Research *with* under fours: some sense making moves

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Abstract

Internationally, the understanding of children as social actors and the belief in children's rights – in particular, the right to be heard and to participate in their lives has led to inclusion of children's voices in research. South Africa was party to the African Charter on the Rights and Responsibilities of the African Child (OAU, 1994), and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989) which advocates strongly for a recognition of children as persons in their own right, capable of acting on their social world, and articulating their experiences in different ways. Whilst there are a growing number of studies in South Africa that include the voices of school age children (for example, Griesel, Swart-Kruger and Chawla, 2004; Children's Institute, 2003; Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005; Van der Riet, Hough, and Killian, 2005), there is a paucity of South African research that includes the 'tellings' of young children, in particular the under fours[2] In this article, a sociological lens is used to explore some sense making moves in doing research *with* under fours as people in their own right. The article draws on a study that investigated under fours as social actors doing childhood in two multi ethnic early childhood centres in KwaZulu-Natal. Four sense making moves are highlighted, namely, the complexities of researching children as social actors doing childhood; the potential of participatory techniques for researching children's knowledge; the tensions inherent in the altering of power relations between researcher and children; and the challenges of working through situated ethics. An examination of these issues suggests the need for the practice of *responsive research* where multiple sense making moves are adopted in order to engage, firstly, with complex circumstances that shape young children's lives and secondly, with the particularities of young children as people shaping their lives.

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[1]   The first author was the researcher in the study described in this paper.

[2]   The youngest child at the beginning of the research was 18 months. At the end of the study, all the children were under four years. The term 'under fours' is used throughout this article.

Introduction

Until recently, understanding under fours was largely dominated by positivist orientations (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2000). Experiments, survey, and objective testing were used to produce universal laws of child development. In the quest to produce scientifically rigorous knowledge of childhood, young children were treated as depersonalised objects in research. Knowledge of children as being universally the same, emanated traditionally from the fields of developmental psychology, biology, and child development (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998).

Understandings premised on the universal child and the positioning of children as research objects is tied up with the forceful position of children "becoming adults"(Morss, 1996, p.158). As adults-in-the-making, they are seen as a set of future potentials for adulthood. Their present state of being, as people in their own right, is made less significant by the future perspective. Notions of incompetence and immaturity portray children as "unreliable witnesses in their own lives" (Qvortrup, Bardy, Sigritta, Witterberger, 1994, p.42). This means that children are viewed as passive, uninformed people who cannot provide information of their experiences for research purposes. In early childhood, the typical responses to young children's participation in research were documented as *they are too small, over literal, ignorant, and egocentric* (Powney and Watts, 1987; Breakwell, 1995). From this perspective, information about children's experience is best facilitated in the voices of their adult caregivers. This type of thinking led to a huge body of research *on* children, often in decontextualised settings (Fraser, 2004).

More recently, the changing concept of childhood is creating new conversations about how we understand young children and their role in research. The new sociology of childhood accentuates childhood as a distinct and important phase where the construction of human experience has value in its own right (James and Prout, 1997). From this perspective, the 'now' of childhood must receive attention. Children, as temporary members of childhood, are seen as fully formed, complete individuals who are social actors in their lives (James *et al.*, 1998; Lee, 2000). The quality and meaning of their present lives is given prominence. It is the children themselves that are seen as experts, who are knowledgeable about their lives and provide information as they "act, take part in, change, and become changed by the social and cultural world they live in" (Christensen and Prout, 2002, p.481). Research from this perspective views children as social actors who can tell stories of their lives

from an autonomous status of being a child. Children's meaning making endeavours, opinions, and perspectives are valued in their own right. No automatic assumptions are made about children and their capabilities (Christensen and Prout, 2002). When researchers view children as social actors, then research *with* children is made a priority.

The new image of the child as an agent participating and co-creating knowledge of life in context is still not a familiar lens in research (Lofdahl, 2005). This is due to the complex nature of working with young children, inadequate understanding of how they present their knowledge, and the challenges of using participatory methodologies. However, there have been some international research initiatives that aimed to prioritise young children as people in their own right who can articulate their experiences. Cousins (1999) included the voices of four-year-olds to inform adults on how to plan education and care for children. Through the use of a conversational approach that was sensitive to the competence of young children, Cousins found that children were able to reveal their likes, dislikes, and thoughts on relationships with peers and adults. Clark and Moss (2001) used the Mosaic approach with multi method strategies to develop a methodological framework for listening to under fives (Clark and Moss, 2001; Clark, 2004). The findings of their study suggest that young children are competent to express their views and experiences provided that researchers create a variety of platforms to listen to children's meaning making in an open-ended way. Similarly, Lofdahl (2005) focussed on three and half and four-year-olds shared meaning making in joint play. By videotaping and observing the complexities of children as acting subjects and co-creators of context, she found that young children actively constructed knowledge about the hard issues of life, death, and illness.

In the findings above, the view of young children as social actors was pivotal to the inclusion of their voices and experiences in research. Researchers worked closely with the children's levels of understanding in their lived contexts. References to open-ended modes of working and complexities in shared meaning making, point to the need for early childhood researchers to undertake research *with* young children. This article presents a move in this direction. By illuminating the sense making moves of research *with* under fours, it seeks to deepen understandings of the complexities of investigating young children as social actors doing childhood.

The South African context

In South Africa, the ratification of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1995, serves as the official endorsement of children as players in their own lives (UNICEF, 1989). As such, the Convention places unprecedented value on children as people in their subjective worlds. Article 12 recognises the right of children to express their views on matters of concern to them. The views of children are given due weight in accordance with age and maturity. Article 13 provides children with the right to freedom of expression. These Articles have led to greater recognition of child participation and listening to children's meanings about their lives. South African research *with* active participation of school age children is becoming a familiar scenario (Children's Institute, 2003; Griesel, Swart-Kruger and Chawla, 2004; Nelson Mandela Fund, 2005; Van der Riet, Hough and Killian, 2005). In early childhood there has been some research with Reception Year children. One such example is a study on gender bias that included the voices of five-year-olds through discussions with a doll (Biersteker and Hermanus, 2003). The findings of the study suggest that young children could make practical suggestions related to gender issues through empathising with doll stories.

There is, however, a paucity of research *with* under fours. The limited nature of research in early childhood has been highlighted in the report on the nationwide audit of early childhood provisioning (Department of Education, 2001). The report makes an urgent call for more qualitative research within the context of children's rights. In this article the sense making moves of research *with* under fours is intended to fill the gap by using a sociological lens to engage with the complexities, potentials, tensions, and challenges when qualitative research is used to investigate under fours as social actors doing childhood in their lived realities.

Research context and methodology

Fourteen children from two urban multi ethnic early childhood centres, in KwaZulu-Natal, participated in the study. The youngest child was 18 months at the beginning of the research. At the end of a year long study, all the children were under four years. Visits to the centres were undertaken twice a week for a period of six hours at different points of the day.

Ethnography is regarded as one of the key research methods in exploring the social worlds of children as social actors managing their experiences (James *et al.*, 1998; James 2001).An ethnographic approach was used in the study. Blatchford and Blatchford (2001) refer to an ethnographic approach as one that uses a multi method strategy to render a partial account of lived experiences in a cultural setting. A range of qualitative methods such as conversations, photographic conversations, stories, role-play, child-led tours were used to access the 'tellings' of the children. Observational positions ranged from strong observer roles to semi-participant observer roles. Observations were recorded as field notes. Data was audio taped and transcribed.

In what follows, four themes are highlighted as sense making moves of research *with* under fours, namely, the complexities of researching young children as social actors doing childhood; the potential of participatory techniques to elicit children's knowledge; tensions in altering power in relationships with children; and the challenges of working through situated ethics.

Complexities of researching young children as social actors doing childhood

When predetermined meanings of who people are, ready-made observation schedules, and lab settings are not frameworks informing research, then the research process becomes a complicated manoeuvre that calls for researchers being responsive to local and specific circumstances in which the research is conducted (Usher, 2000). In so doing, researchers come to learn about the doings of people as social actors and skills necessary to conduct research with them.

In order to gain understanding of what children do in their context, it is important for researchers to pay close attention to the social circumstances that shape the lives of children (Alanen, 2001). An initial attempt in this direction, during the research process, began with a 'soak in' phase. The aim of this phase was to build relationships, trust, and become familiar with routines and expectations at the centres. A strong observer role was adopted. In view of the need for selectivity and perspective, the phase was guided by the question, "What is the institutional logic that guides childhood as social practice at the centres?"

A close examination of the practices of the centres revealed that the children's meaning making and bodily experiences were being shaped by a school-like age-based ethos. The children worked in a thematic skills-based programme organised around a developmentally appropriate framework. Although there was some flexibility in the programme for the 18 to 24 month group, there was a stronger adherence to timetables for children over 25 months. Observations of interactions of teachers and caregivers with the children pointed to the bringing in of Piaget's child – a child catered for and evaluated according to the difference of suggested by the Piagetian stages and developmental norms. It is within these circumstances that children were shaping their lives at the centres. This foundational understanding informed the next phase in the study.

The 'thick involvement phase' was designed with two aims in mind, namely, observing how children as active beings performed in spaces that implicated them, and interacting with the children through a semi-participant observer role which continued throughout the study. The observation of children revealed flashlight meaning making. There were quick shifts of episodic moments that were difficult to capture. The use of the guiding question, "What does it mean to be a child in situations?", and the recording of a sequence of events for five minutes at a time, helped to produce thick descriptions. The description of the sequence below serves to illustrate how the norms of sleep time are brought into being and how the requirements of a sleeping child work to promote agency.

> It is sleep time for the two- and three-year-olds. The mattresses are brought out. The children jump on the mattress. The teacher claps her hand and announces, "It's sleeping time." The children continue to jump on the mattress. The teacher walks in between the children and repeats, "It's sleeping time. You must lie down and have a rest." The children settle down. Krish refuses to sleep. He interferes with Shana. He gets up. "I'm not going to sleep. I go stand by the wall."

It is through the capturing of a thick description we see how the teacher uses sleep time to bring in the prototype of a nursery child. She assumes that all children will comply with the official announcement of sleep time. Whilst the children initially resist, they are quickly brought to order with the second announcement. The norm of a sleeping child is reinforced. However, Krish persists in working outside the norm. The refusal to sleep and being prepared to face the consequences suggests the actions of an agent who can reflect on options and make decisions.

With children under two, there was greater sensitivity to recording the telegraphic speech and bodily actions. Samuelsson (2004) states that meaning making by toddlers becomes visible when one focuses on how they communicate with their bodies and produce actions. They take the world for granted and do not need words to communicate. The embodied messages should be regarded just as authentic as the verbal. The focus on body-use-in-action together with the one word sentences and telegraphic phrases assisted in making sense of the doings of under twos.

> Elsa is playing with Tando in the sand pit. They have an upside down bucket in front of them. Elsa scoops some sand and puts it on the bucket. Tando follows her actions. Actions are co-ordinated to avoid clashes. Nokhukhanya attempts to join Elsa and Tando. Elsa yells at her, "Ja, ja. . .go ggo." Nokhukhanya raises her hand to hit Elsa. Tando intervenes. Nokhukhanya backs off for a little while. Her second attempt to join in is intercepted by Elsa, "Sha. . .gh. . .gh." Nokhukhanya retaliates, "Shaya wena."

In the description captured above, the children's construction of social relationships becomes visible. Elsa and Tando are in a partnership. The co-ordination of their actions help to gain a picture of 'readable intentions' that exist between partners. Body techniques combine with the practical know-how to seek solutions. The way in which the partners deal with the intrusion of Nokhukhanya provides insight into strategies used to preserve partnerships and protect territory. The children pick up positional, gestural, and linguistic clues in order to inform a potential line of action. Paying attention to the details of communication and interaction in a bodily verbal sense created greater understanding of young children getting to know the world.

During the interacting part of the 'thick involvement phase', there were certain researcher skills that needed to be worked through in order to become sensitive to the doings of children. The skill of listening was important in data production. Clark (2004) argues that when young children are seen as social actors, listening is not about making preformed ideas visible but more about hearing, interpreting, and making meaning. In the study there was a search for ways to enable children to communicate their views. The example below illustrates researcher attempts to use an open-ended approach to listening in a sense making moment on friendship.

> It is in between book reading and snack time for the two- and three-year-old group. The researcher squats around a table of six children. She greets them and remains quiet. Keelan is choosing his friends for free play.

Keelan: *I not Viv's friend*

Researcher: *You're not Viv's friend.*

Keelan: *I'm Deacon's friend and Evaan's friend.*

Researcher: *Oh, Deacon and Evaan are your friends.*

Keelan: *Viv is only saying a bad word.*

Keelan displays his understanding of a friend by using the criterion of friends being people who do not use 'bad' words. In order to become involved, the use of the words "I not. . ." by Keelan serves as a clue for the researcher to pick up on his view at a strategic point. The use of repetitions, instead of the 'why' method of probing, was aimed at keeping Keegan's line of thought, deepening his responses, and keeping his voice in the foreground. The strategy of repeating children's words sometimes coupled with 'wh' questions (Peterson and Biggs, 1997) to request specific information, proved to be valuable throughout the study.

Working in an open-ended way to be sensitive to the doings of children was also dependent on language skills. It was difficult to understand some of the 'children words' – *pissy pot (navel)*, *noonoos (ants)*, *sweetchie-swatchies (sponges)*. Since the researcher could only speak English, responses in Zulu, *woza lapha (come here), angazi (I don't know/understand)* and Tamil *Aya (grandmother)*, *karow (hot)*, *moola bone (bone with marrow)* challenged interpretations. The language limitation was partially resolved by directly requesting children to explain meanings and/or enlisting the help of older children. Caregivers and teachers also assisted in this respect. However, these interpretations called for a critical researcher response when caregivers and teachers dismissed children's meaning making attempts as indications of incompetence.

The complexities of researching young children as social actors doing childhood shows that there are no perfect recipes that can inform research. Broad guidelines that emanate from textbooks must be re-constructed in practice. In this study, the sense making moves of designing appropriate phases, producing thick descriptions, sharpening researcher skills, and resources were worked through by being responsive to the contextual realities of the young children as people in a centre-based setting.

Potential of participatory techniques as windows to children's knowledge

Once there is acknowledgement of children as people who have views and opinions that can be articulated in different ways, then there needs to be methods that can access their knowledge (Nieuwenhuys, 2004). Recently, researchers have selected a variety of creative techniques, as constructivist tools, to enable children to express their knowledge about aspects that affect their lives (O'Kane, 2000; Mayall, 2000). The selection of the techniques, however, has been subjected to debate. Those that work with older children as social actors argue that there is no need for special techniques with children as compared to adults (Christensen and James, 2000). With under fours, however, there has to be sensitivity to levels of understanding, knowledge, interests, and what young children do in their particular locations. There also has to be acknowledgement that the age of children does not have a mere numerical competence value but also an experience value (James *et al*., 1998). In other words, predetermined aged-based competence, must not be taken for granted.

The above points to the importance of adults/researchers being prepared to "see the meaning the child is creating" instead making assumptions from children's numerical age (Samuelsson, 2004, p.16). The participatory techniques in the study were selected by careful observations of way in which the children presented their knowledge. At the centres, activities were interactive involving a great deal of talking, playing, singing, clapping, dancing, drawing, acting, sitting, listening, and responding. This informed the choices of participatory techniques such as stories, child-led tours, and photographic conversations to create frames of cultural reference between the researcher and the children.

Stories

Story telling was a spontaneous way in which the children shared their experiences with other children and adults at the centres. As a planned technique the aim of story telling was to elicit meanings on likes, dislikes, relationships, and experiences as boys and girls. It also served as a tool to help children recount critical events at the centres such as Easter Bunny Visit, Year-end Concert, Spring Day, and Kiddienastics. A flexible approach was used to listen to and co-create meaning from stories. The story telling was

facilitated sometimes individually, in pairs, and in small groups either in the classroom or the play area. Encouraging stories with and without toys, mirror stories, and role-play helped children to articulate their knowledge. Child translators assisted in understanding Zulu stories.

Stories without toys created a variety of understandings on children's likes and dislikes. These stories included views and opinions about food, clothing, and happenings at home and at the centres. Relationships with friends, imaginary figures, and adults also featured in stories without toys. The following example illustrates story telling at lunch time.

> Priya: *I don't like food.*
>
> Researcher: *You don't like food. Why?*
>
> Priya: *(pulls a funny face) It makes me terrible. Only I like biryani. It's nice.*
>
> Researcher: *What about you, Kailan?*
>
> Kailan: *(points to Priya) You eating, I'm eating. Nobody feed me. (Mimicks the eating action). See, I eat all my food.*

The lunch time story provides a vivid picture of children's knowledge. Priya's responses give an indication of the emergence of a discerning self. She is bold in providing insight into her food preferences. There is evidence of a cultural preference. Kailan's narrative suggests that he is aware that he has achieved certain norms of what is considered good behaviour, that is, eating independently and eating all the food served to him. The use of 'you' and 'I' in Kailan's response suggests that he is aware that he is part of a social group when eating, and perhaps that lunchtime is a social activity. The facial expressions of Priya and the actions used by Kailan to support his verbal responses all work together with the stories to deepen insight into children's knowledge of their lives.

Story telling with toys provided valuable insight into how the children were making meaning of themselves as boys and girls.

> Trish: *Aunty Hasina Ma'am this is Barbie*
>
> Researcher: *I see Barbie on your lap*
>
> Trish: *Yah, Barbie. She's my best*
>
> Trentan: *I got my motorbike (shows me a toy motorbike)*

Researcher: *Tell me about your motorbike*

Trentan: *My motorbike. . . its its hurt me. I was driving fast. And then fire, fire*

The toys in the stories serve as important props to understand the way in which boys and girls were constructing their identities. Trish's short story on Barbie suggests that she has an understanding of the *best way* to be feminine. The doll is a powerful visual of a slim figure, blue eyes, and blond long hair. Trentan's story on getting hurt, driving fast, and references to fire suggests risk, speed, and power. These qualities are associated with being a *real boy*.

Mirror stories provided rich data on relationships. The children were encouraged to look at images in the mirror and start a story. For safety reasons a mirror with plastic handles was used. After the children had an experimental feel of the mirror, it proved to be a useful tool for meaning making. In some instances, a story starter was used, namely, "I want to tell you about. . ." In other instances, children looked in the mirror and found their own story starters. Although mirror stories added new perspectives to children's likes and dislikes, they were most valuable in revealing information on relationships with significant others. The examples below illuminate peer relations and adult/child relations.

Cara looks at herself and then turns the mirror towards Tina, and tries to remove Tina from the mirror

Cara: *Tina's my friend. She buy for me chips and cup cakes. And also Shana she give me chips and cup cakes*

Keelan: *I see my hair. I tell you about my hair*

Researcher: *You want to tell me more about your hair*

Keelan: *My hair. . . didn't do hair cut. My daddy he didn't take me. I was crying by the darage (garage)*

The mirror image serves as an important starter to gain insight into how children relate to others in their lives. Cara views a friend as someone that shares things with her. She uses the common criteria of cupcakes and chips to relate to Tina and Shana as friends. Keelan's response throws light on children's expectations of adults and the power relations between them. Keelan positions his dad as a responsible person. There is an expectation of performance from his dad. The withholding of performance by the adult and crying by child could both be read within the context of power relations.

Mirror images provided good starting points for children to express their meanings.

In the study, the use of story translators proved to be a valuable resource in understanding story telling by children who were Zulu speaking. Older children who were proficient in Zulu and English served as translators.

> Butsi: *Ngiyabhala.*
>
> Researcher: *Zowe, what is Butsi saying?*
>
> Zowe: *She say she write*
>
> Butsi: *Isikole sami ngiyayithanda (Jumps around, claps and sings)*
>
> Zowe: *She says this is hers school, and she like it*

Butsi (2 years) was a newcomer to the centre. Zowe (3.2 years) joined the centre at the age of one. The proficiency of Zowe in English and Zulu proved to be a valuable resource.

Using stories as a participatory technique can be challenging especially if there is a fixed idea of narrative structure. The children's stories did not display story structure of older children and adults. There was no beginning, middle, and end of stories, as we traditionally know it. In making sense of the children's stories, the focus fell on reporting events, personal experiences sometimes in two or three words and the actions associated with the telling. This required the development of a keen sense of listening and responding to quick moments of story telling.

The participatory technique, moving stories also proved valuable in eliciting children's knowledge. Child-led tours were organised to facilitate these stories.

Child-led tours - follow the leader

The children at the centres displayed high levels of energy. There was much jumping, walking, running in the playground and in the classrooms. This strength informed the technique called 'follow the leader'. It was similar to the child-led tours in the Mosaic approach, which was mentioned earlier on in this article (Clark, 2004). The aim of the tours was to allow children as leaders to point out places of significance and talk about specific experiences of each

place. The children were paired into order to allow for cross conversations and sometimes translations. The tours began at the entry points and sometimes continued around the buildings. On some occasions, the tours were undertaken outdoors around the centres. On other occasions, children guided the tours to different rooms. Children told moving stories that illuminated feelings, views, and the rules attached to specific places. In the example below, we witness performance and the communication of a rule of a particular place, namely, the play area.

> Subash: *This ones the slide. I like the slide.*
>
> Researcher: *I see the slide.*
> (Subash climbs up the slide whilst we watch)
>
> Researcher: *Who taught you to go up the slide?*
>
> Subash: *Aunty B (the headteacher). And. . .and you musn't push any peoples down.*

Subash takes the lead in pointing out an object of significance, gives a demonstration of an appropriate action, and articulates the rule when playing on the slide. In other words, he couples the action on the slide with the 'absent presence' of adult advice associated with performing in a familiar working space. Providing the children with the opportunity to be leaders in a tour-based way proved to be valuable in creating an understanding of how children were mediating the 'dos and don'ts' of childhood.

The child-led tours, although insightful, can be quite challenging. Keeping up with energy and the agenda of the children requires both physical and mental responsiveness from researchers. There has to be 'quick thinking on the feet' to capture the nuances of meaning children present.

The child-led tours revealed snap shot stories of time and events that merited further exploration. Photographs were used to probe further children's meanings.

The photographic talking wall

In order to reconstruct experiences of time and events, children's participation in activities were photographed by the researcher and a photographic talking wall was created. The aim of this technique was to enable children to talk about the happenings that implicated them. The routines such as lining up for

toilet time, snack time, and play time were photographed. Teacher directed activities such as making masks, and discussion time were also photographed. Wall space within the classroom was located in order to paste photographs illustrating a particular sequence, for example, the prayer before snack time, the distribution of snacks, and eating of snacks. Display of photographs in the classroom corner created a flexible environment where children could be free to leave or join in, as they desired. The children were invited to talk about what they saw with or without friends. In the following example, Trish and Gona view a photographic sequence illustrating the toilet routine. Gona is silent throughout.

Researcher: *What is happening here?*

Trish: *We in uh line.*

Researcher: *You are in a line.*

Trish: *Going toilet*

Researcher: *You are going to the toilet.*

Trish: *Yah (looks at Gona). Gona. . . he is making naughty*

Researcher: *So Gona is naughty*

Trish: *He is touching the charts and Shaylin he touch all things*

Researcher: *So, you can't touch anything when you're in a line*

Trish: *Noooooo!*

Researcher: *You wouldn't touch it. Why?*

Trish: *Wouldn't touch it. . .Cause, cause we going toilet. . . Dudu (the teacher) shout.*

The photographic images serve as an important tool to reconstruct the experience of being in a line for a particular purpose at a particular time. Different layers of meaning associated with doing the toilet routine becomes evident – the purpose of lining up, description of a violation, and the consequences of violating a norm. These layered meanings provided rich data on children's knowledge of the experiences that affected their lives.

One of the challenges of using this technique relates to the space used to create conversations about happenings in the photographs. The classroom is a noisy environment. It was difficult to capture children's responses more especially since some of them were momentary.

The participatory techniques of story telling, child-led tours, photographic conversations have the potential to open up windows to children's meaning making. The knowledge shared by the children through the tools and conversational spaces they were provided with, attests to the importance of researchers responding to the particularities of young children as holders of knowledge of their lives.

Tensions in altering power in relationships with children

Alderson (1995) contends that research relationships that involve children must pay attention to the broader cultural notions of power imbalances that exist between adults and children. In both the centres, observations revealed that the balance of power was heavily skewed toward adults. Embedded in many responses from adults to children were notions of control, norms, standards, conditions, and restrictions. It is within these grids of power that various roles of the researcher had to be negotiated. These roles were informed by the researcher attempting to forge relationships in a way that was sensitive and acceptable to the children in their lived realities.

The dilemma of "Do you have to be a child to research one?" tended to be a nagging concern at the beginning of the study. In research with children there are some researchers who respond to the power relations by refusing to take an authoritative stance. Mandell (1991), for example, refused to be an adult with the children she researched. She joined the children in all their activities and attempted to participate as an equal. The prior knowledge and physical size of an adult, however, defies such researcher participation. Mayall (in James, 2001) argues that adults can never be children. They have to accept the differences between themselves and children. This awareness led to the researcher adopting the stance of an "acceptable incompetent" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.99) – a non-threatening person who asks ignorant questions, and a person who affirms children's meaning making. The following serve as some examples.

> I join three children in the sand pit area. Elsa brings a packet of sand to me. Is this for me? She nods her head. I take the packet and place it carefully on my lap – acknowledging her interaction with me.

> I don't know how to make dots on a page. Would you be like Dudu (the teacher) and teach me?

In order to alter power relations, it was helpful to recognise and capitalise on situations in which children placed value on the adult status. During the study, the children called upon the researcher to settle disputes, confirm understandings of situations, and give direction to activities. These instances, however, were not without tensions and complexities. The example below illustrates children positioning the researcher as a knowing person.

> Trentan comes to the researcher with an empty yoghurt container
>
> Trentan: *What must I do with this?*
>
> Researcher: *You must put it in the bin*
>
> Temba watches the interaction, leaves his seat, and approaches the researcher with his lunch and a bread roll in his hand
>
> Temba: *I want to throw my roll*
>
> Researcher: *No, Temba. You must put it in your lunch box.*
>
> Temba takes his roll and puts it in his lunch box. He is about to go back to his seat.
>
> Teacher: *Temba go to your place*

The children see the researcher as another teacher who can give them answers to their questions and direction regarding their concerns. The children invoke a power relation in the sense that the adult/teacher is seen as the knower. In response, the researcher becomes didactic taking on the role of the teacher. The instruction by the real teacher is in the form of a reprimand directed at Themba as he had left his seat to walk over to the researcher. This example reflects the tensions that can arise in forging relationships with young children in the context of a centre with a particular ethos and culture.

Following the cues from studies by Corsaro (1985, 1997), the adoption of the role of a friend seemed an appropriate strategy to alter power relations. However, the reactions of teachers and caregivers pointed to problems associated with the role of the researcher as friend. Some children used the friendly presence to test boundaries. This was especially evident in their attempt to transgress routines, for example, getting snacks during rest time, remaining in the play area with the researcher after most children had gone to the washroom, and telling stories to the researcher during nap time. Whilst this

was viewed from a researcher lens as an expression of agency, the reaction of teachers and caregivers alerted the researcher to dilemma of being constructed as a permissive adult in a care and education setting.

There were also tense moments with some children in the study. In a few instances, children directly expressed negative feelings about outsider presence.

> Deena: *Why every time you coming to school?*
>
> Researcher: *I want to learn about you. Do you like me to come to school?*
>
> Deena: *No!*
>
> Researcher: *Why is that?*
>
> Researcher: *You know because my mummy didn't come*

In the above example, the researcher is positioned as an intruder. The agency of Deena is evident in the way he questions the researcher. He is knowledgeable about who should be at the centre. His reference to the exclusion of his mum and the physical presence of the researcher provides insights into his feelings.

There were also many enjoyable moments during the course of attempting to be acceptable in relationships with the children. These arose mostly when the children used the researcher as a resource. The mothering instinct and care giving skills of the researcher came to the fore when children needed to be comforted before sleep time, and attended to in the absence of caregivers. In these instances, the children referred to the researcher as *mummy* and *nanny*. They called upon the researcher's language skills to label objects, request for information, and extend understandings. In these instances, the children referred to the researcher as *Hasina ma'am* and sometimes as *Aunty Hasina* ma'am. Such momentary relationships helped the researcher to feel more at ease with the children.

Playing the role of the researcher, mother, teacher, caregiver, assistant, and friend helped create understandings of multiple ways of responding and connecting with the children as people in an institutional setting. In these intersecting roles, the researcher engaged with the practical realities of attempting to alter power relations between children as the researched and the researcher.

Challenges in working through situated ethics in research with children

The complex nature of researching young children as social actors in their lived context, called for a situated ethics approach. Simons and Usher (2000) describe this approach as focussing on how ethical issues are handled in practice. The call for being ethical in situations emanated largely from feminist, post modern, and post colonial challenges to universality, scientific objectivity, and value neutrality. Researchers must show how the general ethical principles are mediated not only at the beginning of the research but also throughout the research process (Morrow and Richards, 1996). This approach proved valuable since there were many calls for decision making in specific situations.

Obtaining access and permission to conduct the research and specific aspects of the research was undertaken at different points at the study. At the beginning of the research process, the centres were informed about the study through personal visits and a letter. Parents were informed of the research via the centres. Both the centres were happy to accommodate someone that was interested in young children's lives. Every visit was characterised by negotiating permission and providing information to different levels of authority – head teachers at initial entry, teachers and caregivers at specific venues, and children in their working spaces. The head teachers, teachers, and caregivers were busy people and it was difficult to explain all the details of what the researcher would be doing for a particular visit. In some instances, snippets of information were given as the researcher accompanied the children in their various working spaces.

The acknowledgement of the children as having authority to permit access meant constantly negotiating acceptance of researcher presence. Simple stories to upfront ignorance and state intent proved to be helpful. The following examples illustrate this research strategy.

> *Hello, Tanya. I know how a big person like me does that (using my hands to accentuate size) but I don't know how you do it. Can you show me?*
>
> *I love the way you. . . I want to find out more about. . .*

The negotiation of researcher presence, however, was not a simple matter of empathising with the children. Young (1997) argues that there has to be a concerted effort to create dialogue that allows shared understanding between

the researcher and the children. This heightened awareness led to the researcher foregrounding her lack of knowledge of what it is to be a child at this point in time, and to request information from the children.

> *You know it is a long time since I was a child. I would like to learn how a child. . . Do you want to teach me?*

However, taking on the role of a learner and positioning the children as teachers resulted in contradictory responses from the children. Whilst some children saw the offer to become a teacher as an opportunity to share their stories, others waited for the researcher to take the lead. These latter responses could have emanated from the dominant relationship of adults as teachers and children as learners present at the centres. In other words, the researcher's strategy resulted in a role reversal that was not a familiar practice at the centres. This highlights the importance of early childhood researchers working closely with the situated messy realities in which the lives of young children are embedded.

In the study, children's assent to participate in the research activities was a critical issue in the context of child rights. There was an awareness that children may agree to participate because of existing power relations between adults and children. The message of Langston, Abbot, Lewis, and Kellet (2004) provided direction. Young children give us bodily signs of consent if we look, listen, and take heed of the signals sent to us. This meant paying special attention to responses and signs of discomfort. These signs were noted as children creating distance from the researcher, displaying uneasiness when required to engage with props, walking away, and making gestures to withdraw from participation. In the study, child participation was voluntary and flexible modes of working were used to allow the children the freedom to become involved.

Throughout the study, working ethically in situations with the children called for high reflexivity and negotiation. At different points of the study, the researcher found tensions between her own views of young children and the dominant discourses of the centres challenging. Some of the research activities that encouraged active participation of the children had to be abandoned because notions of young children's incompetence amongst some staff members at one of the centres. One such example refers to involving children in drawings of their experiences. The centres used worksheets with outlines that children were required to colour in. Some teachers felt that giving the

children an open-ended drawing activity would merely result in scribbling, and therefore, would not be of much value. Scribbling was viewed as an incompetent stage in the development of handwriting. Whilst respected as an insider decision, it highlights ethical dilemmas when conflicting lenses are used to inform young children's participation in research.

Conclusion

In this article, we sought to illuminate some sense making moves of research *with* under fours. Each theme detailed how the researcher worked with the circumstances in which children's lives were shaped and the particularities of young children as people actively shaping their circumstances. The use of thick descriptions, the development of researcher skills/resources in implementing appropriate participatory techniques, the researcher in multiple roles, and the situational mediation of ethics attests to the researcher being contextually responsive. This responsiveness is necessary when working within the context of children's rights, and within a theoretical framework that does not make automatic assumptions about young children based on predetermined meanings of immaturity. It might be helpful to think of this type of practice as *responsive research*. The latter makes it necessary to adopt multiple sense making moves to engage with the messy realities when undertaking research *with* young children. In doing so, the practice of *responsive research,* in a South African context, has the potential to fill the gap in knowledge about young children as people doing childhood in their present lives.

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Note

The names of the children, teachers and caregivers have been changed to protect their identity and respect confidentiality. Their gender, however, remains the same.

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