Chapter Six

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Children's games as local semiotic play: An ethnographic account[i]

In this chapter I examine how one group of children's play activity presented opportunities and experiences for them to engage in flexible, creative and productive signifying practices. I argue that a close examination of their activity shows them creating and modelling for each other a variety of flexible, situated ways of making and taking meaning from a range of language and other semiotic resources. Such a focus on children's active engagement in signifying and meaning making activity provides a contrast with the particular kinds of limited engagement with reading and writing that often characterize school-based literacy learning in local schools in Cape Town, South Africa (Prinsloo and Stein 2004). Where the emphasis in school is often on children's passive absorption of the signifying practices presented to them, the perspective I develop here is that children's social participation in meaning making is not simply a unidirectional movement in which they gradually take on board an already available social world. Within constraints, and given the space, children at least partly follow their own interests and experiences as they choose what they want to represent and choose the modes, means and materials for their representative work. In doing so they work with available social resources, and with the values and status that these resources and signs hold in that setting.

A social practices orientation to learning, as I develop and apply it here, sees learning as active and as practice-based; that is, as socially situated, and distributed across people, artefacts and categories, in contexts of activity. In this view, reading and writing are one part of children's social activity. Literacy and language as situated social practices are embedded in children's social and practical lives.

Children play

A productive focus on children's play activities has developed from the understanding of children as active meaning-makers in the practices of reading and writing. (Kendrick 2003; Roskow and Christie 2001) Play offers a space for children to create imaginary situations where they can reshape concrete objects, actions, and indeed, their own voices. They can infuse their own intentions and meanings into those objects and actions (Dyson 1997a). Children often replace the rules of ordinary life with precise, sometimes arbitrary and often unexceptional rules of their own that govern the correct playing of the game. Vygotsky (1978) regarded symbolic play as an important venue where children could develop their sign-making resources. Play provides opportunity for children to draw on texts, images, movement and semiotically imbued artefacts from their multiple social worlds of home, school and peer interaction (Dyson 1993) to create their own intertextual meanings.

Kress (2003, 1997) has usefully addressed differences between adults and children as to how they encounter, learn and use literacy. He suggested that the process of meaning-making is the same for adults as it is for children, in that they both use what is available and which seems most suited to make the meanings that they are interested to make. However, he argued that children encounter literacy differently to adults in some key respects: In social settings where literacy is around and part of everyday life, children don't necessarily attach the same status and importance to print literacy as adults do. Where adults are oriented towards what is

'correct', children are less constrained, Kress (2003) suggests, partly because they are less informed than adults, but also because they are more willing to work inventively with what is at hand, and to explore the signifying potentials of a range of resources and materials. Whereas adults' orientation reflects the particular common sense of their societies, children are concerned to understand the nature of their worlds and to engage with them, to examine what their place is and might become. Where adults see a ready-made path towards meaning-making, children make their meanings by drawing on available resources "governed by their *interest* at the moment of making the sign" (Kress 2003: 155). Children's interest, which is undoubtedly socially shaped as well, works to guide their selection of what they want to represent, and which aspects they use to operate as signs (e.g., circles drawn by a pre-school child to signify a car indicate the selection of the wheels and the steering wheel as emblematic for that child). For adults language, and language as writing, are the most highly valued available resources. To children anything at hand is apt as a sign-making and meaning-making resource – whether it be a stick, which readily becomes a horse (Vygotsky 1978), a cardboard box which becomes a warrior's helmet, a blanket and chairs which become a house (Kress 1997) or an old pantyhose which the children call a 'wait' becomes a barrier rope, a key resource in an elaborate game activity, as I describe below.

The nature of childhood, childhood play and the influences of adult norms upon children need also to be understood as culturally and socially variable practices, where parents and social groups have different attitudes and responses to children's self-directed activities. The social practices approach to the study of literacy draws attention to the reality that children and parents live in home settings where time and space are conceptualised and regulated

differently, where routines are differently organized, where attitudes to children's play and literacy activities vary (Heath 1983).

Making sense in Khwezi Park

My analysis here focuses on one child, in interaction with her peers in a play context.[ii] The child, Masibulele, was seven years old when the data were collected, in her first year of schooling. She lived in Khwezi Park Township, Khayelitsha, Cape Town, and attended a local school where she was learning to read and write in Xhosa, her home-language. She would later learn to read and write English, which will most likely become the predominant language of learning for her.

Both Masibulele's parents grew up in the Transkei Bantustan. Masibulele's mother left school before finishing 'Primary Schooling'. Her father left school during his first year of 'High School' (after six years of schooling) to go and work on the gold mines in Gauteng. By the time we met Masibulele he was currently working on the railways. Masibulele's mother did not have a job, but ran the household and took primary care of Masibulele and her older sister, Ntombephelo. Masibulele was doing well at her school and liked to draw and write, but there were almost no books or paper in her home. Her interactions with her parents were not characterized by those 'scaffolding behaviours', once thought to be near universal but now seen as mostly a Western middle class practice (Hasan 2002): i.e., her mother did not regularly engage her as a conversational partner, where the conversation starts at baby-talk level and gets increasingly 'normal' as the child matures. Nor did her mother try to prepare her for the interactive patterns of communication that are said to characterize the discourse of teacher-pupils, such as those of question, answer, feedback, or Initiation, Response, Evaluation (Heath 1983).

Masibulele was in the 'strong group' in her streamed classroom and was often sent to assist children in the two 'weak groups': they contained around half the children; those who were just not 'getting it' when it came to the 'basics' of reading and who exasperated their teacher. Masibulele played daily with other Xhosa-speaking children in her neighbourhood, in a group varying between 8 and 16 children at a time, of varying ages, mostly girls, but the group often also included one or two boys. Their play was characterized by a mix of languages, narrative resources, images and artefacts from local popular culture (including 'traditional' Xhosa and Christian church influences), from the mass media (TV and radio) and school.

The data I focus on here relate to the children's interaction during two particular, overlapping games, 'rounders' and 'wait', both versions of ball-tag and skipping games. They share much in common with similar games played by children elsewhere in the world, and draw on the names and practices of such games from elsewhere. But the local versions of these games were substantially redesigned and elaborated on by the children studied. The Khwezi Park versions that Masibulele and her friends played allowed for substantial spoken, sung and danced displays at various stages. In between throws, and particularly when the ball was not fielded cleanly the children in the middle had license to tease and show-off. This aspect of the game was signalled by them as '*steji'* or 'stage'. It is apparent that much of the fun of the game came from the space for verbal exchange, jousting, experiment, play and display that the game made possible, but the rules for playing were followed and continuously policed in verbal exchanges. In the *wait* game one of the children, by saying the Afrikaans word *'praat'* (speak; talk), could nominate a particular chant routine to be followed while crossing the rope (made from old twisted panty-hose), when the children had to call out the name of a colour, in English, at the conclusion of each stage. The height of the ropes to be crossed could also be

5

set by the participants, as a further variation, at ankle-, knee- or waist-height. In my discussion of the play below I present the transcript first and then go on to discuss it. I refer to line numbers in my discussion. The mark // indicates there has been a deletion in the transcript. Upper case indicates shouting. The numbering of lines is for purposes of easy reference in the discussion.

Masibulele: Masidlaleni urounders maan (Let's play rounders man)

Masibulele and Thandeka (in unison) STEJI!(STAGE!)

Masibulele: STEJI! Thetha thetha ngubani onothix'omkhulu emhlabeni?
(STAGE! Speak speak who's got a big God on earth?) (*they laugh*)

Child: Hay'aba! (No you!)

Masibulele and Thandeka shouted out 'Stage!" (lines 2 and 3) at the initiation of the game, bidding to be the person in the middle who dodges the ball and is "on stage" in that she has a license to perform, heckle, tease the others as they try to get her 'out' by throwing the ball to hit her. Masibulele's elaborate use of a religious saying (line 3) regarding who gets chosen won her a laugh from the other children as well as a successful bid to be in the middle - on stage. The humour lies at least partly in its mildly transgressive quality, a surprising and hyperbolic religious reference in a peer play setting, and the humorous intervention signaled her competitive intention to perform and tease. She continued, having been given the stage:

Masibulele: Ndinezitayile ngoku. Ndigcwele zizitayile (*she sings*) Isqendu sam nesikaNtombephelo. Esi sesikaNtombephelo. Esi sesam
(I've got style now. I'm full of styles.) (*she sings*) (My piece) (*short skirt or shorts*) (and Ntombephelo's. This one is Ntombephelo's and this is mine.) (*referring to her skirt and top*)

Children in the middle were encouraged to strut, sing, tease and call attention to their bodily selves and their social selves in a kind of interactive display that usually elicited comment from their friends. Masibulele, in line 5 above drew attention to her clothes and to her relationship with Ntombephelo, her eleven year old sister who was also in the game and was an important influence on Masibulele's sense of herself, her confidence, her access to valuable information and what her development trajectory might be. She was thus marking here this relationship. At the same time she was engaged in embodied sign-making practices where her physical and social selves were resources for meaning-making and social interaction. She then moved on to a different kind of teasing display, involving numbers and a subversive intervention in the game, where her emerging literacy (to do with numbers and their social uses) is apparent:

1. Thandeka: Ukhona u one out? Ukhona u one out? (Is there one out? Is there one out?)

2. Masibulele: Ewe, no five out, no six out, no seven out no twenty out.
   (Yes, and five out, and six out and seven out and twenty out)

3. Girl: Hayi, u one out ukhona? (No, is one out there?)

4. Masibulele: Ukhona ewe. Uyophela ku twenty-four. Ha, a out. Uyophela ku twenty eight thousand out.
   (Yes it's there. Up until twenty four. Ha, a out. Up until twenty eight thousand out.)

Masibulele can be seen here to be making use of her license on stage to be humorously subversive of the others efforts to monitor the game. While the others were trying to find out if anyone had gone 'out', she turned this into an exaggerated display of numbering. In her first

year of school at that time she almost certainly had no precise idea of 28,000 but she clearly enjoyed invoking big numbers.

She did something similarly exuberant and playful soon after this episode, again with numbers, and inviting response from the others:

5. Masibulele: Irighti lo nto. Kaloku mna ndimdala ndingange one hundred and million dollar. (That thing is right. By the way I am as old as one hundred and million dollar.)

6. Thandeka: Kodwa umfutshane kangaka kodwa ungange one hundred and million dollar. (But you are this short but you say you are as big as one hundred and million dollar.)

7. Ntombephelo: Ngekudala wasweleka. (You would have died a long time ago.)

Notably Masibulele used the word dollar rather than South African currency (rand), perhaps because of its force as a non-local sign of value, or magnitude, but also perhaps because it marked the freedom to experiment that she had in this part of the game. The responses from the other girls (lines 6 and 7) joined in the playful spirit of the odd metaphor, not questioning its literal appropriateness in correlating amounts of age, size and money. This distributed cognitive playfulness around unconventional signs shows the children feeding off each other's sign-making.

Kress (1997) examined the emerging sign-making practices of pre-school children. He presented a similar example of original sign-making through metaphor, where a child out on a walk described a hill as 'heavy', a sign that worked for the child because of the correlation with the effort required to walk up the hill. Kress used that example to illustrate his point about meaning-making as being an *internal* sign-making process, where meanings are made by children drawing on their own repertoire of interest, experience and semiotic resources.

Such resources do not resemble the conventional standardized forms of descriptive analogy that become the internalized versions used in later life. Kress also made the argument, important for my purposes here, that children happily combine various semiotic systems, such as talk, drawing, gesture, dramatic play and writing. He described "multimodality" as "an absolute fact of children's semiotic practices" (Kress 1997: 137).

The point to note here is that the game allowed the children to engage in such playful and productive exercising of their meaning-making resources, in a communicative context that was permitting of fantasy and experiment, with peer feedback and also with boundaries and rules. The children interactively and reactively shared notions of value and status with each other and explored how these were embedded in language and routines.

Playing by the rules

The following extract is an example of intensive game playing. I relate it in order to show how the children, absorbed in the activity, are engaged in several tasks, including the management of social interaction and relationships and the maintenance and modification of rules of play. Their semiotic activity is seen to be multi-lingual in its resources, referenced to multiple other social contexts, and multi-modal in its blend of kinetic movement, dance, language and gesture. The language is a 'social language' (Bakhtin 1981, Gee 1996): the meanings of words and movements of reference are internal to the social-semiotic domain of play that the children construct. The discourse practices are not those of reproducing inherited scripts or codes, but of situated production, which suggests a processual view of culture (Rosaldo 1993) or what Bourdieu called "regulated improvisation" (1977: 78). The meanings

produced are only fully sensible to insiders, though the bits of language, as resources, come from outside of the play domain.

The frequent use of English (and some Afrikaans) terms in the game signals this process of taking 'status words' or 'fixed words' and using them as clear meaning markers. These words included *rounders, cross, wait, colours, statue, numbers, out, duck, partners, praat* (speak; Afrikaans)*, rules, score*, as well as colours and numbers in English. Numbers were a useful form of division and pacing. Each number corresponded to a step in the children's dance across a rope. While the children were taught the numbers in isiXhosa at school, as well as the days of the week in the Xhosa language, they used the English words in everyday conversations, as did their parents. The numbers and colours below were said in English by the children.

1. Ntombephelo: Hayi ingatyekeleli sisi. Emakhwapheni ngoku. (No, it must not be soft sister. At the armpits now.)

2. Ntombephelo: Wait one chacha, One, two, one, two chacha.

3. Thandeka: Wait one chacha

4. Ntombephelo: Out, one, two, three, four, out, one, two, three, four, out, one, two, three, duck , one, two, three, four

5. Masibulele: Orange

6. Ntombephelo: Orange, one, two, three, four. Yhu praat (Hey talk!) (*Praat is an Afrikaans word meaning talk or speak*.)

7. Ntombephelo: One, two! one, two, three, four. One, two! one, two, three, four, one, two, one, two, three, four, White. one, two, three, four, black, two, three, four, orange.

8. Child: Yithi orange. (Say orange.)

9. Ntombephelo: Yhu praat! (Hey talk!). Yhu! Two, three, four, and two, three, four, and one, two, three, four.

10. Nomha: Irules! Ayikho inzikinzane. (The rules! There's no nzikinzane.) ("Nzikinzane" is a cut under one of the toes, an analogical reference to the height at which the 'wait' is to be held).

11. Nomha: Esinqeni. (At the waist.) Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, out.

12. Thandeka: Ukhona u one out. (There is one out.)

13. Nomha: One, two, three, four, one, two, three, four, Yhu andidinwe! Bhekela Bhekela! (Hey, I'm tired! Move back move back!) One, two, three, four mustard, one, two, three, four, one, two, three, four. Asenzi praat. (We don't do *praat*.) Wait, wait, wait.

14. Mabhuti: Statue, Masibulele! Yiza ubulapha! (Statue, Masibulele! Come you were here!)

15. Masibulele: Skozi? (Score?)

16. N: Seven

The transcript cannot of course capture the blend of words, rhythm, gesture and movement that were involved here. Line 1 shows Masibulele's older sister doing some meta-work, making sure the rope was at the right height for this stage of the game and that tension on the rope was right. Her own turn at the formulaic dance-shuffle movement across the rope was

enhanced by her turning it into a cha-cha. In line 5, Masibulele intervened by nominating a colour, but it was not her turn to do so. However her sister accepted the prompt and then remembered (signalled by 'Yhu!' in line 6) that she should have said the word *praat* (speak), which was the cue to nominate the names of colours at the end of each sequence. In line 9 she 'switched off' the nomination of colours by saying 'praat' again, and then continued her sequence of movements without any more colours. 'Statue' (line 14) was a cue to freeze on the spot without moving, borrowed from another game. In line 10 the child Nomha made an intervention about the rules, again invoking an insider language (*nzikinzane).*

The predominance of English words in this, and very many of the other examples of play recorded in the CELL studies, is remarkable, and could be seen to reflect the dominance of English as a language of status and influence, the language of schooling and knowledge, the language of learning of older children in the group and the language of status in the mass (musical and visual) media and popular cultural resources that the children encounter. But it might also be that English, because of its relative separation from children's immediate, intimate life-world in their family settings, is also an exotic language that can be 'looted' more readily for children to construct their own meanings out of their own activities. An example is the term 'wait' and its uses in a language of the children's own. 'Wait' is what the children in the game do between moves. It signals a completion of a sequence or a pause, a marker somewhat like a comma or full stop on a page. The word 'wait' also signifies the panty-hose ropes that are stretched out and have to be crossed in elaborate patterns of movement and chant, as well as the name of the game itself:

> Thandeka: Yhu akemde uwait wakho ndimbone izolo.Yhu!. (Hey, your *wait* is very long. I saw it yesterday. Hey!)

Masibulele: Uqala pha kulapali aye kuphela ngapgha kwezilabs. (It starts at that pole and ends over at the slabs.)

This term also appears in informal peer talk at school:

Zenande (*talking to a friend in class*): Yhazi ndimlibele u wait wam ndimlibele ekhaya. (You know I have forgotten my *wait* at home.)

It is clear here that materials such as old panty hose are shaped to become over time, context–specific meaning–making resources for articulation purposes of a particular collective group. Equally apparent is that language is similarly shaped as a resource. These processes are linguistic, material and social, and indexical of social relationships. When Zenande talked to her friend about having left her *wait* at home, she was simultaneously signaling their collective belonging to a social and semiotic domain distinct from school and home.[iii]

The children's collaborative production included their own development of an insider language, which was constantly under construction and elaboration. What they did cannot therefore said to be code-switching as such, that is, they were not simply moving from one language (in the big sense of language as being either Xhosa or English) to another. Rather they were speaking a social language of their own, parts of which might well appear to be code-switched, but not in such a way that meanings remained static. That linguistic elasticity is just one example of children's creative borrowings in this study.

Making meaning across social semiotic domains

The children in the study built situated meanings while playing, and learnt how to use these meanings in context. They also displayed a meta-awareness of how words take on different

meanings across different social sites and semiotic domains. Thus Masibulele (in the transcript below), whose ability to use English was quite limited, turned the word 'cross', which was usually about crossing the rope in the game (lines 1 and 2), into teasing a child, a switch that depends on the children understanding the double meaning of cross as in 'a cross teacher' or 'ma'am [is] cross' (lines 3-7):

1. Nompumeleo: Awucrossi! (You are not going to cross!)

2. *Masibulele: Thandeka cross!*

3. Masibulele: Dlala ma'am cross! Maam cross, ma'am cross! (Play ma'am cross! Ma'am cross, ma'am cross!)

4. Thandeka: Hayi ke uyabona ke Masibulele? (Hey, you see Masibulele?)

5. Zintle: U ma'am cross ngubani Masibulele? (Who's ma'am cross Masibulele?)

6. Masibulele: Nank'epheth'ibhola u ma'am cross. (Ma'am cross is the one holding the ball.)

7. Girl: Andingoma'am cross mna. (I am not ma'am cross.)

What these children brought from school was varied but particular: School was one site for their English-language development, so that many of the English terms they were trying out had a school-echo to them. The authority relations of school were also echoed in their play. The language drills of their schooling were reproduced as well, as in the example below. Masibulele had not yet learnt the routine below at school, so the following initiation of an episode around lists of 'comparative words' was unquestionably something learnt out of school, from her eleven-year old sister or an older friend, or during the game at some other time. Masibulele was 'on-stage' when she initiated this exchange around 'school English',

14

starting off with a teasing display of another child and then moving on to a school-English display.

1. Masibulele: Anelisa unxibe la panty incinci. Leya wawuyinxibile. (Anelisa is wearing that small panty[iv]. The one you wore.)

2. Anelisa: Hayi ke mna andinxibanga panty encinci. (No I am not wearing a small panty.)

3. Masibulele: Whowu whowu! (Wow! Wow!) Good! Good gooder goodest!

4. Ntombephelo: Fire firer firest!

5. Child: Good gooder goodest!

6. Ntombephelo: Fire firer firest!

7. Child: Long longer longest!

8. Ntombephelo: Leg lenger longest!

9. Child: Eye! (This child might have said 'I' rather than 'eye'. Either way, she doesn't get any further. 'Eye' would have linked with 'leg' in the previous example, and 'I' would link as a cue for 'girl' in the one that follows.)

10. Ntombephelo: Girl girler girlest!

11. Child: Bread breader breadest!

The children's playful interactive parodies of 'school grammar' speak for themselves at one level. They are deliberate and humorous, and to the outsider provide a comment on the limits of such decontextualized rule-teaching by rote. They show too how such play also involves processes of scaffolding and apprenticeship learning, where older children model resources and attitudes to resources that give younger children access to these forms of meaning-making and identity processes.

Children's multiple social worlds

If we understand the children's social worlds of home, school and peer-play as distinctive but permeable, as does Dyson (1993), we can see them interactively using terms whose meanings adhere and shift across those domains.[v] In the interaction below they play with shifts in meaning of 'cheating' in each location, in their play, at school and in 'home culture'.

1. Ntombephelo: Okay, wena uzoqhatha mna apha. (Okay, so you've come to cheat me here.)

2. Anelisa: Uqhatha uNtombephelo! (You cheat Ntombephelo!)

3. Ntombephelo: Uzosiqhatha elokishini! (You have come to cheat us in 'the location!)

4. Girl: Uyeka ukuyoqhatha esikolweni. (She doesn't go to cheat at school.)

'Cheating' in the game, 'in the location' and at school have distinct but related meanings; they each refer to different sets of relationships in social practice. Running them together like the children do here is a form of embedded, dialogical, meta-linguistic play with the shifts and relatedness of meanings across contexts. The Xhosa term *elokishini* (line 3) is a borrowing from the English *location*. The term 'location' was first used by Natal's 19th century colonial government and later by *apartheid* administrators to refer to segregated urban residential

areas designated for Black South Africans. The Xhosa term has survived multiple substitutes for this term in English (*township* being the most contemporary term) and also survived the demise of formal *apartheid*. So the saying "you've come to cheat us in the location" captures the children's parents' perception of 'outsiders' coming into their socio-residential domain to exploit them, and signals a particular element of local identity that has been sustained despite the ending of *apartheid*-era segregation. 'Cheating' at school has a particular meaning, again, that is school-bound and is linked to the threat of strong sanction. 'Cheating' in the context of game playing is usually a term used in peer conflicts over control, direction of play and interpretation of rules, and of course doesn't carry the sense of transgression or threat of sanction that 'school cheating' carries. By invoking these three distinct domain-based meanings in a quick exchange of repartee, the children play with the situatedess and fluidity of sign-based meaning making.

Dyson (1993: 133) identified a problem that inexperienced readers have in relation to the situatedness of meaning in text: "their difficulties lie not in the words but in understanding something that lies behind the words, embedded in the sense". She suggested that the dialogue between 'composers' and 'addressees' occurs "against a backdrop of other voices – already uttered texts – without which the composers' own voices cannot be heard". The concept of intertexuality that Dyson, drawing on Bakhtin (1981) invoked here, and others studies use (Lemke 1997; Cope and Kalantzis 2000; Gee 1999; Snyder and Beavis 2003) makes the point that when we make or take meaning we do so by drawing on other texts or images we have read, heard or seen. These examples of children's dialogue shows children playing with and across intertextual resources.

Snow (1991) identified the facilitation of language and literacy acquisition in middle-class families in the USA as involving *semantic contingency* with adult speech and literacy. She argued that such semantic inputs from adults as expansions, semantic extensions, clarifying questions and answers to questions, scaffolded children's entry into school, writing-based communicative practices. Snow suggested that certain metalinguistic strategies are only available through adult 'scaffolding' provided for children to learn (Snow 1990: 226) but I would suggest that what we can see here, in children's creativity and linguistic playfulness, is that they are able to undertake and share with each other, without any such extensively provided adult scaffolding, at least some of the metalinguistic activities (involving reflection upon language) that are commonly thought to be not available to them.

'Local' resources for meaning-making

The CELL research also demonstrated that Xhosa home-language resources provided the children with further rich sources for image, metaphor, rhythm and meaning-making, all of which surfaced unpredictably during play, as the following sample quotes from diverse moments of play illustrate:

1. Masibulele: (to Thandeka) Statue! Awuvingcele endlwini yeempuku. (Closed in a rat's house.) *(idiomatic, suggesting close confinement)* Rayi rayi ndinanto yam jikelele ngqu. (I have something that goes around.)

2. Masibulele: Yatsho indoda endala.Yhu awumde ingathi usisikhonkwane esingabethelelwanga.) (Hey, you are tall like a nail that hasn't been hammered in.)

3. Masibulele: Uqale wabaphamanzi. Ubaph'isonka kushota ubaphe umngqusho uphinde ubathengele izihlangu. (*Chant*) (You first gave them

water. Then you gave them bread. You need to give them *samp*

(corn) and buy them shoes.)

4. Ntombephelo: Bendithe nqa umam'umpumputhela angathethi! (I was wondering

why the blind mother didn't talk.) (*She is being sarcastic, implying that*

Masibulele is normally very talkative).

5. Zintle: Hayi hayi hayi akho sesikolweni apha! (No no no, we are not at

school here!) (Zintle's response to Ntombephelo is an indication

that for her sarcasm is a school/teacher resource which is best

left there.)

6. Ntombephelo: Ndizakuniqwayita nina! (I'm going to keep you out of play for a long

time) (qwayita (mqwayito) is a reference to biltong, which is meat that

has been dried for a long time. Her meaning is: 'I'm going to be in the

middle for long enough to make dried meat.')

7. Masibulele: (To Thandeka) Iphi ibhola? Yhe smathamatha somntwana iphi ibhola

x3. (Where's the ball? Hey you sleepy child where's the ball) (x3)

Various metaphorical and connotative resources of the Xhosa language were deployed in the

various examples above and, as they show, this productive work was constantly responded to

by other children. The rich intertextual resources that were drawn on above carry meanings

and echoes for the various children using them. In the last example, Masibulele apparently

enjoying the rhythm and melody of the utterance ('smathamatha somntwana' has a rhythmic

quality in spoken isiXhosa) turned it into a repeated chant.

19

Language and musicality

Another finding of the CELL research was that music of various sorts featured in the children's play, as might have been expected. Popular and church music were favourite resources. The pop music that the children drew on showed them connecting with a wider youth culture, including local rap (*kwaito)* music, international pop songs and 'hit-parade' music, and church music including Xhosa and English hymns. The following musical and spoken dialogue is illustrative of the children's playful interactive work around names and sounds.

1. Masibulele sings: "Say my name, say my name, igama lam nguNtosh. (My name is Ntosh.) (*This is from a local rap or kwaito song which mixes languages.*)

2. Masibulele sings: Elinye igama lam ndingu Sibu okanye undibize Bulele. (My other name is Sibu or you can call me Bulele.)

3. Thandeka sings: My name is Thandeka. I live in Khayelitsha.

4. Masibulele sings: I believe I can fly. I believe I can touch the sky. (pop song)

Masibulele's decomposing of her name into syllables displayed an often identified skill with regard to school literacy learning, where an awareness of discrete sounds of the language (phonological awareness) is treated by some researchers as an early skill required for successful literacy learning (Garton and Pratt 1998). The data on children's play unsurprisingly has many such examples of children's delight in music and rhyme. Such attention to the regularities and musicality of language are commonly seen as important resources for developing children's sense of phonological awareness. Yet children's independent play is not often recognized as an important venue for such learning activity.

Sulzby and Teale (1991) claimed that we can look at *metalinguistic awareness*, or the ability to reflect on language as happening on four levels: phonemic awareness, word awareness, form awareness, and pragmatic awareness[vi]. They suggested that "all levels of linguistic awareness are necessary in becoming literate" (Sulzby and Teale, 1991: 745). I have shown in analysis of the various examples above that the children in this study were constructing precursory practice at these levels (which are analytical levels, after all, and can and do happen simultaneously in practice) in their play.

A social practices perspective on early childhood literacy learning

This study of children's play suggests that that local 'ways of knowing' (Heath, 1983) are themselves simultaneously enmeshed in wider influences from outside the local. In particular, the way children drew on mass media and modelled images and resource for each other, provided an important insight in understanding children's early literacy learning. The children's play that I analyzed can be seen in Bakhtin's (1981) terminology as a space of productive heteroglossia (multiple meanings) where children's meaning-making resources and identity work were given room for intertextual creativity. In their play they mediated and modeled semiotic resources, values and practices from school, local and popular culture, religion, mass media and home.

The study demonstrates the value of studying children's early childhood literacy practices through the lens of a social practices approach to the study of literacy; to show the interactive, participatory, cognitively and socially distributed nature of children's early engagements with literacy and other semiotic modalities. The study draws attention to the large gap between what children are creatively able to achieve in unstructured settings, in contrast to the failure

of the institutions studied to productively engage children as active learners, reported, for example, in Prinsloo and Stein (2004). Dyson's (1993) model of the 'permeable curriculum' is worth drawing attention to in this concluding discussion. She urges teachers to allow children to draw on their resources and experiences from out of school, and to use other media besides talk and print, including drawing and dramatic play, as they learn how the written media work, and what social possibilities it allows, for example, for fulfilling the requirements of the official curriculum, for representing their imagined worlds, and for connecting with friends, as well as with family. In such classrooms the classroom is the space for an "expanded activity" (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López and Tejeda 1999: 287, Engestrom 1999) where hybridity and diversity are viewed as important cultural resources in children's development, where the activity system is extended and the activity itself reorganized, resulting in new opportunities for learning.

In contrast to Dyson's permeable curricula, it is sometimes claimed that teachers do not have the training to see and draw on diversity and difference (Freebody et al 1995; Bloch and Prinsloo 1999; Bloome and Green 1992; Ferreiro and Teberosky 1982; Michaels 1986) Children are often described as learning a narrow capacity to produce a 'successful lesson' with the teacher, where such a lesson consists of a cue/response exercise, with children showing their competencies within a narrow range (Prinsloo and Stein 2004; Ferreiro 1992).

It is interesting, finally, to note that while children in this study were learning how to distinguish and combine various resources, such as singing, drawing, mime, and the potential of various things, their schooling mostly teaches children to use just one: written language. Kress (1997) Lemke (1997) and Gee (this volume) have suggested that this needs to change if we are to help students develop sophisticated multimedia literacies that have value in the contemporary world where new communications technologies have such influence.

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[i] An earlier version of this study was published as 'Literacy is Child's Play: Making Sense in Khwezi Park' in *Language and Education,* 2004, 18 (4): 291-304. The paper was first presented at a panel organized by the Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliqueé's (AILA) Scientific Commission on Literacy, entitled, "Global and Local Issues in Literacy Research," at the 13th World Congress of Applied Linguistics, 19 December 2002, Singapore.

[ii] The research reported on was carried out as part of the Children's Early Literacy Learning (CELL) research project. The data was collected by Xolisa Gazula, working as a research assistant on the Children's Early Literacy Learning project, on which I was a Principal Resaearcher together with Pippa Stein from Wits.

[iii] This domain is also one into which we, the researchers, and now the readers of this work are partially drawn, thus indicating that it is not a narrowly exclusive or exclusionary domain. It is thus unfortunate that adults are often not interested in children's 'play talk'. Teachers, in particular, can surely benefit from engagement with such children's creativity and flexibility.

[iv] 'Panty' is an English South African substitute for the odd-sounding 'pair of panties'.

[v] Dyson's notion of distinct but permeable worlds is an analyst's distinction, and there is a question as to whether the children saw these worlds as distinctive, or as one, with multiple meanings to it. In my own analysis I follow Dyson, but with some hesitancy.

[vi] The distinction between *phonological* awareness and *phonemic* awareness is sometimes blurred in its use. *Phonological* awareness is about sound awareness, while *phonemic* awareness is more print related, an awareness of sounds matching to phonemic units.