (Einarsdottir 2003). In his paper about global and local research on children and childhood, Karl Hanson (2018) refers to flat ontologies, the blurred line of division between global and local childhoods. He adds that the binary notion that the two childhoods are distinct from one another is an illusion, as the context in which childhood is conceived is always shifting. Even though globalised childhood exemplifies the superiority of the childhood model as it evolved in the West as the only true model to be relied upon, it cannot be true that childhood is experienced in the same way throughout the globe. Furthermore, the divides that existed or exist between globalised and local childhoods are being challenged as economies, cultures and political spheres are being interconnected. Children are affected positively or negatively by global events such as colonialism, forced migration, wars, and other occurrences. As the divides between the developed and developing countries are changing, so too are the experiences of children and childhoods. Despite the notion that the divides between the developed and developing nations are becoming blurred, we should nevertheless realise that promoting globalised childhood should not be done to the detriment of those children who are at the margins.

Prout and James (1997) have this to say about globalised childhood:

The globalization of ideas of childhood promoted from the West – as a culture free and timeless concept – takes no account of the conditions of existence of children in poor communities where such concepts may be totally inapplicable.

Myers (2012), writing on the historical perspectives of the ‘crisis of childhood’, suggests another dimension, stating that intervention tools in the form of technology can rupture the ‘crisis of childhood’ and address what Sue Palmer (2006) refers to as the ‘environment of the child steeped in cultural innuendos, which is time-consuming

and allow development to unfold based on the biological clock. According to Palmer (2006), development can be supported through technology by removing all the impediments in the child's environment- for them to thrive (my additions). To add to this, extensive changes in the socio-economic status of families have brought changes to the experiences of children – thus changing how childhood is experienced. The cultural constraints are still a reality, seeking to ensure that children are safe, with the resultant restriction of the development and mobility of children. This is an area that needs to be researched, to establish how much of it holds true within the midst of the call for the transformation of the education, where calls for Africanisation and decolonisation of the curriculum are heard. Maybe it is the exclusion of cultural and indigenous knowledge that leads to the restrictions of the full realisation of the development and movement of children simply because the learning content they are subjected to reside outside their context thus making it unfamiliar to them.

I prefaced my inaugural speech with the construction of childhood, simply to put children we study into perspective, to mainstream them. Can we talk about global childhood or is childhood constructed at the intersection of the cultural, social, economic environments? And should childhood be understood from these environments? This simply put, says that childhood is experienced differently by children – thus we cannot talk about a globalised childhood, simply because the contexts in which children grow, determine who these children are, because each one's experiences are different. However, regardless of the negative or positive experiences any child undergoes, at the centre is the stakeholders' responsibility to ensure that children are cared for and nurtured so that their holistic development is enhanced.

One cannot conduct a study with and on children without defining the lens to be used for understanding their behaviour and total make-up. There is a plethora of theories that mainstream childhood as locally and contextually determined. They dispute the notion of a single global childhood, which in most instances is undergirded by Western views and pervades most of the curricula for children in the South as the only true

understanding of childhood. The Reconceptualised Movement in ECD has moved away from the Western notion of childhood as the only acceptable and true notion to be used worldwide. Postcolonial theories that emerged in the 20th century challenge the Western notion as the only true and acceptable understanding of childhood. They question the power dynamics between imperialism and the marginalised perspectives of knowing. Viruru (2005:9), a proponent of this theory in ECD, states that 'postcolonialism addresses the legacy of colonialism imposed by Western countries to dominate the globe over a hundred years. The influence of colonisation on cultures and societies around the world and the discursive effect it had on the knowledge base of the marginalised communities are questionable and must be interrogated with more vigour and open minds. Children have different experiences; therefore, all experiences matter despite the contexts in which they were accumulated.

I am now going to touch on the policy landscape and its influence on 'childhood' as a construct.

GLOBAL CONVENTIONS AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN POLICY LANDSCAPE

The Global Conventions and the South African government have championed the rights of the child – a contribution shaping how children experience childhood. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1997) promoted the rights of a child. This was replicated in Africa through the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1999). Article 7 of the Charter deals with freedom of expression and affords children capable of communicating their own views the right to express their opinions freely in all matters and to disseminate their opinions subject to such restrictions as are prescribed by laws. Clause 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states: 'Children have the right to give their opinions freely on issues that affect them. Adults should listen and take children seriously.' Clause 13 deals with sharing thoughts freely and states: 'Children have the right to share freely with others what they learn, think and feel, by talking, drawing, writing or in any other way unless it harms other people.'

South Africa has centred the rights of children in its Constitution. According to the Bill of Rights (1996), 'everyone has the right to basic education' – a statement that opened doors for young children to participate actively in the education provision that the country offered. Childhood is no more invisible- but it is now acknowledged as a phase that recognises that children have voices and important in investing in for the sake of the economic future of the country.

A series of laws and policies were enacted that entrenched and sustained the rights of the child. White Paper No. 1 on Education and Training was pivotal in paving the way for all other policies governing the education landscape, including ECD. The Interim Policy on Early Childhood Development of 1996 led to the National Reception Year Pilot Project of 1997. White Paper No. 5 on ECD promulgated the introduction of Grade R across the education sector in the country. National Early Learning and Development Standards (NELDS) and the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) followed with the standards and the curriculum for the early education sector. The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Standards (CAPS) regulates the curriculum from Grade R to Grade 12 and is key to guiding the content and strategies for the delivery of content in the classroom and to dealing with the presumed schism between formal and informal education systems between Grade R and Grade 1. Grade R classes are now part of the Foundation Phase. They are still an informal phase of education; however, they are based in Foundation Phase schools, partly so that they can plan with other grades to promote continuity from the informal to the formal phase of education.

What does it mean to do research in the context I just alluded to?

DOING RESEARCH IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CONTEXTS: THE JOURNEY AND WHAT IT MEANT TO ME

The literature is replete with research conducted representing the voices of children from different spaces around the world. I also forayed into this space to engage the children themselves. This proved difficult at the start of the studies, but as I became familiar and visited the children often, they began to open up to me. This is one of the challenges of doing a study with children, especially persuading them to begin talking to a stranger. I hence relied on other methods that proved equally valuable.

Doing research with children also made me wary of the imposition of my own understanding of children's experiences and of not allowing children to live and relay their experiences. Not only did I have to rely on my understanding, which was not always perfect and sometimes flawed, but I also had to take note of the understanding of childhood by children themselves and those tasked with their care, safety, education, and total development. Parents, teachers and other stakeholders became a valuable source of information on children's experiences in the education arena.

My understanding of children and childhood spurred me on to research the transitions of children and how they negotiate them. This paper straddles the research done in different areas of the early childhood years, with transitions occupying centre stage. Transitions in early childhood, as in other spheres in nature, are milestones that people experience as they move from one phase of life to the other. Transitions may be vertical or horizontal. When children start school, their transition from home to formal schooling is horizontal. Transitions occur when teaching and learning take place in a language other than the child's first language. Further transitions may occur vertically, from one activity to another in the same class. Children respond in different ways to transitions based on the support they receive. Transitions can be harmful to children if not properly planned. All stakeholders, including the children themselves, must prepare themselves properly for smooth transitions.

We know that children come to school full of lived experiences, and are able to express themselves, their needs and wants. Our conceptions and understandings of childhood change and are never static. Hence, research with children has to foreground this understanding and knowledge, namely that there are never two children who are the same, born at the same or different times, from the same or different backgrounds with different experiences and influences in their lives. Children are unique and each one's experiences are different.

My studies were conducted in township and rural contexts that are predominantly black, African, and economically disadvantaged. During my research in these areas, the theme of 'child behaviour' repeatedly recurred and resurfaced in engagements with teachers, parents, and children. I decided to probe deeper into this aspect and find out whether it held any importance in the relationships teachers had with children. This sparked an interest in indigenous knowledge and how to infuse it into ECD. I

became interested in African idioms- and how these influence the classroom pedagogy- this being done in the midst of the call for the transformation of education, Africanisation, and decolonisation of the curriculum. Im not going to report on the study- as it is newly conceptualised.

The study is still in its infancy and is being pursued by my postgraduate students. I hope to get more students registering for master's & Doctoral studies in the indigenous knowledge systems field in ECD.

Let us now look at:

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES ON CHILDHOOD AND HOW THEY ARE INFUSED IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

The construct of childhood is closely tied to social, political, historical, and cultural discourse. Dahlberg (2001) goes a step further by saying that childhood sometimes represents adult-centred interests and anxieties. She adds that this view is further compounded by the developmental psychology embedded in the schools, and country policies on young children that view development as linear and biologically determined. Children whose development is not aligned to the biological clock, among others owing to environmental factors, may be seen as incompetent and are likely to be excluded from participating in classroom knowledge production. This view of children and childhood tends to undermine the capacity of children, labelling them as incompetent. Dahlberg (2001) avers that this view privileges the voice of teachers concerning the meaning of knowledge. Brooker (2008) moreover says that if children are not in a position to express their own knowledge in a new setting, 'they may lose their feelings of competence and withdraw from activities'. During my studies, it was important to determine the extent to which children's voices were allowed in the classroom. As one of the participants in a study on transitions from Grade R to Grade 1 remarked:

In Grade R, the learners learn through play. Actually, when coming to reading, they don't know how to read, they just read pictures, they do picture reading. And whereas in Grade 1 they can read and then now before we start teaching them, they learn how to build words, because they are working independently.

The example shows that children's voices are allowed to pervade the classroom space through learning through play. However, not all studies agree with the sentiments of Grade R teachers, arguing that active participation in Grade R is not integrated into the pedagogy. In one study on supporting student teachers to use participatory pedagogy, Shaik (2021) found that transmissive pedagogy was preferred in Grade R. As a result, children's voices are subdued. Their natural way of learning through active exploration of their environment is constricted. Grade R, which is supposed to be informal, is taught in a formal or semi-formal manner and the purpose for which it was established is therefore compromised.

This abrupt change in the pedagogy from play-based to formal pedagogies implies that children are expected to change how they learn. It runs contrary to theories on child development that state that children learn better through active exploration of their own environment.

Writing on the academisation of early education in India, Vashishtha (2022) says that teachers' inability to weave play into teaching the formal curriculum has led to the academisation of the curriculum in that country. Play in primary schools is often seen as something that occurs between guided instruction – thus never as integral to teaching formal content. Teachers who are unsure about integrating play-based pedagogy into the classroom prefer transmissive pedagogy.

The question to ask is: What informs teachers in the early-year classes when they choose a pedagogy for the benefit of children under their care? We have heard so much about the possibilities offered by early education and the economic spin-offs it offers. Research has shown that quality ECD may reduce the number of people on social grants. It can enhance successful school careers, with more people gaining access to highly skilled jobs. It has the power to reduce poverty. How do we ensure that all these promised benefits become a reality?

Marvin Lazerson, writing in the 70s about social reform and ECE, questioned the grand results promised by educators and supported by philanthropists of gains to be made by making pre-schooling free and compulsory. He warned of putting the cart before the horse (Lazerson; 1970). This was the time in the USA when housing was at the top of the agenda as part of social reform. The social challenges were largely blamed

on lack of education, and early schooling was seen as the solution. Lazerson lamented then that it would take more than a decade to prove that there were gains in introducing preschool education for all children. His concern was not necessarily with preschool education, but the lack of support for these centres, coupled with the dire backgrounds' children came from and the huge expectations imposed on them. Would the provision of education solve the social problems when the same children went back to the same conditions after school? This might sound out of our scope as educators however our role too is to be advocates of social justice.

In a study I undertook on the Foundation Phase understanding of the curriculum, teachers stated that the curriculum does not indicate how to deal with content in a resource-scarce environment or poor backgrounds. How do we ensure that these teachers are equipped and comfortable to teach with few resources? One teacher from the informal settlements spoke about leadership challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic and expressed the desire that parents could be afforded smartphones so that they could assist their children with their schoolwork. This was not a huge challenge in suburban schools where most if not all parents were accessible on their smartphones and communicating with them was easy.

In the same study, teachers' agency came to the fore, especially at the beginning of the Covid-19 lockdown, when schools closed abruptly without any guidance from the authorities on how teaching was to continue. No one can be blamed; the pandemic paralysed us all. Everyone thought that the lockdown would be short and then the learners would all be back behind their desks. Teachers increasingly had to think out of the box as they became worried about their children losing all that they gained in preschools. One of the participants, a preschool teacher, commented on ensuring that children were kept busy in their own homes:

Ok, the big lesson where I am staying, I am in the forum. So we are having eh City ECD forum whereby we are just having one voice. Everything went through the forum. Someone just decided to help with the weekly lessons, they were sent in that group so that we can still have this relationship, communication with our children and parents at home. So being alone you are losing but being together like a forum I have learned that it is very, very important. Together we can make it, united we stand.

The statement is a striking example of how teachers' initiative and agency is essential to ensure that teaching and learning continue despite lack of resources. It underscores the fact that teaching and learning cannot be conceptualised outside the context in which it is to be implemented; it must be firmly rooted and determined to ensure its success in the context.

Elizabeth Peabody an American who in the 19th century started the first English Kindergarten in Boston inspired by Froebel and the kindergartens he started in Germany wrote on child development and the power of the environment to change the behaviours of children- a topic that was shrouded in contestation over centuries. I would like to share with you an analogy of a gardener she used to illustrate the development of children. Writing on children's development, she likened this to a "gardener's cultivation of each plant in the garden. In aiding child development, the gardener prunes all unwanted leaves and weeds and adds nourishment to the soil to enable the plant to grow unhindered ". She maintained that a trained kindergartener, like the gardener, would channel children towards 'social adjustment and cooperation. In her own words, children 'would evolve out of chaos' to become refined social beings with lots of possibilities – these are my additions. History has taught us that this simplistic view of a preschool teacher being likened to a gardener does not always hold true. The environment children come from, and their genetic make-up play a huge role in the possibilities these children bring along to a preschool. We have to ask: does this view of the preschool teacher as a gardener hold true? Are teachers expected, as Peabody believed, to prune all the 'unwanted' in the child without negotiating with the child and the background she/he comes from? What is it that must be pruned? Do we have the same understanding of what must be pruned? Does the curriculum alert the teacher on what to prune, how to prune and the best time for pruning? These questions need to be interrogated as to the value they hold for diverse contexts in which teaching, and learning takes place that has children from different backgrounds.

What is it that children learn? Im going to explore the role of the Curriculum ----

CURRICULUM AS A TOOL FOR EXPOSING CHILDREN TO DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES

Let me first explain the curriculum and what it means. The curriculum is defined in different ways, but it is generally understood to be the academic content used to expose learners to different experiences for dealing with life situations. The curriculum is sometimes used interchangeably with syllabus and instruction. However, it is much wider than that in that it includes planned learning experiences at the national (macro), school (meso), classroom (micro), and individual (nano) level (Van der Akker, 2003). A curriculum is the result of human agency, meaning it is interpreted differently by stakeholders and those expected to deliver it to learners. It is underpinned by a set of values and beliefs about what students should know and how they come to know it.

Researchers argue that as the curriculum is formalised, it affects the pedagogy to deliver such content to accommodate the transfer of knowledge from the teacher to children. Many teachers who participated in one study I conducted confirmed that active participation by learners is constricted especially in the formal phase of education, hence from Grade 1 onwards. The large amount of content expected to be covered within a short space of time is given as the reason.

Kirby (2020), writing on research with children and how they are rewarded for conformity in schools, thus silencing their voices, postulates that it is incumbent on research to disrupt 'problematic power structures' in education settings and create limitless possibilities for children's participation in matters involving them. According to participants in a study I conducted, the curriculum is packed with content that needs to be learned in a short space of time. Hence, very little time is set aside for play-based methodologies. This is contrary to progressive and transformative pedagogies that recognise the agency of the child as a co-constructor of knowledge in the classroom together with other learners and the teacher.

Limiting child-initiated activities and play-based pedagogy in Grade 1 is tantamount to restricting the development of children through play. We must ask ourselves: Are we not perpetuating the notion that adult-initiated activities are the only ones credible and good for children? Kirby (2020) says the following about schools: 'Schools are notorious for emphasising children's conformity into existing social orders, in which

they are expected to learn and comply with what has already been defined by adults as socially desirable to know, to do and to be.' If children are agentic beings, what will become of them, as they have become docile, sitting silently, listening to teachers, and discouraged from expressing their feelings – for they might offend the teacher? Schools are hierarchical institutions, with the teacher wielding power over children. I am not advocating for chaotic classrooms, but for classrooms that acknowledge the voices of children and their agentic nature. CAPS promotes opportunities for active participation by children, but those responsible for actualising them drop the ball. The problem might be at the doors of teacher training institutions, who are expected to introduce the national curriculum to their students, but seemingly do not emphasise much of the participatory pedagogy that is key to ensuring that learners are allowed to shape who they might be and what they can do in schools and beyond.

Is there a place for play in the education of children?

THE VALUE AND PLACE OF PLAY PEDAGOGY IN THE EARLY YEARS

In my study of transitions between Grade R and Grade 1 and what teachers say about the value of Grade R in ensuring that children are well prepared to learn to read, write and count, and do other life skills subjects – I realised that it is important to look at the value of play in a child's life and the space of play-based learning in Grade R and Grade 1.

Children are said to learn through exploration of their environment and the vehicle of exploration is playing. Play-based learning is supposed to underpin the curriculum for young children. However, those who have to implement it should be predisposed toward it and appreciative of its value and how to use it for learning. In a study conducted in the UK on teachers' understanding of play and how it influences pedagogy and children's perception of play, McInnes, Howard, Miles and Crowley (2011) found that teachers were aware of the importance of play. However, they cited external factors which compelled them to ignore playful learning for formal learning. Some teachers, despite being aware of the value of play, felt more comfortable with

introducing adult-led activities to the exclusion of child-led activities. Since Grade R is part of the formal phase of education and has its own formal curriculum to follow, how do teachers ensure a balance between child-led activities and teacher-led activities? I am including teacher-led activities because as alluded to earlier, childhood is formed at the societal level but at the same time cannot exclude children's experiences. It is also important to acknowledge the power wielded by adults that is accorded to them by law as teachers or parents.

In the study I conducted on the continuity between Grade R and Grade 1, the participants who were teachers from two townships, one an informal settlement in Gauteng, informed me that team planning was done along the lines of a grade and not a phase. When asked about the place of play-based pedagogy in both classes, it became apparent this type of pedagogy was applied in Grade R and not in Grade 1. Only in a few instances, for example activities that lead to playing, such as dramatization, was play-based pedagogy practised. Seemingly all teaching and learning was formal as children are expected to learn how to read and write in Grade 1. The meaning of play-based pedagogy will hence have to be unpacked for a better understanding of its implementation in the early years.

When the teachers in the study were asked about how children adapted when moving from Grade R to 1, they indicated that even though Grade R was part of the Foundation Phase and had been moved to primary schools, children entered Grade 1 with trepidation. They were intimidated by the formality of Grade 1 and were not ready for the transition. The teachers claimed that not enough time was allocated to preparing them. I found the same in a study I conducted in 2006, before Grade R was moved into primary schools. Children expressed their fear of Grade 1, and that they were afraid of going into a big school because they were expected to read and write. Parents and teachers too expressed their fear of the unknown and said that their Grade R children had never set foot inside the Grade 1 classroom. More than ten years down the line, teachers are still expressing the same fears. Why is the disjuncture still felt?

What has happened to the teacher's agency where there are shortfalls? Perhaps one should examine the training offered by education institutions. Does the teacher training curriculum equip teachers to deal with adversities in their line of duty, or does it only prepare the teachers to deliver the curriculum as is? How much pedagogical leadership is promoted at the teacher education institution, so that students understand that as classroom teachers, they are empowered to make decisions that will have a positive effect on the development of children? Modise (2021), in her study on pedagogical leadership amongst heads of departments in the Foundation Phase schools, found that their lack of knowledge of Grade R pedagogy is the reason for the adoption of the transmissive pedagogy across the phase, since it is regarded as producing tangible, academic results. However, we tend to forget that emotional and social skills are important too in the transitions of children from one class to the other especially from the informal Grade R environment to the formal Grade 1 (Margetts & Phatudi, 2012). Transitions in the early years is not only about the academic skills but about the holistic development of children which includes socio-emotional skills imperative in ensuring that children adapt well to the new context.

What then are transitions in the early years- and how are they experienced by children?

TRANSITIONS IN THE EARLY YEARS

A transition in schooling is a great step and change for all stakeholders, particularly for children who move from an informal phase of education to a formal phase. These transitions are experienced differently depending on children's experiences of early childhood. We all know that children's adjustment to Grade 1 has a positive impact on their academic journey. In researching transitions, Mayall (2006) reminds us that children may experience their childhood in a particular way, but they do not have the power to shape it in their way, and this includes their experiences of transitions. The voices of parents and teachers thus become important as they are vested with powers to ensure that the children are safe and that their development is sufficiently nurtured to experience a wholesome childhood

Transition studies in the early years using sociocultural and ecological lenses offer insight into transitions to school. The sociocultural lenses stemming from Vygotsky's theory are imperative for understanding the cultural context and experiences of children as they move from one context to another, together with the interconnectedness of those experiences with their development, be it language or overall cognitive abilities. The ecological lens, on the other hand, emphasises ecological influences such as the family, the community and even government policies that shape and affect the transitions of children from one stage to the other (Phatudi, 2007). The multiplicity of factors along the development journey shapes and influences such development. In a study on transitions, parents stressed the important role they played in ensuring that their children experienced Grade 1 positively. Teachers also supported the parents' view that they should work alongside them in familiarising children with the next class to attend.

According to Petriwskyj (2014), it is not sufficient to base the transitions simply on sociocultural or ecological lenses, because it is a simplistic view of transitions. Not all transitions are seamless, as the contexts in which children find themselves are often shrouded in what Petriwskyj refers to as 'complex socio-cultural and power dynamics' that deter inclusivity and thus do not support broader integration and participation in the educational setting. Studies conducted on children coming from disadvantaged backgrounds found that when these children start school with those from mainstream families, they lacked several skills deemed important for transitions. Moreover, their cultures were often ignored and marginalised so they could not adjust to the school with positive results. Niederberger (2011) bases her argument on the simplistic view that children undergoing a transition are expected to understand cultural inferences and expectations imposed on them by society as part of the social processes, but do not necessarily have the power to shape their experiences. In addition, children's contributions should not be interpreted as being equal to those of adults, as the power-sharing is still lopsided. Niederberger (2011) coined the concepts of 'cooperative complicity' and 'competent submissiveness' to denote that children are still dependent on adults. Within all the generational expectations, children have the power and decision to deviate from what is expected from them. You can command a child to undertake an activity, and he/she might do the opposite. This shows that children can take decisions and are capable of deviating from the expectations demanded of them.

Understanding who children are, has offered a glimpse into the many possibilities' children offer in transitions.

At the same time, we are warned of applauding studies that value and promote agency amongst children. One should be cautious about a blanket application of the notion of agency without considering whether it is pertinent to the child's cultural and social world. Agency in the Western sense means individuation and individual capacities, thus separating the child from his wider sociocultural context. Children's agency need not be removed from the interdependent life valued by the community they come from.

In a conceptual paper on children's agency, Abebe (2019) distinguishes between agency and competence and points out that these are sometimes confused. Competence is acquired in different stages, one of them being based on age. It comes with experience and repeating certain actions until they become rote. Mayall makes a distinction between an actor and agent, to clarify the characteristics of the agent and agency. According to Mayall, the actor is the one who does something, while the agent does something in relation to others. Agency can therefore occur in relationships and should therefore be understood against the backdrop of relationships and power within those relationships. Children's agency takes place within social relationships and has the potential of reproducing the social order and reshaping their experiences in a novel way.

How do we envisage agency in the classroom? Do we expect children to direct learning in their own way, or be actively involved in an activity under the guidance of the teacher? These are questions one should ponder upon as studies on transitions are progressing. To what extent does the child's agency assist in making smooth transitions? Are children expected to contribute towards the transitions, and how are they expected to contribute?

IN CONCLUSION

Transitions studies have been part of my life to this day, ever since I undertook my PhD studies. Transitions evolve all the time, just like the society's children live in. Transitions are experienced differently by children in different contexts and at different

times. I am constantly studying transitions in different socio-economic contexts in South Africa and spanning different periods in the history of the country, from the missionary days to apartheid days and now to the democratic era, seeking to understand the variables at play that inform transitions at each stage in the evolving history of the country. This is work in progress and will result in a scholarly publication. Experiences of childhood and its conceptualisation at each stage in history and those who wielded power, such as parents, teachers, and missionaries, were crucial in understanding transitions in schooling during the early years. I am also supervising postgrad students in the same field of study.

Lastly I would like to thank those individuals who introduced me to ECE early in my career as a teacher. I've grown into the field, made it my home and embraced it as an important area to strengthen, so as to yield desirable education outcomes. Thank you to the teachers who did not flinch when I came knocking at their doors but welcomed me to their classrooms, and to the children and their parents as well. Thanks to my parents, especially my father, Rre Pampu, Philemon Poonyane Phaladi who introduced me to ECD early in my career. This is his sixty-sixth anniversary as a Unisa alumnus, and I will forever be indebted to him. To my husband, thank you for being my pillar of strength and being alongside my children, cheering me all the way. To my colleagues – your zeal and enthusiasm for ECE spurred me on to immerse myself in the field and contribute to its development. Thanks to you all, I developed a desire to inspire those at school and preschool level to think deeply about the children under their care and their relationship with them, as this might determine who these children will become as adults.

Ke a leboga!

I thank you all!

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