Education for participatory democracy: a Grade R perspective

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This paper proposes a form of Grade R pedagogy in South African schools that addresses both the diverse realities of South Africa's children and the principles underpinning a participatory democracy. The community of enquiry pedagogy we propose is based on a socio-cultural historical theoretical perspective and focuses on the nurturing of a reasonable person (both learner and teacher) in the context of a play-based Grade R (reception year). This relational pedagogy assumes the inclusion of child's voice and the participation of child[1] as thinker, and therefore challenges teachers to take up different roles as co-enquirers, democrats, guides and listeners.

Keywords: early childhood development, Grade R, developmentally appropriate practice, socio-cultural historical approach, philosophy for children, community of enquiry, reasonable person, thinking skills, participatory democracy, inclusion, childhood, voice

Introduction

Internationally, the conceptual base guiding educational practice in the early years is slowly changing (Anning, Cullen & Fleer, 2009). In South Africa, however, research (WsoE, 2009) suggests that despite the vision in the Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996) and the National Curriculum Statement (Department of Education, 2002) teachers' pedagogy is still dominated by a developmental didactic orientation and the notion of the universal child. This contradicts the idea of a participatory democracy, which implies that people (Greek: *demos)* rule (*kratos)* – not through representation, but through participation.

As a political concept, participatory democracy is understood to include moral principles such as freedom and equality of opportunity (Kelly, 1995), and assumes that schools make space for children to participate as citizens in contexts that are meaningful to them. From a pedagogical perspective, the participatory nature of a democracy suggests a non-authoritarian approach that emphasises self-regulation and reasonableness. At the heart of a participatory democracy is the nurturing of the reasonable person (Bruner, 1996), however this is not a priority in practice informed by a developmental didactic theoretical perspective.

This paper argues for an alternative pedagogy, informed by a socio-cultural historical (SCH) perspective which resonates with MacNaughton's (2003) transforming society position. According to this position, education can open up possibilities for an individual to be a morally, intellectually and politically engaged actor (Giroux, 1990).

The paper includes three sections. First, it sets out some of the assumptions and orientations underpinning traditional early childhood education[2], as well as a more didactic approach and their implications for practice. Second, it considers where current South African Grade R practice is situated in relation to these approaches, and thirdly, argues for an alternative position that emphasises participatory democracy.

Theoretical orientations and assumptions relating to Early Childhood Education and their implications for practice

Early childhood education (ECE) draws on a traditional body of knowledge that has informed teaching and learning in young children. During the 1900s this traditional body of knowledge was informed by different theories (mainly from the field of developmental psychology) and disciplines predominantly medicine and education). The theoretical base informing ECE is subsequently blurred as discrete theories jostle for precedence. One important perspective, however, is developmental theory.

The developmental orientation and implications for practice

The developmental orientation is informed by a number of theories about development, including Piaget's theory of cognitive development, Gesell's theory of maturation and assumptions drawn from these. The developmental stages articulated in these theories, as well as milestones emanating from a range of other theories, underpin a form of pedagogy called developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). DAP, which has become the dominant approach to ECE in the West, was conceptualised in the USA in the late 1900s in an attempt to counter the ongoing formality and authoritarian perspective that was pervasive. DAP focuses on what is known about children in terms of their developmental needs, interests, strengths and abilities (NAEYC, 1997), but only recently has DAP brought into focus the social cultural contexts in which children live. Contextual factors must inform curriculum development. Penn (2009) argues that issues of knowledge-transfer in education and the export and import of ideas from the West is under-researched area, especially within the ECE context. For example, Penn (2009: 57) asks "how do ideas about child-centred practice sit alongside [possibly opposing cultural] ideas about learning self-restraint and respect?" She suggests that the African concept of *ubuntu*[3] implies there are very different ways and values underpinning childrearing practices. Yet the dominant developmental discourse continues to prevail – even in Africa.

The DAP approach implies that the structure of the learning environment is based on the principles of development stage theory so that learning opportunities offered to children are enhanced. Play is central to DAP, which - it is claimed - should be informed by developmental milestones. The notion of milestones, however, is problematised by contemporary ECE theorists (see e.g. MacNaughton, 2003; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999). In addition, developmental milestones are informed by predominantly Western, white middle class children and, as such, reinforce the notion of the universal child (James & Prout, 1990). Consequently developmental theory and its implications for practice have served to decontextualise children (Dahlberg *et al*, 1999; Cannella & Viruru, 2004; MacNaughton, 2003).

> *The notion of 'development' is not value-neutral, and although it seems to speak of the individual child, it is, in fact, a "methodological abstraction" that has stripped the child of "all that tied her to her time, place and position" (Burman, 2001).*

The idea of develop-mentality (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005) exposes the normativity and reductionism involved in viewing teaching as a process that should proceed from the simple to the complex, from the particular to the general, from the concrete to the abstract and from the empirical to the rational (Egan & Ling, 2002: 94). The conceptual confusion is based on the conflation between children's intellectual development and their biological maturation and the mirroring of the development of the species (from 'savage' to 'civilised') with the development of the individual child (Matthews, 1994).

The developmental orientation and implications for a second form of practice: the didactic or instrumental model

The second practice that has been derived, in part, from a developmental orientation is the didactic or instrumental model. This practice has been influenced by a major ideology stemming from the primary school, and is influenced by the utilitarian view that education is about introducing children to useful skills that will make them disciplined and productive citizens (Anning, 1991; Nutbrown, Clough & Selbie, 2008). Behaviourist theory also informs

didactic practice, as learning is largely observable and primarily teacher-focused. The didactic model underpins a 'back to basics' approach with an emphasis on particular, non-contextualised skills linked to school preparedness. Unlike DAP, the focus is not on the holistic development of the child, nor does it acknowledge the importance of play in early learning. It is a more authoritarian prescriptive model, and the ideas of free choice and learning through play - inherent in DAP - are absent. Moreover, didactic pedagogy does not give credence to the role of the socio/cultural/historical context.

Current Grade R practice in South Africa

Explicitly, South Africa follows a developmental orientation (DoE, 2001a). But research has shown that the 'focus on formal' discourse inherent in the didactic model is becoming more prominent (WSoE, 2009). This situation, we suggest, arises out of a particular narrow interpretation of the NCS which is possibly fuelled by a lack of in-understanding of curriculum issues. The Grade R teacher is often poorly qualified (the lowest recommended qualification on the National qualification Framework (NQF) is an ECE Level 4), and some teachers have no ECE/Grade R training (DoE, 2001b; DoE, 2009). Furthermore the quality of teaching and learning is variable (WSoE, 2009; Eastern Cape DoE, 2008). Coupled with a narrow interpretation of the NCS, there is an over emphasis on basic skills which prioritises numeracy and literacy and particularly learning to read. The style of instruction is largely didactic, with the teacher playing a much more interventionist role. Furthermore, there is usually little focus on teaching independent thinking which is crucial to a kind of democratic education that regards children *as* citizens, not as *becoming* citizens.

One major obstacle to regarding democracy as a way of life, and education as a means of nurturing democrats (Biesta, 2010), has been identified by Enslin (2003) who argues that many South Africans understand democracy in terms of access to socio-economic goods, despite the highly participatory notion of democratic citizenship forged by the anti-*apartheid* struggle and laid down in the Constitution and Curriculum 2005. However, participation requires an approach to democracy that is not limited to acquisition of socio-economic goods, but in "the *transformation* of individual wants into collective needs" supported by strong reasons (Biesta, 2010: 98). Schools need to make room for young children to strengthen their ability to reason and to participate through deliberation in democratic processes.

Though DAP acknowledges the child's context, it is wanting in effectively developing children's reasoning capabilities taking into account South Africa's diverse realities. As we have argued, neither DAP nor didactic pedagogy sufficiently acknowledges the profound effects of socio-cultural historical factors which are embedded in the diverse realities of present day South Africa. Thus neither approach adequately prepares children for participatory democracy.

An alternative orientation: the socio-cultural historical (ECE) perspective

An alternative orientation we now consider is the ECE sociocultural-historical perspective (SCH) and its implications for practice. This theoretical orientation is an attempt to counter reliance on developmental milestones and the more didactic approach to teaching and learning in the early years. SCH also provides a framework in which the moral principles underpinning participatory democracy can be realised. It is based on social constructivism and is informed by a range of differing orientations emanating from sociology, anthropology, philosophy and various theories including post-structuralism, post-colonialism and critical constructivism. Two of the specific theoretical perspectives on which SCH draws are Vygotsky's socio-historical orientation and Wertsch's sociocultural theory (Daniels, 2001: 78). According to Vygotsky, development is relational: between social context and the biological child, and not a feature of an individual child (Anning et al., 2009). These interpersonal relations are a type of meditational means.

An inherent part of SCH informed pedagogy – though not an original Vygotskian concept – is the notion of co-construction. However, exact details of ECE pedagogy that mirror these constructs are till emerging, but some implications are already explicit. One of these is the co-construction of meaning and understanding which requires teachers to become aware of what children know, are thinking and understanding to enable them to engage with bodies of knowledge. Reciprocally, teachers need to learn

to share and develop their own thinking and reasoning skills. Co-construction requires that teachers are willing to find out more about content knowledge as well as develop excellent dialogue and questioning skills (Jordan, 2009).

Another implication is how the role of play is conceptualised in the co-construction of knowledge is Wood's (2009) construct of a 'pedagogy of play'. Although play features prominently in a DAP approach, its role in teaching and learning is perceived in a different way. In DAP, free play is paramount and the teacher facilitates learning. Practice that is informed by a SCH perspective places the teacher in a mediatory role in a 'pedagogy of play' which emphasises teaching as well as learning through play (Wood, 2009).

As Podmore notes (2009), teachers need to think differently about children, assessment, types of programmes offered to them, as well as working with families. And for this they need pedagogical support to acquire the sensitivity, insight and an acute awareness of possibilities and constraints that should inform the mediatory approach adopted by a teacher. In contrast, neither the developmental nor the didactic perspective foregrounds this acute awareness.

A SCH-informed approach is about imagination, play, and collaborative learning. An example of Grade R practice underpinned by a SCH (ECE) perspective is a community of enquiry (COE) – a pedagogy which emphasises reasoning, tolerance and inclusion.

Playing with ideas in a community of enquiry (COE)

The COE is the pedagogy of an approach called *Philosophy for Children* (P4C). P4C is originally attributed to the pioneering work of American philosopher Matthew Lipman. Influenced by John Dewey, Lipman claims that the democratic person emerges only through participation in 'lived democracy' (education *through* democracy). The COE is a 'democratic laboratory' where, independent of age, members of this community are invited to participate and are included in what Biesta identifies as crucial for participatory democratic decision-making, i.e. the "construction, maintenance and transformation of the political life" (Biesta, 2006: 122). Lipman acknowledges philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce as his source in understanding a 'community of enquiry' as a practice of self-criticism and self-correction through internalisation of the social practice of thinking with others (Lipman, 1991). The pedagogy is also inspired by Socrates with the prevailing metaphor of thinking as 'inner speech' and resonates with the Vygotskyan assumption that children will learn to think for themselves if they engage in the social practice of thinking with others.

As argued earlier, there is a tension between the develop-mentality that tends to dominate views of childhood and the establishment of a framework for children's moral, political and social status as learners, as persons and as citizens. Develop-mentality tends to marginalise children and limits education (Burman, 2008; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Haynes & Murris, forthcoming; Kohan, 2002). Matthews calls developmental theories "condescending" and "morally offensive" as they encourage adults to "distance themselves from children – both from the children around us and from our own childhood selves" (Matthews, 1994: 66, 7). Developmental theories essentialise and generalise about children and their capabilities. They are based, as Haynes puts it:

> *...on detached observation rather than engaging with children and listening to their ideas, [and] position children as the objects of teaching and research, rather than as subjects with their own stories, interests and views. They tend to position adults as those who always know better what children think or need. (Haynes, 2009:30).*

Including child as thinker

Attributing reason "in the deepest sense" to children, and elevating the status of 'child' as thinker to a "valuable stranger" and the "outsider within", are essential for the 'self-regulation' and 'self-organisation' required for participatory democracy (Kennedy, 2006:148). Drawing on Bauman, Biesta explains that the stranger is not a "natural category", but is produced by "a specific construction of what is own, proper, familiar, rational" (Biesta, 2006:59). People acquire a voice, are able to speak, when they become

members of the rational community, but they speak with their *own* voice only when they are *outside* the rational community (Biesta, 2006:60; 2010:88). Adult rational discourse with its focus on logico-scientific thinking constructs child as stranger, but as Kennedy argues "children's knowledge is not *just* a weaker, or sketchier, or more rudimentary version of adults" (Kennedy, 2000: 515). We suggest an 'expanded' notion of rationality which includes the imagination and narrative thinking (Murris, 1999), and opens up a space for "child as a voice from the margins" (Kennedy, 2000: 515). The aim of education should be to speak with one's own voice and to bring something new into the world. Inspired by Levinas and Arendt, Biesta suggests that individuals are unique in the particular ways they exist with others, and each individual has to respond, and take up the responsibility that particular situations demand (Biesta, 2010:89). Uniqueness is therefore not a property, essence or quality of an individual, but manifests itself in the *relationship with others*.

The COE is a relational pedagogy in its emphasis of listening to children in contexts that are meaningful to them and the creation of educational environments that involve children's direct democratic participation. Relational pedagogy is a dialogical approach to 'guiding children' (pedagogy) that emphasises communication, interaction, reflection and negotiation. It implies "a relation, an obligation and the infinite attention which we owe to each other" (Papatheodorou, 2008:5). The COE approach we advocate takes relational pedagogy a step further by opening up a philosophical space that encourages intergenerational play with ideas from the moment children can talk. Teachers connect with children's talk by, for example, asking open-ended philosophical questions and guiding them to build on each other's ideas democratically and through the process of giving good reasons. Inclusion in democratic experiences nurtures and develops the qualities of a democratic, reasonable person in a non-competitive manner and helps integrate private and public worlds – of utmost importance for participation.

From theory to SHC informed practice

The notion of enquiry, a central feature of P4C, is the process of a search for understanding, meaning, truth and values supported by good reasons. It is the thinking *about* thinking in an enquiry that helps make the practice philosophical, and also democratic as children's decisions and ideas shape the 'direction' of the enquiry. The role of the teacher is that of a 'guide', a 'guardian' and a 'co-enquirer', who, in a spirit of open-ended enquiry, helps the children's investigation, but does not manipulate or steer the course of the often playful enquiry. Teachers have to be willing to treat learners' questions without prejudice, and to genuinely commit to the enquiry, while resisting the desire to drive the discussion in a pre-planned direction. The teacher's presence, attention and responsiveness during the enquiry are of utmost importance to support the children's experience of thinking (Haynes, 2008; Murris & Haynes, 2002, 2010). The teacher does, however, ensure academic rigour and democratic social relations. Academic rigour comes from adherence to the understanding that 'not just anything goes' in the co-construction of knowledge. In terms of democratic social relations, rules pertaining to participation and respect are negotiated.

Apart from using the COE pedagogy for informal 'teachable moments' Haynes and Murris have pioneered the use of picturebooks drawing on diverse theoretical perspectives and practices (Haynes & Murris, forthcoming). A P4C activity or 'lesson'[4] typically involves the whole class and starts with telling a story or reading a picturebook[5]. This use of story books aligns with Waghid's (2005) suggestion of using narrative to mediate autonomy and tolerance through imaginative action. And it is this imaginative action, we suggest, that can fuel participatory democracy.

Teachers present the narratives in such a way that the power of a resource is maximised in expressing ambiguity, producing puzzlement, or evoking a deep response. The illustrations in books are just as important as the text in prompting questions and establishing reference points for discussion. Children usually sit in a circle in a way that enables them to hear and see each other. After listening to the story, the children are given the opportunity to record their first observations and impressions through quiet thinking time – usually through a quick drawing in their 'thinking books'. In pairs or small groups they subsequently construct their own questions about the narrative – the kind that 'internet cannot find the answer to'[6]. It is the examination and pursuit of the children's questions that form the substantial part of

each enquiry. The class democratically adapts or modifies the process to suit its needs. One question is then usually voted for and subsequently explored collaboratively in a large circle. For example, when one of us used the picturebook *Frog is Hero* by Max Velthuijs (1995), the five year olds voted for the question 'Why did Frog go and get the food?' The story features Hare, Duck, Pig and Frog who are stranded on an island after a flood. They agree that they do not want to die and Frog offers to swim and get help. After all, he claims, "I'm the best swimmer of all". The others agree that he is. He starts his journey, but the current is strong and when he is about to drown he is saved by Rat who happens to be passing in a boat. The text nevertheless construes Frog as a true hero. The subsequent enquiry focused on the truth of Frog's claim that he was the best swimmer. After all, Duck was not only a very good swimmer, but she could also bring back food on her back! Despite the embedded messages of the story, they also questioned whether Frog really was a hero. Some thought Frog had been simply stupid, which opened up possibilities for the teacher to engage this young community of thinkers in a philosophical conversation about what it means to be 'brave' or 'heroic' as distinct from 'stupid'. Drawing on their own concrete experiences the children were expressing various opinions supported by good reasons and connecting meaningfully with abstract public concepts[7].

The South African context

In the South African context, Lena Green (2005) argues how the strengthening of judgment and independent thinking that P4C promotes is consistent with the cognitive aims of Curriculum 2005. Enslin, Pendlebury and Tjiattas (2001: 129) suggest that post-apartheid democratic citizenship requires "the young to be communicative democrats", and schools that are non-hierarchical and non-authoritarian with special attention paid to the careful articulation of reasons. Furthermore, room is made for the expression of and serious listening to difference. Moreover, Waghid (2005) suggests that learning to speak English fluently as the "language of power" is imperative in South African schools so that learners have the courage to initiate speech and at the same time drive themselves towards listening and responding to others without inhibition. The role of emotions, imagination and narrative is central to this quest with oracy being the vehicle.

In a COE, assumptions are interrogated collaboratively. Possible hegemonic practices such as which stories and books feature in story time and the book corner can also be closely examined in relation to whom the texts include and exclude and the possible stereotypes they project. Finding good reasons for choices made is paramount. These words – reasons, reasonable people, reasoning – are the building blocks of democracy, and they can be laid, we argue, in Grade R. Burbules (1995) suggests that we should understand reasoning as a situated embodied human *practice*, which is neither a universal, nor a necessary, mechanical application of logical rules. The conception of reason he proposes is one that is:

> *...sensitive to cultural difference and diversity; modest about its claims to universality; situated in human relations and moral reflection; grounded more in practical, social activities of speaking, listening and reflecting than in dispassioned logical deduction or a scientistic search for "facts." (Burbules, 1995: 87, 88).*

Burbules (1995: 90) explains that focusing on reasonableness and communicative relations in the classroom also includes a striving for *objectivity* construed as a recognition of what one's own biases might be, "acknowledging the limits of one's capacity to appreciate fully the viewpoints of others, and caring enough about others to exert the effort necessary to hear and comprehend what they are saying."

It is this element of enquiry, a particular form of enquiry that should, we argue, be woven like a golden thread throughout the Grade R day. Enquiry is a process, a search for understanding, meaning, truth and values supported by good reasons and should not be restricted to story time. A range of different activities, such as drawing, writing, painting and drama, can provide opportunities for exploring cultural and/or societal-embedded assumptions.

Conclusion

Attention needs to be paid, not only to how we reason and listen, but also to how and what we question in classrooms. And this points to the particular role of the teacher in SCH informed practice. In a COE the precise content of a lesson is not known in advance, but is determined by the children's questions. Teachers make room for talk about things that matter to children in ways that go beyond a repetition of the given (Haynes & Murris, forthcoming). Using narratives as a basis for this kind of thinking differs significantly from a conventional, more didactic use of narrative. Enquiry in a P4C approach is more than just discussion. It differs in the way in which abstract concepts are explored, shaped and reshaped democratically, and it includes the high expectations teachers need to have of children's ability to think critically and creatively about their own experiences (a relevant example is stated in the story *Frog is a Hero* referred to earlier where Frog is regarded as either a 'hero' or as 'being foolish'). A community of enquiry opens up a space whereby children as young as 3 (see e.g. Stanley & Bowkett, 2004) can be included in democratic school practices. The idea is to make room for our very young citizens to *be* democratic persons in school and to include them in genuine opportunities for authentic democratic decision-making. The critical and independent thinking that emanates from this form of pedagogy aligns with a SCH perspective, and illustrates an understanding of curriculum as everything that is taught and learnt at school. DAP also understands curriculum in this way whereas a didactic orientation would view the curriculum as that which is taught by the teacher.

The teacher of Grade R adopting the approach that we have proposed is not using his or her agency to control from a didactic orientation but enables reasonableness, and takes into consideration choices that would reflect cultural and contextual sensitivity. The resources, the posters, the texts s/he uses, the 'norms' s/he models, the discourse s/he adopts and the questions s/he poses will exemplify an approach informed by a SCH (ECE) orientation. The teacher, in other words, would personify a practice that we suggest is called **S**CHool. Meaningful pedagogy as participatory democratic practice through the nurturance of reasonableness has the characteristics we propose. This, we have argued, is realised through play, story, other activities and 'teachable moments'. Evidence suggests that teachers in South Africa do not take sufficient cognisance of children's social and cultural contexts (WSoE, 2009). The challenge we face is how to guide the present Grade R practitioners towards effective SCH informed pedagogy given the wide range of constraints that have been discussed. Our paper has argued that a didactic/developmental approach limits the space for meaningful participation in reasoning and decision-making, whereas the proposed relational pedagogy, such as philosophy for children, assumes children's capacity for reason and opens up an enabling space for meaningful participation.

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(Endnotes)

1. We deliberately refer to 'child' as opposed to 'the child', as a main thrust of this paper is to problematise the more common empirical conceptualisation of 'child' in an effort to start exploring the idea that e.g. adults can also 'be child'.
2. In South Africa ECE is also known as early Childhood development (ECD). ECD is an umbrella term referring to children between birth to age 9. Grade R (the reception year) refers to the child who is between four to six years of age. Under the new education dispensation though it is viewed through a preschool lens, it is also the first year of the Foundation Phase (DoE, 2001). As this paper engages with education rather than ECD in general the term early childhood education (ECE) rather than ECD has been used.
3. Ubuntu favours a different understanding of childhood. Penn (2009) claims that the notion of ubuntu suggests that how children should act is built into the very language they speak. Ubuntu embraces many different concepts and prioritizes "collective obligations over personal concerns: rootedness in a particular community rather than within a nuclear family; independence within a community rather than dependency in an isolated family setting" (Penn, 2009: 51). Furthermore, issues relating to spirituality, gender, patriarchy and gerontocracy are all influenced by this concept.

4. In Grade R this could form part of story time. It could also be part of a language or theme discussion ring.
5. The practice of teaching philosophy with picture books was pioneered by Karin Murris in 1992 and subsequently further developed in collaboration with Haynes.
6. We have found this an effective way of generating philosophical questions with audiences of all ages. It helps to distinguish between factual questions that can be answered empirically, and philosophical questions that can only be answered through dialogical talk and thinking.
7. It is beyond the scope of this paper to put forward arguments of either the possibility or desirability of very young children doing philosophy. For the former, see: K. Murris (2000). For the latter see: K Murris (2008).