Editorial

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Recent debates on early childhood have challenged ways in which we have conceptualised childhood and marginalised children. We are challenged to question the perceptions we have of children and childhood, and how these influence and shape our assumptions and choices concerning children. Breaking away from a developmental lens, perspectives from the sociology of childhood are creating new conversations about how we understand young children. The argument is that childhood is embedded in society, and children are actors in that society. This perspective views childhood or childhoods as shifting social constructions, and recognises the participation of children, in a transitory phase, as active beings in the present (James and Prout, 1997; Lee, 2000). There is a full recognition of children as persons in their own right, capable of acting on their social world, and articulating their experiences in different ways.

This reconceptualist stance sees the construction of childhood and children as intricately bound to complexity, uncertainty and to questions of race, gender, sexuality, class, culture, and many more constructions. There is a widespread call for rethinking relationships with young children by recognising them as beings with voice, agency and partial, shifting identities (Grieshaber and Canella, 2001; Canella and Viruru, 2004; Canella 1997; Knutsson, 1997).

Parallel to these developments, there is a growing recognition of the need to secure the formal rights of children The belief in children's rights, that is, the right to be heard and participate in their lives has led to inclusion of children's voices in research. These underpinnings help position children as participants in research and talk of research *with* children in their lived contexts. The continued struggle for social justice in the lives of children is an integral part of the discourse. For example, attention has been drawn to the effects of political and macroeconomic policies on children, and the view that particularly in countries of the South, children have become the most vulnerable victims of global economic policies.

The papers in this special issue engage critically with the theoretical, political, and ethical reasons for rethinking the discourse on childhood and children.

The first paper in the volume by Radhika Viruru provides a rich theoretical contribution that challenges the dominant discourses in early childhood. Viruru questions the lack of uptake by early childhood education researchers of postcolonial theoretical perspectives. Her paper offers a helpful and critical overview of this theoretical field and explains how postcolonial theory offers a way of resisting control, 'unmasking power structures' and adopting an activist position in order to transform social life in ways that are more socially just and equitable. Clearly the other papers in this volume, while not necessarily versed in the subtleties of this theory, share this agenda. However, what Viruru's theoretical paper makes patently clear to us, editors, is that we need ethnographies and other empirically grounded studies of early childhood education that are located explicitly in postcolonial theoretical principles. Such studies, we also believe, could enrich the field of early childhood. If they view children as constructively critical social agents, they could along with other research based on similar principles raise the status of children and childhood in society or, at a minimum, challenge, their current lowly status in most parts of the world.

The paper by Salim Vally powerfully demonstrates the inadequacy and emptiness of the rhetoric of human rights, democratic citizenship, and common citizenship in current South African policy documents when it diverges so enormously from the lived experience of the vast majority of the nation's children. One example he offers is the policy of decentralising funding to school governing bodies. This policy, he shows, is responsible for producing gross disparities and inequities since, unlike affluent communities who can easily supplement the meagre state funding, poor communities have no such option and suffer from acute resource shortages, especially from lack of qualified teachers. The State's push to reduce the cost of personnel only exacerbates this scenario for poor communities. His analysis of the impact of this kind of decentralisation in particular, and the de-politicisation of education reform more generally, leads him to challenge the meaningfulness of the notion of 'common citizenship'. He affirms that social and economic rights should be seen as necessary conditions for citizens to exercise their civil and political rights.

Our own comparative paper shares this perspective. Staying with the theme of inequality and inclusion/exclusion, it attempts to describe and discuss

initiatives in both South Africa and Britain for combatting childhood poverty. A common feature across the two countries, despite their very different circumstances, is the privileging of the economic imperative over the social, the implicit assumption being that somehow if we get the economics right, social justice will follow for all automatically. We argue that in neither country is there evidence in practice of the rich notion of social inclusion identified in the research literature. Economic rationalisation policies have exacerbated initiatives to combat childhood poverty in South Africa, making the realisation of even the narrow notion of social inclusion extremely difficult. Several initiatives, in line with New Labour's Third Way political thinking, have been introduced in the United Kingdom with varying degrees of success in their own terms. While childhood poverty is no longer on the increase, as it was for years under Conservative governments, this remains at the narrow end of a social inclusion continuum.

Two papers in this volume address, in different ways, the research process and vulnerable children. Researching vulnerable children and their communities is the theme of the paper about HIV/AIDS as a barrier to education by Mary van der Riet, Angela Hough and Bev Killian. These authors describe the participatory research techniques they used to obtain informed consent, to negotiate confidentiality and to address beneficence and nonmaleficence as they sought to elicit children's understandings of their situation. Seeing children as social agents, they used a wide range of activity-based tasks, including projective techniques, drawing and ranking exercises within a four-stage focus group design, which they describe in considerable detail in this on-going, large-scale project. However, these were not without their ethical and data-analytic difficulties, not least the unresolved issue for them of using 'playful mechanisms' to probe issues as serious as illness, death and HIV/AIDS. We look forward to further reports of their research project in due course. Carol Aubrey and Sarah Dahl systematically review research studies about interviewing young vulnerable groups of children and they consider the influence of children's views on decisions taken about them. People who work with children will not be surprised at the finding that activity and computer-based techniques tend to be effective in eliciting children's views. Nor will they be surprised to learn that there is still little evidence of children's views actually impacting on decision-making about them. Their provocative title captures the message of their paper very well.

Both these papers are important because, in emphasising good methods of listening to children, they help raise the status of children and childhood and

they testify to the competence of children as research participators and partners in the research enterprise.

Peter Rule's historical case study of an early childhood development training organisation in KwaZulu-Natal (Little Elephant Training Centre for Early Education, LETCEE) is the story of the tensions generated by the 'formalising' demands of the State and needs of the local community, as State intervention increased over that particular history. Drawing insightfully on Korten's theory of the various 'generations' that an NGO might typically go through in a life cycle, he highlights the dilemmas associated with dependence on official funding, on the one hand, and the consequences of this, on the other hand, for maintaining and exercising a critical voice. The question he poses is: can NGOs really challenge government policy and really push for the strengthening of community-based provision when they are so dependent on State funding for their survival? The history of LETCEE would suggest that this balancing act is extremely difficult, and may even be impossible. One thing Rule's analysis makes absolutely clear to us though is the significance of NGOs' direct experience of what is happening on the ground, and how such knowledge and experience ought to critically mediate and inform State initiatives. This article is a much welcome contribution to understanding some of the key developments in ECD in South Africa during the last ten years.

One could be forgiven for interpreting Fraser Brown's and Sophie Webb's account of orphanages in Romania as a story of hopelessness. Yet nothing could be more inaccurate, for the evidence and arguments presented in their paper more than hint at the tremendous contribution of play on particular children who, probably, are the most play-deprived children in the world. The authors of this research and development project were able to identify the children's developmental progress even over the children's relatively short period in a rich, play environment. They also describe the principles of the kind of play environment they sought to facilitate. What we see in this paper is the necessity of warm interaction combined with basic nutrition and hygiene for human development – in line with the messages of most of the papers in this volume. What we also see, however, is the resilience and the recovery potential of the most abused and neglected children, who without attention to their most basic human needs, are consigned to institutions for the 'mentally retarded'. The broader point perhaps is that children may be perceived as developmentally incompetent, when it is social structures and social policies that deny them the opportunities to develop competence (Landsdown, 1994).

Set in more affluent circumstances, the research of Geerdina van der Aalsvoort, Mieke Ketelaars and Arjette Karemaker also testifies to the significance of play – this time what they call 'social play' – in the lives of school children, especially those who have been defined as having special educational needs, specifically, learning difficulties. What is revealing from this on-going experimental research project is the relatively greater benefits social play confers on the educational lives of those children defined as 'at risk' and attending special schools. Their line of enquiry is likely to yield further valuable evidence over the next few years.

As editors of this special issue, we trust that this issue will stimulate new questions and open up new possibilities for thinking and action amongst researchers, policy makers, and practitioners as we commit to the task of enhancing critical scholarship in the field of childhood studies.

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