Funds of knowledge and agentic strategies of three- and four-year-old children in South Africa

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In South Africa, little is known about the funds of knowledge of young children, and how they use this resource to affirm their agency in early childhood centres to build their childhood experiences. With this article we contribute knowledge through exploring the strategies that young children use to show their agency and thereby their funds of knowledge in a marginalised context. The funds of knowledge approach is helpful for illuminating meaning-making endeavours that foreground agentic actions that are imaginative, creative and beyond normative expectations. The study reported on in this article was conducted in Bloemfontein, South Africa, at 4 early childhood centres. Data were obtained through observation of 30 three- and 4-year-old children. The findings suggest that young children engage in agentic strategies of avoiding, ignoring and challenging adult control, pretend-play, imitation of adults and peers, and gendered negotiations, as efforts to contest a largely teacher-controlled environment. The insights from this study contribute to the understanding of the kinds of practices in which young children routinely engage, but which are often disregarded and undervalued by teachers. The agentic imagery of children, together with intersections of other imagery, needs to be part of the knowledge mix to inform teacher development and policy on early childhood care and education of children between birth and 4 years old in South Africa.

Keywords: agency; funds of knowledge; marginalised context; practitioners; South Africa; teacher development; 3- to 4-year-old children

Introduction
In the field of early childhood care and education (ECCE), there has been growing interest in young children's agency. From an academic discipline thrust, the sociology of childhood/childhood studies makes salient the concept of children as agents who enthusiastically construct and influence their own childhood (Mayall, 2002; Prout & James, 2015). Authors such as Alcock are of the opinion that young "children actively, collaboratively and, at times, subversively, create their peer community culture" (2007:281). Corsaro (2015) elaborates on this idea further and emphasises that children are not just victims of social structure, but that they also influence the structures from which they draw their resources. The linkages of this line of thinking to a funds of knowledge approach is highlighted by González, Andrade, Civil and Moll (2001). The authors explain that, every day, informal and diverse knowledge held by young children serves as useful resources for adults to connect with and to advance development and learning. Research and commitments to children's participatory rights are also contributory to the idea that babies, toddlers and nursery school children are capable beings who actively interpret happenings in their daily lives.

With the above in mind, we took a deliberate and critical position on how young children are seen by adults and by society. In doing so, it adds to the expanding body of literature, which advocates for thought and actions to be premised from young children's agency. In this article, the notion of agency is explained as the "capacity of young children to influence and steer their lives" through their funds of knowledge (Caiman & Lundegård, 2014:437). Agency is valued as a flexible, open-ended process, which is constantly negotiated among young children in an attempt to make their presence visible in early learning centres. The literature advances the idea that agency is "something that young children achieve (do) while interacting with others, as opposed to something they possess" (Caiman & Lundegård, 2014:454; Katsiada, Roufidou, Wainwright & Angeli, 2018:943–944). This claim highlights the framing of a "child-centred society" in which children's needs and priorities are addressed (Mashford-Scott & Church, 2011; Prout & James, 2015:2). To support this stance, Corsaro (2005) makes the point that, from the minute children enter this world, they act on it, and these actions affect others.

The affirming child imagery described thus far counters the deficit lens of young children, which casts them as adults-in-the-making and, thereby, not yet having full human status. For example, both biology and developmental psychology minimises young children's capacity to act (Quennerstedt & Quennerstedt, 2014:120). This view is the result of adulthood being used as a marker for what children should know and be able to do (Ebrahim, 2011). Children's physical immaturity and lack of capabilities for rational thought are used as arguments to deny them rights as social actors. Children are then cast as ignorant, without much attention being paid to their competencies, which need to be acknowledged and engaged with. Contrary to the aforesaid, the empirical evidence of Alcock (2007), Ebrahim (2011), and then Shaik and Ebrahim (2015) suggests that

children are, indeed, creators of their own culture and do so by re-interpreting historical and cultural rules, which are then appropriated to everyday life.

The aim with this article was to contribute to existing literature on the agency perspective of young children through the exploration of the strategies that they use to show their agency and, thereby, their funds of knowledge in a marginalised context. In order to do this, a literature review and a conceptual framework is presented to explain the ideas of influence. Through the findings and discussion, key understandings are advanced on how 3- and 4-year-old children navigate the complex context of early childhood centres. In so doing, the article lends weight to the idea that early childhood centres are not neutral places. In the case of this study, the cohort of 3- to 4-year-old children asserted themselves and contested the idea that they were too young and cognitively incapable of making a contribution to ECCE.

Literature Review

Children's right to participate in early childhood centres originates from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989), which is based on humanistic principles. Ebrahim (2011) emphasises that it was the UNCRC that was the catalyst for change, and for placing children's rights, voice and agency at centre stage. The United Nations document on children's rights proposes that all children should experience equitable practices from those who care for and educate them (Bae, 2010:206). These ideas make it possible to think of young children aged 3 and 4 as enacting their rights and showing their agency and funds of knowledge directly in early learning centres. Authors such as Quennerstedt (2016:16) propose that it is important that children enact their rights and agency by showing ownership, influence, and equal value in early childhood centres. This is in keeping with the hallmarks of democratic practice.

International research evidence indicates that there are different ways in which the enactment of children's rights, hence, their funds of knowledge, become visible. Lam and Pollard (2006:123) used a Vygotskian lens to present a conceptual framework for practitioners to understand young children as agents in the transition from home to early childhood centres. In addition to the aforesaid, the authors propose that young children have their own ways of reconstructing their early learning space. Thus, how children cope with and adapt to the novelty of early learning centres is crucial to their "pupil career" during their lifelong learning (Lam & Pollard, 2006:128). Hill and Wood (2019:5–8) explored children's interests, funds of knowledge and working theories. Their findings reveal that the interests and funds of knowledge related to the way

"young children understand unconventional and sensitive topics, are fluid and dynamic."

With this article we advance the notion that young children should be respected and listened to. Furthermore, we call on adults to change in order to facilitate the sharing of power and some co-creation of the early childhood space. Bock (2016) uses a case study of drawings, emergent writings and imaginative role play of two children to illuminate how they use a variety of modes to make meaning of home literacies. This begs the question of the role of adults in an agentic child-led context. Quennerstedt (2016:15) shows a different understanding of children's rights to being heard and promotes the counter-perspective of listening to young children. Listening is important to help adults gain insight into children's worlds. It also builds responsive actions. Children provide the cues that adults should read and respond to.

Research from an agency perspective of young children is at the margins in South Africa. An agency perspective is urgently needed to inform policy and practice in the rapidly transforming field of ECCE. A few studies point in the direction of valuing young children as capable beings. Ebrahim (2011) explains how 3- and 4-year-old children challenge the borders of control, through reclaiming the early childhood space as their own. Martin (2015) takes a critical stance against early literacy as technical practice and recasts it as social practice. She privileges children's agency as a vehicle for active learning that moves beyond concerns about school readiness. Shaik and Ebrahim (2015) advance the same line of argument by focusing on the nuances of child participation in Grade R. The authors argue that the agency perspective is side-lined in favour of images of children that align to the formal didactic approach to school readiness.

Despite the above studies, ECCE in South Africa still needs heightened understanding of young children's agency and funds of knowledge. This must be fully explored, especially with regard to professionalising the workforce and building professionalism when working with young children. We need to ask further critical questions to help our thinking and actions in ECCE: Do young children's funds of knowledge become visible through the agentic strategies they use? What does this mean for children's practice and policy from birth to 4 years in early childhood centres?

Bearing the above in mind, we aim to contribute to the body of South African literature by answering the question: Which strategies do 3- and 4-year-old children use to show their agency and, thereby, their funds of knowledge in a marginalised context? Exploring the kinds of practices that 3- and 4-year-old children

usually engage in, is of critical importance, especially in light of limiting models, such as the obedient and passive child. If we do not acknowledge and act on young children's agency and their funds of knowledge, we run the risk of losing insights from the current experts about childhood – the children who occupy this space.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework was built from four related concepts, namely, funds of knowledge, scaffolding, zone of proximal development (ZPD) and the ecological systems approach of Bronfenbrenner (2005). Funds of knowledge celebrates the competence, knowledge and experience of young children from two microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), namely, the home and early childhood centres.

Thinking from a systems perspective provides affordances to see the interrelatedness of relationships and the interactions of young children with adults and peers in two influential microsystems. Additionally, this perspective makes it possible to view young children, teachers and parents as agents who might co-construct experiences using their funds of knowledge in these two microsystems. Bronfenbrenner (2005) proposes that the intersection of one or more microsystems brings about a mesosystem. The interrelationships fostered in such mesosystems are dynamic and changing (Dunlop, 2003), because young children exercise the capacity to act. Therefore, it makes sense to speak of children's funds of knowledge, which is revealed through their thoughts and actions in specific microsystems.

A funds-of-knowledge approach values the agency of children and is sensitive to young children's capabilities. González et al. (2001) state that funds of knowledge are based on informal knowledge that comes from diverse, everyday knowledge as well as experiences that young children encounter in their contexts. Looking at funds of knowledge in this way shows the linkages to a strengths-based perspective (Garcia & Guerra, 2004) where the potential, strengths and competence of people are made salient (Amaro-Jiménez & Semingson, 2011). Funds of knowledge are typically specific types of knowledge or culturally-rooted knowledge (Hedges, 2012) and hence, it also has a problematic side to it – a dark side (Zipin, 2009). Children experience challenges and difficult circumstances, which affect their well-being in negative ways. Hence, funds of knowledge are informed by different realities, rather than one-off accounts of events. They are also influenced by time and place (Riegler, 2012).

González et al. (2001) and Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt and Moll (2011) argue that a shift in focus to children's funds of knowledge is crucial in order to focus on the assets that children bring to the learning space. These researchers suggest that, if teachers are to advance children's learning, they should draw from the experiences and prior knowledge that children bring with them. Knowledge that children have gathered in their homes, with their family members, guardians, peers and community members, should be treasured. Acknowledging children's knowledge can give practitioners better insight into what children know and can do and how this can be linked to the curriculum (Hogg, 2011:667).

The aforesaid is noteworthy, because, among the key features of the funds-of-knowledge approach, is acknowledging the unique experiences and knowledge children possess. For example, research by Riojas-Cortez (2001) links 12 five-year-old Mexican American children's socio-dramatic play occurrences to the funds of knowledge they gathered at home. Findings show how, during socio-dramatic play, children engaged with their funds of knowledge from home and used it as a resource during their play activities. The children revealed what they knew and that they were capable of using the cultural practices, values and beliefs from their primary microsystem. Their cultural practices included activities such as helping in the house, cooking food, and ways of behaving when eating at the table. In early childhood centres, funds of knowledge like this become visible during eating routines (Alcock, 2007).

The concept of scaffolding and the ZPD comes from the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978). His work on social constructivism explains how context is treasured in children's development and learning. Vygotsky acknowledges the importance of the child's socio-cultural milieu and providing a more inclusive understanding of the child's development (Vygotsky, 1978). The two levels of the ZPD can be described as the actual and potential developmental levels (Many, Dewberry, Taylor & Coady, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). The two levels differentiate between what children can do with and without support. The level of potential development lies where learning transpires. The ZPD looks at not only what is in place, but what can be developed (Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, ZPD knowledge can help teachers to see how much of key developmental experiences are in place and what needs greater attention (Vygotsky, 1978).

In addition, within the mesosystem, social learning occurs because of the interaction between children and adults. They learn from one another while interacting with objects in their environment (Vygotsky, 1978). The concept of scaffolding suggests the social nature of learning between practitioners and young children within their microsystem. Scaffolding is a means through which learning can be co-constructed by the children and practitioners in early learning centres. One pivotal

aspect of learning is that it creates a ZPD, that is to say, that learning allows insights to develop and this becomes visible in children's interactions with others in the meso-system (Vygotsky, 1978). Teaching in the ZPD affords support to stimulate young children's funds of knowledge, their capabilities and their learning possibilities. Scaffolding of young children's learning depends on two aspects. The point of dismantling the scaffolding, and responsibility for completing the task by the young child. For example, Turuk (2008) links scaffolding to an instructional structure in which the teacher is not just a model, but gradually shifts the responsibility of task completion to the child. The scaffold may, therefore, be dismantled when children start to take on more responsibility. This signals that the child can complete the task independently. Teachers, therefore, need to monitor children's progress, give them more responsibility and allow for independent functioning. For children to reach such independence, scaffolding methods should be developmentally, culturally and linguistically sound.

The concepts discussed above were valuable for providing a more nuanced understanding of children's agency and funds of knowledge as operational in a system where adult priorities for control mattered.

Method

In this article we draw in part on a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) study on funds of knowledge of practitioners and 3- to 4-year-old children in a marginalised context (Daries, 2017). In light of the value of subjective meaning-making by the children, a qualitative approach was deemed most suitable. A multiple case study approach assisted in gaining a deeper understanding of the funds of knowledge and agency of young children, as influenced by the social realities of a real-world contexts in four early childhood centres (Yin, 2014:4). The four chosen early childhood centres are situated in a neighbourhood where families and young children live in poor socio-economic circumstances in Bloemfontein, South Africa. Families are subjected to many social ills and anti-social practices related to poverty, unemployment, crime, violence and poor service delivery.

Purposive sampling was used to select the centres that catered for the target age group (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Maree & Pietersen, 2016). Thirty young children from three community-based and one privately-owned centre took part in the study. Classroom observations of indoor and outdoor activities took place over a period of 6 months in order to gather the data. The naturalistic or narrative observations were conducted with field notes. The stance of "observer as participant" assisted us in the data-production process (Nieuwenhuis, 2016:91). It was possible to observe patterns of behaviour in and across the four centres during indoor and outdoor activities. Researcher participation was informal and, for the major part, an uninvolved stance was suitable. This helped us to remain on the periphery, without significantly influencing the dynamic of practice at the sites during observations (Nieuwenhuis, 2016:91). The interactions of the children during daily observations were video-recorded in order to obtain evidence of funds of knowledge and agentic strategies in action. As the observation took place, notes were made about children as individuals, as well as members of small groups during teacher-directed and child-initiated learning opportunities. This attests to research involving young children being both multi-layered and "messy" (Mukherji & Albon, 2010:36).

Parental consent for participation was obtained prior to the study. This served as a means to negotiate "assent" with young children during the observations (Dockett & Perry, 2011:233). Attaining assent from very young children was a recurring, time-consuming process, and we had to be vigilant about their reactions to or presence, and respectful behaviour in moments of "dissent." The children's body language and their verbal articulations provided cues about research presence and distancing.

The data were analysed using an adaptation of the thematic approach for qualitative studies of Miles and Huberman (1994). Once the data had been transcribed and the visual segments identified and viewed, it was possible to identify units of meaning, which were then clustered to give ideas on concepts arising; the patterns were identified and three themes emerged.

Findings and Discussion

The observations revealed how young children claimed their space in the centres through agentic strategies. The children, individually and in groups, showed their agentic strategies in the following ways: avoiding, ignoring and challenging adult control, peer and gendered negotiations, and imitation of adults through pretend play.

Strategy of Avoiding, Ignoring and Challenging Adult Control

Childhood is regarded as a space that is structured for children by children. Hallström, Elvstrand and Hellberg (2015) note that, if one watches individual children, it is possible to see their interpretation of childhood. To be sensitive to this means that practitioners have to see value in the informal, every-day, diverse knowledge and experiences that young children bring to centres of learning (González et al., 2001). Practitioners need to take into account that children are not passive about what is presented to them. They show notable resistances. The excerpt below shows the agentic

strategy of avoiding and challenging adult control to make individual knowledge and personal interest known.

> [Teacher] *T5 made apples and oranges models with the clay. The children were instructed to replicate the models with the clay in front of them. T5 insisted on children rolling the clay and making fruit balls. Once the children settled, T5 moved between the tables. She shouted at a boy and girl for deviating from the model. These children flattened the clay. The children ignored the teacher as they pushed the flat clay pieces over the card box. They then added sound effects to their creation, namely, a 'car.' T5 reprimanded them. They continued to push their 'cars' without making a car sound* (observation – OB).

The above illustrates agency of the children through their choices, thereby giving insight into their funds of knowledge. This is a case of taking ownership and risks to contest the normative rules (Wood, 2014). Wood (2014) takes a critical stance on how the teachers are seen in this microsystem when children's agency and funds of knowledge come to the fore. She argues that the way young children participate during teaching and learning sessions becomes a "risky business" for teachers. One of the reasons is that teachers feel confident when there is compliance from young children. Teachers work on the assumption that children passively absorb teacher control. However, research by Markström and Halldén (2009) show that, when young children figure out how the centre works, they feel confident to test the rules and boundaries. This is possible, as children exercise their autonomy and take ownership and feel a sense of belonging (Markström & Halldén, 2009). The following excerpt illustrates this:

> *T2 goes to the children to see how they are progressing with playing with toys. She pauses at two 4-year-old girls playing with a bucket with holes and a few shapes. She watches them for a while as they attempt to put the correct shapes in the holes. She then intervenes by taking one of the shapes from the girl. T2 explains the activity and then demonstrates to the two girls how to turn the shape over the opening until it falls in the bucket. After this brief scaffolding she moves to her table. The girls continue with the activity and start to show improvement. They are successful in dropping a few shapes in the bucket. After a few minutes the girls decide to sort the remaining shapes in a row. This is done according to matching colour.* (T2/OB)
> *A girl and a boy walked with the bean bags on their heads. They were heading towards the group. Halfway back the boy decided to take the bean bag from his head and throw it into the air. He caught the bean bag and shouted out the number, one. He continued with throwing the bean bag in the air and counting … The girl watched for a few seconds and joined his game of throwing the bean bag in the air, catching it and counting. This delayed the official activity. The other children in the small group did not get the chance to do the*

> *balancing activities. The game of the two children continued until the teacher came back and scolded them for holding up the flow of the activities.* (T7/OB)

The excerpts above can be understood through a Vygotskyian lens. Considering the children's meaning-making attempts, including interactions, it is possible to think about their actual and potential development (Vygotsky, 1978). The children made use of their funds of knowledge to exhibit their experiences and agency in creative ways. They assisted each another to move to an advanced level of development within the ZPD (Many et al., 2009). It could be argued that the teacher presence and absence catalysed specific meaning-making attempts for the children to forge ahead. Such ways of proceeding are indicative of knowledgeable and skilled agents.

Overall, this theme shows that the resistances that children display are attempts to exert their capacity to act. It challenges teacher control and makes demands on teachers to adjust the power differentials that exist between the children and teachers. This, however, requires of teachers to be keen observers and co-constructors of early learning.

Peer and Gendered Negotiations

In this study, the children also used various strategies and made visible their agency when they protected their play from others, negotiated with peers to prolong play activities and attempted to get access to certain toys. The children were creative in constructing their own peer cultures and in this microsystem they made up the norms, values and expectations for social life at the centres (Corsaro, 2015). They were learning about friendship and how to "team up" within the peer cultures they had established.

> *In the first group, four children received a box with animal shapes and another four children a box with transport shapes. The children had to find the correct shape and place it in the correct opening on the plastic board. T5 stopped for a few seconds and showed the children how to find the correct animal and transport shapes and how they should place them in the correct opening. T5 also moved to the other groups of children. One of the girls took a few minutes to find the correct transport shape and placed it in the correct place. She was very pleased with herself. Most of the children working in this group were busy turning and trying the different holes to find the correct place to put the shape. The girl continued by helping the other children. Together they found the transport shapes and placed them in the correct openings.*

These opportunities for social learning advances the development of higher mental functions. From a Vygotskyian perspective, this means that the support that children receive helps them to build "tools for thinking" (Vygotsky, 1978:102). This

occurs through peer scaffolding, which enables young children to reach the next level of the ZPD. In the above excerpt of T5, the more abled peers, who had figured out how to complete activities quickly, were willing to share their funds of knowledge with others. In the following excerpt, this sharing of knowledge and scaffolding happened despite the teacher's warning that the children should not assist each other:

> *T1 moved to the group doing cutting and pasting. At group 3, she held up a page with a picture of a sheep. She instructed the children to use the outline to cut out the picture of the sheep. She told a boy not to help the other children. However, he ignored this instruction. When the teacher was out of view the boy took the page from another boy and showed him how to hold the scissors and how to cut.* (T1/OB)

Fights, arguments and negotiations about toys or space were common among the children. These disagreements must be understood in the context of forming friendships, keeping friends and being part of the peer culture (Daries, 2017). It also emanates from the differences that children experience from what they know and do in their homes, compared to the dynamics they encounter at the early childhood centre (Corsaro, 2015). This being the case, the children in this study had to work their way through numerous encounters, which made demands on their funds of knowledge and specific negotiation skills. There were episodes of forceful behaviour in order to reach an outcome. The excerpt below illustrates how the children argued and negotiated the use of certain toys:

> Boy 1: *See there* [pointing at his group] *we making a garage for our cars.*
> [Girl 1 and Girl 2 do not look at him]
> Boy 1: *What are you making?*
> Girl 1: *We are making a home for the animals … the animals of Jesus.*
> Boy 1: *Can I help?*
> Girl 2: [Loud] *No, no! Play there* [pointing to his group] *with them.*
> Girl 1: *Yes … play there. You will take our animals.*
> Boy 1: *No, I don't want your animals.*
> Girl 1 and Girl 2: [loud] *Go!*

The boy moves over to the other boys, who have broken down some parts of the garage walls. He does not look happy and returns to the girls, and tries to negotiate for a few long blocks.

> Boy 1: *Give us these blocks then we will give you some of our blocks.*
> Girl 2: *No!*
> Girl 1: *This is the house of the animals of Jesus. You can't take it. Where will the animals go?*
> Boy 1: [Ignores the girls and starts picking up two blocks] *I will bring it back.*

In summary, the peer and gendered negotiations show the complexity that characterises the activities of the children. They draw from their funds of knowledge related to friendships and responses to the opposite sex to guide their actions.

Pretend-Play – Imitating Adults and the Lifeworld

The claim, "pretence is a form of agency" (Wood, 2014:14), is meaningful for young children, because children create their own situations, rules and internal logic through their imaginary roles and events. Furthermore, Vygotsky (1978:102) argues that "pretend-play is a leading activity" for children. Seemingly, through pretend-play, children think abstractly and provide us with windows to their thinking (Vygotsky, 1978). In this study, the children participated with peers through imitating the activities of the teacher, which revealed their funds of knowledge that was linked to emergent literacy and numeracy concepts. In an observation, a girl displayed her knowledge of being a teacher through exerting her agency and taking the lead with a group of peers:

> *In T3's class, one of the girls took the small library book, which the teacher had just used. She pretended to be the teacher. She imitated T3 by saying 'one tomato.' The children who sat around her repeated this. She also asked them the colour of the tomato. The children answered correctly. She smiled at the children and they gave each other a high five to express their joy of getting it right.*

The girl continued to play the role of the teacher: "*The girl held up her fingers and asked the children to name the fingers they saw. She then used her arms and the children had to identify how many arms were held up. She continued using other body parts.*"

From this observation, it is clear that young children are observant and able to attach meaning to experiences and act them out in ways that show their understanding of the microsystem of influence in their lives. In the study, the mesosystem of vulnerabilities that the children experienced also became evident as problematic or dark funds of knowledge (Zipin, 2009). The following excerpt shows children's knowledge and actions related to violation of law and order. It shows how incidents in the adult world are construed by children. The notions of speed, recklessness and, consequently, the loss of life, plays out in their script.

> Boy 1: *See …* [hitting on his tyre filled with sand] *my car, it's a* [Bayerische Motoren Werke] *BMW and it is really fast.*
> Boy 2: *Yes my car is also fast.* [standing with his tyre]
> [Boy 1 and Boy 2 start rolling the tyres and some of the sand falls out due to the speed. The boys push the tyres fast for a few metres near the first tree.]
> Boy 1: *Let's see how fast our cars can go … come, let's drive fast.*
> [Boy 1 and Boy 2 roll their tyres to the next tree where a group of girls are playing. Boy 1's tyre lands against one of the smaller girls and she starts to cry. She goes off to find the teacher. The other girls start to argue with the boys.]
> Girl 1: *I am going to call the police because you killed her.* [She takes her sandal off her foot, holds one next to her ear (the pretend phone) and gives the other sandal to her friend.]

Girl 1: *See you killed her ... I am calling the police.*
Boy 1: *We are driving here and you can't stand where we are driving ... the cars drive here.*
Boy 2: *Yes, this is the cars' place and if you stand here you get hurt.... You have to stand at your house.*
Girl 2: *I am going to tell teacher you killed her with the car.* [Girl 2 walks in the direction of the teacher.]

This theme lays bare the idea that children are born into a world that is not of their own choosing. They look at adults for their information and they observe the happenings in their environments. This gives them the content to create their scripts and act them out.

Conclusion

The main aim of this article was to explore the strategies that 3- and 4-year-old children in centre-based early childhood settings used to show their agency and, thereby, their funds of knowledge. The findings of the study illuminate some strategies they use to position themselves as agents who act and make their knowledge in the context of what is available to them. This suggests that they have prior knowledge and have the potential to expand their knowledge through the use of resources that are available to them. Despite adult control and presence, the children find ways to make their values and norms matter. The ideas of funds of knowledge, children as agents to influence aspects that matter in their lives, as well as performances showing actual and potential developmental levels, all contribute to moving us closer to influencing a more affirming view of young children.

Using the vantage point of an agency perspective needs to be valued together with the background influences that impact on children's sense of belonging and their vulnerabilities. This is particularly stark, as the study reported on in this article took place in a marginalised context, where child development was characterised by high risk factors. An intersection of the agency perspective, with sensitivity to cultural context and socio-economic circumstances in which children experience their development, is a necessary focus for in-service and pre-service teacher development.

The above is particularly important for a country such as South Africa, which is rolling out the National Curriculum Framework for birth to 4 and working towards professionalisation of the birth-to-4 workforce (Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa, 2015). Both these developments point in the direction of ensuring that teacher education for the early years is made up of a knowledge mix that values multiple imagery of children, namely, their agency as beings, their cultural context as key influencers in developing their sense of belonging and their socio-economic experiences as a force shaping child development.

The complex but holistic imagery of young children should permeate not only early childhood practice, but also levels of engagement for policy development for building a quality system for ECCE. Key attention should be paid to the way that the centrality of young children in policy and practice embraces a more holistic understanding of their lives, and those of their families. Future research on the intersections of child imagery for practice and policy needs to be undertaken to advance the knowledge base for action.

Authors' Contribution

Doctor G Daries wrote this article under mentorship of Professor HB Ebrahim, her doctoral supervisor on conceptualisation, argumentation and logical flow of ideas. Both authors reviewed the final manuscript.

Notes

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