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# TROUBLING 'RACE' AND DISCOURSES OF DIFFERENCE AND IDENTITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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*Abstract: This article emerges from a broader ethnographic study exploring how young children aged five and six years, and their educators, construct 'race' identities in a culturally diverse early childhood education setting in post-apartheid South Africa. Historically, systems of educational inequality and injustice have had a profound impact on how subjects have come to be 'raced' in the South African context. Drawing on a poststructural framework that problematizes the notion of identity, 'race', and young children's discursive understandings of 'race', this article traces the complex ways in which young children and educators (re)construct, negotiate, resist and subvert subject formation processes in the school environment. Notions of performativity and embodiment provide important analytical tools through which ethnographic data is analysed. Such a framework moves discussion regarding young children and identity beyond more conventional psychological theories that postulate that the self emerges from intrapsychic processes or, at best, is shaped within very limited caregiver and familial contexts, thus avoiding the 'complexity of human subjectivity' (O'Loughlin, 2001, p. 57). Dominant narratives about diversity and difference circulating in a formerly 'white' primary school with a commitment to transformation and diversity are interrogated. The frequent struggles with discourses of 'race', power and privilege that emerge in the lived experiences of both young children and educators points to the ways in which discursive positioning frame subject formation processes. It argues that educators need to closely interrogate their own 'race' positioning(s) and simultaneously make visible the notion that children, like adults, are social agents who are as affected by political, economic, social and cultural forces.*

Globally, notions of diversity and difference in early childhood education are gaining increased traction (Ebrahim & Francis, 2008, Berman, Daniel, MacNevin & Royer, 2017). A range of theoretical lenses not traditionally related to ECE has opened up alternative readings of how young children, their educators and families negotiate everyday educational experiences in complex societies (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Cannella, 2005; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015). For example, poststructuralism, postcolonial theories, and theories on white privilege have been employed to challenge the more prevalent lines of inquiry, such as cognitive developmental psychology and sociocultural perspectives (MacNaughton 2006; MacNaughton & Davis, 2009), that have traditionally dominated understandings of children and identity formation processes. Such conceptual shifts provide tools to work both *with* and *against* taken-for-granted identity categories in order to make connections between lived experience, political relations and knowledge production (Gunaratnam, 2003). In relation to questions of diversity and identity, these theories disrupt the 'business-as-usual' approach to ECE to highlight that the field 'is neither culturally neutral nor politically innocent' (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015, p. 2). Drawing on poststructural and postcolonial scholarship, this article analyses and interprets the (de)/(re)construction of young children and their educators' 'raced' identities in an early childhood education setting in post-apartheid South Africa.

Understanding the myriad ways in which young children wrestle with the notion of 'race' builds on studies that have shown children as young as three years displaying 'racial' prejudice and acting on it (for a review see MacNaughton, 2006). Children are aware that differences in skin colour, language, gender and physical ability are connected with privilege and power (Aboud, 1988; Derman-Sparks, 1989). In stratified societies prejudice in children appears to be more pronounced (Aboud, 1988), which can negatively influence the formation of identities, as well as physical self-concept in young children (Katz, 1982). The impact of 'race' and racism is felt early on in childhood (Tatum, 1997).

In the post-apartheid South African context, identities are being refashioned with the hope of providing 'alternative ways of seeing, understanding and responding' (Ebrahim & Francis, 2008, p. 286). In this article it is argued that skin colours *matter* to young children in complex and troubling ways, and that early childhood

educators can constrain or open up possibilities for disrupting engrained ‘raced’ scripts and narratives that inform processes of subject formation. This article, therefore, contributes to calls for transformative pedagogical possibilities (Somerville, 2010; 2013, cited in Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015) in early childhood education where discourses of ‘race’ are regularly silenced or overlooked.

## **Constructing a National Identity in Post-Apartheid South Africa**

Respecting diversity is a legal requirement in contemporary South Africa (RSA, 1996), and serves as a symbol of national unity and transformation. The notion of ‘unity’ is a central feature of the ‘nation-building project’ post-apartheid and has popularised an ‘overarching national identity and the formation of a new South African nation’ (Bornman, 2006, p. 385). Within the milieu of the relatively recent dramatic shift in the socio-political order of the society, people have begun to rearticulate their identities and intergroup relations through processes of reconciliation and nation-building (Steyn, 2003). In post-apartheid South Africa, ‘the dominant discourse came to orbit around postulated common interests and destinies [r]ather than difference, contradiction and antagonism [a]s the fundamental dynamics at work in society’ (Bundy, 2000, cited in Van der Walt, Franchi & Stevens 2003, p. 253). The promotion of a unified state, and a common identity, is not unusual in the project of nation building, as attempts are made to ‘overcome and avoid manifold problems associated with heterogeneity and diversity’ (Bornman, 2006, p. 385). However, advancing a supra-national identity to replace and/or subsume subnational identities and cultures (Bauman, 1998) is controversial given concerns of forced membership, as well as conflicting historical experiences and value systems (Bornman, 2006).

The dominant discourse of non-racialism in post-apartheid South Africa is increasingly challenged by persistent economic and social inequality and the ‘continued exclusionary dominance of white values and racism’ (Hofmeyr & Govender, 2016, p. 3). The only social survey of its kind, the South African Barometer Survey (Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, 2015), showed that 61% of South Africans believe ‘race’ relations have either deteriorated or stayed the same since 1994, and more than 50% of people never interact in private and social spaces with other ‘race’ groups. Furthermore, 67% of people ‘indicated that they generally have little or no trust in people of other race groups’ (Hofmeyr & Govender, 2016, p. 3). The politics of ‘race’ and its impact on the lives of individuals remains powerful. A weakness of survey data, however, is that it tends to ‘fix subjectivity rather than allowing room for self-understandings which may be multiple, shifting and contradictory’ (Vincent, 2008, p. 1429). Thus, qualitative studies can provide deep insight into relations of power and inequality and serve as a ‘lens through which to view contemporary dominant tropes of race in South Africa as manifested in day-to-day life’ (Vincent, 2008, p. 1429).

### *‘Race’, education and constructing identities*

Education based research on identity formation processes in post-apartheid South Africa signals the tensions and complexities that subjects face—both adults and children—in making sense of their place and, importantly, their relation to others, in a democratic dispensation (Dolby, 2001; Soudien, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c; Walker, 2005; Vincent, 2008; McKinney, 2010). While acknowledging the range of identity notions at play, it is ‘race’ that remains a primary identity marker in this context (Dawes & Finchelescu, 2002; Bock & Hunt, 2015). As Soudien (2015) argues, it remains a powerful *invention* that requires interrogation, troubling and unsettling to ensure it, and a range of other debilitating inequalities including class, gender and home language cease to determine the worth of individuals. Apartheid schooling was a powerful mechanism to promote ideas of racial separateness and white supremacy (Soudien & McKinney, 2016). Post-apartheid, desegregated educational institutions are wrestling with difference and diversity in complex and often contradictory ways (Soudien, 2007a). As Erasmus (2001) writes:

The challenge for all South Africans is to begin to recognise racist sentiments and practices as part of our everyday reality and the shaping of all of ourselves. It is to relinquish the desire to leave the past behind and instead, to start processing the past with due regard to the powerful emotional burden which accompanies it: feelings of anger, guilt, betrayal, shame, pain and humiliation. A progressive, transformative politics cannot be based on a denial of the past. The realization that no one South African can claim a moral high ground, that all of us have been profoundly wounded and shaped by the past, is more likely to provide the ground for creating new identities. (p. 26)

Education settings provide spaces for creating new identities where ‘racial’ scripts can be rewritten, and new and innovative ways of managing identities explored (Soudien, 2007a). In early childhood education, Kurban and Tobin (2009) note that children have moved beyond the family circle into the more public world of preschool and are thus experiencing the elaboration of their identities in a context outside of their immediate family circle. ‘The preschool is not and cannot be a site which is immune from the tensions and discourses that circulate in the larger society...none of us are immune from reflecting and reproducing our society’s

discriminatory thoughts, words and actions' (Kurban & Tobin 2009, p. 33). Similarly, the young child 'is not innocent, apart from the world' but is 'in the world as it is today, embodies the world, is acted upon by the world but also acts on it and makes meaning from it' (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999, pp. 50-1).

### *Conceptualising 'race': a social construction of power and discourse*

Anyone writing about South Africa is challenged by what Thompson (2001) calls a 'terminological minefield.' Terminology to describe so-called 'racialized' groups is highly contested (Gunaratnman, 2003). In the post-apartheid state the old racial categorizations of 'black African', 'white', 'coloured' and 'Asian' are still retained in order to assess progress with regards to transformation as per affirmative action (Moodley & Adam, 2004) and 'race'-based university admission policies (Govender, 2010). Thus, tensions between discourses of 'non-racialism' and that of 'racialism' present policymakers, social scientists, and educators with complex and important dilemmas (Whitehead, 2011). In this article the following terminology, placed in quotation marks, is used when writing about so-called 'raced' groups: 'black Africans', 'Asians' (people of predominantly Indian and Chinese descent), 'Coloureds' (people of mixed descent), and 'whites' (both English and Afrikaans speakers). I do not use these terms in an unproblematic sense and follow Gunaratnman's (2003, p. 18) thinking when she states that these terms might be understood as 'dangerous categories' in that their use can serve to '...reify 'race' and ethnicity as entities that individuals are born into and inhabit, and that are then brought to life in the social world, rather than 'recognizing' race and ethnicity as dynamic and emergent processes of being and becoming.'

Seeing 'race' as a construction does not deprive the term of its force in life (Butler, 1993). Indeed, it is not possible to neglect the psychic hold and the materiality of racism (Howarth & Hook, 2005), which requires an analysis of the permutations of the notion of 'race' through time and space. Undertaking a critical analysis of 'race' and racism is challenging as it involves 'imagining the possibilities in spaces and relationships that de-racialize practices and identities, while acknowledging the practical impossibility of moving beyond 'race' as part of our current ideological realities' (Howarth & Hook, 2005, p. 429).

## **Methods**

### *Research question*

The central aim of this article is to interrogate ways in which the 'raced' identities of young children are shaped and (re)produced within the official discourse of non-racialism that forms a cornerstone of education practice in post-apartheid South Africa. Moments of troubled positioning in relation to the notion of 'race' are evident through interactions among early childhood educators and children and signal constraints and possibilities facing individuals as they engage in complex identity work.

### *Data collection*

This article draws on a portion of data generated during a larger ethnographic study undertaken over an eight month period in the early childhood setting of a historically 'white' only primary school (currently with a 'racially' and culturally diverse student body) located in a large South African city. During this time the author spent five days a week in the ECE setting for approximately seven hours a day. Observations took place in a variety of contexts, a few where adults were almost always present such as inside the classroom, and others where adults were rarely involved, such as during free play times and in the playground. Careful attention and time were devoted to establishing myself as a non-sanctioning adult (Mandell, 1988) in the setting. This involved addressing concerns of trust, power, privilege and authority generally associated with adult researchers (Spindler & Hammond, 2006; Thorne, 1993; Eder & Corsaro, 1999).

The data presented in this article are drawn from a) field notes of a classroom discussion of South Africa's segregated past initiated and led by the self-classified 'white' early childhood educator (Gillian), b) an in-depth interview lasting 1.5 hours with the same educator, and c) participant observation data generated in the form of field notes through my close engagement with fifty children aged 5-6 years from diverse cultural, linguistic and social backgrounds.

### *Data analysis process*

Through an analysis of the data collected I offer an interpretation of the discursive practices—both verbal and embodied—of young children and educators as they engage in 'raced' identity work. Emerson et al. (1995, p. 8) point to the recognition that 'field notes involve *inscriptions* of social life and social discourse. Such inscriptions inevitably *reduce* the welter and confusion of the social world to written words that can be reviewed, studied and thought about time and again.' Thus, writing down field notes is a selective process that filters and transforms that which has been witnessed—the events, people and places—into words on a piece of

paper (Emerson et al., 1995). The linearity of written text means the complexity of embodied discourse is reduced, even though numerous attempts are made to capture, for example, nonverbal cues. Yet, as Emerson et al. (1995, p. 10), drawing on Geertz's (1973) well-known term 'thick description', explain, it is through 'deep immersion—and the sense of place that such immersion assumes and strengthens—that enables the ethnographer to inscribe the detailed, context-sensitive, and locally informed field notes.'

Thus, the ethnographic account presented here has been formed as part of an interpretive process whereby I, as ethnographer, convey my understanding and insights gained from my immersion into the lives of my research participants. Viewed through a poststructural lens, my effect on the research and its effect on me is an integral part of the process and one that needs to be acknowledged. Theoretically, I was aware of this; however, in practice, I soon began to realise just how complex and fraught with tension sharing experiences with others in such a study (focused particularly on 'race') can be. For example, being a 'white' woman who had grown up under apartheid and had attended an all 'white' primary school, meant that when discourses of whiteness were invoked to explain or rationalise a thought or an idea, it was assumed that I would 'get it.' This highlighted how meanings of 'race' are dynamically constituted through social discourse as well as the subjective investment of individuals (Gunaratnman, 2003, see also Hall, 1996). Gunaratnman (2003) highlights that how people *talk* about themselves is fundamental to the project of examining the ways in which 'race' categories are produced and have meaning in a subject's life.

While 'race' and its categories are understood to be discursive formations whereby differences are accorded social significance, as social researchers studying 'race' it is the knowledge that 'such ideas carry with them material consequences for those who are included within, or excluded from, them' (Bulmer & Solomos 1999, p. 5) that is of central importance. While data collection methods such as interviews and participant observation are useful in capturing instances and processes of 'race-making', theoretical tools are required in order to make sense of the data. Poststructuralist approaches are useful here in terms of both 'their theoretical assumptions on the nature of order and their practical applicability for the analysis of empirical material' (Leonard, 2010, pp. 44-45). Analysing data that is in the form of discourse presented as text in field notes and interviews requires an interpretive analysis rather than making use of more traditional classroom discourse analysis tools (McKinney, 2010). The poststructuralist influence on this work has resulted in a deconstructive consideration of the data.

## **Findings and Interpretation**

### *Resisting 'race': (Re)constructing notions of 'difference' in early childhood education*

In the following extract from my field notes, the early childhood educator, Gillian, is leading the children in a discussion about apartheid as part of the school's commitment to diversity, transformation and non-racialism. She begins by asking the children if they know what 'apartheid' is. The children respond as follows:

Soraya ('coloured'): You don't look like me so you can't be part of my world!

Ellen ('white'): It was the white and the black people all fighting

Gillian: Is it fine to call someone 'black' or 'white'?

Children shout out in unison: No! It's rude!

Grace ('white'): [looking and pointing at Thandi] It would be rude to say 'Hey black girl, come here'.

Gillian: What should one say instead?

Catherine ('white'): Hey Thandi, please come here

MacNaughton, Davis, & Smith (2009, p. 34) note that 'Early childhood spaces are intimately involved in offering children discourses through which they might 'racially' construct themselves and enact their 'race' relations with others. This signals the important role that educational settings play as mediators of 'racial' identity possibilities (Connolly, 2008). Post-apartheid, discourses of 'race' that invoke a direct association with skin colour have become increasingly problematised. This has given way for the ideals of 'non-racialism' to serve as the framework within which differences and diversity are addressed. However, there is a risk that in this framework 'race' becomes simply recoded in terms of 'difference' and 'culture' (Back & Solomos 2000; Vandenbroeck, 2007), thereby muting practices of 'racial' power and privilege. In this ECE setting the children were strongly discouraged, and at times prohibited, by the early childhood educators—most notably Gillian—from using 'racial' labels such as 'white', 'black' and 'coloured' when referring to individuals. Throughout my

fieldwork I observed how the educator would repeatedly point out to various children who had used a 'race' term that this was impolite and/or not permitted. Yet, during my time as a participant observer in the classroom and on the playground, children regularly employed skin colour terms when looking for colouring pens, to identify a particular child/educator/family member/community member, and when telling stories about events or experiences outside of the ECE setting. In this section I focus on two discussion threads that highlight the often contradictory and conflicting ways in which 'race' is taken up in early childhood.

In this ECE setting, labelling individuals as 'black' or 'white' was viewed as an overt form of naming 'race.' Yet, no further discussion was offered by Gillian in response to her original question about what apartheid 'is.' Effectively, the potential of this discussion to engage with young children in a meaningful way about how this fraught historical period affected citizens in relation to power and privilege was not realised. Instead, apartheid was reduced to a 'race' conflict that could be addressed through the dissolution of 'race' labels. Opportunities to explore with young children how the body is an inscriptive surface marked according to the operation of social relations and hierarchies were missed. Upon reflection, Gillian stated that she did not feel the need to interrogate these labels in more depth; instead, she believed that it was sufficient to attempt to move the discourse of difference away from the surface of the body. Her aim was, therefore, to point out that skin colour is not the substance of difference.

One reason for this can be found in an extract from the in-depth interview with Gillian. Here it emerges that her dominant perception of children and 'race' centres on the belief that five and six year old children are incapable of understanding the ideological weight that 'race' terms carry with them. In response to an interview question about young children and their perceptions of 'race,' Gillian states in two different instances that:

I don't think they've gotten *that* far...[the children] see colour, but I don't think they know what it means...from what I've noticed they're very literal...they'll see *that* as a black person, *that* as a white person, and that's it. But they won't...like I think adults, they attach *other* things to that colour...you know cultural differences, thought differences...whatever, whereas they [children]...from what I see they're just very literal...you're black, you're white...o.k. cool.

A lot of what kids say they actually don't understand the meaning behind it...say they use quite a derogatory word and then often if it goes to the parent and they make such a huge thing they're actually like 'why did I get into trouble for saying that word' and then the child is not actually explained, you know, the meaning...and then they can go 'oohhh, ok!'

Gillian's attempt to prohibit children from using the 'racial' labels 'white' and 'black' stands in contradiction to her beliefs that children are not able to grasp the loaded meaning of such terms and thereby the implications of 'race' and racism (Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001). Thinking through the relationship between children, 'race' and identity formation is, however, a slippery slope, as while the discourse of childhood innocence is very appealing—given that children should not have to take responsibility for historical, institutional and systemic practices (Skattebol, 2003)—views were also expressed that suggested that children are able, and should, be engaging with complex identity and social concepts. In other words, instances arose that served to disrupt the idea that children are naïve of social power and supported the fact that they have the cognitive capacity to understand 'race' (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 1996).

The practice of transmitting to children that 'racial' discrimination was something that happened in the past and that it was only perpetrated by a few 'bad' individuals has been identified by Hirschfeld (2008) as a common practice when adults engage children in discussions about 'race' and racism. While alluding to this past, Gillian's focus was firmly on encouraging children to look beyond colour and to respect diversity. In my interview with Gillian we spoke about the discussion she had had with the children as I was interested in her reflections on this experience:

Some of the children...when I spoke about apartheid and I explained what it meant I said 'look around at everyone and how different they are' and 'do you know, back in the past there was...you know...just *one type* of person that you would be in a class with...whether it be that we all speak Afrikaans, you know...because I didn't want to keep on the colour...but obviously I also said that it was mainly about colour. And they couldn't believe me...even Ellen, she was like 'how's that! That means that I couldn't be friends with Chelsea!'...you know how she goes off... 'That's so sad!' And everyone was like 'Ja, that would be so sad! We would never have met you then!' So for them, they related it directly to the kids that were in the class.

Highlighting her belief that children use 'race' in a purely descriptive way and not in a discriminatory way, she continues:

They could not really comprehend why children of colour were separated from those who were 'white'... When we spoke of how we are different, they all stated how we are different physically and in our abilities. They noticed the colour differences but they didn't attach any prejudices to any of the races present...I think that if the parents did talk about apartheid, they would be very surprised by their children's non-bias, intuitive responses.

### *A perspective from the 'other' side: invoking 'race'*

Returning to the classroom discussion on apartheid, Gillian spontaneously invited Nobanzi, her teaching assistant who had been at the ECE setting for approximately two weeks, to share her experiences living under apartheid, 'such as sitting on segregated buses' (Gillian's words). Hesitating at first, Nobanzi soon began to cite numerous examples from her personal experience regarding what life was like for her under apartheid. The following vignette describes what she explained to the children:

I first really understood what apartheid meant when I was 12 years old. I had to go into certain shops via a different entrance to the 'white's', I was prohibited from entering [formerly 'white's' only suburbs]. There were different toilets for 'blacks' and 'whites', as well as benches. I needed to carry around a 'dompas'<sup>1</sup> and was 'lucky' in that my mother had married a 'coloured' man when I was still quite small and I had been adopted under him. This allowed me marginally more rights than other 'black' people. One experience I will never forget is when I was working in an old age home here in [the suburb where the school is located] not far from here, and during my lunch break one day I was walking down the street and I saw a police van slow down. I ignored it and kept walking. I then heard them come closer to me and they shouted 'Hey k\*\*\*\*r! Stop!' But I just kept on walking. They shouted again 'Hey k\*\*\*\*r, ons het gesê jy moet stop!'<sup>2</sup> They pulled up to where I was standing and demanded to see my pass. I explained to them that I didn't need one and they looked at me and said 'Voetsek!'<sup>3</sup> Then in 1976, with all the students fighting against Afrikaans in the schools...many children lost their lives, and many parents lost their children...they killed them like it was nothing, we were just flies to them. But we are finally free...we are now all one.

The children sat in rapt silence while Nobanzi explained her story. Gillian looked taken aback by the account. The suffering and the humiliation that Nobanzi lived through stood in stark contrast to the experiences that myself and Gillian—as 'white' South Africans—had lived through growing up. Having grown up on different sides of a historical 'race' divide, this situation highlighted the extent to which our lives, including our personal and collective memories, have been shaped in vastly different ways. Not surprisingly, these experiences help define the way that we as social subjects make sense of the world in which we live. In a moment of reflection Gillian alludes to the difficulty of seeing 'Otherwise' when she states that:

I *struggle* now. Like even at church and at cell groups and whatever that I'm in...like um...when I sit there and you have conversations, even about someone's week and just in general, you still struggle, there is still this *huge barrier* and it's not like...oh, you are whatever'...it's just like, there's something, you just aren't on the same like...not level...but just...it feels like 'am I *really* connecting with this person?', Do they feel like I'm really listening and understanding where they're coming from?

Deconstructing these differences and what they have come to mean in contemporary society is vital if we are to better grasp how 'race' continues to shape everyday experiences. This was recognised by Steve Biko (1988, p. 27) who wrote that 'My friendship, my love, my education, my thinking and every other facet of my life have been carved and shaped within the context of separate development.' 'Separate development' was vital for creating images and ideas of the 'Other' that continue to haunt interactions and relationships among people from different so-called 'racial' groups. As Hall (1996) reminds us, identification is always a double-sided process, constructed *through* rather than outside differentiation (see also Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996 for discussions of 'othering'). In an extract from Hall (1996, p. 5), Gunaratnman (2003, p. 12) draws our attention to how an 'identity' is always constructed in relation to its *constitutive outside*—'the unity, the internal homogeneity, which the term identity treats as foundational is not natural, but a constructed form of closure, every identity naming as its necessary, even if silenced and unspoken other, that which it 'lacks.' This 'theorization of processes of identity formation' (Gunaratnman, 2003, p. 12) alludes to the psycho-social

<sup>1</sup> 'Dompas' refers to the pass book that all 'black' South Africans had to carry with them at all times when in so-called 'white' areas.

<sup>2</sup> Translation: 'Hey k\*\*\*\*r, we told you to stop!'

<sup>3</sup> A derogatory term in the Afrikaans language.

entanglements of difference as well as, importantly, challenging the assumption that the category of 'race', for example, only has relevance and meaning for minoritized groups.

The lived experiences of Gillian and Nobanzi that have shaped their interest in, and understanding of, difference, can be used to reflect critically on the structures and discourse that have positioned them in society. But, as Davies (2003) notes, 'as a speaking subject, they can also invent, invert and break old structures and patterns and discourses and thus speak/write into existence other ways of being.' This, however, requires a commitment to disrupt and challenge oppressive power relations, thus reflecting on who we are, and how we are, in this world. As Mangcu (2003, p. 9) poignantly writes, '[A]s a young black parent who grew up during apartheid, I am often torn by two clashing instincts. On the one hand, I want my children to understand the history that has informed our collective political and social identities as black people. On the other hand, I want them to be able to define their world as they see it, and that is as autonomous being, unburdened by my issues.'

### *Naming 'race' and engaging in identity work through play*

In this section I problematize Gillian's concern about 'race' labels, how she positions young children as ignorant of 'race,' and how children with diverse histories construct their play narratives in ways closely aligned to dominant 'race' discourses circulating in the broader South African context. My exploration of the children's understanding of 'race' was greatly facilitated by the resources that formed part of daily life in Reception year. Through making use of these resources I was able to examine the children's thinking around 'race' in diverse ways and across various contexts. One such example involves a teddy bear I named Thabo [a common isiXhosa<sup>4</sup> name], which Chelsea and Ellen were not too happy about, as highlighted in the following vignettes:

Catherine ('white'), Morgan ('white') and Thandi ('black African') are playing 'baby baby.' I pick up a brown teddy bear and pretend that this is my baby whom I name Thabo. Chelsea ('Asian') and Chris ('white') are sitting facing towards me and I show them my baby and introduce him as Thabo. I see Chelsea flinch and infer that she is not happy with the name that I have chosen. I decide to ask Chelsea if she likes my baby's name (to test my hunch). She says 'no, I don't like it.' I ask her why and she says 'because it's a black name.' She insists that a better name would be Mineesha but I say that I prefer Thabo and she looks at me as if I am half mad. She then shrugs and seems to resign herself to the fact that my baby's name is Thabo.

I find myself in the fantasy corner with Soraya ('coloured') and Ellen ('white'). Soraya is pretending to be the mom and Ellen her daughter. I grab my baby bear 'Thabo' and introduce him to them. Immediately Ellen pulls her face in a look of distaste. I ask her if she likes the name I have chosen and she responds with 'No, it's not a nice name!' Soraya scolds her telling her to be nice to me. I ask Ellen why she does not like the name but in keeping with the game and her 'mother's' warning to be polite she responds in a falsely sweet voice: 'It's a lovely name.'

Later in the week I arrive at school to find Morgan, Catherine and Darlene ('coloured') playing in the doll corner. Darlene appears to be playing by herself and invites me to play with her. I accept the invitation and sit down:

There is a 'black' newborn baby doll amongst the other 'white' dolls and teddy bears. I haven't seen anyone playing with this doll yet. I pick it up and suggest that this can be my baby. Darlene doesn't agree and hands me another, 'white' doll. I persist, saying that I am happy with this ['black'] doll and that I will call it Thabo. Darlene insists that I mustn't play with the 'black' doll. I ask her why but she just shrugs and tell me that the other doll, which is 'peach,' is better. When I hesitate, she tells me that I don't need a doll, but that I can rather take care of her doll. She suggests that I prepare some food for her baby and she shows me where the cooking utensils are kept. Just then we are called for line-up and so we quickly pack up and go outside.

While the children in this study were more specific when, for example, speaking about the colours they were using to draw somebody's 'skin,' an incident with Josh ('white') and Sophia ('coloured') while we were colouring in at the art tables suggested that 'white' remains normative in this setting:

[Josh is about to colour in the face on his drawing and asks]: Where's the skin colour?

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<sup>4</sup> The Xhosa identify the south-east part of the country as their home. The language they speak is IsiXhosa, one of the eleven official languages of present day South Africa. It is the second most spoken home language in the country.

Jaci: What skin colour?

Sophia: This one [as she points to her picture where she has begun colouring in the person peach]

Jaci: Is that everyone's skin colour?

Sophia: My skin colour is brown

Jaci: Why don't you make it brown?

Sophia: 'Cause I don't want to.

Josh then goes over to the table behind us and asks: 'Can I borrow your skin colour? [He takes the peach crayon]. I'll bring it back now.'

Sophia did not look at Josh's picture to get an idea of what colour he was looking for. She understood the term 'skin colour' to mean 'peach.' A little while later during snack time a discussion took place about husbands and wives which led to someone suggesting that Lelethu ('black African') marry Josh, which in turn led Siphon ('black African') to interject: 'Lelethu must marry a black... a black boy... an ugly black.' Siphon has albinism and his family members are 'black.' These incidents point towards the understanding that 'white' skin continues to have a higher status than 'black' skin in this setting. While children were strongly encouraged not to use the terms 'black' and 'white' when referring to people, when they played together out of earshot of authority figures, these terms were employed on numerous occasions. In the same way that the children were careful about using 'racial' labels that were not considered 'polite' in front of authority figures, issues of 'race,' as Tatum (1997) and Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) also point out, were only spoken about within their peer groups, and more frequently than the educators were aware of. Knowing that they were not allowed to use standard 'race' labels, the children developed other labels to refer to 'race' groups. These labels were most commonly used during art activities where the children sat at tables and were directly observed by the educator and her assistant. The term 'peach' was used to refer to 'white' people, while 'brown' was used to refer to 'black' people. To speak about 'coloured' or Indian people the children would use terms such as 'light brown' or 'a little bit brown'. The educator found this acceptable as she stated that it was a realistic observation on the part of the children and that these terms closely resembled actual skin colour. These terms, therefore, were viewed as being free from the connotations that came with the use of labels such as 'white', 'black' and 'coloured.'

The use of these labels suited the educator's idea of children as innocent of 'race' politics. However, as MacNaughton (2005, p. 90), drawing from the work of Derrida, notes: 'there is no objective, true meanings for a sign or specific text, only meanings that are linked, cultural, historical, contradictory and shifting.' While the term 'white' is, for example, certainly impregnated with meaning, the substitution of this term for another ('peach') does not mean that children are unaware of the power effects of the term. Subject formation is intricately tied up with an individual's sense of self and belonging and as Steinitz and Solomon (1989, p. 135, cited in Pica-Smith, 2009, p. 2) note, schools serve as 'sites of identity,' places where 'young people draw conclusions about what sort of people they are, what society has in store for them, and what they can therefore hope for.'

The interpretation of these findings signals both explicit and implicit ways in which 'raced' identities are constructed in early childhood education. The notion of 'race' remains highly relevant in the South African society where education settings and children are both posited as central to the project of establishing a non-racial society. While possibilities emerge to challenge dominant 'race' narratives in early childhood, these are often resisted on the grounds that young children are innocent and unaware of the discursive power of 'race.' This is further complicated when 'old' conceptualisations of the self and 'other' remain strong and little is known about the effect of 'race' on the lives of the other. While attempts to open up new subject positions are integral, care must be taken that they do not serve to reinscribe 'race' and practices of racism through, for example, dismissing the continuing salience of 'race' in present day South Africa. This risks the creation of new hegemonies and forms of exclusion. This article positions the young child as highly attuned to 'race' and its entanglement in their lives, their friendships, and their play. A transformative pedagogical practice invites early childhood educators to explore complex identities through a consideration of diverse experiences of 'race' with young children.

## Discussion

Transforming pedagogical practice in the South African early childhood education context requires a multifaceted approach that opens up possibilities for educators and young children to create 'decolonised spaces founded on social justice and equity' (Atkinson, Cruz, Srinivasan, Davis, & MacNaughton, 2009, p. 175). In this article it is shown how children are actively contributing to, and contesting, dominant definitions of 'race' and how this contributes to the construction of complex identities and belonging in early childhood. Educators working in early childhood settings are uniquely positioned to gain insight into the lived experiences of young children from diverse backgrounds (Adair, 2012). Concerns regarding young children's exploration and understanding of complex 'race' matters can be addressed only when it is acknowledged that children and their families face complex daily realities (Diaz Soto & Swadener, 2002) of which young children are acutely aware (MacNaughton & Davis, 2009). An acceptance of children as competent social actors with expert knowledge about their lived worlds provides educators with an opportunity to dialogue with children about 'race' and racism in this diverse social and cultural milieu.

In South Africa, a key concern for transformative pedagogy is the limited number of educators from diverse cultural, ethnical, 'racial' and linguistic backgrounds that reflect the diversity of learners in these settings (Harris & Steyn, 2014). Alongside this, it is evident that the training of early childhood educators remains a key factor in fostering critical awareness on issues of 'race' and as such the findings presented in this article support calls by Ebrahim and Francis (2008, p. 286) for the establishment of a postmodern teacher education that aims to 'sharpen teachers' awareness of the self and competing meaning systems that offer possibilities for their work with diverse groups of children.' Such *mezcla* (hybrid) theoretical perspectives (Diaz Soto, 2009, p. 168) would provide educators with the tools to become 'border crossers' (Giroux, 2005) and critical pedagogues who analyse 'how ideologies are actually taken-up in the voices and lived experiences of students as they give meaning to the dreams, desires, and subject positions that they inhabit' (Giroux, 2005, p. 146). This is particularly timely for many 'white' educators given the colonial and apartheid privileging of certain 'race' identities over others. While such interrogations can be unsettling and uncomfortable, a commitment to 'multiple ways of knowing' (Diaz Soto & Swadener, 2002, p. 38) accessed through powerful narratives of experiences of 'race' provides educators with a starting point to critique how issues of power and privilege come to shape all our lives, structure pedagogy, and affect the construction of 'race' identities. As Delpit (1995) writes,

When we teach across the boundaries of race, class, or gender—indeed when we teach at all—we must recognize and overcome the power differential, the stereotypes, and the other barriers, which prevent us from seeing each other...Until we can see the world as others see it, all the educational reforms in the world will come to naught (Delpit, 1995, p. 134).

## Conclusion

The findings from this article highlight that 'race' remains a salient identity marker in contemporary South Africa with important effects on the construction of subjectivities in early childhood education. Future research will focus on exploring the importance of language and 'race' embodiment within the discursive space of early childhood education to provide deeper insight into pedagogical practice with young children that fosters social justice and transformation.

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