Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education:

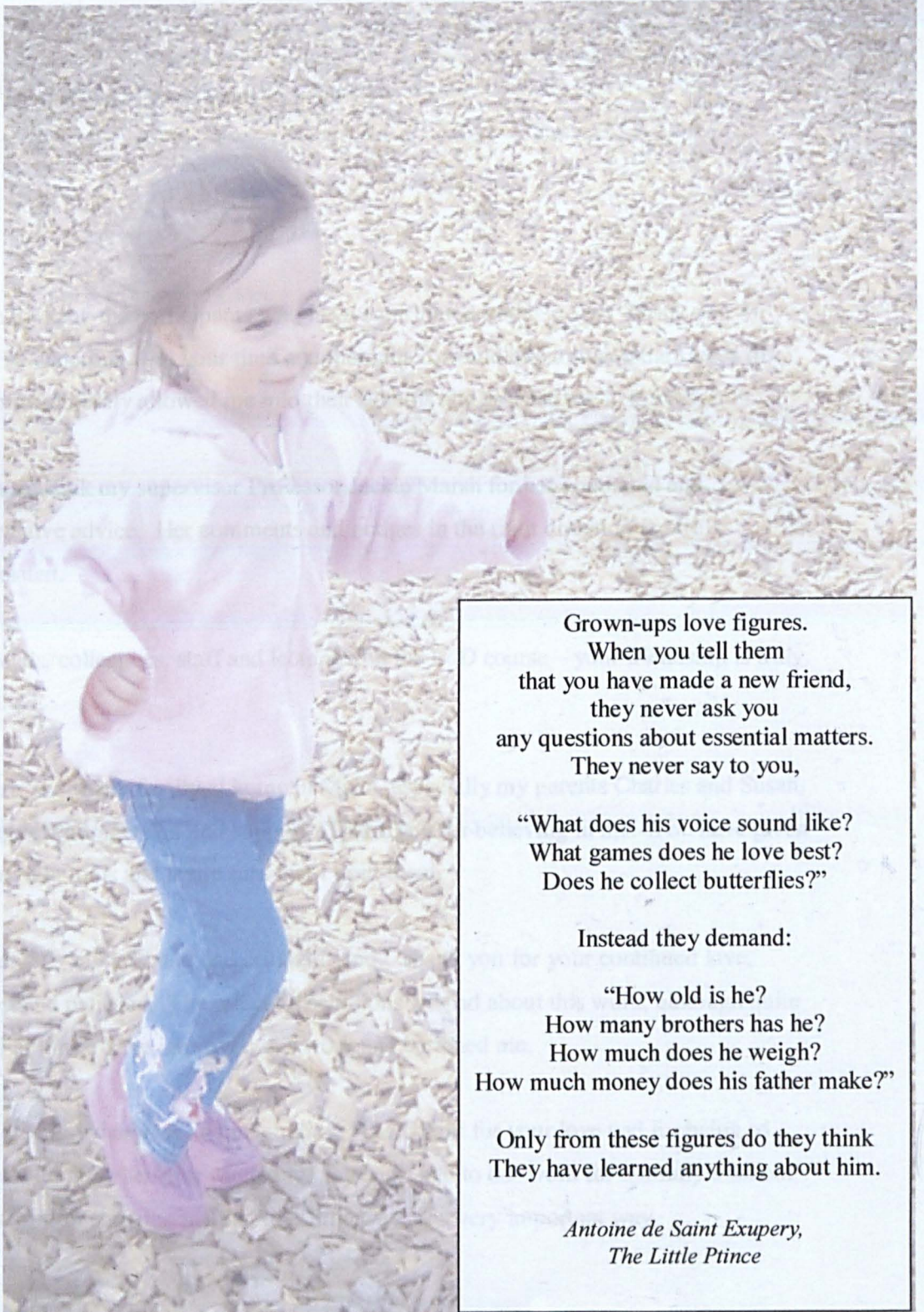# A Child-Appropriate Practice

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Abstract

The Early Childhood Education and Care policy (ECEC) document published in Malta in 2006 regulates national early childhood education. Concerns have been raised as to whether this policy adequately represents major stakeholders in the field. The aim of this thesis was to ascertain the relationship between the ECEC document and the voices of children, parents and early years practitioners (EYP), if any. Subject to a disparity being found, a secondary aim was to use reconceptualist principles to make recommendations towards modifying aspects of this policy. Data pertaining to the views of stakeholders in Maltese early childhood education were collected from children, parents and EYP. The setting was three local primary schools and the subject was the participants' views of early childhood education in Malta. Circle time methodology was used for data collection with children. Focus groups and in-depth interviews were used to collect data from parents and EYP respectively. The participants' voices were elicited from the data using grounded theory approach. The ECEC document was analyzed using principles from Critical Discourse Analysis. Findings from child participants were then juxtaposed against aspects of the ECEC document. The main findings of this work included children's concerns about their experience of early years education, the failure of grown-ups to listen, issues of friendship and camaraderie at school and play. Parents expressed concerns about most things digital, the disneyfication of childhood and a perceived deterioration of traditional values. EYP stressed their exclusion from participation and educational gazing. Juxtaposition of the ECEC with the concerns of children demonstrated a considerable mismatch between the concerns of children and the text of the policy. A framework of recommendations, termed *child-appropriate practice*, was formulated in an attempt to readdress this. In conclusion, this work demonstrated a tenuous relationship between participants and the ECEC with poor representation of the voices and agency of primary stakeholders. Child-Appropriate Practice may ameliorate aspects of early childhood education in Malta, but additional research in the field is necessary.

Grown-ups love figures.
When you tell them
that you have made a new friend,
they never ask you
any questions about essential matters.
They never say to you,

"What does his voice sound like?
What games does he love best?
Does he collect butterflies?"

Instead they demand:

"How old is he?
How many brothers has he?
How much does he weigh?
How much money does his father make?"

Only from these figures do they think
They have learned anything about him.

Antoine de Saint Exupery,
The Little Ptince

Acknowledgements

To my dear husband, Marcel and to my beloved daughter, Klara

Contents

CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

"There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct or more uncertain in its success than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things."

Niccolo Macchiavelli

Italian dramatist, historian, & philosopher
(1469- 1527)

Chapter 1

Introduction

Prologue

I was with my four year daughter in a washroom in a popular shopping centre. My daughter was patiently queuing by the lower level wash basin to dry her hands, when she was muscled out of the queue by a woman. At that moment, my daughter's eyes said it all. She looked in disbelief first at the woman, then at me and said, "Ma, am I invisible?"

(Source: Field notes, 2009)

I have been preoccupied with the lack of visibility of children in our society for a number of years. I had thought about the participation of children in matters that concern their daily lives. However, the look in my daughter's eyes that day and the direct question that she asked me made me crave for an appropriate answer. I felt that as a minimum I owed my daughter an informed answer to her query.

Each child is a unique being, endowed with her/his own personal ideas, needs and desires. In my daughter's case, she clearly felt that this basic premise had been disregarded. I have always wondered whether this disregard reflected a more widespread attitude towards children, and whether this was also reflected in policies aimed at children and their welfare. Policies are generally designed to take into consideration the

10

collective, by referring to group benefits and the interests of society at large. My work will endeavour to explore aspects of this paradoxical disparity between the needs of the child as an individual within society and existing early childhood educational policies (and resulting curricula) which cater for the collective. In particular, I wish to investigate the issue of predeterminism, and attempt to reconceptualise early childhood education, so as to encourage the development of a truly 'child-appropriate' practice.

1.1 Introduction and focus of the research

Globalisation has blurred the boundaries that segregate the existence of individuals into well-defined borders. With the advent of this new order, issues are emerging that challenge daily existence. Education, and more specifically early childhood education, is no exception. The process of globalisation has shed light upon the importance of diversity, cultures, identities and economies in the interaction between educators and younger human beings.

Despite these movements, elements within the educational sphere have been somewhat hesitant to unravel truisms that have underpinned theory and practice in early childhood education. This has led to grand narratives and their overarching principles (mainly in biology and psychology) which now dominate the field with little regard to how our life-worlds have been transformed. In certain spheres, education has been characterised by a return to neo-liberal attitudes and pedagogies that rely upon testing and scoring, and assessing outcomes overridden with standards and procedures (Yelland, 2005). This reductionist behaviour has led to the narrowing of the scope of both education as well as apposite curricula generated in response to this quest for measurement and efficacy.

Developmental psychology has dominated the sphere of early childhood education, mainly through an over-reliance upon principles from developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). While it is self-evident that certain principles within DAP are beneficial to the field of early childhood education, it is also true to say that these principles are neither all-encompassing nor exclusive. For instance, DAP fails to recognize and cater for the diversity within families and children. This is especially perturbing given the current globalised context. In addition, present systems emphasise western, male privileged theories without questioning who is being left out or who is being silenced.

Overdependence on mainstream theories of development, including those by Piaget and Vygotsky, has often led to negative reactions within a postmodern and poststructural framework in early childhood education (Viruru, 2005). In early childhood education, emphasis is placed on the child being unique and having the potential to develop progressively into adulthood through play, experimentation and discovery. From a post-colonial perspective this ideology is flawed because the adult/child discourse employed implies that a child is not yet a full human being. Another problem that arises is the notion that this is a 'culturally grounded belief' (Viruru, 2005, p.17) and excludes other possibilities from being explored.

Post-colonial theorists argue that children's experiences are multifaceted and diverse (Viruru, 2005). As such, the linearity of accepted theories which explain how children develop, clashes with the post-colonial assertion of multiple experiences and diversity. Dahlberg (1999) argues that because of the linearity of theories of development,

hegemony and colonization are further perpetuated and this discourse translates into life-ways that are left unchallenged.

This constriction in the field has led to pre-determinism, a concept wherein a resolve is held prior to outcome. When applied to early childhood education, grand theories in biology and psychology have provided a time-frame against which children are measured up. Developmental psychology, in particular, has been a key player in shaping early childhood education (Yelland, 2005), and relevant policies have been deliberately designed around principles of DAP (Prout and James, 1997). DAP has provided early childhood education with the theory and knowledge that have shaped the understanding of young children and their learning (Prout and James, 1997). Additionally, DAP's claims for child-centeredness are 'laden with inherent biases and modernist views' (Yelland, 2005, p.4). It can be argued that by adhering to child-centred ideology, the adult is situating the child without reflecting upon the implications on the pedagogical knowledge that is generated.

Developmental theories and theorists provide valid contributions to the field of early childhood education. However, the knowledge generated by these theories may be too narrow in scope. By taking away the 'primacy' status awarded to theories of development, postmodern perspectives can be given space to flourish and challenge pre-deterministic practices (Yelland, 2005). The field of early childhood education can be reconceptualised from outside developmental theories (Moss, 2002). Consideration of early childhood education through the postmodern and poststructural perspective may create new and effective learning environments.

Dominant perspectives of children, their learning and development are undergoing 'creative innovations' (Wood, 2009, p.vii). Post-developmental theories are being instrumental in shaping the current discourses in early childhood education. Post-developmentalists, together with post structuralists, feminists and reconceptualists, highlight ethical issues, cultural contexts, and equity in early childhood education (Edwards and Nuttall, 2009). Increasingly, the contribution and shift in thought is being represented in curriculum documents of a number of countries, such as the United Kingdom, France, Sweden, Italy and New Zealand (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006). Unlike, DAP, post-developmentalists focus on the child-in-context (Edwards and Nuttall, 2009) when planning children's learning, rather than focusing on developmental norms. This shift in perspective brings about critical engagement with children's learning.

Against this background, my thesis will seek to present a new facet to the development and implementation of early childhood policies in an attempt to counteract child-centeredness from a poststructural perspective. The term 'child-appropriate practice' will be used to refer to a process whereby issues pertaining to cultural diversity, voice, silence and critical reflective practice become central to policy development.

1.2 Cultural diversity

Early childhood institutions and curricula have been described as microcosms of society (Ang Ling-Yin, 2007). Cultural diversity is a significant issue within policy development, particularly given the constant changes that society goes through because of factors such as migration and other fluxes. The implication of cultural diversity within

14

early years policy is intricate. Issues of justice and equity for children and their parents are of fundamental consequence in a curriculum that is 'inclusive and appropriate' for all children regardless of their cultural and social background (Ang Ling-Yin, 2007). Early childhood education has been regarded as a window of opportunity for equity, social justice and reconstruction (Soto & Swadener, 2002) highlighting the importance of early years policies and curricula in utilising knowledge and discourse that informs our understanding of the diversity of childhood. Reconceptualisation is one of the means which facilitates the deconstruction of texts (such as policy documents) in such a way as to bring to the forefront power struggles inherent to these documents. This process may lead to a better representation of those voices which could have otherwise been silenced.

1.3 Voice and silence

Children's voices are often ignored or misunderstood (Soto and Swadener, 2002). One of the aims of this work will be to look at the power relations that have dominated the field of early childhood education, and the degree to which they may have silenced children's voices. One way of achieving this and bringing children's voices to the foreground involves deconstructing early childhood truths. One of the steps in reconceptualising early childhood education involves a commitment to become better listeners and increasingly sensitive to multiple perspectives. Intrinsically, the process of reconceptualising early childhood education is an obligation to honour the voices in the field that have been ignored or silenced (Kessler and Swadener, 1992).

It is envisaged that such a study with children will 'enlighten the needs of learners' (Soto and Swadener, 2002), wherein those who are older learn new methods and open up novel

possibilities on how to listen to those who are younger. One of the ways to facilitate this goal may involve the adoption of decolonizing methodologies which specifically address and redress issues of power. Embracing decolonizing methodologies includes practices such as the questioning of truths that have prevailed in the field. New decolonizing methodologies can be sought by making the familiar strange.

When a century ago Ellen Key, a Swedish social reformer, announced that the twentieth century should become the century of the child (Key, 1909), the plight of children faced a dualism whose effects still reverberate today. Children's services and rights are given prominence through such awareness, however, so is the 'othering' of children. Children become the focus of numerous observations and studies. As a result children are converted into 'objects of knowledge' (Prout, 2003, p.12). The attention given to *childhood* as an area of study *per se* leads to the creation of a dichotomy. Children are regarded with uncertainty in society: they are seen both as dangerous and in danger (Prout, 2003). The vulnerability of children is portrayed through images that show concern about their safety and health, resulting in policies designed to protect children. On the other hand, children are also perceived as dangerous, attributing many of society's ills to them. As such, the need to exert control over them is deemed of utmost importance in policy making (Prout, 2003). An analysis of both these types of policies brings to light a major shortcoming; namely that children's voices are not represented in policies that concern them and their families (Prout, 2003).

Article 12 of the UN convention on the Rights of the Child has been pivotal in bringing about a movement that advocates for the involvement of children in the decision-making process and policy formation. Although a century after Ellen Key's statement, children's

participation is on the increase, the methodology of how children are asked to participate is still inadequate (Prout, 2003). Children are expected to participate and make themselves heard in ways that are adult-initiated and adult-run, as opposed to working with children to find ways that suit them most.

1.4 Critical reflexive practice

As previously mentioned, an essential consideration for reconceptualisation is an attempt to establish a just and equal society. This may be achieved through critical reflective practice; the act of being analytical of one's thoughts and actions. Reflection involves a high degree of passivity where no or little action is taken, explaining the use of the term 'critical'. In this context, the terms *practice* and *practitioner* are being used to include persons who work directly with children and their parents, scholars, as well as persons involved in drawing up relevant curricula and policies.

One of the characteristics of a critical reflective practitioner is to be sceptical about what is informing practice. This mindset represents a continuous strife to transform pedagogical knowledge in a way that is better tuned to the diversity of needs within the learning society (MacNaughton, 2005). In this respect, and because this work is situated within a poststructural framework, reflective practice alone will not suffice. The term *critical* also indicates that relationships and the power struggles inherent within them are being scrutinised. It is a move away from the individualistic towards an examination of dynamics of power. In the context of my work, *critical reflective practice* may best be described as the act of unravelling the oppressive and the inequitable in relationships

present in education, and subsequently using that knowledge to overcome social injustice and inequities (MacNaughton, 2005).

1.5 Research questions

Through this work I analysed the relationship between early years educational policies and the extent to which children's voices are represented in these documents. The relationship between the children's, parents' and their teachers' desires and policy is also analysed from a reconceptualist perspective. Contextual frameworks that reflect the voices of children, teachers and parents will also be explored.

Against this background, the research questions underlying this work are:

- What is the relationship between early years policies and the desires of children, their parents and early years practitioners in relation to children's voice and agency?
- What are the children's, their parents' and practitioners' desires in relation to learning in the early years?
- In what ways can overarching contextual frameworks for learning in the early years be designed to reflect the desires of children, parents, and practitioners?

1.6 General overview of policy context

The context of this study is the Maltese educational system. Although I have lived in the United Kingdom for the past eight years, after careful consideration, I concluded that the

most appropriate context for my thesis was my country of origin. I felt I had better knowledge of the Maltese educational system, having pursued most of my studies in Malta and having taught in Malta for a number of years.

Between 1800 and 1964, Malta was a British colony. Due to this colonial past, the Maltese education in Malta draws heavily upon the British educational system. State early childhood education in Malta is represented mostly through Kindergarten centres, which are available free of charge for all children from the age of three until age five when the child reaches compulsory school age. Church run Kindergartens and nursery schools are also available. These are also free of charge, although a registration fee and/or a voluntary donation is requested at the beginning of the scholastic year. Due to the high demand for the limited church-run kindergarten and nursery places, children's names are balloted and successful applicants are assured a place in one of these centres. In addition, over the last twenty years, Malta has seen an increase in private run nurseries and child-care centres. Most private schools also have their own nursery classes and Kindergartens.

In April 2006, a working group set up by the Ministry of Education presented an Early Childhood Education and Care review to the then Minister of Education, Youth and Employment – the Hon Louis Galea. In June, 2006, this review was presented to Parliament as the first national policy for early childhood education in Malta. The policy document was entitled *Early Childhood Education and Care – A National Policy*. To date this is the only policy in Malta which refers to early childhood education, and for the purposes of this study I have reviewed this policy.

1.7 Outline of thesis

Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis respectively, examine key literature in the areas of reconceptualising early childhood education and policy analysis. In these two chapters I have considered existing links between various theories and theorists pertaining to these topics.

Chapter 4 details the methodological tools I employed in carrying out this work and considers the implications of these methods. As will be detailed in Chapter 4, I have taken a qualitative approach to my research. I have used a range of tools namely, circle-time methodology with the children, focus groups with parents, and in-depth interviewing with pedagogues. My commitment to listening to the children's, parents' and pedagogues' voices made the qualitative approach an ideal and to certain extent an obvious choice. I was being allowed a view into people's lives and I felt that I had to respect what I was being told by trying to include as many diverse views as possible in my analysis. I did not want a single voice to be lost in the crowd.

In Chapter 5 – Analysis of Findings, I analysed the data I recorded during my field work. This study has shed light on what children want out of their early years at schools. It also reported on what other stakeholders look for in early childhood education. These findings are split into themes, all of which relate to what children, parents and pedagogues want out of early years education.

Having assessed what the primary stakeholders want out of early childhood education, in Chapter 6, I juxtaposed the data collected from the children against the current Maltese

National Policy – Early Childhood Education and Care. I looked at how what the children talked about during the circle time sessions was represented (or not) in this policy. I have specifically chosen to juxtapose only the children's themes against the National Policy and not include those of parents and pedagogues. This was done for reasons of pragmatism and more importantly this decision represented a form of positive discrimination in favour of children's voices.

In the concluding chapter (Chapter 7), I make recommendations for changes in policy that might make early years education in Malta a more child-appropriate practice. This Chapter also makes recommendations for future research in this area.

In the next chapter I review aspects of the literature pertaining to different theories and ideology that have shaped my thinking throughout this research.

CHAPTER 2:

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

"Knowledge is not a series of self-consistent theories that converges toward an ideal view; it is rather an ever increasing ocean of mutually incompatible (and perhaps even incommensurable) alternatives, each single theory, each fairy tale, each myth that is part of the collection forcing the others into greater articulation and all of them contributing, via this process of competition, to the development of our consciousness."

Paul Feyerabend

(1924-1994)

Chapter 2

Theoretical Perspectives

Numerous theories inform our current understanding of the world around us. With specific reference to early childhood education, differences between modernism and postmodernism, Foucauldian philosophy and the effects of developmental theory and policy are of decisive importance in the field. These ideologies, together with the concepts of predeterminism and reconceptualisation, and post-developmentalism will be explored with an emphasis on how these apply to early childhood education in an attempt to better understand what truly constitutes a child-appropriate practice.

2.1 Postmodernism

This work is situated within a postmodern framework. Postmodernity offers a platform where 'uncertainty, complexity, diversity, non-linearity, subjectivity, multiple perspectives and temporal and spatial specificities'. (Dahlerg, Moss and Pence, 2007, p.22) are accepted and approved of. In contrast to modernity, postmodernity moves away from the expert application of knowledge to include the social and the individual at the very heart of the process. Within the postmodern perspective knowledge is neither

absolute nor universal. This allows individuals within society to construct and co-construct their own understanding and involvement with the world.

Contrary to modernity, postmodernity allows for different perspectives of the world to be represented, perspectives which are situated in a time, place and culture, thus imbued with individual and cultural values. This challenges the notions of modernism where neutrality and universality are at the very heart of the modernity premise. As a result, postmodernity does not provide individuals with answers or knowledge. On the contrary, it raises issues which cannot be answered from a particular universal fountain of information or knowledge. It makes individuals face up to a reality of open-endedness and a self which is in a constant state of flux. Another difference between modernity and postmodernity is in relation to the construction of meaning. In as much as knowledge and truth are extraneous to the individual in modern perspectives, so is meaning-making. Within postmodernity, the individual is fully engaged in the meaning-making process. Meaning-making is a process because in itself it is influenced by the relationships that make up the lives of various individuals (Dahlberg et al., 2007).

Themes within postmodern perspectives

From grand narratives to little narratives

One of the legacies of the project of modernity has been the production of and reliance upon grand theories which were a product, mostly, of an over reliance on the scientific method and discovery. Lyotard challenges the legitimation of claims based on grand scientific truths (1984). Postmodernity is disillusioned by these grand narratives and instead chooses to renounce them. Consequently, this creates a void, which is filled by

'little narratives'. A major difference between grand narratives and little narratives is that the latter embrace local knowledge. In so doing, tolerance and diversity are embraced (Lyotard, 1984).

The demise of objective truths

As previously ascertained, postmodernity calls into question the methods and claims that are maintained by grand narratives. As a result, the notion of objective truths is questioned. From a postmodern perspective, knowledge is not absolute, nor is it objective, disinterested or abstract (Dahlerg et al., 2007). Quite the opposite, knowledge is permeated with power relations and struggles to determine what can be accepted as truth or described as a falsity. Within the postmodern tradition, reality is constructed by individuals. Hence, universality as a claim to knowledge is contested. Claims to power and knowledge lie at the core of the construction of social reality.

The representation of social reality

Social reality is another point that is challenged by postmodern theorists. From a modernist perspective, an individual's reality is merely mirrored without distortion or interpretation. Postmodern theorists disagree. Proponents of postmodern theory argue that there is more than one reality, and such realities are constructed and influenced by the individuals and their contexts, 'construction replaces representation' (Dahlerg et al., 2007, p. 25). Once again, power structures become highly influential in the construction of an individual's reality. Thus, the construction of a representation of reality is a result of power perspectives that are privileged. As a result, there is more to reality than face

value and consequently perspectives lose their impartial status. The claim to neutrality is disputed within the postmodern perspective. The effects of the social, historical and linguistic become central to the construction and understanding of reality. Similarly, objectivity is also disputed (Dahlberg et al., 2007). Although postmodern theorists challenge claims that sustain grand narratives, theorists do not reject science. Claims to neutrality, objectivity and universality are indeed dismissed. However, postmodernity acknowledges science for the influential role it plays within society and in the mesh of relationships and generation of knowledge it serves. Science is but one of the many threads that make up the weave of society. Postmodern theorists question the understanding that science is the sole source of knowledge in addition to challenging the scientific claim to truth and universality (Dahlerg et al., 2007). The alternative offered by postmodern theorists is to view science and scientific claims within a context of 'multiplicity, ambivalence and uncertainty of life' (Dahlerg et al., 2007, p.25).

Consequently, the binary modality within the modernist perspective is also questioned by post modern theorists. Dualistic thinking and the absoluteness represented within modern theories is rejected. The unquestionable constructs of 'either/or' are replaced in postmodern thinking by 'both/and' (Dahlberg et al., 2007). All forms of knowledge become viable and valid within the postmodern perspective. The context within which that knowledge was generated, together with an awareness of the relationships surrounding the knowledge, become essential to the understanding of that knowledge.

The values within the postmodern perspective are also in contrast to the values of modernist beliefs. As mentioned earlier, universality is replaced with singularity, and consequently local knowledge is also essential to the formation of thoughts and beliefs.

In addition, rather than seeking conformity, diversity is celebrated (Dahlberg et al., 2007). The development of the reflective process is one of the major differences between postmodernity and modernity. The very process of accepting different perspectives, such as diversity and ambivalence, in itself, harks a process which requires a level of reflection for tolerance to develop (Toulmin, 1990).

It is for this reason that postmodernity is being used here as a platform for the deconstruction of early childhood education. History also plays an important role in postmodern thought. Being true to postmodern beliefs is also a way of acknowledging what has come before. This means that although this work will undertake a process of deconstruction, it also hails the knowledge that has formed early childhood education and the practices that surround it, however not without questioning it and unravelling its origins.

The contributions of Michel Foucault, a philosopher of the late twentieth century, have played a decisive role in determining post modern thought. Some of his ideas on discipline and power, as well as his analysis of discourse, are relevant to this work.

2.2 Foucault, discipline and power

Michel Foucault played an important role in the development of postmodern thought. One of Foucault's main contributions to postmodernity was the importance he placed on the development of new forms of subjectivity (Foucault, 1980a). Consequently, Foucault challenges the concept of power. This brings into question dualisms that arise as a result of power, namely the ruler and the ruled, master and slave, colonizer and colonized (Dahlberg, 2007). Power has been described as a commodity that is owned by

individuals in society and creates a dichotomy which favours a particular group, and consequently disadvantages others (Popkewitz and Brennan, 1998). Power is described as pervasive and is exercised by a vast number of members in society and for a myriad of different reasons and justifications. Children are often at the wrong end of this dualism that results from power relationships in our society. From a young age, individuals are shaped through what Foucault describes as 'disciplinary power' (Ransom, 1997). Discipline, in Foucault's terms, is a constraining process of conformity. It moulds individuals towards a preset state of being. No force or violence is used, instead, through the use of power, norms are generated. In addition, the norms created are assumed to be a form of standard that needs to be reached and any deviation from that norm is frowned upon. Furthermore, this form of disciplinary power deprives individuals of the critical ability to question what is being asked of them (Foucault, 1977).

Disciplinary power is exercised through a number of technologies, of which knowledge, truth and discourse play an important and distinct role. For Foucault, knowledge and truths are dependent upon how such claims become treated as claims of truth and knowledge in particular contexts and times. Thus, for a claim to be awarded the status of knowledge of truth, a power structure would have exercised its supremacy to grant that status and in so doing refute other claims (Foucault, 1980b).

2.3 Disciplinary technologies in society

Disciplinary technologies of education cause human bodies to become objects to be moulded and controlled with the educational preamble of development and improvement (Cannella, 1999). Foucault discusses the concept of disciplinary technologies in his influential work *Discipline and Punish; the birth of the prison* (1977). Disciplinary

technologies are tactics used that render human bodies docile. A number of elements are portrayed as being essential in the construction of disciplinary technologies. The first technique mentioned is the control over space and how this creates bodies within ordered spaces. Another technique is described as *hierarchical observation* and refers to the notion of 'supervised supervisors' (Cannella, 1999). These supervisors are the channel through which others are closely watched; in turn the supervisors themselves are also the object of this aforementioned surveillance. Finally, a third technique used in the creation of docile bodies comprises of standards that define normality. Consequently, the standards defining normality, by default, construct notions of judgement, penalty, abnormality, irregularity and disobedience. In essence, disciplinary technologies can be implicitly constructing invisible, silent and colonizing forms of power that create a dichotomy of bodies that are observed and other more powerful bodies that observe. This concept of disciplinary technologies can be applied to an analysis of education (Cannella, 1999).

2.4 Disciplinary technologies of education

There are three disciplinary technologies in relation to education (Cannella, 1999). These are: the *conceptualization and practice of curriculum development, the implementation of methods of teaching and management* and lastly *the proliferation of evaluation as educational practice.*

Curriculum development

From a Foucauldian perspective, the curriculum objectifies bodies creating a system whereby teachers are constrained within a framework, no matter how broad or open-

28

ended a curriculum is. In turn teachers objectify children's learning by capping their learning in terms of the curriculum (Cannella, 1999). The curriculum may also create a colonizing power, where what is learnt is predetermined by officials who rely upon a notion that children's learning is linear and similar. The very act of writing a curriculum, or standards, from a Foucauldian perspective can be regarded as a form of normalising children's learning and quantifying children as 'objects of the developer's gaze' (Cannella, 1999, p. 41). Furthermore, the production of such a document could signify a form of discourse which conveys to teachers the message that there is no other way to go about their craft (Cannella, 1999).

Curriculum development unleashes 'an invisible power (that) places limits on what can be perceived as education' (Cannella, 1999, p. 41). A curriculum does not only set the boundaries for identifying what is education, but it also objectifies practitioners and providers through setting a framework for planning. This is another way of reproducing pre-determined learning (Cannella, 1999) and could be interpreted as an attempt to demarcate a boundary which limits both the child and the practitioner.

Teaching/management methods

Hierarchical observation constructs a system whereby methods are created to ensure a controlled environment. Observation becomes intrinsic to the system; it is normalised and it is embraced as part of that system's expectations (Cannella, 1999).

Evaluation as disciplinary technology

Evaluation is another way of objectifying bodies. Through observation, children are likened to flowers or trees and described as bodies that are made to perform much in the same way as puppets or entertainers are (Cannella, 1999). Moreover, practitioners and children are reduced to defendants on trial who are constantly being judged (Cannella, 1999). When an assessment is recorded, whether the evaluation process is ongoing or not, it captures a moment in time and space, albeit there may be more than one moment. Hierarchical observation is also perpetuated through evaluation. The use of checklists and assessment scales may be regarded as ways to ensure that supervisors are supervised (Cannella, 1999).

Disciplinary technologies provide a set of lenses that construct educational gazing. Children are rendered voiceless and objectified through observation. They are perceived as devoid of privacy rights and self-determination (Cannella, 1999). The use of constructs in education legitimises hierarchical power of one group over another.

2.5 Foucault and discourse

For Foucault, truths are at the very heart of the generation of discourse. Truth, he argues, depends upon what discourses are accepted and made as true. Truth and falsehood are created as a result of a sanctioning process which is dependent upon the value awarded by the echelons of power (Foucault, 1980a). As such, discourses are an instrument of power (Dahlerg, 2007). The use of language in discourses is how power is produced and disseminated within society. Regimes of truth (Foucault, 1980a) exercise power and

regulate how members of society behave and function in society by way of influencing thoughts, ideas and actions. In addition to having an inclusive function, regimes of truths are created through the use of discourse. They also have an exclusion function. What is not acceptable to the echelons of power within a specific society at a point in time does not make it as the truth. In other words, what is not acceptable to the powerful is excluded.

Foucault moved away from the deterministic and deductivistic concepts within the Marxist theoretical tradition. In particular, he rejected the importance given to the economy and the explanatory quest within Marxism (Olssen, Codd and O'Neill, 2004). Central to his different way of thinking was the interplay of dependencies between the social and the historical perspective, reflected in the *interdiscursive, intradiscursive* and *extradiscursive* concepts. The *interdiscursive* notion unveils the relationship between objects and concepts within the discursive formation. The *Intradiscursive* considers the relationship between different discursive formations, whereas, the *extradiscursive* unpicks the relationship between discourse and the economic, social and political processes. Through discourse analysis, Foucault questioned how cultural formations appeared to be rational and unified. He unveiled the regulations behind this process thus marking the origin of the influential work on 'madness'. For the first time, deconstructed meanings were attributed to the rational and sane and applied in nineteenth century psychiatry.

Foucault distances himself from the Marxist tradition on numerous other levels. In allegiance to postmodern thought, the conception of an ideology as *truth* and its acceptance and proliferation lie at the heart of Foucault's analysis of the epistemology of

power and knowledge. The claim to truth or deterministic discourses is challenged not by denying universal truths, but by unveiling the historical and discursive method employed in generating universal truths (Olssen et al., 2004). On the theme of ideology, Foucault looks at the way that the human subject has been constructed through discourses in history. There are three ways that lead to the social construction of subjects, according to Foucault. Primarily, the human subject has been constructed through the human sciences, then through the 'dividing practices' which objectify the subject into categories (such as male, normal, and abnormal) and finally, through those humans who change the construction of history by means of resistance (Olssen et al., 2004). Human beings then 'identify with particular subject positions within discourses' (Olssen et al., 2004 p. 22).

Foucault substitutes the concept of ideology with that of discourse (Olssen et al., 2004). In this mindset, there are several components that define discourse, which, in turn, is made up of units of statements (both written and spoken) that bear upon the historical context. Such statements can be replicated. These units are composed of signs which go beyond the designation of names for things and actions. For Foucault, this transcendental meaning of units of statements requires deconstruction. By means of this deconstruction, it is possible to expose power relations and subjectivity otherwise obscured within social relations (Ball, 1990).

Rules that regulate transactions within society have a central role to play in this paradigm. For Foucault, rules in society determine whether a statement appears in a document. It is here that the relationship between the discursive and the extradiscursive becomes apparent to unravel interplay between power and subjectivity. From a

Foucauldian perspective, these relationships are inherent in an analysis of institutional power. This places discourse analyses within a framework, and is given a context.

Scientific endeavour, with its search for 'truth', has been one of the most powerful dominant discursive regimes for centuries. Scientific discourse has been responsible for making the rules through which truth and falsehood can be identified and thus constructing knowledge (Dahlberg et al., 2007). Knowledge within early childhood education has been constructed mainly by using methods of classification and stratifying concepts. For this reason, there has been a reliance on developmental psychology to provide answers for problems arising within the field of early childhood education. From a Foucauldian perspective, the notion of child is a construction pertaining to the discourse of classification and concepts typical within the rigour of developmental psychology.

Construction of the child

The inception of developmental psychology resulted in the creation of a language which led to the construction of the child and with it the construction of the discourse pertaining to childhood. The whole notion of developmental stages together with the creation of notions about what a child is supposed to do or feel at a certain age, for example, has led to the adaptation and the creation of pedagogical approaches in response to this discourse.

One perspective is that various groups within different societies hold different views of what constitutes childhood. For this reason, it can be argued that the notion of childhood is socially constructed because it pertains to a discourse constructed within a particular group in society in a given moment in time. This construction of meaning has influenced the field of early childhood education. Educational discourse within early childhood

33

education has been constructed around the knowledge within developmental psychology. One of the implications of such practice is that the concerns with measurement, classification and observation have resulted in standards that by way of power relations and discourse have undergone a process of normalisation within the field of early childhood education. Parents, teachers, policy makers and society at large have become familiar and conversant with these norms to the extent that children are expected to perform against these standards. Any deviation from the norm is considered problematic. In addition, societal practices are built around the legacy of the developmental psychology discourse. Curricula are constructed around developmental stages and abilities; the toy industry and children's media also capitalise on the phenomenon that is developmental psychology. Dahlberg et al. (2007) contend that developmental psychology has become one of the most influential discourses in the field of early childhood education. They go on further to suggest that the 'childhood landscape' and 'our understanding of children's needs' (Dahlberg et al., 2007, p. 36) have been constructed by the discourse of developmental psychology.

Pedagogy has also been affected by the powerful discourse that is developmental psychology. Consequently, pedagogical issues are being addressed through psychological tools. What is of value within pedagogy is regulated by psychological concerns. Dahlberg et al. (2007) warn that this practice, other than making pedagogy tantamount to psychology, also means that other practices and values within society are being overlooked, namely 'societal and value-based considerations' (Dahlberg et al., 2007, p. 36).

2.6 The influence of developmental psychology on early childhood policies

Dominant theories influenced by gender, class, race and ethnicity often endorse social privilege and pathologize social disadvantage. Re-constructing educational discourse from a poststructural perspective may be instrumental in exploring alternative ways of envisioning childhood. Poststructuralism provides a framework whereby the knowledge and discourse that is accepted as 'given' can be unravelled and the basic understanding and knowledge about the child can be questioned. This is exemplified by the concept of a curriculum.

As one of the basic tools in education, a curriculum is itself fraught with a kind of discourse that distorts the meaning of child and childhood. It can be argued that curricula are permeated by political and cultural constructs that are given universality and universal applicability. The curriculum is a site of power through which language and discourse construct a perceived and accepted reality of what constitutes childhood. Truth and knowledge are perceived through a set of lenses through which the real essence of the child is lost to more powerful structures. Some maintain that deconstruction is necessary in order to reveal the obscure meanings in dominant discourses that maintain knowledge and power (Derrida, 1978). This deconstruction has permitted a re-evaluation of the grand theories of developmental psychology by poststructural and postmodernist thinkers.

Child developmental theories are amongst the major constructs that inform policy and curriculum development in the early years. They are primarily derived from scientific

methods in developmental psychology and biology. These theories have been used by policy makers and curriculum developers on the assumption that they provide robust guidance to what is expected of children at different stages of their lives. This exemplifies the *deficiency model* wherein children are portrayed not as whole and accomplished beings, but as fragmented individuals who have not reached their full potential. Knowledge of this kind and acceptance of such information is based on the empirical and quantitative method (Soto, 2002). Over-reliance on the scientific paradigm has made the knowledge generated by developmental psychology absolute, leaving no space for alternate theoretical and methodological perspectives to be heard or developed.

Knowledge within the psychological and biological paradigms has gone unchallenged and taken for granted as being the only truth that informs childhoods (Soto, 2002). There exists an almost dogmatic acceptance of such paradigms that by virtue of this position of authority belittles anyone with the audacity to think otherwise. This position is in no way intended to discredit the influential works of grand theorists such as Piaget, Erikson or Bowlby, whose ideas are widely accepted to have contributed significantly to the field of early childhood education (Soto, 2002). However, it is the claims to absolute and unequivocal truth (which grand theories generate through discourses of knowledge and language) that is being challenged.

The poststructural framework questions the unchallenged positions of Western, male, privileged theorists who have predetermined the universal understanding of the child. Poststructuralism is the medium through which practitioners and policy makers can

reflect upon the paradigms and truths used to inform knowledge within the early years curriculum (MacNaughton, 2005).

Policies and the curriculum contain language and discourse that regularly predetermine the lives of children. The theoretical and analytical framework employed within such documents often reflects a reductionist view of what society has grown accustomed to with regards to what constitutes a child and in defining childhoods. Poststructuralist thought calls for a critical reflection on the 'notion of predetermined universal childhoods' (Cannella, 1999, p. 36). In so doing, 'older human beings' (Cannella, 1999, p. 36), are engaged in the construction of children as the *other*. In turn, this unchallenged construction of the child further sanctions education and educational institutions to act as regulators and programmers of younger individuals (Canella, 1999).

Pre-determination can be described as a process whereby a resolve on outcome is held in advance. In early childhood education, psychology and biology have provided truths as a foundation for deciding what younger children are capable of doing as well as providing a time frame for this development to occur. Through the rigour of scientific methods that have shaped the deterministic movement of the nineteenth and twentieth century, a picture of the 'average' young child has been constructed. Regrettably this image of the child was constructed on predetermined truths from the Western world (Cannella, 1999). It makes no allowance for cultural, ethnic, or other diversity. In addition, pre-determinism has also led to the construction and acceptance of norms against which the child is constantly measured, resulting in descriptors such as normal/abnormal and qualified/disqualified children. Foucault attributes constructs of discipline and regulatory power to the process of psychologising and biologising of the child (Foucault, 1977).

Such perspectives still pervade educational institutions and it is this type of discourse that legitimizes the treatment of younger human beings in a pre-deterministic way. In the educational setting, educators (and parents) have been given a gauge to assess a children's progress. With this one-size-fits-all yardstick, adults have been led to believe that they can reliably predict when to expect children to reach particular milestones. This type of discourse is aggravated by prescribing measures that can be adopted if a child does not measure up to a particular milestone in the stipulated timeframe. Poststructural authors query this pre-determinism on a number of levels. Firstly, the issue of universal childhoods is questioned due to its misrepresentation. Secondly, the educational experience that results from the universality of childhoods is problemetized. Finally, the lack of representation of children's voices in the process of determining what shape their education (and more specifically their lives) should take is highlighted.

In response to these and other qualms about pre-determinism in the early years, some educators and researchers have sought to 'turn the world upside down' (Cannella, 2005, p. 17) by deconstructing knowledge. One way of reconceptualising early childhood education is to reconsider dominant truth regimes as represented in discourse used by institutions within the educational settings and challenging beliefs built upon 'notions of diversity, equity and power in the conceptualization of the child' (Cannella, 2005, p.17). In addition, discourse pertaining to early childhood education, which includes the skills and knowledge accrued by professionals within the field, requires deconstructing (Cannella, 2005, p.17).

2.7 Reconceptualisation

A salient question at the forefront of the process of deconstruction is to question what we think we know (Cannella, 2005). In early childhood education this process focuses mainly on a number of beliefs. Among these is the notion that science holds the key to the truth about human beings (both adults and children), that adults are the experts and consequently they have the power to judge over and decide what they think is best for children. In addition, this perspective assumes that human change is represented by growth and development that implies progression from a state of not-knowing to a state of knowing.

Other perspectives have provided additional grounding in the field of reconceptualisation of early childhood education. New discourses emerged when oppressed groups have voiced their own experiences. These groups have pioneered new ways of making the familiar strange. Among them are the voices that have exposed the experiences

of the largest marginalized group in the world – women. The prominent work of hooks (1984, 2000) and other feminist writers such as Collins (1990), Lerner (1993) and Grosz (1994) have uncovered the oppressive ideology imposed by universalized gendered thought. In the field of early childhood education, feminist perspectives have provoked voicing issues relating to social justice, equity within curriculum content and a respect for women in all walks of life (Cannella, 2005).

Post-colonial and sub-altern theorists have also voiced issues of injustice and inequity. This perspective analyses the effects of past physical occupations which include economic ruin, seizure of resources for the colonizers' benefit, together with institutional imposition. The long-term effects of colonization have been examined at length in the

39

works of Bhabha (1990); Said (1996); Spivak (1999); Lavia (2006, 2007), Young (2001) and Said (2001). One of the main issues that post-colonial theorists address is the concept of *othering*. This is described as the process of constructing individuals 'savage, ignorant and not civilized' (Cannella, 2005, p.23).

Post-colonial theory is not a tool to be used exclusively by nations that have been colonized; it offers more than that. Post-colonial theory adheres to and develops an activist position. This in turn promulgates social transformation (Viruru, 2005). From an early childhood education perspective, Macedo (1999) points out the similarities between colonial ideologies and how western ideology treats *the other*, that is, groups deemed as inferior or different. It is in schools that *the other* dualism begins through undue dependence and obsession with measurement and categorizing children and their abilities or lack of them thereof. Post-colonial theory can highlight binaries such as superior/inferior, same/different within educational policies and curricula and could offer alternatives that respect every child.

According to McLaren and Farahmandpur (2003) global capitalism is the new form of imperialism, thus influencing schools and by default what and how is taught. Global capitalism has been sapped from its political connotations and infiltrated with seemingly harmless messages about needs and commodities. Instead of the law or regime of a particular country, the law of the market is imposed on humanity. Children and schools are not immune. Seemingly innocuous processes such as privatization of education, the 'businessification' of schooling through schemes that run in school through the financial sponsorship of big corporations (e.g. sports day sponsorship by McDonalds in a Maltese

primary school, Tesco's computers for schools, Sainsbury's sports equipment) illustrate

the effect of global capitalism (Gatt Sacco, 2008a).

Pedagogy of revolution

Critical pedagogy sees its roots in the work of Freire (McLaren, 2000). One major aspect

of this reconceptualist educational methodology is that it considers the notion of

Universalist truth orientations as problematic. In addition, pedagogy of revolution offers

alternative education methodologies that facilitate reconceptualist work. However,

critical pedagogy is not without its flaws. It has been heavily critiqued by feminist and

other scholars as perpetuating western, male forms of liberation (Cannella, 2005).

Nonetheless, aspects of the theory can be applied in reconceptualising early childhood

education, for instance, an acquisition of knowledge that is rooted in one's own being and

discerning the fabrication of dominant discourses and taking transformative action

(Lankshear and McLaren, 1993).

Deconstructing developmental psychology

One of the Universalist truths that have been at the foundation of early childhood

education is developmental psychology. 'Our field represents the applied side of the

basic science of child development' (Caldwell, 1984, p.53). A review of constructs

within early childhood education would be incomplete without acknowledging the role

that developmental psychology has played in the field. The Enlightenment period hailed

with it a yearning for the scientific and the positivist attitudes associated with it. This

provided the backdrop for the perpetuation of works by Western, male theorists who

categorized children's ways of being into various domains such as cognitive, emotional, and social. The science of child development saw its inception in neatly categorized developmental stages that suggested linear progression of growth and development (Cannella, 2002). A century long domination of developmental psychology and notions based on theories of child development dominated the field of early childhood education (Bloch, 1992). From Froebel to Montessori, from Piaget to Bredekamp with *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Education Serving Children from Birth to Eight* (1987), a fascination with developmental psychology has led to a narrowing of scope in the field.

Consequently, it can be argued that the knowledge field that has supported early childhood education in the twentieth century is responsible for maintaining the *status quo*. Prejudices are upheld, stereotypes reinforced and the voices of children, their parents and teachers ignored (Cannella, 2002). Unless dominant discourses, such as the Universalist truths maintained by developmental psychology undergo a process of *problematising* (Foucault, 1980a), social injustice and inequity are further perpetuated. When beliefs and truths are unraveled, and dominant discourses deconstructed, the scope of early childhood education is broadened, thus allowing non-dominant views in the field to provide alternative theories.

As a result of alternative theories finding voice in the field, the process of reconceptualisation then begins. 'Deconstruction without construction is an act of irresponsibility' (Putnam, 1992, p.132). When Derrida talked about deconstruction, he described it as a process where the written word can be re-read in terms of power (1981). He further argued that deconstruction unveils the dominant ideologies and socially

constructed norms (Cannella, 2002). Deconstruction is described by Cannella (2002) as a process whereby the stitches that hold together loci of power which create dominant discourses and in turn suppress non-dominant voices are picked. This process goes to the root of the generation of power; it questions thinking processes, thus revealing the contradictions that are embedded within society. The role of the researcher attempting the route of deconstruction is also scrutinized. Contrary to positivist enquiry, the researcher is no longer the bearer of hegemonic truth. Quite the contrary, the researcher is responsible for shedding light on multiple forms of thought (Cannella, 2002). The researcher is but a voice amongst manifold voices. Thus, the process of reconceptualisation was initiated by scholars who wanted to re-imagine and reconsider the voices of those that have been *othered* (Cannella, 2002; Bloch, 1992; Kessler, 1991; Silin, 1995). One of the prevailing discourses that *others* younger human beings is that they are immature, needy and incompetent and thus require older human beings to speak for them. Their needs are excluded because they are deemed as innocent, savage and in need of protection (Cannella, 2002).

Aries (1962) argues that the concept of child as a dominant discourse was constructed in an attempt to come to terms with diversity. Childhood was not the only construct of this kind; other such constructs include race and class. Discourses around childhood have been influenced by Piagetian developmental theory (Canella, 2005). Piaget was influenced by individualistic, enlightenment patriarchy in a society where a democratic form of governance was deemed as the only viable process that would result in world survival (Walkerdine, 1988). On the other hand, cognitive developmental theories show partiality to the individual as opposed to group orientations within Piagetian developmental theories. In addition, cognitive developmental theories privilege forms of

reasoning that are stereotypically male. These theories are also deterministic in nature, claiming knowledge into the mind of the child (Cannella, 2005).

Another dominant discourse that has influenced the field of early childhood education relates to the family and its structure. The work of Coontz (1992) shows how the nuclear family has been portrayed as the absolute form of family structure. Traditional family values, as portrayed by imperialist, Western ideology, are problematised by Coontz. The nuclear family and the fabrication of the causal relationship between self-esteem and mothers' occupation are seen as constructs. It is interesting to note how dominant discourses regarding attachment theory seem to gain popularity and media attention during times of economic recession when unemployment soars and governments try to maintain a certain amount of control on employment statistics.

The work of Burman (1994) shows how developmental psychology has been pivotal in creating an incompetency discourse around disadvantaged groups such as women, in particular mothers and children. The effect of this type of dominant discourse has been significant in creating control and discrediting the competencies of such groups under the auspices of developmental psychology's grand truths.

Reconceptualisation within developmental psychology can be attributed to have been started by Vygotsky's work on socio-cultural perspectives of development (Soto and Swadener, 2002). By arguing that there is more than one accepted form of human development, Vygotsky can be said to have been instrumental in opening the path to reconceptualisation. The incorporation of cultural notions within human development led

to the argument by reconceptualist theorists that human development is in itself a male and Western construct (Rogoff, 1991).

The constructs within developmental psychology have shaped early childhood education and the policies that have been the very core of early childhood education. One of the roles of reconceptualisation is to problematize and re-construct policies that ameliorate the lives of children, parents and their teachers.

Post-developmentalism

One of the reactions to the over-reliance on DAP in the field has resulted in the development of a contemporary discourse within the early childhood education. Post-developmentalism questions the assumptions that have shaped the discourse of developmentalism (Edwards and Nuttall, 2009). Discourses emanating from the reconeptualist movement have led the way to developing a framework that critiques the developmentalist approach in early childhood education.

Contemporary discourses that take into account childhood and development from a socio-cultural historical perspective in early childhood education are emerging as a result of feminist, poststructuralist and reconceptualist critiques of developmentalism (Edwards, 2009). This new movement argues against the universality of childhood as represented by the ages and stages of the developmental movement. Fleer (2003) argues that post-developmentalism is the driving force behind this transition from developmentalism to sociocultural theory and the resulting implications in curriculum and practice (Anning, Cullen and Fleer, 2004).

The writings of Lev Vygotsky are providing insights into providing alternatives to addressing the limitations of developmentalism such as the shortcomings inherent within Piagetian and constructivist focus on the individual and individual development. As a result of cultural awareness as argued by Vygotsky, research has suggested that knowledge is not individually framed but culturally understandings are a significant component of learning and development (Rogoff, 2003). Children are considered are cultural beings within a historical and temporal milieu (Vygotsky, 1987). Thus, a sociocultural-historical perspective considers far more than the age of a child and takes into account other dimensions in research and policy making contexts (Fleer, Anning and Cullen (2009).

This work is situated within the poststructural, reconceptualist and the emerging postdevelopmental framework and uses these perspectives to offer a position that moves away from the child-centredress of developmentally appropriate practice in order to participate in the continuing debates that are offering new directions in early childhood education.

2.8 Why child-appropriate practice?

Terms such as *child-centred practice* and *developmentally appropriate practice* are widely used in early childhood education by practitioners and policy makers (Bredekamp, 1987, 1997, 2007; Dahlberg et al., 2007). *Prima facie*, such terminology may seem innocuous and celebratory of the child. However, these terms reflect a modernist view which this work is trying to move away from. One of the main issues that arises when considering the term child-centred is that by placing the child at the centre of the world, the child becomes removed from relationships and contexts (Dahlberg et al., 2007). Within this perspective, the child is hence considered as a 'unified, reified and

essentialised subject' (Dahlberg et al., 2007, p. 43). In contrast, proponents of postmodernity problemetise the centeredness with which the child is viewed. Dahlberg et al. (2007) contend that from a postmodern perspective, the child at the centre is an imaginary child and the *childhood landscape* created around this child is also fictional. The alter argument is that there are many children and many childhoods, each constructed by our understandings of childhood and what children are and should be. This is significant because the way we as a society construct the child will bear heavily on the pedagogical outcome which is available in early childhood institutions.

The term *child-appropriate practice* moves away from the essential and reified view of modernism by considering a group of children, their views, their relationships and contexts within a particular culture at a set moment in time. Essentially, what is being argued here is that rather than locating the child at the centre, which seems to be a lonely and vulnerable place, the child is being viewed in terms of the relationships experienced with parents, teachers, society and other children. Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of the Reggio Emilia project, strongly asserts that the key to children's learning is communication, which is the very essence of the pedagogical relationship (Readings, 1996).

The pedagogical relationship referred to in this work is based on the etymology of the word pedagogue. Etymologists believe that the origin of the word 'pedagogue' hails from the Latin word *paedagogus* which refers to a slave who escorted children to school and generally supervised then. Essentially, then, the role of the pedagogue is to walk with the children. This is one of the salient facets of this work where children will be

involved in a democratic dialogue which will eventually inform and effect the decision making processes on early childhood education in Malta.

2.9 Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed some of the issues salient to my work before, during and after my time spent in the field collecting data. Amongst other themes, this chapter has highlighted the issues of the imbalance and dualisms of power and the lack of recognition of children and their voices. This becomes especially poignant in a review of policy. The next chapter will detail aspects of the literature pertaining to policy and policy review.

CHAPTER 3:

COMING TO TERMS WITH POLICY AND POLICY CONSTRUCTION

"I make a fortune from criticizing the policy of the government, and then hand it over to the government in taxes to keep it going."

George Bernard Shaw

Irish dramatist & socialist

(1856 - 1950)

Chapter 3

Coming to terms with policy and policy construction

Various attempts have been made to define educational policy. Amongst the more poignant is that by Cunningham (1963) who proposes that:

> 'Policy is a bit like an elephant – you recognise one when you see it, but it
> is somewhat more difficult to define.'

<div align="right">(p. 229)</div>

History has played an important part in shaping current educational policies. 'Achievements and lessons of the past' (Nutbrown ed., 2002) constitute important lessons for policy makers. For this reason, a review of historical milestones within early childhood education is central to an analysis of educational policy. Against this background, one of the aims of this chapter will be to establish an appropriate definition for educational policy. This will be followed by an appraisal of historical events that have moulded such policies. The following section considers the effects of citizenship on policy in the early years. The participation and representation of pedagogues and parents in policy is then analysed. Subsequently, a Foucauldian perspective to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is discussed. Finally, a case for the transition in policy analysis from Foucault's ideology to that of Deleuze is presented.

3.1 Defining educational policy

Several authors have attempted to define educational policy (Taylor et al., 1997).

Harmann (1984), working from a traditionalist framework suggests that policy is:

> ...the implicit or explicit specification of courses of purposive
> actions being followed or to be followed in dealing with
> recognised problems or matter of concern, and directed towards the
> accomplishment of some intended or desired goals. Policy also
> can be thought of as a position or stance developed in response to a
> problem or issue of conflict and directed towards a particular
> objective.
>
> (p. 13)

This definition highlights certain realities within the policy-making process; however it is not flawless (Taylor et al., 1997). The definition states that the process of policy making can be either 'implicit or explicit'. Hidden agendas can be at play when policy-makers, pressure groups, or indeed governments are formulating policies. Policy-making is multifaceted, to include ethical aspects, moral and value dimensions as well as political facets (Winters, 2007). Several dimensions may co-exist to reach a degree of general acceptability on the part of stakeholders.

Harmann (1984) defines policy-making as a 'response' to society's ills. This is a medical model of diagnosis and treatment. Scheurich (1994) describes it as the traditional or postpositivist approach to policy studies. Scheurich moves away from this way of thinking and suggests an alternative approach to understanding policy-making and policy research. This alternative approach is known as policy archaeology (Scheurich, 1994). It finds its origins in the Foucauldian school of thought. The notion that social problems are a natural occurrence is dismissed. In policy archaeology, importance is given to the

50

process with which a particular social problem is constructed rather than responding to the problem *per se* (Gatt Sacco, 2008a). In addition, Schuerich advocates that 'policy archaeology suggests that there are powerful grids or networks of regularities' (Scheurich, 1994, p.301). Regularities are described as 'rules of formation' that intertwine together from the various social arenas to then make visible a particular social problem. In this way policy archaeology represents a methodology that analyses how a social problem gains visibility. Scheurich describes a third phase pertaining to policy archaeology which constitutes the policy solution arena (Gatt Sacco, 2008a). This is described as the 'study of the range of acceptable policy solutions (Scheurich, 1994, p. 300).

Another criticism to this definition as presented by Taylor *et al.* is that it pertains to positivist ideology. Within a positivist framework, Taylor *et al.* contend that this approach 'purports to apply scientific method to solve policy problems' (Taylor *et al.*, 1997, p. 24). The authors assert that attributing technicist solutions to policy-making is an oversimplification of the process. In addition to being positivist, the Harmann definition is described by Taylor *et al.* (1997) as one that assumes a functionalist approach. Harmann is said to be operating from a hypothesis where policy making is a linear process and society functions within value consensus (Taylor *et al.*, 1997). As a consequence, this linear approach to policy-making dismisses the complexities of various groups within society; groups that may have disparate levels of power. In addition, their access to power may be different.

Research into policy and policy-making, therefore, may necessitate more than an analysis of the final document. A thorough examination of policy also needs to look at the text of

the policy document and the story and context behind the document. The notion of implementation is thus being considered. The process of drawing up the policy is scrutinised together with an analysis of how the document was then implemented into practice (Taylor et al., 1997). This results in another definition as suggested by Ball (1994):

> Policy is both text and action, words and deeds, it is what is
> enacted as well as what is intended. Policies are always
> incomplete insofar as they relate to or map on the 'wild profusion'
> of local practice.
>
> (p.10)

Policy text and process may follow a rational and chronological order. These stages of progression have been identified as defining a problem, then clarifying values, goals and objectives, pinpointing options to achieve goals, making a cost/benefit analysis of options, deciding on a course of action, and finally bringing about modification to a programme (Taylor et al. 1997). Although theoretically the above order gives focus and seemingly direction, events, circumstances and people rarely allow for such a neat progression of events. The chronology suggested by Taylor et al. (1997) disregards occurrences within a society that can place the development of an educational policy on the back burner of a government's agenda or throw it completely out of the picture. An example of such an occurrence happened in 2008 during the run-up to the general elections in Malta. The party in opposition (the Malta Labour Party) drew up a proposed educational policy in which early childhood education was being differentiated from the rest of primary education. This proposal was published in a document entitled 'Pjan ghal Bidu Gdid' (Planning a New Beginning, translated) (SKS, 2007) and catered for the specific educational needs of early childhood. It became one of the party's main political

priorities during the run up for national elections in March 2008 but was put on hold when the party lost the elections.

At least three key factors affect the rational and chronological approach to policy-making, namely, political decisions, rational determination and bureaucratic structure (Carley, 1980). Political decision making is conditioned by a plethora of factors to include values, political agendas and economic discourse, and these aspects in turn determine which policies see their inception. The bureaucratic structure of a government also affects which policies make it through or not. The complexities of this rational and chronological approach imply that the drawing up of policy is not a simple linear process that necessarily follows predetermined rules (Gatt Sacco, 2008a).

Another dimension to the art of policy-making, is 'the achievement of settlements in the face of dilemmas and trade-offs among values' (Rein, 1983, p.211). The relevance of this observation lies in the fact that the final text of a policy document is the result of several concessions that are made by influential parties and stakeholders on particular issues. The end product is the result of negotiation and bargaining. This statement by Rein gives rise to another element in trying to find a definition of educational policy: values and their effect on policy formulation.

Taylor *et al.* (1997) emphasise the 'value laden nature of policies' (p. 27) which in turn accentuates the politics involved in policy formulation. In this respect, Prunty (1985, p. 136) has described policy making as the 'authoritative allocation of values'. Amidst this discussion, an analysis of authority and who is in authority becomes paramount. In countries that exercise democratic values, the authority can be described as the

government that has been elected by the majority of the citizens. However, in policy making, determining whose values are typified is not always clear and straightforward. There are several schools of thought that try to determine whose values are being represented in policy formulation. These include the pluralist, elitist, neo-Marxist and feminist approaches (Taylor et al., 1997). From a Foucauldian perspective, three elements and their relationship are central. These are: power, knowledge and discourse (Ball, 1994). As a result of this poststructuralist approach, the notion of discourse and language is one of the determinants in defining policy. The tactful use of language and discourse is seen as the epitome of the struggle between contenders of competing objectives (Fulcher, 1989). Codd (1988) contends that discourse is the tool that legitimates the exercise of political power by the state in policy formation.

In summary, it becomes apparent that an appropriate definition of educational policy needs to consider elements relating to text, history, context, values in addition to the process that have gone into formulating a particular policy.

3.2 Educational policies: a historical perspective

In the previous section, the fluidity and transitions that educational policies go through have been highlighted. In this respect, the difficulty in defining educational policy may be likened to that of trying to catch a rainbow; easy enough to see, but challenging to pin down (Gatt Sacco, 2008a). One way of trying to catch a glimpse of and analyse the rainbow which is educational policy is to look at the political, economical and social contexts within which educational policies occur (Ozga, 2000). History of educational

policy and its 'accompanying narrative' (Ozga, 2000, p.114) provide a framework within which specific historical conditions that help mould educational policies can be summed up.

The historical perspective of an educational policy allows policy-analysts to reflect upon the knowledge surrounding that particular policy in addition to considering how it has been constructed. Additionally, a sound knowledge of the circumstances leading up to policy documents may be useful in understanding the assumptions that have moulded such policies and the 'prevailing patterns of provisions and the ideologies that sustain them' (Ozga, 2000, p. 115). The milieu of an educational policy is made more complex by competing ideologies and rival ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. A historical perspective on educational policy sheds light on the process more than the content of a policy and can be compared to the relevance of reflexivity to a researcher (Gatt Sacco, 2008a).

Policy discourses and strategies

The intervention of the government or state in writing and legislating policy signifies what knowledge should be taught and learnt, thus giving that knowledge cultural, social and economic worthiness (Wood, 2004). It can be argued that policy, a multidimensional, multifaceted social and political phenomenon (Farrell, 2001), goes through the motions change and transformation under the control and regulation of the state (Ball, 1999). "What works" (Wood, 2004, p.363) has often been interpreted from international research and then applied at national level without considering the local and cultural contextualizations (Beard, 2000). In addition, with reference to early childhood

education policy findings from research in primary school aged children have been applied to early childhood education without differentiation (Wood, 2004).

Developmental theories have also been used as informants to policy texts (Edwards, 2005). The underlying argument for this practice is that children in their early years are developing the cognitive and linguistic abilities they require in view of the acquisition of new content material (Spodek and Saracho, 1999). The Developmentally Appropriate Practice (Bredekamp, 1993) is informed by a set of theoretical descriptions that rely on theories of child-development and knowledge construction. These are at the heart of pedagogical expressions in relevant curricula (Edwards, 2005). Although, expressed and interpreted by pedagogues in different pedagogical ways, the Reggio Emilia Approach has also been described as making references to Piaget's genetic epistemology (Edwards, 2005). This, however, is more evident in the DAP and the developmental stage based characteristics are testament to this. For instance, the DAP states that:

Development and learning are dynamic processes requiring that adults understand the continuum, observe children closely to match curriculum and teaching to children's emerging competencies, needs and interests and then to help children move forward by targeting educational experiences to the edge of children's changing capacities so as to challenge but not frustrate them.

An illustration of direct reference to the constructivist discourse is found in DAP and also in the EYFS. For instance the DAP states that:

> Understanding that children are active constructors of knowledge
> and that development and learning are the result of interactive
> processes, early childhood teachers recognise that children's play is
> a highly supportive context for these developing processes.
> (Bredekamp and Copple, 1997, p.8-9)

56

Similarly, the EYFS states that:

> Children need time to explore resources and equipment (engage in epistemic play) before practitioners challenge them to use the resources to solve a particular problem. The experience gained helps them to feel familiar with the resources and thus to be more likely to solve the problem successfully.
>
> (EYFS, 2008)

The Maltese early years policy, the ECEC is also informed by developmental theories

and constructivist discourse. The following quotations illustrate this.

> Rather than learning through play, explorations, discovery, on-site inquiry and hands-on activities, children are formally taught mostly factual information. At times, children are challenged to work at an abstract level when their mental capabilities are not suited for this.
>
> (Ministry of Education, p.39)

In another instance, the ECEC states that:

> An appropriate early years curriculum builds on prior learning experiences. The content and implementation of the curriculum builds on children's prior individual, age-related and cultural learning......An early years curriculum should be comprehensive to include critical areas of development, namely physical well-being and motor development; social and emotional development; approaches to learning; language development; cognition and general knowledge and subject matter areas such as science, mathematics, language, literacy, social studies and the arts.
>
> (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 49-50)

It is also interesting to point out that these above quotations make direct references to the

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National

Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education

(NAECS/SDE), or as more commonly referred to as DAP.

Policy discourse has been shown to be informed by developmental theories and

constructivist ideology. This impacts curricula which in turn this effects pedagogical

57

practices. Another link to this chain is the interpretation that pedagogues give to policy and curricula which may further perpetuates the developmental and constructivist discourse (Edwards, 2005).

3.3 Policy and citizenship in the early years

Although in the previous sections, I have discussed a number of definitions associated with policy, terminology and the value associated with particular terms gradually appear to transform themselves with time. Interestingly, the term 'citizenship' is becoming increasingly popular in the field of early childhood education (Millei and Imre, 2009). Its use is becoming more prevalent in certain policies, in pedagogical documents and curriculum documents.

Policy documents are progressively bringing into play the concept of citizenship when referring to children, their education and well-being (Millei and Imre, 2009). It can be argued that the idea that children are being given citizenship status by policy-makers is to be applauded and encouraged. However, from a reconceptualist and poststructuralist perspective this trend needs to be unravelled and the discourse behind such actions analysed more closely. It can easily be assumed that by giving children the 'citizenship status' they are being empowered. There is the tendency of this becoming a form of tokenistic discourse. At face value, the terminology itself may appear innocuous and neutral (Millei and Imre, 2009). In fact, the presumption of neutrality is acting as a shield obscuring more complex issues associated with early years' policy and children's involvement in early years' policy documentation. In order to fully appreciate the term 'citizenship', Millei and Imre (2009) analyse the use of the term within political theory; how 'citizenship' is used in 'relation to other public discourses in order to highlight the

complex discourses, power relations and positions it constitutes' (Millei and Imre, 2009, p.281).

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reported that in 2001 the interest in early years' policy had increased within some of the member states (OECD, 2001). This interest translated itself into investment in the sector to create what Dame Gillian Pugh described as 'the golden years of early childhood education' (Pugh, 2010). For instance, programmes such as Sure Start saw their inception in the United Kingdom and National Curriculum frameworks in countries such as Australia were being presented. In the meantime, better communication networks were being set up between education and health services.

In order to fully appreciate an analysis of policy and citizenship in the early years, three policies in early childhood from three different countries Malta, England and Australia will be analyzed with reference to issues of children's inclusion and exclusion, the discourse pertaining to children as future investments for nation states, communitarian theory and lastly global citizenship.

In Malta, child-care centres burgeoned around 1996 and 1997, when initiatives for the under-three's were being developed by the then Department of the Advancement of Women (which has since been replaced by the Commission for the Promotion of Equality for Men and Women) within the Ministry of Social Policy (now renamed the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity). Kindergartens in the state sector in Malta cater for 3 to 5 year olds. In 2002, a technical committee for child day care centres was set up by the Ministry of Social Policy in Malta to commence the process that would subsequently lead

to the legislation and licensing of child-care centres. A few years later, in 2006, a working committee was set up to review the situation and relative policies and services in the field of early childhood education (Ministry of Education, 2006). With this new found global interest in early childhood education, a paradigm shift also took place. Early childhood education was not only concerned with providing care to the children of working parents but it was now focusing on providing 'early learning experiences' (Millei and Imre, 2009, p.281).

In conjunction, policy documents were increasingly making use of the term 'citizenship'. However, as mentioned above, the definition and the relationship between policy documents and the use of the term was rather tenuous. In essence, this could be due to the ease with which the term is used. The term 'citizenship' is taken for granted in a way that its meaning is assumed to be a concept which is shared and agreed upon by policy makers, stakeholders and the general public. This is a contentious issue; because the meaning attached to citizenship varies according to the interpretation it is given. In addition, from a poststructuralist perspective, when the notion of citizenship is used with reference to children without weighing out the true meaning behind it, the term becomes both dangerous and presumptuous towards the children it is supposedly empowering. The loose use of the term 'citizenship' might also promote an apathetic attitude with regards to an apparent need or problem and thus halt further efforts to ameliorate the plight of children's participation in policy documents. In their discussion of citizenship, In this section, I analyse various definitions of citizenship and will subsequently investigate the role of citizenship in the context of childhood.

Definitions of citizenship

Various fields look at citizenship from different perspectives. For instance, in the legal discipline, citizenship is viewed in terms of birthright or naturalisation. Participation is represented through the right to vote. This definition is problematic when applied to children's perspective of citizenship and participation. Children can be defined as citizens through their birthright or naturalization, however, the right to vote is not given during the conventional definition of childhood. Hence, it can be argued that children are passive citizens within the paramenters of such a definition.

Janoski (1998), includes both active and passive membership in his definition of citizenship, thus within the remits of participation, children can be still classified as citizens, even though, according to this definition from the social science perspective, they are portrayed as passive citizens. Contemporary citizenship theory develops the notion of the social science theory. Legal obligations are compounded with a focus on rights, socio-political practices, meaning making and identity formation (Isin and Turner, 2002). This definition is purporting agency through active participation (Lister, 2007).

A typology of citizenship and rights was devised by Marshall in 1950. Marshall (1950) argued that citizenship was strongly linked to rights and obligations. Civil, political and social rights were amongst the main categories. Of main interest to this discussion are the social rights. It can be argued that children have access to social rights, since social rights can be defined as the right to economic welfare and security. The obligation of providing for this right is on educational institutions and social services.

Millei and Imre (2009) focus on different meanings and perspectives that can be attached to citizenship when used in policy documents, namely inclusion and exclusion, the

61

discourse of children as investments for nation states, Communitarian Theory, global

citizenship and early childhood citizenship

Inclusion, exclusion and seclusion

Citizenship can be seen as having two components. Primarily, it can be viewed as

consisting of membership within a policy and secondly, gaining access to a set of rights

and responsibilities. The notion of membership brings with it a dialectical process of

inclusion (Kivisto and Faist, 2007). If applied to nation state, this argument would focus

on who might be eligible to become a member of such a state. A significant problem

with the status of children and the use of citizenship terminology in policy documents

arises at this stage. A highly contentious issue is whether children are included as

citizens. It can be argued that having the status of citizen awarded to children in policy

documents only falls short of the expectations an adult citizen would have as a result of

such a status. Claiming that children are excluded from citizenship is not entirely true,

however, it can be contended that children are in a state of limbo when it comes to this

particular issue. They are awarded the status in some policy documents, but inadequacies

within the mechanisms of policy-making exclude them from being citizens in the polity

of the nation state.

Children can also be secluded from participating citizenship. It has been argued that

children are in a private world of play (Roche, 1999). This private world is

characteristically perceived as a safe haven for children by their adult carers (Wyness,

2000). This protection typically results in secluding the children to private worlds and

hence excluding them from actively participating in policy making.Another dimension

associated with citizenship is the set of rights and responsibilities as a result of such

membership (Millei and Imre, 2009). This dimension is indeed multifaceted, since it varies across time and place, nation and culture. Consequentially, an analysis of policy documentation in relation to citizenship has to be set against the background where the document is unfolding. On the other hand, though, some of these rights and duties are universal. Historically, rights were not awarded to groups who were excluded membership from the polity. For instance, women, slaves and children were denied inclusion into the polity and thus were devoid of rights. Sadly, the plight of children and their inclusion into the rights debate was a long time coming. Children were seen as enmeshed with their families rather than individuals in their own right (Qvotrup, 1994). The convention of the Rights of the child (UN, 1989), was a defining moment as it started the process were children began to be considered as members of nation states in their own right.

One of the steps that ensured that children were seen as 'autonomous, strong and capable individuals' (Millei and Imre, 2009, p.283) was the ratification of their rights. Amongst other benefits, the ratification meant that children were being thought of as being in control of their thinking and learning. Consequentially, since some children in some cultures have been allowed access into the polity with participatory rights, the term citizenship is more befitting within educational policy.

Increasingly, research has shown that in the western world, there is a move towards including children as active social participants (MacNaughton and Smith, 2008). The benefits of increasing child participation are manifold. When children participate activelty in the building of their society, their stance within the community changes. Children through participation see themselves included as members (Minow, 1999).

Consequently, the adult members' perception of children's ability may also be impinged upon. Lansdown (2005) has shown that children are more proficient that what adults thought them capable of. The view that adults have of children is significant in facilitating children's participation (Lister, 2008). A respectful attitude towards children in terms of their active participation in citizenship has shown to increase the sense of belonging within the community of these children. Furthermore, the children's participatory skills increased (Lansdown, 2001).

However, the issue of treating children as a 'collective' also needs consideration. The ratification of the convention has meant that children are now being seen and treated as a group, what James and Prout (1997, p.14) call 'a collectivity'. The implication of this is that the individuality, cultural specificity and diversity are jeopardised in the name of the collective. James and Prout (1997) further state that the collectivity can cause the 'best interest' discourse to be used. The principle of best interest may stand for the collective, however, it can supplant or even act against individual children's or group of children's rights (Millei and Imre, 2009).

Since the ratification of the convention, terms have been conflated (Millei and Imre, 2009). Consequently, this has brought about changes in discourses which in turn have had their impact on policy making. The authors highlight the conflation of the terms 'education' and 'play'. Article 28 of the convention states that children have a right to education. On the other hand the 'play' discourse is increasingly morphing its meaning and becoming more enmeshed with the discourse of education. The inter-changeability of the two terms in policy documents is seemingly unproblematic; however, this is causing a reconceptualisation in terms of what the two terms refer to. It is reported that

64

policy documents in Western Australia have indeed conflated the terms. The current UK policy document, the Early Years Foundation Stage, uses the terms play and learning concurrently (see page 10, section 1.18).

Due to the conflation of the terms 'education' and 'play', Millei and Imre (2009) argue that education has broadened to include those activities that were previously associated with environments outside the formal learning settings. As a consequence, play has taken on the guise of a duty for the child and a responsibility for parents and carers. In other words, the child has to be engaged in learning activities, whether in a formal setting or in an environment where the child is engaged in other endeavours. This shift in discourse has displaced the responsibility of providing for Article 28 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child - the right to education – from the government within policies onto the child. This, apart from being unrealistic, is also discriminatory, since not all children are exposed to the same environments with similar levels of opportunities.

In addition, this shift places expectations which are not viable upon the child. It assumes that all children have this 'innate desire for learning' (Millei and Imre, 2009, p.283) at every moment in time. Those children, then, who for a variety of reasons have a lessened desire or capability to learn and play are henceforth problemetized; they become deviations from the norm through discourse that has been established in policy documents.

The discourse of children as future investments for nation states

Governments of various nation states are recognising that investing in early childhood education will result in a productive workforce in the future. Policy documents replicate

65

this ideology which is a reflection of the Human Capital Theory. It is rare that models of citizenship are designed to include both adult and child participants (Qvortrup, 2001). Typically, children's citizenship is regarded in terms of the future, rather than as present citizens (Corsaro, 1997, James and Prout, 1997). Although there has been a tendency to take into account older children as active participants in society, younger children are gradually being increasingly involved in active decision making and participation (MacNaughton, Hughes and Smith, 2008). The use of the Human Capital Theory compounded with the use of the term 'citizen' with reference to children in policy documents illustrates the human investment argument. The following excerpts from three policy documents in three different countries (Malta, England and Australia) illustrate this.

When the Maltese national policy for early childhood education was launched in June 2006, the Minister of Education at the time claimed that: 'Young children deserve the best education and care as early childhood is not a distinct phase in the life of a human being, but it has the potential to shape the future adult' (Galea, 2006).

The first sentence in the introduction of the current policy for early childhood education in England, the Early Years Foundation Stage also states that: 'Every child deserves the best possible support to fulfil their potential. A child's experience in the early years has a major impact on their future life chances' (EYFS, 2008, p.7).

The Australian Government made a bolder claim when the Minister of Education argued that 'overall, the government's interest is to produce productive citizens for the future economy' (Rudd and Macklin, 2007).

In these three sentences, three policy documents from Malta, England and Australia have reflected a reliance upon the human investment argument. Children are being seen as future citizens and what can be achieved in return when these children eventually reach adulthood.

An analysis of children's citizenship is required when considering the discourse imbued with human capital theory ideology. Human Capital Theory saw its inception after World War Two. This theory argues a causal relationship between investment in education and the productivity of labour and labour productivity and individual earnings (Millei and Imre, 2009). Following the ravages of the Second World War, governments around the world were beginning to invest in education in an attempt to rebuild the countries and infrastructures that were destroyed by the war. In Malta, the Compulsory (Primary) Education Ordinance was passed in 1946. Education in Malta came into its own in the post-war era (Sultana, 1992; Zammit Mangion, 1992), when compulsory schooling was introduced in 1946. Prior to that, educational provision had generally lagged behind when compared with developments in the United Kingdom and mainland Europe. An educational structure had gradually evolved by the middle of the nineteenth century, with a Director of Elementary Schools being appointed in 1844, pedagogy being taught at the University, and a number of influential education reports (e.g. the Storks Report, 1865; the Keenan Report, 1880) being commissioned by the British, who were Malta's colonial masters from 1800 to 1964.

The introduction of compulsory schooling can be seen as one of the first steps towards a satisfactory system of state-sponsored primary education. The Labour Government led

by Paul Boffa, which emerged victorious after the 1947 General Election, following upon the restoration of self-Government during that same year, was forced to concentrate its energies upon consolidating the existing State System of primary education (Zammit Marmara', 2001). The Maltese government was also making plans for the extension of State-sponsored secondary education.

Secondary Education for all had been introduced in Britain as a result of the 1944 Education Act. This event influenced the 1948 Consultative Committee's Primary School report in Malta. The Report, which dealt principally with primary education, made an important contribution where the development of State primary and secondary education in Malta was concerned. Concurrently, Malta's economic situation was dire and skilled Maltese workers were emigrating to countries such as Australia and the United States hoping for better opportunities for them and their children. In response, the Maltese government, so as to avoid the worsening of a skills drain, invested further in education by setting up the Labour Corps where masses of workers were trained into new skills and they became the new work force.

Hence, via the human capital theory, the Maltese government of the late 1940's and early 1950's started investing in early childhood education. This excerpt from Malta's convoluted educational history, illustrates that although as Margisson (1997) argues, human theory is spurious as it is based on fabricated data, it was still responsible for an interest by governments in the early years. Several government policy documents (e.g. Rudd and Macklin, 2007, p. 3; EYFS, 2007, p.7) refer to children as 'citizen partners' in what is to be the building of future nation states. This can be problemetized in a number of ways. Firstly, the child's right to learn is being conflated with what the child has to

give in return once that child reaches adulthood. In addition, by linking early childhood learning with citizenship, the notion of duty shifts onto to the child rather than the onus of responsibility for providing for Article 28 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child residing with the governments and policy makers. Furthermore, this type of discourse is encouraging future thinking, which is normalised and regulated through policies, rather than focusing on making the child's present as fulfilling and enriching as possible.

Communitarian theory

The Maltese early childhood policy document (Ministry of Education, 2006), 'Children First' (Government of Western Australia, 2006), EYFS, (2007, p.10) encourage the idea that a child is part of a community and thus the community has duties and obligations towards that child. The old adage that 'it takes a village to raise a child' (Millei and Imre, 2007), typifies this understanding. Communitarian theory is based on the work of MacIntyre (1984) who argues that reciprocal arrangements between citizens exist. In turn, reciprocal arrangements ensure equality between the duties to be performed by the citizens and the obligations that are a consequence of being a member of a community in social, political and economic terms.

Children are at times referred to as active citizens within a community (Millei and Imre, 2007). When the terms 'citizen', 'child' and 'community' are used together in policy documentation, a confusion of meanings, duties and obligations may arise. Children cannot partake in this communitarian idea unless they are truly empowered and if they are participating political members within a community. The legal and administrative

systems do not allow this to happen and children's participation in the political within their community remains a myth.

Global citizenship

The Early Years Foundation Stage (2007), in different sections stresses the importance of children recognising their existence goes beyond the nation state they belong to (for example p. 12, 15). Similarly, this trend is continued in a consultation paper - Early Childhood Development Sub-group (2008) by the Australian government where children are hailed as global citizens (p.3). This type of discourse is problematic because children cannot partake in the same global rights that adults benefit from. In addition, the issues, problems and concerns that embody the adult global citizen are thrust upon children by the governments so that children 'must now think of themselves as global citizens' (Millei and Imre, p. 287).

Sociological Theory

From a sociological theory point of view, children are increasingly being regarded as social agents. Literature on citizenship shows a continuum of how this evolution has been gradually taking place. Reason, reationality and autonomy are consiered to be prerequisites for citizenship participation. Many adults consider children as being devoid of these attributes (Stasiulis, 2002) As argued previously, there is a tendency to view children as either innocent or as developing. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that children are in fact perceptive of global social themes which include the environment and peace (Jans, 2004).

Early childhood citizenship

As discussed above the terms 'early childhood' and 'citizens' at times seem to contradict each other. Children's participation in society has generally been curtailed to minor and inconsequential matters. Their voices are rarely heard especially within early childhood policy documents. Thus the idea of using the citizenship discourse within early childhood policy documents is an attempt to obscure a very real deficit within the early years discourse – where are the children? At this stage it is worth investigating the role that pedagogues and parents play and how they might be engaged in facilitating a more participative role for children in the making of their own learning.

3.4 Pedagogues and early childhood policy

In as much as children's representation in policy making is lacking, the same can be argued for pedagogues. The relationship between policy and research is gradually being ensued (Wesley and Buysse, 2006). However, the third element of the equation seems to be trailing behind. The third component is practice (Rust, 2009). Policymakers support their decisions with scientific evidence, consumer preferences, cost effectiveness, and ideology amongst others (Wesley and Buyess, 2006). Alas, the view from the classroom or nursery setting is rarely sought.

This may be happening for a number of reasons, some of which stem from the set-up of teacher education itself. Most teacher education programmes tend to separate theory and research from practice in the field (Rust, 2009). Thus, this reinforces the notion that the physical act of teaching is informed by practice and experience rather than research and

71

theory. The dislocation between theory, research and practice is mirrored in policy documents. Teacher representation is hugely absent from policy documents.

The image that policy-makers hold of early childhood teachers may also play a vital role in trying to explain the lack of teacher representation. It is a commonly held belief that early childhood education is 'something that any nice, patient, person can do' (Rust, 2009, p.260). This belief extends itself to policy makers. Rust (2009) argues that the impression that policy makers have of teachers is the one they have developed since their student days. Since 'most adults do not remember the detail of educational experience prior to third grade' (Rust, 2009, p.260), this image of the early years pedagogue is flawed. Thus, it can be deduced that the field as a whole needs reconceptualisation since most of the premises are based on erroneous beliefs. Rust calls for a 'different mode of practice for early childhood, a different type of pre-service education, (and) a different set of policies to support professional developments' (2009, p.260).

In addition, pedagogues need to engage themselves with policymakers and consequently make their position and efforts known. In this way, pedagogues would be penetrating the 'assumptive worlds' (Marshall, Mitchell and Wirt et al., 1985, p.98) of policymakers. Rust (2009) describes the notion of assumptive worlds as the subjective understanding of the environments within which policy makers operate. By purveying a series of objectives to policy makers, pedagogues can be instrumental in bridging the gap between research and theory, and practice.

A further tool at the hands of pedagogues and policymakers in bridging the gap is the use of teacher narratives (Rust, 2009). When teachers recount their stories, policy makers

may engage in bringing about real change by reflecting more on the consequences of what they write has on schools, nurseries and the field of early childhood education as a whole. It is a known fact, however, that the voice of the collective will achieve more than the solitary voice of one teacher. Wenger (1998) calls this a 'professional community of practice', where through the voice of the collective, professional practice is enhanced and policy shaped with the participation of practitioners.

3.5 Parents and early childhood policy

Having discussed the relationship between research and theory, and practice, the relationship between people and policies needs to be considered. The issue of the role of parents in policymaking is pivotal to this analysis. From birth, children are guided into the roles and traditions of their particular socio-cultural contexts. Through the notion of family and community children learn what is expected out of them and what is not. LeVine and New (2008) argue that the socio-cultural context plays a significant role in the early education and childcare choices that parents make for their children.

It can be argued that governments have taken over most of the decision-making processes that parents engage in when deciding on the early years education of their children. Policies rather than parents seem to be taking on the role of regulating the lives of children (New, 2009). In Bakhtin's analysis of language this persuasion and regulation may be occurring on two levels. These are the use of authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse (Bakhtin, 1982).

Bakhtin (1982) describes authoritative discourse as being 'single voiced' since meanings of such discourse do not change through the process of communication. By isolating itself from other voices, authoritative discourse maintains its univocal status (Yuen and Grieshaber, 2009). Conversely, internally persuasive discourse seeks and engages contact with other voices. Autonomy of thought and action are key features of internally persuasive discourse. Bakhtin describes this form of discourse as an interaction between one's own discourse and that of others. Ultimately, these voices can be working in tandem to achieve a particular goal, that is, an ideology. The different ideological viewpoints, approaches and values and strive for hegemony within human consciousness (Bakhtin, 1982).

Policy influences these internal struggles which take place whilst parents are deciding on early years learning and child care for their children. At times, government discourses as represented in policy documents may be in contention for hegemony over the voices of parents. In a study carried out by Yuen and Grieshaber (2009), it transpired that governments not only succeeded in influencing the discourse of parents, but also shape the field of early childhood education. This study complies with the argument discussed by numerous research studies that larger cultural forces do influence parental thought on early childhood (New, 2009). It is clear from the study of Yuen and Grieshaber (2009) that parents acknowledge authoritative discourses when it comes to early childhood, but they do not automatically give up their own view. As New argues, 'what is most clear is that policies of this nature will remain dynamic due to their inclusion of parents in the decision-making process (2009, p.310).

Unmistakably, the role of children, pedagogues and parents is essential to a policy that is fully representative of the cultural, social and political views of a community. The above section has discussed the merits of such participation. The following section looks into critical discourse analysis from a Foucauldian perspective.

3.6 A Foucauldian perspective to critical discourse analysis of policy

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) considers four principal elements essential in the consideration of discourse. Primarily, it considers valid knowledge in space and time; it also contemplates how this knowledge is awarded the status of knowledge and how it is then communicated as such. Thirdly, the functions that knowledge has for its subjects is taken into account and lastly, CDA is concerned with the consequences that knowledge has on shaping and developing society (Jager and Maier, 2009).

The above components focus on knowledge and its transmission, so an analysis of what constitutes knowledge is essential within a discussion on CDA. Knowledge is made up of 'meanings that people use to interpret and shape their environment' (Jager and Maier, 2009). It is also dependent upon time and location, both geographically and also within society. These knowledges can be identified through an analysis of discourse or an extension of CDA: dispositive analysis. In addition, CDA and dispositive analysis identify the power relations surrounding knowledge. One of the principal functions of CDA is to expose the relationship between power and knowledge and make it available for scrutiny. Knowledge can be communicated through a number of vessels such as every day media, schools and policy documents, amongst others. The power relations and the status of these media are also essential to what is hailed as knowledge.

Central to Foucauldian discourse analysis is an 'analysis of current discourses and their power effects, on uncovering the linguistic and iconographic means – in particular, the collective symbolism – by which discourses work' (Jager and Maier, 2009, p.35). Discourses operate mainly through collective symbolism (Link, 1982) and on the function of discourse to legitimise and secure dominance in modern society (Jager and Maier, 2009).

Link (1983) argues that discourse is a way of talking that through institutionalisation acts as a regulator and reinforcer of action. The resultant effect is power (Link, 1983). The accumulation of this knowledge is referred to as 'societal discourse' (Jager and Maier, 2009). In addition, discourse is connected with the exercise of power which in Foucault's theory of discourse analysis leads to other behaviours and discourses (Foucault, 1996). In essence, discourses regulate ways of thinking, talking and acting (Jager and Maier, 2009).

Critical discourse analysis

The principle aim of Foucauldian critical discourse analysis (CDA) is to unravel societal discourse to expose the main components namely, what is said, how it is said (also referred to as qualitative spectrum) and lastly when was it said. In addition, one of the main purposes of CDA is to question and criticise discourses. This is achieved primarily through revealing 'contradictions within and between discourses' (Jager and Maier, 2009). Furthermore, CDA looks at methods employed within discourse to ensure validity and apparent rationality at different locations of time and place. Secondly, the positionality of the critical discourse analyst is essential to the process. Within CDA, the

analyst invokes values, norms, laws and rights which have also been discursively constructed. Central to Foucault's analysis on the mechanisms of institutionalised power is the production of discourses in time and space (Foucault, 1998). In other words, Foucault emphasises the connection between discourse and reality.

Reality

According to Jager and Maier (2009), discourses reflect, shape and enable reality. Discourse can be described as producing subjects and realities. This is done through active subjects who intervene within a time and space, thus assuming the role of co-producers and co-agents. What gives these subjects their privileged roles is their access to knowledge. Worth noting is that CDA is not a retrospective analysis, but it also analyses present production of meaning as conveyed by active subjects (Jager and Maier, 2009).

Power and discourse

It can be argued that power and discourse have a two-faceted relationship. One of these facets is the *power of discourse*, whilst the other is the *power over discourse*. These will now be analysed in turn. The power of discourse can be described as demarcating a 'range of positive statements which are sayable' (Jager and Maier, 2009, p.37). Conversely, the sayable statements also conjure up a range of statements which are not said, thus making them 'unsayable' (Jager and Maier, 2009, p.37). As already discussed above, discourses shape reality interpretations within a society to generate even further discourses. The effect of this is two-fold. Primarily, the discourses contribute in the moulding of both and individual and also a mass consciousness (Jager and Maier, 2009).

The second effect is that the mass consciousness in turn, determines action. Consequently, the syllogism that is argued by Jager and Maier is that discourses determine action that is ultimately the guiding force behind the individual and collective creation of reality (2009).

Power over discourse refers to the different chances of influence that groups or individuals have on discourse. What Foucault argues is that none of these individuals or groups has complete control over discourse, nor over the intended consequence of the discourse. Furthermore, discourses develop and evolve to unintentionally communicate more knowledge than subjects are aware of (Jager and Maier, 2009).

Policy archaeology

As discussed previously, policy archaeology is considered to be one of Foucault's fundamental methodologies to analyse discourse. This methodology considers the process that leads to the construction of a particular social problem rather than attending to the problem *per se*. Scheurich argues that 'Policy archaeology suggests that there are powerful grids or networks of regularities' (Scheurich, 1994, p.301). In order to make a particular social problem visible, Scheurich maintains that regularities, or 'rules of formation', come together from the various arenas of society. As an archaeologist would meticulously dig for hidden clues, unveils them and reconstructs a moment in time gone by, in a similar way the policy archaeologist analyses how a social problem gains visibility (Scheurich, 1994, p.300).

Foucault's discourse analysis desists from analysing actual texts (Fairclough, 2001). Fairclough's work on critical discourse analysis (CDA) supplements Foucault's work on

discourse analysis as it incorporates both Foucault's social and political theories and augments them with linguistic analysis.

The following section will look into a shift that is occurring in policy discourse analysis from the disciplinary societies of Foucault to the control societies of Deleuze (Foucault, 1977; Deleuze, 1995).

3.7 From Foucault to Deleuze

In his epic work, *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault describes discipline as 'practices that constitute the identities of subjects through power relations that do not totally dominate over subjects but function through their actions' (Ruffolo, 2009, p.292). In other words, subjects are assigned a location on a grid and they must maintain this position due to highly defined and prescribed norms. These regulations and norms – referred to as technologies in Foucault's terms, can be described as panopticism and confessions (Foucault, 1977).

Panopticism

Panopticism refers to the architectural construction of prisons where a tower, centrally placed ensures obedience, formality and structure. Self-discipline is instilled in prison through having 'constantly before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is being spied upon' (Foucault, 1977, p.201). This form of discipline employs visible characteristics, whereas unverifiable characteristics of discipline denote that the prisoner

does not know whether he is being watched. What ensues from such disciplinary practices is the normalisation and abnormalisation of subjects (Ruffolo, 2009). In early childhood education panopticism can refer to the discourses within policy documents that normalise or abnormalise children. It can also refer to the educational gazing of documents such as policies and curricula on pedagogues.

Confessions

Ruffolo describes confessions as acts of expression that articulate a sense of self (2009). In early childhood education, children go through this process of confession through identity norms that establish their self. So for instance, the toys that the children choose to play with, the clothes they prefer to wear and the activities that they engage with are all aspects that confess their selves. Another dimension to confessions is the assessment and evaluation that are part of the rigour of most early years settings and policies. In this way children are being differentiated according to what is the expression of the acceptable norm or, on the other hand, what is unacceptable. This idea is especially true when children are assessed and evaluated according to developmental milestones that are integral to most early years settings and policies pertaining to assessment and evaluation. Children are not only confessing to the assessors and evaluators, but they are also confessing their abilities or non-abilities to themselves, such that every action or non-action is internalised.

In essence, the above shows how panopticism and confessions (Foucault, 1977) influence early childhood education. However, Ruffolo (2009) argues that to fully appreciate the changes that early childhood policy documents are going through, an analysis of Deleuze's control societies is critical.

Control Societies

Whereas disciplined societies availed themselves of confined spaces to control members of society, the main approach employed in a control society is through continuous control and instant communication. A main point made by Deleuze is that of deterritorialisation of power and the general breakdown of all sites of confinement (Deleuze, 1995, p.178). When applied to early childhood education, for example, parents are urged by the predominant discourse to prepare their children for early childhood education through what they do at home such as computer programmes and educational media (Ruffolo, 2009). The confines of the early childhood setting have been removed. Furthermore, Deleuze argues that this ensures the businessification of the field.

Another difference between Foucault's disciplined societies and Deleuze's controlled society is the notion of the mechanisms of control. Policy documents within the disciplined societies emanate learning goals, visions and expectations from one source namely, the government. In turn, feedback is returned to the top of the pyramid. In contrast, within control societies, members are accountable to the 'social body where the objectives of learning arise from the immediate relations among subjects' (Ruffolo, 2009, p.300). Thus, Ruffolo argues, the evidence-based practices emerge (2009). In this way, the pyramid is flattened out since the field is regulating itself. Consequently, the re-distribution of power is reflected within policy documents. In turn, this deterritorialisation of power places more accountability and responsibility on the frontline worker (Ruffolo, 2009). The need for perpetual training is created together with the emergence of the critical reflexive practitioner, where a policy document is not simply

accepted as such, but it is a document which comes to life through participation and critical thought.

3.8 Conclusion

In summary, Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 have highlighted some of the issues in the literature that are pertinent to power distributions and dualisms. This power imbalance is also reflected in how policy is formulated in society, where it is increasingly evident that, grand theories mainly influenced by Western, male, positivist ideology are privileged at the expense of other major stakeholders in the field of early childhood education. Children, their parents and pedagogues are rendered voiceless or have voices that are barely audible in the policy-making process. The subsequent chapters in this work aim to address these issues. First, I set out to investigate the desires of children, parents and pedagogues with respect to early childhood education. Subsequently, I suggest ways that translate these findings into a framework for policy that is inclusive and ensures child-appropriate practice.

CHAPTER 4:

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

"The outcome of any serious research can only be to make two questions grow where only one grew before."

Thorstein Veblen

US economist & social philosopher

(1857 - 1929)

Chapter 4

Methods and Methodology

4.1 Introduction to Methods

Wisdom begins in wonder (Socrates)

The above quotation set the stage for this study. By the time the study was taking shape and my thoughts were becoming more coherent, I began asking myself what my role in this study was going to be. I toyed with the idea of being a storyteller, but storytelling implied a certain element of passivity and that did not sit very well with the rest of my thoughts. Similarly, I wasn't pleased with the next level: to be an eye-witness. In the same vein, I did not want my research to be an account of other people's thoughts, lives and experiences. Selfishly, I wanted more than that. Pretentiously maybe, through my research I aspired to be an emancipator and an agent of change. Only time will tell if I have been successful in achieving my goals in this regard.

4.2 Theoretical compass

In this research study, I have used the terms 'postmodernism' and 'poststructuralism' interchangeably. I am aware of the fact that poststructuralist theory revolves around the individual, whereas postmodernist theory is more concerned with human societies and how the individual is functioning in a society, albeit believed to be fundamentally incoherent and discontinuous (Hughes and Cohen, 2010).

Ontologically, my position with regards to the thinking that has framed this study fits the poststructuralists' bill. Postructuralists are concerned with the 'relationships between knowledge and meaning, power and identity and they regard those relationships as dynamic, *(and)* unstable' (Hughes and Cohen, 2010). There are three basic epistemological assumptions that have shaped this study: the research focus, the use of language and the construction of meaning by individuals in a society. The research focus was that of giving children, parents and pedagogues a voice with regards to policy making in the early years. Other sources that have fed this research are the use of language and the construction of meaning within the Maltese early years policy.

Poststructural feminist research

Within the poststructuralist paradigm, importance is given to the relationship between power, meaning and identity and how these inter-relate depending on the linguistic, institutional, social and cultural factors (Hughes and Cohen, 2010). My poststructural thinking led to an interest in the discursive field and I was intent on analyzing these relationships and how they are maintained. However, an analysis of the discourse in early childhood education in Malta did not suffice. Since I am also influenced by feminist thinking, I was intent on doing more with my research. In line with feminist

84

research, I wanted my research to play its part in creating social change (Reinharz, 1992). In Letherby's words, I wanted my research to make a difference:

> Feminist researchers start with the political commitment to produce useful knowledge that will make a difference to women's lives though social and individual change.
>
> (Letherby, 2003, p.4)

In keeping with principles of feminist research, this study employs multiple methodologies, namely the use of focus groups, in-depth interviewing and circle time methodology. The methodologies that I have used in my research are not value-free and they have brought me, the researcher, closer to the participants. During the focus groups with the parents (all were mothers) and during the in-depth interviews with the pedagogues (all were female), I thrived to develop a special relationship with the people I was working with (Reinharz, 1992). The methods were value-laden because at times, during the interviews and focus groups mainly, I showed the participants that I was agreeing with what they were saying, mainly about how they felt left out of the decision-making processes that control early childhood education. I also made clear my political stance, in that, my belief was that there is not enough representation of stakeholders' voices in policy-making. Within the remits of feminist research, by exposing my values, and being genuine to my research, to the participants and to myself, I was hoping to get a better representation of the participants' experience of early years education in Malta.

My backdrop for engaging in feminist poststructural research was the assumption that the powerful members of society dominate social life and ideology. With reference to my research, I have considered children as the group whose lives are dominated by the more powerful in society. In addition, traditionally, pedagogues in early childhood education

tend to be female. According to the latest Education Statistics published by the National Statistics Office (NSO), in Malta, in 2006, the total number of pedagogues working in the pre-primary sector was 795. Out of those, 780 were females and 15 were male (98.1% females). In the primary sector, out of a total of 2,516 pedagogues, 2225 were females and 49 were males (88.4% females) (NSO, 2010). Thus, although gender is not one of the basic criteria within the parameters of this research, it is placing emphasis on women's experiences which according to Harding (1987) are a strong indicator of reality. Although gender is not taking centre stage in this inquiry, it is still making women and their thoughts visible (Harvey, 1990).

Furthermore, through my research I wanted to identify and deconstruct oppressive social structures (Harvey, 1990) through Critical Discourse Analysis. I wanted to expose the structures and the echelons of power within the policy-making mechanism that contributes to the lack of representation of children, parents and pedagogues. Through my research I wanted to listen to the voices of children, parents and pedagogues and their experience of early childhood education from their own perspectives. Social change and reconstruction are two of the aims of this research.

Positionality

My roots are also pivotal in understanding the structure and direction of this research which focused primarily on education and pedagogy in my country of origin – Malta. According to the last census carried out in 2005, the total Maltese resident population was estimated at 404, 962 (www.nso.gov.mt accessed 13/11/2008). The Maltese archipelago consists of three main islands – Malta, Gozo and Comino. Population per square kilometer for the Maltese islands is 1,260.94 (www.nationmaster.com accessed

13/11/2008). Historically, Malta has been colonized by numerous empires such as Phoenicians, Arabs, Romans, Normans, Knights of St John and the French. For two hundred years following French occupation, Malta was part the British Empire before gaining independence in 1964. In 2003, Malta became a member of the European Union.

My familial background has also influenced my thinking to a large extent. When I was about six or seven years old, I fondly remember my mother's kitchen, once a week transforming itself into a hubbub of activity. I'm not referring to the culinary type of activity, but a pursuit where an old and faithful typewriter, several chairs and cushions and about four or five of my mother's friends discussed and typed out plans and policies. My father was in charge of supplying tea and coffee and entertaining five or so young children. My mother's kitchen was where the women's liberation movement in Malta was starting to take shape. I remember asking my dad what where those women doing in the kitchen? And he replied that because men and women were not treated equally, mum and her friends were working to do something about it. So, having witnessed the birth of feminist discourse in my own house, it comes as no surprise that I have been aware of, and sensitive to, inequality issues from a very young age.

My mother's involvement with the feminist movement went further than the weekly meetings at home. My parents both trained as journalists and in 1976, a few weeks after my younger sister was born, my mother was offered the equivalent to the BBC Woman's Hour programme on Maltese national radio. This was her opportunity to further promote the feminist cause through education on the radio. She became a household name and for more than thirty years (even though she is now supposedly retired), she has continued to spread awareness on issues of equality and emancipation through the airwaves and also in

print. She is also a champion of children's rights and currently, by appointment of the Ministry of Justice, sits as a consultant advisor on the Juvenile Court in Malta.

My late grandfather, Remig Sacco, was a journalist who wrote extensively. He often wrote about the colonization process and effects of colonization, in Malta. The media was the tool my grandfather used to highlight injustice and fight ignorance and fear. Understandably, as an impressionable young girl and later during my teenage years, I used to be fascinated listening to my grandfather discussing his latest article with my parents who, as I mentioned previously, are also journalists. This has surely impinged on my thinking, writing and research.

I, as an investigator, am specifically interested in a theory of hope and empowerment. My positionality in this respect is very clear and will be brought to bear in this chapter and throughout the research. These ideologies bear heavily upon my thinking, but have been moulded by my years of training and practice in Personal, Social and Education (PSE) in the early years, where emphasis is made on issues of empowerment and giving children a voice. Another major influence on my views relates to previous training and practice as a social worker in the fields of domestic violence and child welfare. My concerns with issues of power, interaction and empowerment hail from this work experience and training. Another major influence on my thought development has been my research supervisor. She has inspired me down the path of poststructural feminist research during my years as a Masters student at the University of Sheffield.

4.3 My role as a researcher within the schools

Above, I have discussed my own positionality with regards to the study and the motivation that drove me to carry out this research. I will now examine my positionality vis-à-vis the participants in the study.

During circle-time with the child-participants I was operating in teacher-mode. On listening back to the taped sessions, it was obvious that my voice and pace was very much akin to how I sound when I'm teaching young children. The children responded to me as a teacher.

With the parents' focus groups, I explained my position as a researcher and although I said in my introduction that I used to teach young children, they did not really regard me as a teacher. I had also mentioned that I am a mother of a young daughter, which seemed to influence my positionality with the mothers in the groups (as mentioned previously all parents were female). There were instances in the group where the parents were using the camaraderie of motherhood to get certain points across. For instance, an issue that featured in all three focus groups was the amount of homework and extracurricular activities the children are involved in. The parents were seeking my affirmation and understanding as a mother, definitely not as a teacher.

Interestingly, during the pedagogue in-depth interview, one of the younger pedagogues regarded me as a teacher and a researcher. During the beginning of the interview, she was using terminology that is more commonly found in lecture rooms in teacher-training courses. However, as we delved deeper, she felt more at ease and I became a colleague. The other two teachers' approach was different. They were both married, with children

and are trying to juggle a career and a family, so when I said that I was married with a young child, they talked more about the difficulties that the demands of teaching places on their lives and their roles as wives and mothers. In a way, they identified with my positionality in that respect.

One of the participating schools was my old school. It was a strange, yet welcome feeling to return to an institution where I had spent eighteen years of my life. Whilst waiting outside the Head of School's office, I was becoming quite nostalgic (and a little scared). Little things, such as a picture of St. Augustine which used to terrify me as a child because its eyes followed me everywhere, brought back a wave of memories. Even the smell remained the same, the smell of food cooking, mixed with what I describe as the smell of pencils and crayons. This school is a nuns' school and convent, so on my way in I met a few of my old teachers who were delighted to see me and we had reminisced about my years as a student and why I had returned to their school. For these nuns, I will always remain that little girl in plaits, and *"ta' Sacco"* (Maltese for: of the Sacco family).

Methods

4.4 The general aim and purposes of the research

One of the fundamental aims of this research is to explore the relationship between early years policies and the desires of children, their parents and early years practitioners. The extent to which policies echo voices of developmental psychology rather than the wants of children, their parents and early years practitioners is analyzed.

These aims can be realized through the following objectives:

1. To critically review the Early Childhood Education and Care policy document using critical discourse analysis.

2. To elicit children's wants and desires on how they would like to spend their time at school / nursery.

3. To find out whether the children's parents think that their voices are represented in the process of early years policy making.

4. To explore whether early years practitioners think that policy-making is representative of their voice and how their voice can be represented in policy making.

5. To find out how policy makers can ensure that policy making can become more inclusive.

6. To make recommendations for policy changes that would be representative of the data collected from children, parents and practitioners.

4.5 Research questions

Through this work I analyzed the relationship between early years educational policy and the extent to which children's, parents' and pedagogues' voices are represented in these documents. The relationship between the children's parents and their teachers' desires and policy is also analyzed from a reconceptualist perspective.

Against this background, the research questions underlying this work are:

- What is the relationship between early years policies and the desires of children, their parents and early years practitioners in relation to children's voice and agency?

- What are the children's, their parents' and practitioners' desires in relation to learning in the early years?

- In what ways can overarching contextual frameworks for learning in the early years be designed to reflect the desires of children, parents, practitioners and policy makers?

4.6 Focusing the research

The main focus of this research was the participants themselves. Since the main backdrop of this research was voice in relation to children, parents and pedagogues, the participants had to take centre stage. All research-related decisions were taken with this principle in mind.

Needless to say, there were other factors that influenced certain decisions pertaining to the research. One of the main decisions I had to make was the location of the research, that is should the research be based in the UK, the country where I have been living since 2003, or my home country of Malta? A number of issues featured in this decision-making process, such as knowledge of the educational system, access to participants and last but not least temporal and financial considerations. At the end, an intimate knowledge of the educational system and access to participants far out-weighed other factors and favoured the decision to base my research in Malta. I had better knowledge of the Maltese educational system having been part of it all my life, first as a student and then as a teacher. With regards to access to participants, I had more contacts and a better network of potential participating schools in Malta than I had in the UK. I knew all the schools I visited very well and this made gaining access to participants much easier.

Once the location was established, I also had to decide on the age group of the child participants. In more ways than one this decision was partly influenced by circumstances and availability. I had planned to carry out my field work when I was in Malta, between May and June 2010. This is a time when six year old children in Malta are busy preparing for their First Holy Communion. During an initial contact with one of the Heads of the participating schools, the Head was going to rule out participation in the study due to the commitments that the children, parents and pedagogues had in relation to this celebration. To account for this, I made the decision to move down a year group and work with children from Year 1. In the Maltese educational system, due to the absence of a reception year, Year 1 children are mostly aged 5.

A decision I made early on in my research related to gender and gender balance for the participants in this work. I was mindful of the fact that I needed to focus the scope of my research and that including gender as one of the variables would have broadened the research criteria too widely. For this reason, and following due discussion with my supervisor, I decided not to consider gender as a variable in the research.

Lost in translation? Another issue which I considered prior to my research related to that of language, particularly whether to use Maltese or English as the language of choice during the research. On the one hand, I was aware of the risk of losing certain nuances if I were to translate my transcripts from Maltese to English. However, on the other hand I wanted the participants to use the language they were most comfortable with. For this reason I decided to use Maltese as the language of choice of this research. Malta can be described as a bilingual country. Most of the population can speak both Maltese and English. I left the choice of language in the hands of the participants. Interestingly, most

of the children preferred to conduct the sessions in English and the parents and pedagogues preferred Maltese, although some code-switching took place, especially when referring to technical language. I transcribed the parents' and pedagogues' sessions verbatim in Maltese and then proceeded to translate them into English, mindful to maintain accuracy in the process.

An additional overarching issue which I needed to consider related to when to stop collecting data. Initially, I had planned to visit and collect data from four Maltese schools. However, once I had collected data from three of these schools, I became aware that I had reached a point of 'diminishing returns' because the data I was collecting was a replication of what I already had collated. My interviews, focus groups and circle time were adding nothing new to what I had already discerned from the previous sessions. It had become clear that I had reached data saturation. I therefore took the decision that the data I had already collected was adequate for the purposes of this research. I discussed this with my research supervisor who agreed. I then contacted the Head of the fourth school to inform her about this decision and the reasons involved, to which she was receptive and understanding.

4.7 Justification of methods

Sampling: Schools

The schools I enrolled for the purposes of my research were chosen on the basis of a number of criteria. Firstly, I had to ensure that I had access in my informal capacity as a researcher. In this respect, the chosen schools were therefore a sample based on availability and convenience. On this basis, I selected four (of which I surveyed three)

94

church primary schools. The catchment of the schools spanned the whole of Malta. In Malta, parents of children aged three are invited to enter their children in a ballot for a place to be allocated within a church school. The diocese manages this ballot and the selected children are allocated a place in the schools are then distributed across the various schools according to ballot order. This system is significant because it provides a broad range for the purposes of this research. There is a skew towards child-participants being females in this research, however, since gender is not one of the issues being considered, this did not affect the outcome of the study.

Participation by the schools was voluntary. All three schools were very helpful and in all three instances, it was the head of school that made the initial contact with parents and teachers on my behalf. The head of school ensured that the voluntary participation of children, parents and teachers was conveyed on my part. With regards to child participants, the head of school chose the class within the year group and this was solely based on convenience and availability of the children. The children were aware that their participation was also voluntary and that they could withdraw and go back to their class at any time during the fieldwork. In all three schools, child participants were selected on the basis of which of the children had returned a signed parental consent form. As previously mentioned, another selection criterion was the availability of the children at the agreed time. In these three schools, the classes were split in half for circle time and music. So the children who had a signed parental consent form and were assigned to be doing circle time became the participants. The children were all very willing to participate and were very helpful. All parents who agreed to participate were contacted and attended the focus group sessions.

The names of the participating schools anonymized and randomly allocated colour codes. Table 4.1 lists the number of child and parent-participant from each of the three schools as well as the number of pedagogue participant in each individual school.

The methods for data collection were:

1. Circle time methodology with 4-5 year old children from 3 primary schools in Malta.

2. Focus groups with parents from three primary schools in Malta.

3. In-depth interviews with early years practitioners from the same three primary schools in Malta.

4. Critical discourse analysis of the policy document pertaining to early childhood education in Malta.

School	Number of Child Participants	Number of Parent Participants	Number of Pedagogue Participants
Pink Primary	13	11	1
Brown Primary	16	10	1
Blue Primary	6	5	1

Table 4.1: Child-participants, parent-participants and pedagogue-participants in each school

Circle-time methodology

Four to five year old children assigned to circle time had circle time sessions carried out for this study which lasted 30 minutes in all three schools and followed the Jenny Mosely lesson plan model (Mosely, 2003). The first part of the session was an ice breaker whose objective was to get the group comfortable through a fun game. The particular game I chose also helped me get to know the children's names. The session then focused on ground rules. The class teacher informed me that the class already had their own ground rules during circle time, which included: children had to respect each other especially when someone else was talking; they were free to pass if they had nothing to add, and children were encouraged to value each others' contributions. After revising these ground rules with the group, I stressed the issue of consent and that the children who did not want to be there were free to leave at any time.

The discussion part of the session then followed. Through the use of a puppet, I asked the children to complete a sentence which was: 'One of the best things about school is....' followed by: 'One of the things I would have liked to have at school when I was younger was...' The children's responses were recorded and are discussed further in Chapter 5. After processing the children's, responses which involved eliciting main points from the group, I concluded the session with a fun game. All the groups were extremely participative and from feedback I got from the class teacher afterwards, the children enjoyed the circle time session and as one child put it, "I felt important because I could help other children" (child participant).

In an unpublished syllabus developed by a focus group set up by the Ministry of Education in Malta, the Mission Statement states that:

Personal and Social Development (PSD) aims at empowering individuals to develop skills, that enhance their well being, by identifying and developing their potential thus enabling them to participate effectively in their social environment.

<div align="right">(Ministry of Education, 2002, p.9)</div>

One of circle time's main aims is that of empowering the person. This is achieved through the facilitation of knowledge, skills and abilities to the individual with the main emphasis being skills. The central pedagogical approach implemented during circle time is *experiential learning* (Kolb et al., 1984). This pedagogical theory avails of techniques aimed at assisting the learner in becoming aware of everyday choices and reflecting upon them. Through this reflexivity, the learner would subsequently become aware of alternatives which could be applied in varied situations extraneous to the learning environment (Gatt Sacco, 2005).

Through circle time activities, children are empowered to share their 'personal feelings and ideas about anything important to them' (Duman, 2009, p. 1730). This was the backdrop for choosing circle time as one of my methods in this study. In addition, I have been trained as a PSE teacher at the University of Malta and for six years I was employed as a specialist PSE teacher in an independent school in Malta. As part of my training and in my role as a PSE teacher, I received the necessary training to apply this tool and had the necessary experience to implement it effectively

Another justification for circle time as a method in this study lies within the roots of circle time itself. It can be argued that the origins of circle time can, in part, be traced back to one of the pioneers of early childhood education – Friedrich Froebel. In

Pedagogics of the Kindergarten (1912), Froebel discusses the use of circle time as an opportunity for the child to appreciate the significance of relationships in nature and in life. Sadly, the games that Froebel refers to in the *Pedagogics of the Kindergarten* have never been published, however, Liebschner in *A Child's Work* contends that the culmination of circle time in the Froebelian model saw the children coming together in a big circle where other children's wishes and demands have to be taken in consideration (1992). The democratic facet of circle time is thought to have been emphasized in the 1930's (Rubenstien-Reich, 1995 in Lang, 1998). This was developed further in 1945 when circle time was hailed as a means of fostering democratic values in Sweden.

Since the theoretical framework for this study sees its roots in reconceptualisation I was aware that I was going 'against the tide' (Yelland and Kilderry, 2005). This was also reflected in choosing circle time as a method. Peter Peterson, who in the 1920's was Professor of Education at the University Laboratory School of Jena in Germany, wrote that:

> The absolutely new point of view in this Theory of Guidance is the
> supposition that in the varied pedagogic situations in schools, pupils and
> teachers meet as interdependent selves. Because of his (sic) mastery of a
> greater quantity of subject matter and because of his (sic) greater maturity,
> normally the teacher teaches and the children learn. But there may be
> moments when it is the child who teaches whereas the teacher learns. The
> process is quite different and may go without words, but this diversity is to
> be accepted as a natural aspect of human life.
> (Quoted in Both, 1990)

Professor Peterson is hailed as the founder of the *Jenaplan* where the formal way of communicating is in a circle where everybody sees everybody and nobody dominates. This democratic behavior is expected of the teacher, as well as of the children (Lang,

1998). Indeed, this democratic empowerment is one of the main aspects of this study. I wanted the children to inform me about what they consider to be essential in early childhood education. Furthermore, circle time facilitates communication within a group and allows children to be both listeners and speakers. I was not new to using circle-time as a research method. As part of my research for my Masters degree, I had used circle time methodology with children to collect my data and I was aware of its benefits and effectiveness. Hence, circle time as a method provided the ideal tool to achieve the aims of this research.

In-depth interviewing

During an in-depth interview, the researcher tries to find that kind of intimacy that is commonplace during mutual self-disclosure. Given that self-disclosure is reciprocated, the researcher is also active in generating thoughts and ideas that might lead to further revelation. However, mutual self-disclosure must not be erroneously mistaken for friendship. The researcher is duty bound to clarify boundaries, in that the information obtained during this interaction will be used for the purpose of the research, rather than for the purposes of friendship. In-depth interviews are useful particularly when 'deep' (Johnson, 2001, p. 104) information and knowledge are required, such as information about a person's occupational ideology and perspectives (Johnson, 2001). It is with these considerations in mind that data from early years practitioners was gathered through the use of in-depth interviewing.

I met with the pedagogues soon after the circle time sessions with the children. In all three schools this was suggested by the heads of schools and the pedagogues themselves

100

for convenience's sake. With all three pedagogues, the interviews were carried out during a free lesson, whilst the children were doing subjects with a specialist teacher such as Physical Education (PE) or Information and Communications Technology (ICT). The interviews lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. Two of the sessions were held in the teacher's own empty classroom and one of the sessions took place in the staff room (no-one else was present). In all three instances the pedagogues themselves chose the venue for the interview. The interviews were digitally recorded and the data will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

Focus groups

Focus groups bring together a specifically chosen group to explicitly discuss a chosen topic. Data and outcomes emerge through the interaction within the group. Morgan (1988) suggests that focus groups are particularly useful when the researcher wants to create an interaction within a group about a particular topic. Focus groups were the tool of choice with parents. One of the aims of this research was to elicit a healthy interface of ideas between parents so that views and ideas could emerge through communication within the group. Since one of the main purposes of the study was for parents (together with teachers and children) to voice their opinions with regards to policy in early childhood education in Malta, it was envisaged that focus groups would allow the participant's agenda to predominate (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000).

Focus group interviews with parents were the preferred method of data collection given the focused nature of this technique and the fact that I envisaged a large amount of data to be gathered in a short period of time. I acknowledged however, that the quantity of data

collected in this fashion might have been less than when using individual interviews with the same number of individuals on a one-to-one basis (Morgan, 1988).

I made it a point to inconvenience the parents as little as possible. To this end I met with them at the respective schools either at the beginning of the school day after they had dropped their children off, or just before the end of the school day. A total of 26 parents participated in these focus groups, 11 from the first school, 5 from the second and 10 from the third (Table 4.1). All parents participated willingly and were very enthusiastic about giving their views about early childhood education. It was at times difficult to get individual parents to listen to what other parents were saying due to the fervour that this topic raised in each of the three groups. The sessions lasted for approximately one hour. The sessions were digitally recorded; later they were transcribed and sent back to the participants for verification. No amendments were made by the parents. When the sessions were held at the end of the school day, the group discussion had to be curtailed because the parents did not want to be late picking their children up. However, on leaving the schools, I observed that participating parents were still discussing issues raised in the group. When the session was held in the morning (Brown Primary School), parents were still discussing issues two hours after the focus group session had ended and I had already moved on to carry out the circle time session with the children and the in-depth interview with the pedagogue. A copy of the guide questions for the focus groups sessions can be found in Appendix 4.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the policy document

CDA provides a structured framework of analysis; it 'documents multiple and competing discourses in policy texts, highlights marginalised and hybrid discourses and it

102

documents discursive shifts in policy implementation processes' (Taylor, 2004, p. 433). In so doing, it provides the policy researcher with three aspects of policy analysis: the text itself, the hidden or absent text and the implementation.

With reference to the importance of text, Fairclough states that a knowledge-based economy, new communication technologies and discourse driven social change have led to language becoming central to sociological analysis (2001). Luke (1997) argues that CDA isn't only an analytical tool that examines education *ipso facto*, but it is also a 'research practice which has some force and which can make a difference' (Luke, 1997, p.349).

Discourse can be analysed in two ways: textually oriented discourse analysis and non-textually oriented discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003). From a Foucauldian perspective, a discursive analysis would scrutinize the social and historical context of a document; whereas Fairclough (2003) engages the analysis of 'linguistic features' in the text (Taylor, 2004). From this perspective, issues related to power and power structures emerge because CDA focuses on text, the social and political context, and also takes into consideration the historical context (Fairclough, 2001).

4.8 Ethics in educational research

Research attempts to acquire new knowledge by transcending the limits of what is currently understood. In an attempt to attain such new understanding, it is implicit that one will venture beyond the confines of familiarity and into the unknown. By its very

nature, educational research deals with human participants and their lives. This venture into the unknown places a burden of responsibility upon researchers to ensure that participants are not exploited or harmed in this quest for new knowledge. This accountability has repeatedly been brought to the forefront by notorious publications that have caused physical, psychological or moral harm not only to the research participants themselves, but also ultimately to the research community as a whole (see MacIntyre, 1982).

The endeavour to establish ethical methods of performing social research with human participants is well established (Howe and Moses, 1999). Over the past decades, researchers have witnessed a progression of ideas starting from basic ethical concepts, such as minimisation of harm, to more recent developments on participatory research. Needless to say, ethical concerns are also dependent on the research methods employed, be this quantitative or qualitative.

It is generally accepted that awareness of ethical issues needs to be established at the outset of every research project. Conceptually, Aubrey (2000) argues that researchers using different methods, be these qualitative or quantitative, disagree as to what constitutes ethical issues. As such, determining whether or not ethical issues within the two methods are the same or different remains, at best, difficult and more often than not, contentious. As studies in educational research rely increasingly on mixed methods to gather and make sense of data, one might argue that the boundaries between the two models have become even less distinct (Gatt Sacco, 2008b).

When considered side-by-side, both methods give importance to core values such as truth, consistency and applicability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), albeit with some differences in procedural approach. For example, in the search for truth, quantitative researchers emphasize methods that include standard measures, replicable findings, comparison to accepted gold standards, minimisation of bias, and successful prediction. Qualitative researchers, on the other hand, emphasize different parameters in their pursuit of trustworthy results. These include, for example, the need for prolonged immersion in the area of interest, study from several different points of view, recording detailed description, discussing findings with experienced members of the relevant community that record procedures, actively debate among members of the scientific community, and systematically exploring the investigator's and participants' points of view throughout the research process. This is of pivotal importance to my thesis. I have endeavoured to immerse and partake in the lives of the research participants. As mentioned earlier, one of the reasons why I chose to analyse Maltese Early childhood educational policy as opposed to UK policy is the fact, that although I have been living in the UK for the past eight years, I had more cultural and social knowledge of the Maltese educational system and its ramifications.

The appropriateness of a particular method depends on the quality of the research that is being performed. Since, 'research is ethically sane at its inception' (MacFie, 1999, p. 938), the rigour with which the study is carried out is reflected in the ethical questions which the researcher asks throughout the study process. These considerations are best exemplified by reflecting on issues which relate specifically to informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, misinterpretation and misrepresentation, exploitation and

boundaries, as well as social construction and cultural sensitivity. I shall explore each of these in more detail, stressing how each are relevant to my research.

Informed consent

The ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) states that 'all educational research should be conducted within an ethic of respect for the person' (BERA, 2004, p.5). Central to this principle of respect is the concept of 'informed consent'. A person can be said to have given 'informed consent' when they freely and willingly agree to engage in specific conduct based upon an appreciation and understanding of the facts and implications of their actions. By inference, informed consent is a continuous process, not a distinct action. It is the starting point of well-designed research endeavours, and must be continued throughout the course of investigation.

Mindful of this fact, failure to obtain informed consent for participation in research may be considered as an abject disregard of an individual's autonomy and right to choose, irrespective of whether the research endeavour is quantitative or qualitative in nature. Procuring informed consent respects the research participant and in so doing, the researcher endeavours to make the research process morally acceptable and harm minimized. Research carried out in this way adheres to the spirit of the ethical guidelines for educational research as outlined by BERA, and, possibly more importantly, is decidedly respectful of human decency (Gatt Sacco, 2008b).

This raises the issue of how informed 'informed consent' actually is. MacFie (1999) argues that knowledgeable consent is not 'black and white' (MacFie, 1999 p. 938),

because achieving an adequate informed decision on the part of research participants is also dependent on the amount of time that the researcher spends with the participants. Exploitation of research participants is recognized as a contentious issue and Dame Mary Warnock has rooted this issue squarely on the process of obtaining informed consent (Warnock, 1998). In a research project, it is often the case that individual participants end up being used as means to an end (albeit within action research projects); a situation which may be worsened if participants are not aware of what is going on (Warnock, 1998).

With reference to qualitative research unexpected themes can arise throughout the research process for which, neither the researcher nor the participant would have envisaged. For example, at the time of the interviews, researchers may be given more information than that which was agreed to at the time of consent. In addition, researchers may want to hold onto their research diaries and field notes so as to be used in future research. When such circumstances arise, research participants should have the prerogative of withdrawing their consent for the use of their data (Richards and Schwartz, 2002). As previously mentioned and to ensure that research is ethically sound, researchers should treat consent as an ongoing process; a 'process subject to renegotiations over time' (BSA, 1991). This encourages the move towards participatory research as well as an attempt to minimize exploitation. Needless to say, there are practical drawbacks to this approach, which include the geographical mobility of research participants, as well as the fact that re-contacting participants may be construed as unnecessary harassment. Nevertheless, the consensus of the scientific community appears to be that the benefits of treating consent as a process in preference to a one-off act outweigh the drawbacks (Gatt Sacco, 2008b).

In my research project I obtained informed consent by primarily explaining the research questions that I was asking to the potential participants during a preliminary meeting. After this, participants were given an information sheet which they were invited to take home, reflect upon and subsequently return for the actual research session if they wished (See Appendix 6). Since I had both child and adult participants, different strategies were employed. Prior to the circle time sessions, the children and I discussed the project and what they were being invited to do. Prior to the circle time sessions, the child participants' parents had been given an adult information sheet and a separate consent form which they had to complete and sign.

On collecting the data, I re-checked with the participants that the data that I had collected was indeed the data that the participants wanted to share with me. This process was ongoing, taking place both whilst the session was underway by way of me, the researcher paraphrasing and checking that I was interpreting the participants' thoughts accurately and also at the end of sessions through summarising what had been discussed. I undertook this process with both child participants and adult participants.

Confidentiality and anonymity

Within the interpretative method, a vast amount of personal information is usually gathered, sometimes in a seemingly non-prescriptive fashion. Personal narratives form an important part of the contextual data made available to the researcher. It is the researcher's ethical responsibility to ensure the proper protection of that data through apposite and secure storage of files and transcripts. Furthermore, steps should be taken to

ensure that the anonymity of participants is safe. This can be achieved through the use of pseudonyms and initials in transcripts and the elimination of markers that can identify individuals or otherwise eliminate others, making participants identifiable by omission.

With regards to this research, participants' names were never recorded. Both adult participants and child participants were made aware of their right to remain anonymous. Confidentiality was discussed at the beginning of each session both with the adult participants and also with the child participants. Appropriate language and examples were used with the different participants. Data that has been collected electronically will be destroyed by the researcher a year after the award of the Educational Doctorate. Written data will also be disposed of appropriately at this time. Participants were made aware of this procedure during the sessions.

Misinterpretation and misrepresentation

In qualitative research, participants have the opportunity of voicing their take on a particular issue or life concern, in contrast to a quantitative analysis, where responses are often limited to one-liners. However, if the researcher either misinterprets or misrepresents that data, the ethical soundness of the research project may be at stake, as the final report may not reflect the true views of the participant. One solution to this quandary may take the form of 'participant research' wherein data is fed back to participants. In this way, respondents have the opportunity to validate the collated data prior to publication, ensuring its correct representation and interpretation (Richards and Schwartz, 2002). I employed this approach through my research. Once the data was collected and transcribed, I discussed the data that I had recorded with the participants.

One of the problems that I encountered was that not all participants could be present for the second meetings.

Other commonly utilized methods to enhance the appropriate interpretation and representation of collated data are supervision and reflexive practice. It was helpful to have the opportunity to present findings during the residential Weekend Study Schools of the EdD programme at the University of Sheffield. Colleagues offered their feedback, which was very insightful. It was an opportunity for my research to be dissected and mulled over by individuals who were in a similar situation as my own, being totally immersed in their research. My research findings were also discussed with my research supervisor, and this helped the reflexive process immensely.

Exploitation and boundaries

Hammersley and Atkins (1993) claim that the imbalance within the research relationship is inevitable even when the researcher is intellectually and consciously committed to avoid exploitation of participants. Feminist theorists have often warned researchers of the dangers of exploitation and power imbalance within research relationships (Ribbens, 1989). Whilst all forms of research are at risk of this pitfall, these issues may be exacerbated in qualitative research because of the (often) stricter confines of quantitative projects. A good example is that of ethnographic research, wherein the researcher becomes so immersed within the culture and environment of the participants that boundaries become unclear. This could lead to a situation where participants provide information to the investigator out of a sense of duty towards the research relationship rather than because they are exercising free will. In other words, the provision of data is because of feelings of obligation rather than of their free and informed consent. One way

I dealt with this quandary was to check with the participants at different times of the research that it was acceptable for them to leave any time they wanted. Prior to the sessions, I also stressed the concept of free participation to the head of schools. This was especially problematic with the child participants. However, the Heads of the participating schools substantiated my understanding that participants were not being coerced into taking part in my research and that the precaution, that I had put in place to prevent this coercion appeared to be working. It was interesting to see mothers who had participated in my focus group in one particular school still discussing issues an hour and a half after I had finished the session and went on to carry out the interview with one of the pedagogues at the school. When they saw me, one of the mothers said, "We couldn't stop!"

The qualitative interview can result in another pitfall in the form of 'participant ethical relationship'. Empathic responses and willingness to listen may sometimes be confused with therapeutic interventions and in this way participants may be encouraged to divulge more information than they were initially willing to do. Similarly, the researcher may be tempted to ask questions which are not pertinent to the research. One way of exercising some control over this ethical issue is to ensure that participants have the opportunity to veto what gets published and for the researcher to have the opportunity to be reflexive throughout the investigative process (Richards and Schwartz, 2002). As I mentioned earlier, I protected my research against this pitfall by firstly preparing a set question guide to help facilitate the research sessions within the limitations set in the consent process (Appendix 4). I then checked with the participants that the data I had recorded was faithful to what they had expressed during the groups.

Social construction and cultural sensitivity

Weis (1992) argues that the identity of the researcher is made up of three parts: the identity within the researching field, the one outside the field and a separate identity within the researching community or institution. These aspects of one's identity not only affect the ethical soundness of a research project, but also the methodology employed (Weis, 1992).

Arguably, a researcher becomes what the people in the field will define him/her as being, with little control over this. A possible explanation for this could be that through their participation in research, the investigator becomes part of the cultural totality of the participants. From this viewpoint it became essential, both from an ethical perspective and also from a methodological one, to ascertain my positionality at the outset of the project. By acknowledging my perspective (both intellectual and personal) *a priori* and throughout the project, it was possible to curtail fracturing of the self (Weis, 1992).

The construction of language, beliefs and attitudes is dependent upon social relationships where the research is taking place (Howe and Moses, 1999). Qualitative descriptions within research are dependent upon the relationship, beliefs and cultural norms of the researcher and participant as distinctly divergent from the neutral language that regulates quantitative research. It is through a dialogical relationship that participants' voices can be truly heard and interpreted to reflect the true spirit in which they were originally intended by the participants. During this research, the use of language was of concern to me. As discussed earlier, the language issue, that is, whether to use Maltese or English and the issues that might arise from translation was something I had to reflect at length

112

upon. At the end I decided that the participants would indicate to me the best way to solve this dilemma.

4.9 Ethics in research with child participants

Defining 'child': pertinent legislation and professional codes of ethics

The Oxford English dictionary defines 'child' as 'a young human being below the age of full physical development'. This relatively vague characterisation of a child highlights at least two essential principles about childhood. Firstly, that a child is different and distinct from an adult, and secondly that it is not possible to be prescriptive about defining childhood (Gatt Sacco, 2008b). Standardising a definition of the term 'child' has been problematic due to the parameters used. In the legal framework, chronological age has been a key factor in establishing a dividing line between childhood and adulthood, however many recognize that this prescriptive approach fails to reflect what constitutes a child in a holistic manner. In 1940, Isabel Gordon Carter, a professor of social research in Philadelphia (USA), warned the academic community that chronological age alone was inadequate for defining the term 'child'. She argued that:

> It is not to be assumed that the ages set by legislators are necessarily representative of the thinking within the respective states, nor is it to be assumed that such enactments of age limitations is necessarily the most desirable solution of the problems involved. It is possible that future legislation may continue to modify age limitation, or in some instances, at least, age limitations will be eliminated entirely, leaving to the administrative officials the definition of what constitutes a child in a particular case.
>
> (Gordon Carter, 1940, p.41)

113

In contemporary publications authors proceed to identify characteristics that should be incorporated in such a definition (Morrow and Richards, 1996). These include the need to take into account context and cultural considerations, as well as the need to take each case on its own merits. Extrapolating from this second suggestion, it is implicit that research proposals that involve child participants should define what they mean by 'childhood' within the framework of that particular research project.

It is noteworthy that the ancillary definitions of 'child' in the Oxford English dictionary are 'a son or daughter of any age' and 'the descendants of a family or people'. In other words, the term 'child' also denotes a relationship and a close affiliation with others (Morrow and Richards, 1996). The parental bond is often perceived as a decisive factor on the outcome for any research involving children. However, it is naive to assume that the parental relationship is the only obstacle to research with children. The child is surrounded by other relationships that may act as 'gatekeepers' during the planning and execution of educational research. Few have expressed this more poignantly than Campbell (2008) who describes the trials and tribulations he had to endure during the recruitment phase of his research as a result of near insurmountable restrictions by the university's ethics committee, family service providers and parents alike (Campbell, 2008, p. 33). A holistic definition of childhood within the parameters of educational research needs to take into account such relationships and negotiate access with each new hurdle encountered. Regardless of these difficulties, interest in 'child-inclusive practice' has been on the increase (Campbell, 2008).

In an attempt to both facilitate, as well as regulate, access to child participants in research, a number of constituted bodies have issued guidance on this issue. Central to

these considerations is a body of legislation exemplified by the United Nations
Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which has now been ratified by many
states. Article 12 of the CRC stipulates that:

> 1. States parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or
> her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters
> affecting the child, the views of the child given due weight in accordance
> with the age and maturity of the child.
> 2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the
> opportunity to be heard in judicial and administrative proceedings
> affecting the child, either directly or through a representative or an
> appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of
> national law.

(Convention on the Rights of the child, www2.ohchr.org, accessed 25 June 2008)

The CRC clearly places the onus of accountability upon researchers to perform research
with children, but also assigns investigators with a responsibility to work within a child-
inclusive practice. This convention goes a step further by specifying that administrative
and judicial proceedings should give children a voice. Implicit to this ruling is the notion
that educational research should be targeted *for* children, rather than *on* children
(Noddings 1986), such that research can positively impact their lives. Accordingly,
educational researchers are bound by the CRC to perform ethically sane research with
children.

The British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for
Educational Research (2004, includes a specific section on ethical issues pertaining to
children as research participants. In this framework, children are compartmentalized with
vulnerable young people and adults, in a similar fashion to other such strategic
documents. In the spirit of the CRC, article 14 of the guidelines highlights the importance

115

of giving primary consideration to listening to children on matters which affect them. With reference to informed consent, article 16 recommends that consent from guardians such as parents is only required when the 'extent to which they (children) can be expected to understand or agree voluntarily to undertake their role' (p.7) as research participants is limited.

Research ethics with children participants: same or different?

So far the common perception appears to be that degrees of competency can be used to distinguish children from adults. In their writings, Morrow and Richards (1996) identify at least three competencies (or in their absence, incompetencies) which affect how researchers tackle ethical dilemmas pertaining to children as research participants. These include the observation that children are conceptualized as vulnerable individuals; children are perceived as incompetent beings and the relevance of children's powerless status in an adult society. These perceptions are considered below in turn.

Vulnerability

Historically, children have been considered as vulnerable individuals. Implicit to this is the recognition that they need protection rendering them unsuitable as research participants (Campbell, 2008). This perception of the vulnerability of the child has manifested itself in a number of ways, primarily within the socially acceptable belief that children need protection.

There are a number of reasons for this way of thinking. Research is dominated by studies of groups of children who are indeed vulnerable, a direct result of a body of research that

116

has focused on children who face difficult situations in their everyday lives (Qvortrup, 1989). Further, children are perceived as being physically and biologically weaker than adults (Landsdown, 1994). However, many are now mindful of the fact that the child is not necessarily more frail or feeble than their adult counterparts, but that children live in a world constructed by adults for adults. As such, children are devoid of social, political, economical and civil rights. Misconceived childhood vulnerabilities have been, for the large part, constructed by adults through a progressive 'disempowerment' of children by adults in society (Morrow and Richards, 1996). While misconceptions about childhood vulnerability and weakness are intuitively a narrow-minded and abject misrepresentation of youth, the consequences are self evident. Children are now almost universally perceived as weak, passive and open to abuse. They require special ethical considerations to ensure their protection as research participants.

Whilst acknowledging that truly vulnerable children do exist and that these individuals do require protection, this view of childhood is, for the best part, an oversimplification, a misrepresentation which hinders the social analysis of childhood. Misconceived perceptions on vulnerability and the need for protection prevent educational researchers from capturing a genuine picture of childhood. The resultant lack of understanding of childhood has an additional derogatory 'positive feedback' effect that renders children even more vulnerable. In direct contravention of the CRC, this standing denies children the possibility of becoming social actors whose experiences have values which are of true social significance.

This dominant, *quasi*-dogmatic discourse (which describes children as vulnerable) restricts researchers from positioning children as less vulnerable individuals (Campbell,

117

2008). As such, few attempts have been made by researchers to make children's voices heard from their own perspective and as primary sources of information (Morrow and Richards, 1996). The creation of new methods which portray children in a less vulnerable position are automatically refuted (Campbell, 2008). This (misplaced) school of thought has rendered children voiceless in western society (Campbell, 2008). When dominant discourses focus on children's vulnerabilities, adults view children as their property and children's true needs tend to be ignored; children are rendered all but insignificant (Maudeni, 2002).

I wanted to distance myself from the notion of vulnerability of children in my research. It was for this reason that the method of data collection I chose with child participants was circle-time methodology. This is considered to be an empowering method (Mosely, 2003) and through my field work I found that this provided a medium for the children to speak about their thoughts on early childhood education from a position of strength.

Incompetence

Another difference between children and adults as research participants is that children are often perceived to be incompetent. This ineptitude is perceived on a number of levels, leading some researchers to doubt the validity and reliability of children's contributions to research (Morrow and Richards, 1996). Additionally, complex ethical considerations previously mentioned and the perceived profound differences from adult research participants have resulted in some individuals questioning whether children should be allowed to participate in research in the first place. Fine and Sandstorm (1988, p.47), maintain that because of these profound differences from adults, '...discovering

118

what children "really" know may be *almost* as difficult as learning what our pet kitten really knows. We can't trust or quite understand the sounds they make'.

The counter-argument to this position is that children are actually capable of verbalising or otherwise demonstrating whether or not they are willing to participate in research. Many feel that it is unacceptable to reduce children's cognitive processes as par to that of kittens. After all, it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure proper understanding of what children say and do (Morrow and Richards, 1996). The endeavour of educational research should be about children's experiences and knowledge of the world from their own perspective, not an assessment of what adults expect them to know (Morrow and Richards, 1996). Claiming incompetence due to lack of understanding on behalf of the researcher shows disregard for children's ability to be research participants. Researchers are duty bound to find ways to ensure proper understanding and correct interpretation of children's data. However, Waksler cautions against adults acting as interpreters and translators of children's behaviour. One way of guarding against this is through participatory research where children are involved in all phases of the research to include data analysis and ultimate interpretation. In this respect, children's competencies should be viewed as *different* not *inferior* to that of adults (Waksler, 1991). The follow-up sessions I had with the children where I shared and discuss my findings proved useful in this respect.

Power and powerlessness

The concept of power is an intriguing ethical dilemma that educational researchers face when enrolling children as research participants (Morrow and Richards, 1996). The child's status of powerlessness in an adult world described previously makes the

119

participation of children in investigational projects a major challenge. Mayall claims that in these circumstances the major test for researchers occurs during the interpretation of data rather than during data collection itself (1994). While it is self-evident that research involves a degree of interpretation of the collated data by the researcher, a major pitfall is that this analysis may misrepresent or misinterpret the data collated from child participants. Qvortrup blames this on the need to interpret data derived from another age group 'whose interests are potentially at odds with those of (the researchers) themselves' (Qvortrup, 1994). Being only partially cognisant of children's views has a profound effect on the type and quality of the research performed because of the direct consequences this has on both the research methods used for data collection as well as the way that the data is ultimately interpreted.

I attempted to counteract the effects of misrepresenting the children's voices in a number of ways. Namely, during the circle-time sessions, as part of the methodology, I was recapitulating what was being said. In addition, once the data was collected and analyzed, I discussed my data with the children to ensure that I was faithful to their voices. The children had the opportunity to agree or disagree with my interpretation as they deemed fit.

Listening to children's voices

Historically, ethical debates about children as research participants have centred around issues pertaining to children's willingness to participate in research. However, children do negotiate the extent to which they are willing to engage in research (Hill, 2006). There are various ways how researchers can ensure ethically sound research that employs methods that are respectful to children. Firstly, as in other qualitative research with

120

adults, over-reliance on one type of method to collect data can lead to bias and might produce artefacts of testing. In addition, researchers should strive towards being creative in their methods combing different techniques and using multiple research strategies that encourage children to participate interactively (Morrow, 1999). For instance the use of visual and digital methods can facilitate participation. Researchers can also involve child participants to partake in the development of research strategies and methods. The child-participants could themselves be invited to test out methods and then feedback to the researchers what works and what does not.

Researchers can improve willingness of participation by ensuring child-friendliness of key considerations which influence research outcomes. These include, for example, method choice, motivation, and above all listening to children's voices.
Investigators are increasingly committed to listening to children's narratives and this has led to an explosion in innovative methods to perform research with children (Greene and Hill, 2005). These range from traditional questionnaire surveys and interview studies to the more contemporary methods which involve role play, games and exercises, all of which are becoming increasingly popular (Hill, 2006). The more recent trend of combining methodologies has increased the likelihood that data collection is ethical by securing more proper representation and interpretation within the limits of the collated data. Interactional methods such as role play and games also encourage a higher level of trust between researcher and participant when compared to more traditional approaches to research (Hill, 2006). It is with this mind-set that I chose circle time as the method of choice to collect data from the child participants.

Level of involvement

Children are known to be concerned about proper participation and representation in research projects (Hill, 2006). However, at the same time, from a practical perspective a balance needs to be sought about the level of involvement of children participants in any research project. Researchers should respect children's time as being as precious as that of adults. For this reason, research questions and formats should be curtailed so as not to take up too much of the children participants' time. Additionally, they should not be too intrusive into the private life of children and their families. Children participants have reported that questions about individual experiences could sometimes be intrusive (Hill, 2006).

Issues pertinent to power and privacy also influences children's willingness to participate in research (Christensen, 2004) and must be addressed to keep research ethically sound. Children's willingness to participate in research can be encouraged through proper consideration of the relationship that exists between the adult researcher and the child participant. Ethically sound research ensures that this relationship is one where children's voices are heard by giving due consideration to differences between the generational groups and cultural diversity.

Performing research with children raises numerous other ethical considerations, some of which are common to all forms of research, such as issues of anonymity and confidentiality and others that are specifically pertinent to the participation of children in research. Examples of the latter include issues of vulnerability, incompetence and powerlessness.

Society's views of childhood and children's abilities influence the extent to which children can participate in research. Ethical guidelines provide one of the means of ensuring that child participants are treated respectfully. However, it is necessary to caution against too many restrictions and the excessive interference by gatekeepers on the false premise that this is in the best interest of the child. Evidence presented here suggests that such stringency can hinder investigations with child participants and limit researchers from representing children's stories as they really are. This is counterproductive and ultimately detrimental to children in their role as members of society.

Empowering children was one of the main aims of my research. To achieve this, as a researcher I tried to be diligent so as to guarantee overall ethical soundness as well as the faithful representation of children's perspectives. Ethically sound research which ensures that children's voices are heard can enhance children's lives. Such educational research has the potential to benefit the children directly involved in research in the short term, but these benefits may also resonate through later generations of children.

Specific documentation relating to my application to the University of Sheffield, School of Education Ethics Committee for this research is provided in Appendices 1-7 of this thesis. The ethical procedures as prescribed by the University of Sheffield were followed and all necessary documentation was completed and approved.

4.10 Approaches to data analysis

The techniques adopted in this research include circle time methodology, focus groups, in-depth interviews and Critical Discourse Analysis. In implementing the various

methods, I followed the framework as described by Mann and Stewart (2000). In this framework, the salient considerations are that data should be collected for one purpose only, that people involved in the research should have access to the data about themselves, that the data should be protected against damage, loss, modification or disclosure, that data should be collected in the spirit of free speech and that data should not be communicated externally without consent. The University of Sheffield's ethics application covers the above and I made provisions to adhere to all of these considerations.

With reference to circle time sessions, in-depth interviewing, and focus groups I employed thematic analysis to systemically organize the data. My first step was to collect the data. Sessions with participants were digitally recorded. These were later transcribed and from these transcriptions patterns started to emerge. In accordance with this approach I have created lists which I then compared against the three participating groups to find relationships between the data.

This research does not set off with a hypothesis that needs testing. On the contrary, my motivation behind this research was to get an understanding of a situation. For this reason, thematic analysis allowed me to code the data in a way which was representative of the data collected in the field. Within this research, thematic analysis was shown to be responsive to the situation in which the research was conducted. This is in line with the values that have underpinned this research namely, elements of poststructuralism, predeterminism and voice.

Thematic analysis is described as a 'foundational method for qualitative analysis' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.4). As described above, I have used thematic analysis to thematise

meanings from my data for a number of reasons. Primarily, thematic analysis offers flexibility as a method, in that it fits a broad range of theoretical frameworks (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and ideologies. In addition, due to my positionality as discussed earlier, I wanted the theory to emerge from the data. Thematic analysis is described as being 'essentially independent of theory and epistemology' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.5).

Thematic analysis is an approach that acknowledges the ways individuals make meaning of their experience. In addition, it sheds light upon the social context and the meaning individuals ascribe to their experiences. Thus, thematic approach as a tool, was useful in unravelling and unpicking the surface of reality (Braun and Clarke, 2006) in this study.

The thematic analysis approach used in this study can be described as an 'inductive approach' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.12). The themes were identified and then linked to data. A number of steps as indicated by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed in identifying the themes. These were:

1. Familiarising myself with the data: this involved listening to the digital sound recording of the data for a number of times. This was followed by transcribing the data.

2. Generating initial codes: at this stage highlighter pens and coloured sticky paper was used to begin to organise the data.

3. Searching for themes.

4. Reviewing the themes.

5. Defining and naming the themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

In this study, themes refer to a pattern within the data that demonstrated a relationship to the research questions in one way or another. It is essential to point out that prevalence

125

of a theme does not necessarily reflect the number of times the particular theme appeared in the data corpus. However, it does reflect a judgement or decision on my behalf as a researcher as to whether the theme was indeed reflective of the research questions.

To claim that the themes emerged from the data would be to deny the 'active role' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.7) that I as a researcher had in this process. My values, thoughts knowledge and positionality have undoubtedly played a role in identifying a theme over another. In this research, I claim that one of the aims of my research was to voice the wants of children, parents and teachers in relation to early childhood education in Malta. Nonetheless, my values, and ideas have in one way or another impinged upon my selection (or omission) of data items from the data corpus.

Having identified the data items, I catalogued the related patterns that emerged into subthemes. The subthemes emerged from the participants' stories and were pieced together in a 'meaningful way when linked together' (Leininger, 1985, p.60).

My main sources of data were the circle-time sessions with the children, interviews with the pedagogues and focus group session with the parents. Once I had transcribed the sessions, and validated my transcriptions with the participants, I started coding. I found that using my field notes whilst coding was immensely useful. My field notes, other than being a memory prop were also helpful in the coding process. In a way, the coding process had already been instigated in the field.

I coded my circle-time sessions, focus group sessions and interviews using a constant comparison approach. I coded my data from a particular set of participants with the previous data from another group of participants in mind. In this way, I could identify

categories and properties. From this set of categories, core categories emerged. Core categories were those categories which were mentioned with high frequency and were associated with the other categories.

Throughout the process of data analysis, I also made use of memoing. This consisted of writing notes to myself on sticky paper which I then attached the relevant set of data. Together with the core category and the categories, memos depicted the different characteristics of the emerging theory.

The final phase of the data analysis process consisted of sorting. The sticky notes and the categories were grouped according to the properties or issues that they addressed. In this way, the relationship between the groups was identified. At this stage I referred back to the literature. This allowed me to make inferences and develop further the themes that emerged.

For the purpose of studying the Maltese early childhood policy document, I used Jager and Maier's 'toolbox for analysis' (Jager & Maier, 2009, p.52). The authors divide this analysis into two sections namely, framing and analysis (Jager & Maier, 2009; Huckin, 1997). This made collection of data systematic and logical, ensuring that significant issues pertaining to my research did not go unnoticed.

4.11 Conclusion

Having explored my role within this research study, I recognized that I did not want to be a story-teller or an eye-witness; instead I wanted to be an agent of change. In order to be

an emancipator though, I first had to listen to the participants' voices and, to an extent, be an eye-witness through the process of gathering data by way of the methods employed. The story I tell through this research is truthful to the extent that it is a story as seen from my own perspective, through my own set of lenses; cognisant as well that these lenses may have distorted to some extent how the story was understood and re-told. Hopefully, my findings are not too dissimilar from those messages that my respondents wanted to convey. As Greenback states:

> Reject claims that research is able to uncover the 'truth' by adopting a
> value-neutral approach, preferring instead to accept the existence of
> different realities due to the influence of values in the research process.
> (Greenbank, 2003, p. 789).

CHAPTER 5:

ANALYSIS OF DATA

"It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts. ."

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

British mystery author & physician

(1859 - 1930)

Chapter 5

Analysis of Data

This chapter describes the findings of my research within three Maltese primary schools. As discussed in Chapter 4, I have used thematic analysis to analyse my data. Below, I have specified the various themes that have emerged from my data. A discussion of each theme ensues.

5.1 The emergence of themes

On analyzing my data, a number of themes started to emerge in relation to voice and policy in early childhood education. Since my study sought the distinct views of children, parents and pedagogues, the emerging themes will be discussed accordingly. Furthermore, the findings that relate to the analysis of policy through critical discourse analysis will be discussed separately. Some of the themes are common between the different participating groups.

5.2 The children's circle-time sessions

The main themes were:

1. Grown-ups need to listen to the children

2. Listening

3. Friendship and camaraderie

4. Play

5. Non-academic pursuits

Themes 1, 3, 4 and 5 were the themes that emerged as a result of what the children said would make learning in the early years more fun. Theme number 2 is an observation that I made on account of what the children said and how they behaved during the circle-time sessions. Themes 2 and 4 have been further subdivided into categories.

Analysis and presentation of findings

Having identified the key themes, my next consideration was how I was going to analyse and present my data. . In the light of the qualitative nature of my study, compounded with my positionality with regards voice and empowerment, I felt that thematic analysis was the most suitable approach to elicit the theory from the participants' data. Statistical analytical tools would have been inappropriate in this study for a number of reasons. Primarily, I wanted each participant to be heard. In a statistical analysis, participants become numbers and unless their voices are in unison, or there are many of them saying the same thing, the value of what they are saying as individuals would be lost. Secondly, I wanted to analyse my findings and as a researcher become part of that process through which the theory emerged. It can be argued that when a statistical programme is used to analyse data, the process is extrinsic to the researcher, whereas, I wanted to be at the very heart of that process. This became more apparent to me during the fieldwork. My interviews, focus groups and circle time sessions contained intense and powerful data. From the outset, I was intent on using qualitative analytical tools to examine my data, and as the fieldwork developed, I became more convinced of this approach. I felt that I could not effectively convey what the participants were telling me by employing quantitative statistical analysis.

Initially, I envisaged that my data would be full of surprises. However, when I immersed myself in the data it became apparent that I was partly anticipating some of the answers. This previous mind set is what made me choose my research topic in the first place. I call these thoughts a *mindset* rather than a theory. , Within my research, I wanted to allow the theory to naturally emerge from the data. Some researchers might argue that the data leads them down the path which allows their theory to emerge without necessarily knowing the destination. I tend to somewhat disagree with the contention that I did not know my destination. I had a rough idea of where my data was leading me to and once I was immersed in the field, it became more apparent. Having said that, I must stress that I did not select a theory in advance. This would have seriously jeopardized my data analysis. However, my positionality, and mindset could not be ignored. My view is that by being aware of this, I could be more truthful and faithful to my data.

One of the attractive qualities of thematic analysis is the flexibility that it allows the researcher. Research can be fluid and sometimes researchers may find themselves answering questions which they had not previously considered in their initial research questions. This enriches the study and demonstrates a certain level of commitment to remain loyal to the voices of the participants. As a result, I contend that my research became stronger. There is however, the flip side to this argument. Potentially valid data could be disregarded if stronger data associated with a different research question emerges. Having said that, if that is what the participants wished to convey, my position was that I should convey those thoughts and not my own agenda because that would answer my initial research question.

Findings

The findings and a discussion of the significance of these findings follows. From the children's circle time sessions the following themes emerged.. These sessions took place in May 2010 in three schools in Malta.

The Children's emergent theory

The participating children in the sample of Maltese schools want to make their education better by getting the grownups to listen to their voices. They want to play more and have longer breaks at school. Notwithstanding, they value learning and are fully capable of understanding and articulating the concept of the work-play balance. They value friendship and the camaraderie that ensues as a result of them being at school. They also understand that the balance in the curriculum needs to be readdressed through non-academic pursuits. Finally, from the data analysis, it is evident that the curriculum is successful in creating what Foucault describes as *docile bodies* and his notion of discipline is further exemplified through the findings. These themes will be discussed further below.

Theme 1: Grownups need to listen

In all the three sessions in the different schools, this theme came across very strongly and many of the children felt very fervently about this issue. This point was made by more than two or three children in each circle time session.

The grownups need to listen

> Sometimes the grownups need to ask for help as well
>
> (Children's responses during circle time)

It is interesting to note the use of the verb in the above quotations. The children in all cases used the verb 'need'. They could have used the verb 'have'. However, the use of the verb 'need' denotes a feeling at a deeper level of wanting grownups to listen to their voice. Children have often been at the receiving end of the use of the word 'need', both when it is used as a verb and also when it is used as a noun (See Qvortrup, 1994, Woodhead, 1997 and Parton, 1996). The discourse around children's needs is centred on two deficit models of the child (Wyness, 2002). In the first instance, a comparison is made between a child and another child labelled as a *problem child*. The discourse surrounding the child with the problem label is imbued with a needs language. The needs of the abused child are not met by the parents or state, the needs of the disabled child are dissected by the education and health authorities and the needs of the child with special educational needs are discussed in several fora. All these examples illustrate how the child requires intervention on behalf of an adult or a group of adults.

The use of the second deficit model is more prominent in the western discourse of the child. It portrays the child as incomplete, as lacking when compared to the adult such that the language of needs now applies to the whole child-population. The adult provides for those needs whilst the child is in adult-training. It is argued that childhood is an apprenticeship for adulthood and the needs of the child are met in the first instance by the adult and as the child develops, the needs are steadily worked through (Wyness, 2002). So in essence what the child participants have done is turn the adult world on its head. They have challenged the adults to take on the deficit model that they have been assigned; and for a while let the children have a say.

This leads on to another point which the children participating in the study wanted to convey. They were expressing their frustration with how they are denied full social status (Wyness, 2002). One of the implications of this exclusion from full membership in society is that children are denied citizenship. Social inclusion and citizenship are prerequisites for political participation.

The a-political child

As a result of children's lack of participation in society and their assigned incompetence, adults take on the roles of children in society that require social and moral responsibility. Adults speak and act on behalf of children because children are deemed unable to do so because of their age and implied ineptitude. In Western ideology, being a stakeholder in the political arena implies the observance of rights and obligations (Wyness, 2002). Since adults have taken on the moral and social obligations of children, essentially children have become invisible in the social and political arena. The children's lack of political status implies that their needs are identified and met by adults. This concept has been developed by Archard in his 'caretaker thesis' (1993, p.51) where it is argued that adults take on the responsibility for children's physical, moral and social needs. Furthermore, due to the lack of children's voice and participation, these needs are not only met by the adults, but also identified as needs by adults and not the children themselves. Because adults are placed in this position of power where they identify and provide for the children's physical and social needs, children are thus placed in a powerless position where they do not have a say in their own welfare. From this

powerless position, it is incomprehensible to think of children as political actors. It is for this reason that the child is rendered a-political.

However, this study has shown that not only is it unjust to oust a portion of society out of the political decision-making process, but that, in contradistinction to this viewpoint, children actually want to be part of this process. In all three circle-time sessions, the children expressed their vexation at not being part of this process. The language used, 'grown-ups need to listen' implies that the children have been trying to partake in the decision-making process in society that concerns their welfare. It is the adults who have not been doing the listening, not the children who have not been doing the talking. The children placed the onus of responsibility to rectify the situation on the adults.

In a sense, the children are telling us adults to stop seeing their welfare in terms of 'needs', and instead change our perception to children's 'interests'. A needs-based approach to children's welfare implies helplessness and dependence; on the contrary, 'interests' purports agency, competence and responsibility. When a social group is formed, group members usually share common interests. In a similar manner, when children are recognized as competent social actors in their own right, who are capable of articulating their own interests within society, they form a 'separate social category' (Wyness, 2002). This otherness does not see its inception out of a power differential. The separateness when thinking in terms of interests is a celebration of difference where the issues of power are addressed and children's involvement as social actors is given its due credit.

Theme 2: Listening

> Listening to each other
>
> Be good and staying quiet
>
> Sitting quietly on our bottoms and putting our hand up to speak
>
> It will be easier to do something if we listen to each other, if we do what the teacher says the first time.
>
> We can listen, work will be easier and then it will be more fun because the teacher won't be cross and we can enjoy it.
>
> (Children's responses during circle time)

The above are a few of the comments that the children made during the circle time sessions with reference to this theme. These illustrate the use of various teaching methods and classroom management techniques that are employed at an early age to create what Foucault describes as 'docile bodies' (1979).

In *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison* Foucault (1979) first described the notion of disciplinary technologies. Foucault describes this moulding of bodies using formal techniques and operations as 'one got rid of the peasant and given him the air of a soldier' (Foucault, 1979). The moulding which takes place is what creates the notion of docility, hence, the use of the term 'docile bodies'. Foucault argues that the docile body is made up of two parts 'the analyzable body which is joined to the manipulable body' (1979). When the two terms – analyzable body and manipulable body - are dissected it becomes clear how in early childhood education, children are subjected to this moulding into docile bodies.

In the first instance – the analyzable body, educators have been using psychometric testing, standardised tests and developmental milestones to analyse children and their development. Not only are these techniques used within the remits of the classrooms without questioning, but they are also made universal by the prominence they are given in most teacher-training programmes. The testing and categorising also leads to another notion related to how these tests are used to attain normalisation within the classroom. A child who does not make the mark in the standardised tests, or who does not satisfy the requirements within a developmental milestone is identified and in a desire to normalise and conform, measures are taken to rectify the situation. Foucault describes this as a form of efficiency that results in the making of docile bodies. Through this efficiency then, it can be argued that the classroom will produce the desired results within the environment of educational gazing that is constantly pushing teachers and children to meet targets.

The other aspect of the docile body which Foucault describes is the manipulable body (Foucault, 1979). A docile body can be 'subjected, used, transformed and improved' (Foucault, 1979). In a sense, once a docile body has been attained, it can then be moulded further and improved. The connotation here is that there was something wrong with the original. There are various disciplinary techniques that are employed to attain this state of manipulable bodies. To begin with, most teacher training courses in Malta teach Pavlovian and other behaviourist strategies to the aspiring and novice teachers. Once again, behavioural psychology becomes unquestionably universal. What is being disregarded is that it is children and not dogs that are being told to listen, to sit down nicely, or to put their hand up before they speak.

The children during the circle time sessions reported back evidence that the education system is indeed transforming them into docile bodies. Teacher training programmes and teaching methodology is indeed a way of how bodies are controlled. It also creates an expectation of how everyone else should behave where those children who veer from what is expected and accepted are shunned upon and often ostracised by means of punishing methods such as the use of the Golden Chair or the Naughty Step. In this way children are moulded into the knowledge that what is desirable is to be docile.

Theme 3: Friendship and camaraderie

Friendship featured highly during the circle-time sessions with the children. During the sessions the child participants talked about the importance of friendship and why this is important to them.

Friends are important at school so that you are not lonely.

- Share better at school.

When someone hurts in the playground, friends can go tell the teacher and others help him (sic).

Be kind to our friends.

If we have something we don't know we ask for help from our friends.

Be more kind because rude is not nice and when we're kinder, we're helpful and happier.

(Children's responses during circle time)

Research into friendship in early childhood education has identified the importance of forming significant relationships in the early years. Through socialisation in the early

years, children can begin to learn constructive social behaviour such as sharing and empathy (Bern, 1994). It is also widely acknowledged that the relationships between young children contribute to their social and cognitive development (Niffenegger and Willer, 1998). Children's ability to form friendships is significant to an individual's growth. Emotional ties help the children cope in different ways. For instance, during the circle time sessions, children expressed the importance of friends during a stressful event. One of the boys mentioned how friends are the first port of call after an injury in the playground. Another girl talked about the knowledge that friends provide in times of doubt at school. The concept of sharing also featured highly during the sessions. Children talked about sharing colours and pencils, but they also talked about sharing feelings. During one of the sessions a child said:

> When my dog died, I was very sad. I told my friend Sarah (name changed) and that day she stayed with me and she also shared her sweets with me.
>
> (Child participant)

It is evident from the above that this child was grateful to her friend for sharing her sweets, but also for spending the day with her. In a sense, this example illustrates what Costin and Jones call emotional responsiveness and prosocial interventions (1992). Through friendship, children are learning to recognize the cues to which to respond to and the correct ways to respond in a relationship.

However, from a reconceptualist perspective, one needs to question whether the representations of friendship and early childhood are guilty of universalising childhood. The Reconceptualist movement has been instrumental in responding and challenging the claims for universality of dominant discourses (Sorin, 2005). When considering

friendship and early childhood education, it may be possible that the lens being used is one that is creating power for some children and families whilst marginalising others. In other words, the view of friendship in the early years may be dominated by discourses such as Developmentally Appropriate theory and child development theory. If this is the case, children from middle-class homes who have the necessary cultural capital (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009) are benefitting more from the friendship experiences of early childhood education. This then might shed light on the findings of Morison and Masten, who sustain that those children who lack friendship in the early years are at risk of academic problems, dropping out of school , criminality and mental health problems (1991). In addition, the prevailing theories and knowledge about friendship and the early years is sustaining the Western, linear developmental trajectories. It is clear that more research is required into the nature of friendships in the early years from a reconceptualist perspective.

Theme 4: Play

Play was another theme that emerged as a result of the circle time sessions. Some representative responses relating to this theme include:

Longer breaks

More time for play and longer breaks

We have to play more

First we work, then they give us a break, and then we play and then we continue our work.

So then we can think better and know what we're doing. If we rest a bit then our brain is refreshed, we can think and we think a lot and then we'll know and then when we know all our work we can have fun.

(Children's responses during circle time)

Several categories transpired within this theme. One of the main concerns of the children was the need for more play at school. Another issue that became apparent during the circle time discussions about play what the role of the adult (either teacher or parent) during play. Lastly, the children talked about an aspect of play described as affordances of learning (Wood, 2009). These three categories will be discussed sequentially, in more depth.

More play

Policy documents in both the UK and Malta (EYFS, 2008 and ECEC, 2006) mention the value of play as part of the learning process in the early years. The in-depth analysis of the role of play within the Maltese policy document (ECEC) will be discussed at a later stage, as part of the discourse analysis of the policy. The EYFS stresses the importance of play as part of the curriculum and it highlights the validity of creating meaningful play situations for children. According to the children participating in this study, this is a step in the right direction and the children want more of it.

At this stage, it is essential to reflect on what play is and the quality of play provision. Sociocultural theories that inform policy documents in various countries such as Te Whariki in New Zealand, First Steps in Australia and Reggio Emilia, to name but a few, have stressed that play should not be left to chance (Wood, 2009). Play should be integrated and in response to specific social situations and relationships that occur within the child's life at home and at school. Research has shown that through play children develop verbal communication skills, improve their social interaction abilities, enhance their creativity and hone in their problem-solving techniques (Wood and Attfield, 2005). Thus for play to be meaningful, it has to be relevant to the child's interests and socio-

cultural situation. There are instances when play does not always tally with the child's home and community cultures (Wood, 2009). This is where play stops being a bridge between the real world and what is possible and becomes a source of tension where inequalities and discrimination can take place.

The children in this study stressed their wish for more play. Research suggests that incorporating play within the daily routine in the classroom becomes challenging beyond the pre-school phase (Bennet, Wood and Rogers, 1997). The authors in the Bennet et al. study found that frequency, duration and quality of play suffered at the expense of demands on teachers to be accountable, perform and achieve. For this reason, adults in this study reported taking a more non-interventional approach to play. This concept leads on to another category that emerged from the circle time sessions with the children.

The role of the adult during play

> Child: The teacher can play a little with us and then go back to her work.
> M: During lessons or play time?
> Child: Both because if teachers play with the children learning will be
> more fun.
>
> (Child during circle time)

One of the ways that teachers can adopt an interventional approach to play beyond the pre-school years is to have a pedagogy of play. Wood (2009) describes a pedagogy of play as 'the ways in which early childhood professionals make provision for play and playful approaches to learning, how they design play/learning environments, and all the pedagogical decisions, techniques and strategies they use to support or enhance learning and teaching through play' (Wood, 2009, p. 27).

This definition highlights the use of play as a strategy for learning. However, it also draws attention to teaching through play. Indeed, this aspect was identified by the child participants as one of the ways that will make school more fun. The discussion between child-initiated and teacher-led activities has long been a contentious one. Whilst taking the merits of both into account, it is also essential to recognize what the children are saying, in that more emphasis should be placed on the presence of play as a relationship between individuals of different age groups. Together children and teachers can construct meanings, communicate, teach and learn through play.

Affordances for learning

> I liked pre-junior because we had a lot of toys and big blocks, a see-saw and I used to try to make a see-saw out of blocks. We used to get all the teddies out and hide them under the table and then throw them at each other.
>
> (Child during circle time)

Play activities create affordances for learning (Wood, 2009). Affordances for learning include the ability to perceive the actual and imaginary possible uses of objects and how these can be transformed. The above quotation illustrates this child's ability to go beyond the conventional use of the blocks and use these to make a see-saw. In a way it can be argued that affordances for learning are pushing the boundaries in play. For instance, the use of new technologies both in the classroom and at home have provided children with added challenges and benefits to children's learning (Marsh, 2005; Yelland, 2007).

However, this leads one to reflect on whether play activities as prescribed by various policies are once again created with the universal child in mind. The cultural implications of play need to be examined before play strategies can be suggested within policy documents. Policy-makers need to look at the cultural implications of play, what meaning is assigned to play in different homes, neighbourhoods and educational settings. Another important consideration is the role of gender and stereotyping in play. Since it can be argued that play provides the medium through which children can enact real-life situations, professionals in the field must be aware of how the child is understanding and interpreting their cultural and social habitus (MacNaughton, 2000).

In addition, professionals need to be aware of whose learning is being privileged through play activities. For instance, some children never get to take responsibility for the planning of a play activity. Power relations within society, prejudices and cultural differences may be reproduced during play within an early years setting.

In conclusion, through this study, early years practitioners are being asked to be playful in their approach to teaching and learning. Maybe listening to the children will introduce the concept of lifelong playing (Wood, 2009) alongside that of lifelong learning.

Although play was one of the themes identified through Grounded Theory, it was also clear from the circle time sessions that the children had a good insight into a work-play balance. This was evident in what the children said. For instance, one of the child participants claimed:

> First we work, then they give us a break, and then we play and then we
> continue our work.
>
> (Child during circle time)

Further evidence of this work-play ethos that the children were talking about is the final theme that emerged from the circle-time sessions. I have labelled this non-academic pursuits.

Theme 5: Non-academic pursuits

Generally, this theme might be referred to as extra-curricular activities, however, to honour my commitment to the child-participants in this study, I have decided to rename it as non-academic pursuits. The children were adamant during the sessions that what is generally referred to as extraneous to the curriculum, should be incorporated within it. It is for this reason that the term *non-academic pursuits* is being used. The children were referring to activities which are generally more associated with after-school clubs. They claimed that they wanted to see activities such as ballet, dancing, football, cooking, art and crafts activities as part of their daily routine at school. Although in Maltese schools some of the above activities are offered at school, the children in the study maintained that they do not always have enough time for these pursuits. They also stressed that there were times when these non-academic pursuits had to be relinquished in favour of school work (academic subjects).

Participation in non-academic pursuits carries with it a number of benefits (Mahoney, 2000). If the children themselves are able to choose the non-academic pursuit, they will be more inclined to choose something that they are interested in and in an area where

145

they know that they will excel (Mahoney and Cairns, 1997). In addition, social networking and friendships can be encouraged through participation in such non-academic pursuits. Same-minded children will have the means to share common interests and pursuits (Mahoney, 2000).

It has been shown that participation in non-academic pursuits is beneficial at a number of levels. For instance, school drop-out in adolescence and a reduced crime rate have been shown in a longitudinal study by Mahoney (2000). However, it would be interesting to observe the benefits of participation in non-academic pursuits for the early years.

Availability and accessibility of non-academic pursuits should also be taken into consideration. Once again, there is the risk of universalising this concept. Financial, time and knowledge constraints could potentially place children from specific sectors of society at a disadvantage. Careful policy-making and at times positive discrimination may help to readdress this imbalance.

In conclusion, the above emergent themes have shed light on what the children in the three Maltese schools visited thought would make schools more fun. In Chapter 7 of this research I will use themes that have emerged here to inform recommendations for future policies pertaining to early childhood education.

5.3 The parents' focus group interviews

My opening question in all three sessions with parents was whether they knew of the existence of the policy. I followed this question by showing the parents a copy of the

146

policy document. One of the most poignant findings that emerged as a result of the parents' focused group interviews was that in all three groups, none of the parents were aware of the existence of the policy that regulates early childhood education in Malta, The Early Childhood Education and Care Policy. Since the participating parents did not know about the existence of the policy, I briefly discussed the role of the policy and how its implementation was being envisaged. When I asked whether any consultation with parents had taken place, all participating parents answered that they did not even know about the policy document, let alone have a say in what was written in it.

The participating parents in all three focus groups felt very strongly about what they had to say. At times, participating parents were talking over each other and it was quite challenging to get some parents to listen to one another. The parents also talked about their worries and anxieties of parenthood. My dilemma was whether to try to re-direct the group to discussing policy in early childhood education or not. However, in the end, I concluded that if what I wanted to achieve out of these sessions was to give parents a voice, the parents should be given the space to express their worries and anxieties. These concerns could then serve as a springboard for proposing recommendations for future policies. I was aware of the dangers of either transforming the sessions into some form of group therapy, or to be mistaken for the 'expert'. For this reason, I was attentive to stick to my role as facilitator where I limited my interventions to managing the group dynamics and to ensure that time constraints set down in my methodology were adhered to.

The Parents' emergent theory

The main themes identified from these focus group sessions were:

1. School as a form of discipline

2. Childhood nostalgia

3. 'Digipanic'

4. Disneyfication of childhood

5. Values in our society

6. Children's rights and responsibilities

These emergent themes will be discussed in turn.

Theme 1: School as a form of discipline

School gives the children a sense of discipline.

They learn rules, it gives them routine and a schedule.

It gives children a sense of purpose and gets the family together.

(Parents from focus group sessions)

The notion of discipline was a common thread within all three focus groups. Parents were concerned that their children create havoc around the house particularly during the holidays. At times, during all three focus groups, I was getting the impressions that holidays were considered to be a great nuisance to parents. They claimed that school provided the children with the sort of discipline that they approved of. This theme highlights the notion of docile bodies (Foucault, 1977), which was already identified as a theme during the children's circle time sessions. From a Foucauldian perspective, this is a type of discipline that although, in essence, is being exercised by the parents themselves, still resonates of the tension between the powerful and the powerless. In a way, parents and teachers concur that children need to be transformed into docile bodies. In his book *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault portrays the genealogical analysis of

148

power which he explains as discipline (Holligan, 2000). What those in power want to achieve, according to Foucault, is the governmentality of those who lack power. This is attained through specific regulatory techniques including: inspection, discipline and normalisation. From a Foucauldian perspective it can be argued that the parents are in conspiracy with the state to achieve governmentality of their children. It can also be argued that parents, by having already gone through their own process of governmentality, are aware that it is through discipline and normalisation that their children will be successful in their lives. In turn, their children's success or failure in life could also be a reflection of their parenting abilities.

Knowledge is a means of achieving the normalisation process to produce docile bodies (Foucault, 1777). The discourses of knowledge, which are dependent upon a power differential and ideals of the Enlightenment, deceive members of society into thinking that through knowledge they are being liberated. The deception continues with the idea that within the socio-political structures, individuals within a society believe that they cannot do without these said structures (Hall, 1992). Within this method, it is thus understandable that parents in the focus group sessions were so keen on saying that their children needed the routine and the discipline that the early years offer.

With parents, who have all been children themselves and have also been subjected to this form of routine and discipline, it is not surprising that this form of reproduction of events takes place. Challenging an ideology that reproduced the mechanism of creating docile bodies to achieve governmentality is to move away from normalisation, with the consequences that such an action carries with it. Foucault's notion of power reaching the very capillaries of existence and permeating into individual bodies is a way of describing

this parental fixation with discipline and routine (Foucault, 1980). Parents can be likened to the capillaries, the medium through which this creation of docile bodies can be achieved.

According to the child participants in this study, they are not happy with this state of affairs. However, children's voices are ignored, partly due to the internalisation of educational regimes which produce self-controlled bodies (Walkerdine, 1986), and partly due to the power differential between adult and child. In this way educational policy is reproduced through the mechanism that creates docile bodies and rewards normalisation.

In conclusion, the way parents talked about how educational regimes are beneficial to their children is somewhat a symptom of a collective amnesia of childhood that the parents themselves had. This notion leads on to the next theme that emerged from the parental focus group sessions that of childhood nostalgia.

Theme 2: Childhood Nostalgia

> When I was at school we did not have this sort of pressure. Life was so much easier then. Those were the days.
>
> I don't remember having to work so hard at school and after school doing homework, we used to play in the street after school with the neighbourhood children.
>
> We never had expensive toys that needed batteries to work, we were always happy.

<div align="right">(Parents from focus group sessions)</div>

In his book, *The Invention of Childhood*, Hugh Cunningham quotes the 1842 journalist Lady Eastlake who wrote that 'childhood was the truly enviable part of life'

<div align="right">150</div>

(Cunningham, 2006, p. 15). This envy relates to those emotions felt by adults of a time gone by, of a childhood that now lies in the past. Cunningham goes on to argue that adults might look upon their childhood with nostalgia and reminisce about their childhood days as being the happiest days of their lives. However, it is questionable how reflective of reality this notion is: 'Childhood was something to be got through on the way, they hoped, to something better' (Cunnigham, 2006, p.15).

So, in a sense, through childhood nostalgia, adults are mourning the childhood that never was. This could explain why, for many, childhood evokes feelings of lack and absence (Moran, 2002). Stewart (1993) attempts to define nostalgia and retraces its origins to a 'desire for desire', where childhood is viewed through a utopian lens and all that was horrid and difficult with it brushed away to one side in an attempt to reconcile with the past. By creating nostalgic memories, the lived experiences become pushed aside and the narratives created for the 'mediated' (Stewart, 1993, p.23) experiences become more comforting and offer more of a reconciliation and closure with the past.

Through this form of collective re-creation of childhood, as being representative of the best days of our lives, a utopian childhood is being created. However, a history lesson would show that in fact, the present children's voices are being ignored. For many children, across the centuries and in the present day, life is not all about playing outside with their friends. As illustrated previously in the circle time analysis, children have talked about their worries, preoccupations and frustrations that they go through. Subsequently, with regards to policy and policy making this type of nostalgic discourse may be obfuscating what the children are saying in terms of what they want out of their early childhood education.

Another effect of childhood nostalgia which the parents talked about during the focus groups sessions was their preoccupation with the amount of media and digital technology the parents felt their children were being bombarded with as opposed to when they were children. This has been identified as the next theme and will be discussed below.

Theme 3: Digipanic

I have coined the term *'digipanic'* by combining the beginning of the term *digikids* as used by Jackie Marsh (2005) in her analysis of pop culture and the media with regards to young children; and 'panic' is derived from Cohen (1987). The reason why I have called this theme *digipanic* is to explain the feeling that came across when the issue of new technologies, media and young children arose during the parents' focus group sessions. As I have explained above, these sessions were a form of catharsis for parents who had a forum where they could talk about the task of being parents as well as their experience as parents of children in the early years.

One of the intra-themes that emerged was the adults' fear of new forms of technology and an anxiety that the children were too exposed and vulnerable to this sort of media. In 2001, Luke and Luke considered what might be at the root of this fear of children's competencies with the media (Marsh, 2005). Luke and Luke (2001) argue that fear and anxiety of new technologies have throughout history triggered 'moral spectacle and panic' (p.100). The authors exemplify this by referring to the Protestant educational reformers of the early sixteenth century who felt threatened by the young men on the streets at night and suggested that they should have been indoors studying scripture

instead. Five centuries later, and parents in the focus groups sessions were still making references to children being better off reading a book than watching television, as is illustrated by the quote below:

> Parent: I hate it so much that she (the daughter) watches so much television. It's Dora and Boots all the time. I'd rather have her read a book instead.
> M: Dora counts, does shape and letter recognition.
> Parent: It's not the same. It's watching a picture move. When she's reading she's thinking and concentrating.
>
> (Conversation with a parent participant during a focus group session)

The parents also showed their concerns about the children knowing more about the new technologies than the adults. They talked about losing control and also about how they could no longer monitor what their children were doing because it was happening so quickly. This issue is also discussed by Luke and Luke (2001). Parents are finding it difficult to keep up with their children's proficiency with new media technologies. Even though this research study has taken place a decade after Luke and Luke (2001) talked about why parents feel that their children are more vulnerable to paedophiles and stalkers because of new technologies, the same worries are still troubling parents today. According to the sample in this research, parents still are the 'outsiders to kids' insider know-how' with regards to new technologies (Luke and Luke, 2001, p.103).

Referring back to the Foucauldian notion of docile bodies and governmentality, it seems that parents and educators could be losing control because of this skills shift. Children have become the proficient users and the owners of knowledge, which in Foucauldian terms is shifting the balance of power. This would result in parents and educators losing

control to a certain extent. As a consequence, governmentality and maintenance of the principle of the docile bodies would thus be lost. Subsequently, new technologies are demonized and labelled as harmful to young children.

This leads on to another subtheme that emerged in this category. Parents in the focus groups talked about the 'experts' and the potential damage that can be caused by television, computer games and console-based games such as PlayStation and Nintendo Wii. This quote from a mother of two young sons sums up the scaremongering that the media has generated in this regard:

> Parent: We recently bought the Nintendo Wii for the boys' birthdays. I think it was a mistake. They are far better at switching it on and playing on it than I am. I can't do it. I worry that if they play too much they'll become aggressive and violent. I tell them over and over again, to stop playing and to read a book instead. I try to get support from my husband on this, but instead he encourages them and tells me that I shouldn't believe all that I hear. I don't know – he's sort of proud of how good they are on the Wii.
>
> (Parent participant during a focus group session)

A number of issues emerge from what this mother said. Firstly, the moral panic (Cohen, 1987) that computer games can turn docile, young children into aggressive individuals is evident here. The media capitalisation on this issue has led to parents believing what the so called *experts* and studies say about the dangers of obesity, playstation thumbs and violence. In an attempt to re-address the power differential between adults and children, and because in this area children are appearing to be the more skilled, new technologies are being demonized.

Another interesting point is the fathers' role. According to this mother (and other mothers in the groups were in agreement), fathers were more inclined to support and encourage the use of console-based games such as Xbox and Nintendo Wii. A gender divide is apparent here. One of the conclusions that can be reached from this observation is that if dads are crossing over to the other side and becoming conversant with their children's Xbox and Nintendo's, these fathers are in a way overcoming that anxiety and becoming skill proficient themselves.

A sub theme that emerged illustrates the conflict between what the 'experts' (in this case, teachers) say and real life parenting:

> Parent: When we have talks at school, the teachers are always telling us to limit the amount of television that the children watch. But sometimes I can't do otherwise. Mind you it's always something suitable for children like Nick Junior. There is so much work to be done in the evenings and I have no choice. I'd rather be playing with them [the children], but the clothes have to be washed and ironed, supper has to be cooked... and everything else. I feel so guilty.
>
> (Parent participant during a focus group session)

Marsh (2005) highlights this incongruence between parental and teacher attitudes towards children watching television. This is explained in terms of Bourdieu's doxic attitudes. Bourdieu explains doxa as taken for granted principles and attitudes because they are part of the hegemonic discourse within the habitus of individuals in that field (Marsh, 2005). However, contrary to Marsh's findings, the parents in this study, rather than resisting what was being said about children and television, seemed to internalize what was being said by the teachers and as a consequence, this caused the mothers anxiety and worry. A possible explanation for the difference in findings could be cultural, in that Marsh's study was located in the North of England, where as this study took place in Malta.

An additional point emerges from this mother's quote. It is apparent that new forms of digital literacies which children engage in are not seen as significant forms of learning. This was substantiated by another mother who said:

> I worry because my daughter spends too much time on the computer. She should be reading or we should be doing things together, but she likes it. And there is so much to do and I feel so guilty.
>
> (Parent participant during a focus group session)

Unlike Marsh's findings, the parents in this sample were concerned over their children viewing too much television or using the computer and they did not rate it as a significant mode for developing literacy. Instead of a tool or a form of entertainment, it was a source of stress and anxiety.

Theme 4: Disneyfication of children

Another aspect of children's popular culture that parents participating in the focus group sessions talked about was how their children were being influenced by all things Disney. This influence did not merely stop at the children's choice of clothes and toys, but had also infiltrated to the children's choice of school-related paraphernalia and equipment such as pack-ups, satchels, pencil cases and stationery. The concern that the parents shared during the focus groups was on two levels. Primarily, they were concerned over the earnest want of all things Disney and the financial considerations that families have to make at a time of global recession. Parents explained in earnest how on the one hand they did not want to disappoint their children and not buy them the branded toys and

other goods, but on the other hand parents faced a conflict of financial considerations. All this was compounded with a feeling of wanting to teach their children the monetary value of things. Secondly, some parents expressed their anxiety over instances of taunting that took place in school, because a child had the 'wrong' pack-up.

This theme shatters the understanding in society that children's popular culture is not important enough to warrant adult's attention (Lee, 2009). As Giroux (1995) explains, 'the happiest place on earth' (p.25) has successfully permeated the individual and collective identities of children. The world of animation has gained access into the everyday lives of children and their families. It can be argued that this multimillion dollar empire is ticking all the right boxes through the use of vision, sound effects, consumer products and theme parks.

However, it is disquieting to think that certain stereotypes and childhood universalities are being portrayed through this branding and through this aspect of children's popular culture. For instance, the portrayal of Disney princesses and princes is always the archetypal white and beautiful or handsome. Furthermore, the animated figures of Disney princesses are incessantly thin. From this viewpoint, young girls may perceive the Disney princesses' ethnicity and body shape as one to aspire towards (Lee, 2009).

However, this does not mean that the Disneyfication of children's culture should be demonized. On the contrary, through this popular culture, adults are being presented with an opportunity to give heed to children's meaning-making response; policy-makers, teachers and parents can take advantage of this multimillion dollar phenomenon. For

instance, it can be used as a medium to cultivate values of respect for diversity and gender. As this quote from Orvell (1995) so poignantly explains:

> Disneyland satisfies... several of the deepest needs in contemporary culture that are otherwise not satisfied: the need for order, for mastery, for safety, and for adventure. What is it like to be in Disneyland? We walked down ordered paths and streets, carefully landscaped and scaled to give us a sense of variety and discovery. Architectural focal points capture our gaze as we move, pulling us from place to place. We travel passively through landscapes, on water, on rails, on wheels, surveying the whole of the contained spaces with a sense of mastery, a sense of the overall coherence of the total world.
>
> (Orvell, 1995)

Theme 5: Values in Society

> I worry about the differences in values that my child is getting. On the one hand, at home we try to give her good values of sharing, cooperation, respect. At school, they do the same thing as well. But then, when she's out in the real world and making friends with others...I don't know! All that we're teaching her will go down the drain.
>
> (Parent from focus group sessions)

This theme relating to the erosion of traditional values emerged quite dominantly within the parent sessions. Parents were highly concerned that they, as parents, were doing their best to pass on to their children the values that they hold dear. They felt reassured that the school shared the same values as they did. However, what was causing them anxiety was what some parents called the *deterioration of family values*. This came in the light of a concurrent social debate in Malta about divorce. Political parties in Malta were arguing about the issue of whether to introduce divorce or not. In 2010, the Nationalist Member of Parliament, Jeffrey Pullicino Orlando presented a Private Member's Bill in the Maltese Parliament Introducing Divorce based on the Irish Model (Times of Malta,

158

2010). This set the wheels of power into motion which heralded a national and robust debate on the issue.

To understand the full extent of this argument and why it caused such uproar in Malta, one has to appreciate the extent of years and years of Catholic history and the adjoining together of church and state. The first divorce that has to occur before such a debate can take place is that between church and state.

The landmark report for the Children's Society – A Good Childhood (Layard and Dunn, 2009), defines values as 'what we live by' (p.73). Since 60 A.D. (that is when St. Paul was shipwrecked on the island of Malta and the islanders embraced the Christian faith), these values have been drawn from religious belief. With a very strong history of the Catholic Church having a say in most power structures in the country, it comes as no surprise that the Catholic Church was present in education and schooling. This presence is apparent not only in faith schools run by the church but also in state schools. For instance, in George Cassar's analysis of a village school in Mosta (at the time a rural village, located centrally) between 1840 and 1940, he reports that the first school master to be appointed when the school first opened in 1841 was the Rev. Tommaso Chetcuti, a cleric (2001). This historical trend, which reveals the enmeshment of values between state and church, reverberates across the centuries. Maltese history has shown that until recently, individuals who have tried to bring about an element of value reform, which meant a detachment between state and church, have been ostracized from society, unless the reform that they were trying to achieve had the blessing of the church in Malta. The following example illustrates this.

Malta was a British colony for over 200 years. The British appointed a new director of Education, A.V. Laferla in 1921. Laferla was a civil servant historian who was a 'noted anglophile' (Zammit Mangion, 1992, p.41). Through Laferla, the Maltese educational system served the interests of the dominant group, the colonizers. Laferla made decisions regarding the provision of the educational service in Malta between 1921 and 1943 that were dictated by the colonial hegemonic power. Each curricular subject Laferla introduced into the system reflected a web of power that defined what counted as knowledge that would ultimately ensure consent for domination.

Laferla's appointment and lifetime work however, did not put to rest Maltese resistance against the imperialist power. Subalterns began to emerge. Persons whose perspectives lie outside of the hegemonic power can be described as subalterns in post-colonial theory (Morton, 2007). The subalterns Manuel Dimech (1860-1921) and Dun Gorg Preca (1880-1962) fit the above definitions perfectly, although the two are diametric opposites of each other. Manuel Dimech was the official who confrontationally stood up to the hegemonic power. Dun Gorg Preca was the missionary. He was a priest who through education and with the blessing of the Church subverted the authority of those who had hegemonic power. The first was in due time deported and the second was made a saint. These two prominent figures in Maltese history have impacted the landscape of education in Malta, each in their own way. The subaltern Preca delivered his message from a position of strength, the pulpit. He was acknowledged and honoured whereas the subaltern Dimech who clashed with the hegemonic power was shamed and ostracised.

After centuries of having the church in Malta being part of the hegemonic power, it comes as no surprise that secularisation of values or a threat to centuries' long beliefs

seemed daunting to parent participants. These challenges to traditional values came across as a source of stress and anxiety. In a sense, the divorce between state and church may be looming in Malta and parents in this research clearly felt that the point of reference they had with regards to values that had been passed on to them from one generation to the next was slowly disappearing. The stress and anxiety that they were feeling may be a grieving process that a nation has to go through until peace is made with this secularisation.

Theme 6: Children's Rights...and responsibilities

The final theme that emerged from the parents' focus group sessions was that of children's rights. Parents felt very strongly that children in schools were being taught about children's rights; however, the parents claimed that too little stress was being made upon the responsibilities that are attached to these rights. As Nutbrown (2000) argues, this may be symptomatic of the view of childhood that adults embrace. Some adults, as was the case within the parent focus groups in this study, argued that children should not be taught about rights because they are not yet ready to understand and 'shoulder the attached responsibility' (Nutbrown, 2000, p. 5). Further discussions on the issue of children's rights and responsibilities shed light on the view that the parents within the sessions had of children and childhood. It was clear that the majority of parents still held the belief that children are *quasi* adults and cannot be entrusted with the responsibility that comes with rights.

It is perturbing that the parents within these groups still had the vision of children as 'unfinished adults'. One asks whether this construction of childhood is symptomatic of

161

other more fundamental issues that might be at play. Primarily, this view limits the construction and transmission of knowledge within early years curricula. It is a view that underestimates children's abilities and capabilities as learners (Nutbrown, 1996, 2000) and as co-constructors of their own knowledge. Learning becomes a one way system, where those with power both in the classroom and at home, teachers and parents, decide what knowledge is suitable for those with less power, the children, to be able to assimilate and handle.

Additionally, this view of children as unfinished adults could also underpin the value associated with adults who work and live with these children. As previously mentioned, the three focus groups consisted of mothers, the majority of whom were stay at home mothers. It can be argued that if the perceived role of those working and living with children was not a respected and valued one, it might also denote a low level of respect of children as full citizens in a society.

5.4 The Pedagogues in-depth interviews

Three pedagogues from the selected schools were interviewed. Interviews lasted for around an hour to an hour and a half. The main themes identified using a thematic analysis approach were:

1. Exclusion from participation

2. Educational Gazing

The theme of educational gazing has been divided into three subthemes which are:

a) Curriculum development

b) Teacher/management methods

c) Evaluation

Theme 1: Exclusion from participation

> I was never asked anything about a policy. It is very frustrating that once you are in the classroom, you become like a tool to implement the policy. But we [pedagogues] have so much more to offer. I would feel more comfortable using and working from a document that I would have worked on, or some of my colleagues would have, than being told, "This is it, it *is fait accompli*, and now use it"
>
> (Mariella, Pedagogue)

The pedagogues interviewed in this study claimed that they felt excluded from participation in the creation of a body of knowledge that will influence their own profession and their daily professional lives. Scientific discourse in education creates experts who are given 'exclusive rights to speak and act' (Cannella, 1999, p. 39). Within this knowledge pyramid constructed by the 'experts' there are groups and individuals who are excluded from generating knowledge. The knowledge pertaining to these groups or individuals may be labelled as mediocre and not significant enough to be given voice and awarded the status that it deserves. What this research has shown is that the major stakeholders in the pyramid of educational discourse are given no voice and certainly no partnership in the process that constructs educational discourse. The early childhood education teachers who were interviewed in the study all denied being involved in the process that resulted in the formulation of the policy document that regulates early childhood education in Malta. They were also unaware of any other colleagues who had been asked to participate in the process.

By virtue of exclusion from the educational discourse by the powerful stakeholders at the top of the pyramid, deconstruction and reconceptualisation are also at risk. According to the Foucauldian notion of the 'will to truth' (Foucault, 1972, p.218), certain truths continue to be such because they are unchallenged. Hence, they remain mostly so because of the dominant hegemonic discourse prevalent in society. The very idea of rocking the boat, as Cannella argues, leads to a 'professional death sentence' (Cannella, 1999, p.39) to which none of the teachers interviewed were willing to commit.

> There are a lot of things I do not agree with, but I still have to do. Unless something is really against my principles, I will not speak out. I need this job and I love this job. I don't want to get into trouble with the Head or the parents. So I keep my head down and get on with it.
>
> (Chiara, Pedagogue)

One example of the prevalent hegemonic discourse is the reliance on principles of child development as a blue print for policy-making and teacher training programmes (Burman, 1994). This *true* discourse has not been fully challenged and remains the influential backbone of educational discourse.

The dominant discourse in education is perpetuated by creating the exclusive right to speak and by virtue of eliminating those who are considered to be less knowledgeable or inferior. In addition, educational institutions reinforce the hegemonic practices of 'learning, thinking, education, advancement, privileged knowledge and human inferiority' through prohibition, which according to Foucauldian terms involves the covert silencing of individuals for fear of consequences (Cannella, 1999, p.40).

Theme 2: Educational Gazing

> Sometimes it feels as if we are being watched all the time. I understand that the head of school needs to know what is going on in the classrooms, however, at times I feel like I'm being scrutinized all the time.

> If there is a child who other parents think is disruptive and they think that I'm not doing anything about it, they'll go running to the Head and I'll be in trouble. Sometimes, I feel like I have joined the police force rather than being a teacher!
>
> (Michela, Pedagogue)

When the pedagogues were asked how the policy influences their work, the answers mirrored the notion of education gazing (Cannella, 1999). The teachers I interviewed in this study described how they were required to adhere to the powers within the education discourse on at least three levels. These levels, which have been identified as sub themes within this theme, have been already named by Cannella as curriculum development, teaching/management methods and evaluation (1999). These disciplinary technologies of education will be discussed below.

Cannella draws on Foucault's work *Discipline and Punish – the birth of a prison* (1979) to describe how objectifying principles in a culture produce docile bodies. This work further explains how the formal techniques and operations create human bodies as objects to be moulded (Cannella, 1999). The teachers interviewed in this study explained how knowing that the Head of School could come into their classroom unexpectedly and observe a lesson and of having to submit their lesson plans on a weekly basis, all compounded with the threat of an ad hoc inspection from the Department of Education was always at the back of their heads when preparing lessons and when teaching.

Foucault describes this hierarchical observation as key to the production of docile bodies. Supervised supervisors (in this instant the pedagogues) ensure that hegemonic practices

are adhered to and in turn, the pedagogues are the instruments who observe others who are in diminished position of power – the children. The ramifications of this web of power are endless. One of the teachers interviewed claimed that, for instance, a noisy classroom is generally frowned upon. Children are not allowed to move around the classroom unless absolutely necessary and if they have to, this shouldn't be done too quickly in the interest of health and safety. The pedagogue becomes that instrument which through the exertion of her own power over the children creates class rules and determines systems of rewards, tokens and punishment in order to control bodies and restrict them into spaces designated to these bodies. The same system of reward and punishment is also imposed on the pedagogues by virtue of professional recognition and monetary rewards. This control is achieved through a power that, covertly, and at times more violently (through the use of practices such as the golden chair and time out) control the bodies of children.

Subtheme (a): The curriculum

- We're just told what we have to teach from and that's that. It would be
  very rewarding if we could influence what goes on in the curriculum, but
  other than choosing some books [text books] it stops there.
  (Michela, Pedagogue)

The pedagogues in this study said that they had no say as to how the curriculum that they were teaching from was developed. Neither did they influence its implementation. The choice of textbooks, for example, is a choice that is not within their power to make. Teachers are expected to teach within the framework of the given curriculum. What seemed to irk the pedagogues in this study most was the linearity of the curriculum. There is a universal acceptance of what can be taught to children, at what age and level. The teachers asserted that there were instances where this linear power was indeed

166

detrimental to some children's attitude towards school and being in the classroom. However, the teachers felt constrained to be *'traditional'* (Mariella, pedagogue) and teach from the curriculum in order to protect themselves and their teaching career.

Another aspect of curriculum development that the pedagogues commented upon was the notion of who determined education and why this is done. Cannella argues that through disciplinary technologies of education 'teachers and children are controlled by the very concept of curriculum development as if there were no other choices' (1999, p.41).

Subtheme (b): Teaching/management methods

> We have behaviour policies at school and we also get training on behaviour management. Also, at university we did a lot on classroom management, mainly using rewards systems and time out
>
> (Mariella, Pedagogue)

Disciplinary technologies of education also create docile bodies through the various methods of teaching and classroom management. The pedagogues interviewed claimed that they were expected to maintain classroom control by primarily using school-agreed upon procedures and also by using their own methods. The pedagogues applied strategies from behaviourism using rewards and punishments to achieve the creation of docile bodies. Once again, a dominant discourse is perceived as the 'true' discourse (Foucault, 1972, p.218). Children soon learn that there is a cause and effect. The desired outcome creating docile bodies is produced. The children are ordered in space and controlled. This is perpetuated further because not only do the children learn to order themselves as individuals, but in turn they themselves then become supervisors to other children who do not succumb to the teaching method used. The pedagogues interviewed complained that a good proportion of their time was taken up by children telling upon their peers.

167

Subtheme (c): Evaluation

> We have just had our half-yearly exams. Other than the mountain of
> corrections that the exams bring with them, it is also a stressful time for
> me because I'm so anxious that the children do well. I know that parents
> talk about each others' results and that they sometimes ask the Head of
> School to put their child with a certain teacher and not another based on
> results attained. In a way they are my exams too!
>
> (Chiara, Pedagogue)

One of the anxieties of the job that the pedagogues interviewed identified was assessment. Here they were referring to the assessment of children which indirectly, they felt, was also a means of assessing them and their ability to teach.

Evaluation has been given numerous names and what constitutes assessment has been argued in many educational circles. Assessment has changed over the years, however, at the very heart of the matter is the fact that children and pedagogues are made to perform. They are judged as defendants on trial (Cannella, 1999). The notion of expertise and privileging particular forms of power over other knowledge comes to life through evaluation. Cannella (1999) describes evaluation as suspending human bodies which have been made docile in space. In this instant, the pedagogues interviewed felt that they too were subject to this hierarchical surveillance because their ability to teach, or rather, to create docile bodies was also under scrutiny. This determined their reputation within the schools and among parents.

5.5 Conclusion

My fieldwork has identified a number of intriguing facts pertaining to early childhood education in Malta, but ultimately these can be encapsulated into two key themes namely those of participation / exclusion and the creation of docile bodies.

All three participant groups talked about how they wanted to have more say in *what* is taught in the early years and *how* it is taught. The groups participating in this study all felt excluded from the participatory process that would eventually lead to the inception and implementation of policy.

The other key theme which also ran across the three groups, albeit in a different manner, was that of the creation of docile bodies. From this study it is apparent that one of the mechanisms to achieve success in the educational process is through the creation and maintenance of 'docile bodies'. The child participants already have this notion being instilled in them. It is disquieting to learn from this study that the children were being encouraged to become 'docile bodies' both from their teachers, and also from their parents.

It was my intention at the outset of this research project to be able to listen to the voices of those whom I consider to be the major stakeholders in education – the children, parents and pedagogues. I have made every effort to ensure that my representation and analysis of their voices is accurate and does their opinion justice. In the next chapter, I analyse the extent to which the voices of children, parents and pedagogues and the findings from this chapter are represented in the Maltese Early Childhood and Care Policy.

CHAPTER 6:

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE ECEC POLICY

Watching the budget parliamentary debate, Klara (age 4):

Klara: What are those men sitting down doing?

Author: They talk together and decide how hospitals work, how schools work...

Klara: Our school works – we have toys, books, a golden chair. We work, we play – it works!

Research Diary 2009

Chapter 6

Critical discourse analysis of aspects of the Maltese national policy Early Childhood Education and Care

6.1 Introduction

This chapter is based on my concerns that the voices of some of the major stakeholders in early childhood education may not be represented in policy. It reflects upon the 'Early Childhood and Care Policy: A National Policy' in Malta and the only early years policy to date. I argue that although this policy represents an important step in the field of early childhood education, and suggests a commitment by the Maltese Government to value early childhood education as an important aspect of a child's education, it does falls short of addressing the interests and needs of the main partakers in the field.

It can be argued that analyzing educational policy is like trying to catch a rainbow, given the fluidity and transitions that educational policies goes through. One way of trying to catch a glimpse of this rainbow and analyse it is to look at the political, economical and social contexts within which educational policies occur (Ozga, 2000). History of educational policy and its 'accompanying narrative' (Ozga, 2000, p.114) provide policy researchers with a framework within which to encapsulate specific historical conditions that would have led to the shaping of a particular educational policy.

One can reflect upon the knowledge surrounding a particular educational policy considering how it has been constructed and what assumptions have been made that have

moulded by looking at the historical perspective of that policy. Additionally, one may also look at 'prevailing patterns of provisions and the ideologies that sustain them' (Ozga, 2000, p. 115). The milieu of an educational policy is riddled with competing ideologies and rival ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. Educational policy and historical research sheds light on the process rather than the content of a policy. Such an analysis is akin to a researcher's concept of reflexivity.

Neoliberal discourses and Early Childhood Education

Neoliberalism emphasizes the individual's ability to function autonomously, albeit driven by sef-interest. A key point in neoliberal thought is 'governing without governing' (Olssen, 1996, p. 146). This concept stresses the idea that although individuals are, at face value, free from regulation by the state, government introduces devices whereby the individuals are observed and scrutinized through measurement and surveillance (Salazar Perez andCannella 2010). One such policy is the United States national policy the No Child Left Behind Act which was introduced in 2001 with the preamble of holding teachers and schools to account by measuring achievements through standardised tests of children at risk. The rhetoric behind this type of discourse could be interpreted as creating the need for the state to intervene to counteract what surveillance and tests have suggested to be inadequate schools, teachers and parents. It provides a justification for government to intervene. Not only, a whole industry based on testing, textbooks and tutoring also relies on such a neoliberal approach to policy in the early years.

Parts of this discourse can also be identified within the Maltese context. In a press release that marked the launch of the Early Childhood and Care Policy in Malta (See Appendix 9), the Minister recommends the setting up of a Quality and Standards in

171

Education Directorate which will be responsible to ensure that "the whole process of educating a child is of the highest standard and that the outputs of the human and financial resources invested in our children result in quality education for all" (Galea, 2006). Neoliberal discourse in policy as illustrated by the NCLB and the ECEC has been critiqued as using political, modernist universalisms to normalize inequalities in society brought about by racial, socioeconomic or gender privilege (Salazar Perez and Cannella, 2010). In addition, poststructural, feminist and postcolonial thinkers have also argued that neoliberal ideology strengthens inequalities between the privileged and the oppressed (Bergeron, 2006; Cannella and Viruru, 2004; Gibson-Graham, 2006). The hegemonic discourse within neoliberal thought also implies that societies and services such as education can only function through capitalist and market based systems (Salazar Perez and Cannella, 2010). From a poststructural and feminist perspective this thinking is creating an ideology based on modernist, patriarchal and colonialist assumptions (Salazar Perez and Cannella, 2010).

The Maltese educational context and policy

Education is a political process (Sultana, 1997). In the Maltese educational context this statement definitely holds true. The educational process and the formulation of educational policies are closely linked to the vested interests of different groups in society. In this respect, the field of education represents a metaphorical battlefield where these groups attempt to assert their agendas and via mediation or otherwise manage to obtain access to have specific policies adopted. The repercussions of these educational policies reverberate through people's lives and their futures for generations. Education cannot be considered as a separate entity to the society where it belongs. On the contrary, it is a reflection of the society's cultural values, practices and preferences, its economic

system and its political structure (Sultana, 1997). As such, an analysis of the Maltese educational practices and policies opens a window on Maltese society. The aim of the following section is to shed some light on prevailing power structures, the character of dominant and subordinate groups, the agendas of these groups and how these groups go about using education in order to achieve their ends.

In the Maltese context, what may appear as conflict over education actually represents a struggle over power (Sultana, 1997). A history of the Maltese educational system is a reflection of power struggles that have taken place throughout the centuries. Briefly, there are four historical conflicts that have marked the educational development in Malta in the 19th and the early 20th century (Sultana, 1997). These are: *access* to free education for all, *pedagogy* (the language of instruction), *curriculum* (the grafting of technical and applied sciences onto a classical programme of studies that focused on the humanities) and finally, *structures* (the decision to differentiate between students on the basis of ability and gender) (Sultana, 1997). The 21st century is seeing different contestations, namely in structure, where differentiation on the basis of ability are transformed to opportunity through the inception of colleges of tuition. Such an evaluation into history is a reminder that educational policies today are the result of decisions taken in the past (remote or immediate) by persons who have their own agendas or interests and have access to the echelons of power.

It is also pertinent to appreciate how educational policy in Malta has developed since gaining independence from the United Kingdom in 1964. Post-War Malta (World War II) faced a number of economic, political and social challenges with that of education provision being but one. From a technocratic, human capital perspective, or a more

173

liberal, emancipatory view of education, schooling has featured highly in contributing to human development on the island (Caruana, 1992). Malta's educational development has been described as a retarded growth when compared with mass education provision in primary, secondary and tertiary levels in the rest of Europe and the United States (Sultana, 1997). The 1946 Compulsory Education Ordinance made primary education compulsory in Malta for children aged six to fourteen years (Sultana, 1997). Access to Secondary education for all was introduced in 1970. Early Childhood Education started catering for children aged four in 1977 and in 1988, children aged three were given access to Kindergartens. Nursery facilities from birth to three such as day care centres have only recently become more widely available. Due to the extended nature of Maltese families, a substantial amount of early childhood provision has been undertaken by grand-parents or other extended family members such as great-aunts.

6.2 Outline of the national policy – Early Childhood Education and Care

This policy document is the first ever published policy pertaining to early childhood education in Malta. 'The Early Childhood Education and Care: A National Policy' (ECEC) was presented to the then Minister of Education, Youth and Employment, the Hon Louis Galea in April 2006 by the Working Group for the Early Childhood Education and Care Review. The document is seventy-five pages long and is divided into three sections as follows:

1. The International Context – Recommendations

2. The Local context – Current Situation

3. Recommendations and Guidelines.

These three sections are preceded by an Executive Summary.

The first section reviews current early childhood policies from 12 other countries and seeks to adopt key points that would ensure the setting of standards for early childhood education in Malta. The second section focuses on the current situation in Malta, considering such themes as: demography, the labour market, current provisions for early childhood, staff training, curricula, financing and evaluation and monitoring. The third and final section of the document offers recommendations and guidelines as regards financing early childhood education, participation and access, transition issues, ratios, staff training and qualifications, monitoring and evaluation, and research (Ministry of Education, 2006).

6.3 Justification for critical discourse analysis as a method of analysis

One of the tenets of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is to legitimize the voice of the marginalized. In addition, CDA also questions the voice of those in power to reveal hidden agendas, and motives that serve self-interests, maintain superiority, and ensure others' subjugation (Henry and Tator, 2002). In essence, CDA unravels the connections between the use of language and the exercise of power (Thompson, 2002). These principles make CDA the tool of choice for this study were one of the aims was to explore and analyse issues of voice of the powerless.

CDA is not just an emancipator tool. It also seeks to promote social change (Liasidou, 2008). Unlike Freudian and Marxist theorizations of power, which tend to be repressive and mono-dimensional, critical analysts adopt the Foucauldian optimistic theorization of power. Saliently, the 'productive elements' (Liasidou, 2008, p.486) of the Foucauldian

175

perspective of the theorization of power offers the possibility of addressing and bringing about change (Gore, 1998).

CDA is best described as a shared perspective encompassing a range of approaches (van Dijk, 2000). It is not based on a unitary theoretical framework or ideology. The eclectic nature of CDA is an additional reason why I chose CDA in this research. This diversity and non-allegiance to a particular school of thought suggest that CDA is not based on any particular dominant discourses. The analysis does not commence from a position of power. The stance which is asserted within this work is to unravel contexts where power is exerted and maintained, making CDA the ideal tool for aspects of the Maltese National Policy – 'Early Childhood Education and Care'.

Critics of CDA argue that CDA is not an analysis, it is instead a biased, ideological interpretation of selective texts (Liasidou, 2008). A further criticism is that the outcome of CDA is pre-determined by the analyst because of the enmeshment of assumptive worlds of the researcher and the author, thus leading to a 'biased version of discursive reality' (Liasidou, 2008, p.493). In defence of CDA, however, Fairclough (1996) recalls the principles of multiple interpretations upon which CDA is established. Furthermore, the analyst spells out her commitment and orientation at the outset of a project involving CDA. This clearly makes the endeavour explicitly a socio-political one. In addition, the stance and values that the analyst believes in cannot be negated. It can be argued that for this reason, a more accurate depiction of discursive reality is offered because the researcher or analyst do not negate their orientation and commitment.

6.4 Method – 'A Little Tool Box for CDA'

The analysis of the document, the 'Early Childhood Education and Care – A National Policy' (Ministry of Education, 2006) is based on Jager and Maier's 'toolbox for analysis' (Jager & Maier, 2009, p.52). The authors provide an outline for analysis which I have adopted. Based on Jager and Maier's work, I have divided this analysis into two sections namely, framing and analysis (Jager & Maier, 2009; Huckin, 1997).

Framing involves looking at the document as a whole and probing into the perspective that is being presented. The second part of this inquiry into the ECEC involves Analysis (Jager and Maier). For this second part of my analysis I have focused on themes that have emerged as a result of the children's circle time. One of the reasons why I have chosen to focus on the children's themes specifically is to further affirm my positionality within this study and to bring to the foreground children's voices in policy analysis, policy making and implementation. In addition, as I will highlight in the framing section of this analysis, the perspectives of parents and service providers are represented to a greater extent than children are.

6.5 Framing

My first approach to the text was performed in an uncritical manner. However, I maintain my positionality of harbouring suspicion as to the lack of representation of whom I consider to be the main stakeholders in early childhood education, namely children, parents and pedagogues. This first unsuspecting encounter with the document is recommended by Huckin (1997) who purports that the first reading of a document should be achieved with a naiveté, and then re-approached with a critical and judicious mind set. By engaging with the document in this way, I submitted to the power of the text, trying to

suppress my own position and thereby accepting and reading the document with unquestioning support of the *status quo*. The second reading, on the other hand, involved questioning the document and comparing it to other similar documents from other countries.

Physical appearance of the document

The full text of the ECEC document is freely available online at www.education.gov.mt/ece.htm and hard copies are available through the Ministry of Education in Malta. The publication carries a glossy front page, with a picture of a face of a child in the upper right hand corner and a shoot blossoming in the centre of the page (See Appendix 8). The frailty and the vulnerability of the shoot may be a tribute to children and their continued development. However, they may also represent a dominant view of the powerlessness of children and how society is called upon to protect them because of this perceived vulnerability. As argued in Chapter 5, this needs-based attitude towards children creates an aura of powerlessness and helplessness with respect to children. In this respect, this is a disempowering image. Although it might have been intended to portray the nurturing aspect of the policy, in effect the imagery takes away power from the children and their agency.

Language and key words

The introduction of the executive summary sets out short-comings in early childhood education in Malta, rather than a summary of what has been achieved so far in the field. This suggests that this document is not written in the spirit of widely accepted policy language. Most aspects of this document do not follow the genre template pertaining to

early childhood education policy documents from countries such as the UK and New Zealand (comparisons with other Maltese early childhood education policy documents is not possible as this is the first early childhood education document that has been legislated). One may speculate that this poor use of policy language contributed to the fact that the pedagogues interviewed in this study did not value the ECEC as an important tool in their work.

The strategy for early childhood education is not highlighted in the summary. It is more of a commentary looking at the international context with reference to recommendations made by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and what the local context looked like at the time that the ECEC was formulated. There is no emergent dominant theme that gives the reader an indication of the direction of the policy. The choice of words such as 'appropriate training', or 'substantial' are words that lack quantification or responsibility of ownership. As the document itself suggests, these are words used more in terms of recommendations rather than policy that is legislated.

By the document's authors own admission, the document's rationale is more of an advisory nature rather than a policy document. The authors have considered the then current situation in Malta with regard to early childhood education and made recommendations as to how the situation could be ameliorated. The use of the word 'recommendations', further strengthens the position that this document is not written in the language of policy. One of the sections of the document is entitled – 'Recommendations and Guidelines'. This, in terms of educational policy making is, in itself, contradictory: a recommendation is a suggestion, and the use of the term guidelines indicates a non-mandatory nature.

The authors have structured the document in the form of problem to 'possible' solution (Taylor, 2004). The use of the word 'possible' indicates that some of the suggestions are tentative and not necessarily evidence-based. For example:

> Generous leave benefits for working parents could help reduce the need for costly infant provision and promote more equitable sharing of responsibilities.
>
> (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.9)

The use of the word 'could' indicates an element of doubt. It also the raises the issue: 'who is it addressing and who is responsible for making the changes' (Taylor, 2004, p.441). Additionally, it raises concern about the evidence (if any) upon which these recommendations are being made. Accountability is lacking throughout the document. It is difficult to decipher who is required to do what, what government is supposed to do and what practitioners should do.

The use of tenses is also an indication of the problem to 'possible' solution structure. The authors have, at times, made use of the present tense to indicate what the situation looks like at present and then moved on to use the future tense when suggesting possible solutions.

> Ratios of adult to children need to be addressed.
>
> (Ministry of Education 2006, p.9)

Emphasis has been made to terms relating to the economic aspect of educational policy making. For example, the mention of the OECD in the introduction of the document,

180

focusing on tax rebates and leave benefits and suggestions that 'employers should be partners in child-care provision' are all ideas that are used to draw on the prevailing discourse of a changing economy in Malta, which, after accession into the EU, has become one of the main priorities of the Maltese government.

Throughout the document the two most frequently mentioned recipients of the implications of this policy are 'family' and 'society'. This is in sharp contrast to the UK policy, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), where the child is the focus. The EYFS is about attaining and improving the quality of life of children. One of the questions that come to mind is: for whom has the ECEC been written? Is it for practitioners or for parents? In the guidelines and recommendations section of the policy, out of a total of 19, only two and a half are child-centred. The other points focus on parents, the general public, the labour market, provision, staff and monitoring. The children's voices in this document are barely audible!

Family is an important concept throughout the document. There seems to be an interplay of values between cherishing the family unit, and at the same time wanting to encourage a stronger work ethic so as to develop the economy through the labour market. The document emphasizes the role of 'care' in the early years more than that of 'education'. This significant choice of language reveals an orientation and commitment adopted by the policy. It is not about the children, their education and empowerment in the early years. On the contrary, it is more about placing children in a safe place whilst the parents go to work. Child-appropriate practice within the policy is conspicuously absent.

The document stops short of indicating 'how' the ECEC will be implemented. After reading the document, it feels as if the development of this 'policy' has been curtailed at the Recommendations and Guidelines section. There is no mention as to who is responsible to ensure that implementation takes place, and neither is there mention of a date line.

6.6 Analysis

In this section, I have juxtaposed the themes that emerged from the children's circle time sessions against the Maltese National Policy, Early Childhood and Care. As I have stated earlier, the children's themes were chosen for this analysis to assert my commitment to bring children's voices to the foreground. Some overlapping of themes and inclusion of parents' and pedagogues themes in the discussion was inevitable.

In Chapter 5 I identified the following as being the children's themes that emerged as a result of applying Glaser and Strauss Grounded Theory to the data from the circle time sessions with the children:

1. Grown-ups need to listen to children

2. Listening

3. Friendship and camaraderie

4. Play

5. Non-academic pursuits

These will be discussed with reference to the policy.

Grown-ups need to listen to children

The ECEC policy states that:

> The way in which adults interact with young learners is an issue that needs to be addressed......Schools and centres should have a policy which enables staff to find out about individual children's strengths and achievements at the beginning of the scholastic year.
>
> (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.40)

This statement begins to address the issue that the children so emphatically highlighted that they want grownups to listen to them. It is commendable that the policy writers have begun to identify this as an issue. However, the policy stops short of describing how it can ensure that grownups listen to children. As previously argued, because the policy lacks authority of implementation, it leaves it up to the schools and early years centres to write and implement their own policy with regards to identifying children's strengths and achievements. Whilst it can be argued that in this way schools and early years centres are being given leeway to adopt their own policies, there is no mention of accountability that early years centres are actually building on the strengths and achievements of the children. It would be interesting to find out how many schools and early years centres in Malta actually have such a policy, implement it and audit their achievements against it.

When one reads this section in the ECEC policy in detail, it is also possible to ascertain that this article does not specifically refer to listening to children as such. It talks about adults identifying strengths and achievements of children. Although it begins with the premise (and maybe with the promise) that children will be treated at a par in this interaction, in the subsequent sentences, the power differential becomes all too clear. It is the adult who is going to name and classify the child's strengths and achievements. There is no mention of this being a collaborative process. Adults are identified as the keepers of universally accepted knowledge about children. Children are placed in a

position of helplessness. The needs model of the child as discussed in Chapter 5 (Section 5.2) is evident.

With reference to the issue of enabling communication between children and staff, the policy writers reflect on staffing issues and the lack of policy for staffing with the under three's.

> The legal ratios for older children are one adult to 15 children for three-year olds and one adult to 20 children in the case of four year olds. However, in the private sector there are even classes of 14 two-year old children with one adult. In comparison to countries where good practice is promoted, these ratios are rather high. There are several disadvantages of having such large groups: less opportunities for extended communication between the adult and individual children. It is also more taxing to manage a group in a creative way.
>
> (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.45)

On reading this section of the ECEC it is self-evident that there is no monitoring when it comes to staffing and one questions why this was not provided for in the policy document despite being identified as an issue. Since this matter was clearly on the agenda of the working committee, it should have been addressed and catered for within the document and provisions for monitoring created.

Although, to some extent, the document identifies the importance of grownups listening to children, it also reveals the adult-centred nature of the policy. The policy claims that it is 'taxing to manage a group in a creative way' when staffing ratios are low. It is reminiscent of Foucault's docile bodies, that is, of finding ways to bring about uniformity, rather than to allow the children to explore learning possibilities in a safe and learning enabling environment. The children's interests are superseded by the adults' obsession with managing children's behaviour and maintaining order and discipline.

184

Judicious reading of this section also reveals the meek disposition of this policy. Staffing ratios are compared to 'countries where good practice is promoted' (ECEC, p.45). It is considered good practice to ascertain what other countries are doing with regards to early childhood education; however, the question asked earlier is revisited. The committee had an opportunity to address the issue of staffing ratios, regardless of what other countries deem fit for their own. The issue of what works best in the Maltese context needs to be addressed.

> Early childhood centres and settings should promote good quality care by ensuring that the ethos of the centres is based on positive relationships, responsive care and respect. Positive relationships are at the basis of effective learning, healthy development and emotional well-being. Responsive care evokes a feeling of belonging. Through mutual respect, children thrive, make contributions and are happy.
>
> (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.48)

The policy addresses the issue of positive relationships, responsive care and respect. It describes the benefits to be had for children through the provision of such qualities within the early years setting. However, it does not say how these positive relationships, responsive care and respect are going to be achieved or put into practice. The policy does not state how children are able to assert a sense of belonging, get high levels of care and are respected within the early years setting. Concerns with monitoring of how these positive relationships are nurtured and maintained within an early years setting are also omitted from the document.

Two words in the above statement shed light on the lack of commitment of the policy to child participation in their own education. According to the above statement, when children are respected they 'make contributions' (p. 48). Children who participated in

this study have demonstrated that they do not simply want to make contributions; they want to be totally involved in decisions made about their learning and about their lives. This, in essence, brings together what the children's desire for grownups to listen. Listening to the children entails going beyond the idea of children making contributions. It entails both an involvement and also a commitment by grownups to fully comprehend and address children's interests.

Listening

In Chapter 5, I have discussed the notion of listening and how according to Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1979) this notion is capitalised in teacher training programmes to produce what Foucault describes as 'docile bodies'. The children's responses during circle time in this study showed how children's bodies are controlled. At an early age children are taught what is expected of them, and the space that they should occupy is also defined at an early age.

The ECEC national policy refers to the lack of space for children to move around in freely most early years settings. It also draws attention to the lack of outdoor play areas.

> One of the difficulties concerning resources is related to buildings and physical space available for early years groups and classroom for young children. Many of the centres especially state schools but also several private establishments have not been purposely built. Consequently in several settings there is not enough room for children to move about freely......
>
> Several private centres lack outdoor play areas where children can engage in gross motor play or take part in free-play activities.
>
> (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 40)

The policy describes the lack of adequate space for children in the early years. However, it does not provide alternatives, nor does it impose regulations as to how this matter has to be addressed by staff in early years settings. The policy makes no provision for implementation, or monitoring to ensure that the situation is rectified in the settings mentioned in the policy.

The use of the words space 'available for the early years groups' could be indicative of the value awarded to the early years as a specialty in its own right. The choice of words could be suggestive of the plight of early years practitioners, that is, that there is hardly ever enough space to go around. The discourse used suggests that early years in schools are not considered in par with other year groups. Younger children and the practitioners working with them seem to be inferior.

With reference to the theme of listening, this was the only theme identified within the policy. This could be symptomatic of the universality of teacher training programmes that mould children into docile bodies. Since this notion is inadequately addressed within the policy, it can be inferred that it is not an issue which has been considered by the policy writers, or that it has not been given enough importance to warrant statutory means to counteract the effects of disciplinary technologies of education (Foucault, 1979).

Friendship and camaraderie

This theme was identified by the children during the circle time sessions in this research. However, in the ECEC policy document there is nothing in the text that alludes to the notion of children developing friendships and the camaraderie that the children so passionately and expressively talked about during the sessions. In this respect, I argue

187

that the ECEC needs to engage with a deeper understanding of what children want and expect out of their early years education. In addition, I contend that the aspect of education in the ECEC policy needs to be considered more profoundly.

It is evident that the language of care underpins this document. The overall purpose of the policy document leans more towards providing care provision for children in an effort to encourage more gainfully employed parents. However, I argue that while the rhetoric for education can be found within the discourse of this policy document, it also raises questions and ambiguities. For instance, clear recommendations pertaining to curriculum or practitioner training are absent from the document. The dominant discourse within the policy is written with parents and providers in mind, however the silence of the children's voices is deafening.

Play .

This theme is mentioned extensively in the ECEC policy. The document uses language that emphasizes the importance of play in the early years. While these contentions are essential for valuing play in the early years, it may also be argued that the ECEC policy does not go far enough in making substantial recommendations for practitioners in the field with regards to play. The document highlights the ambiguity that still exists amongst some of the parental population on the notion of learning through play. However, the policy document does not insist sufficiently on the validity of learning through play. In this respect, the policy recommends that:

> Programmes should be pedagogically sound and conducted by appropriately trained professionals. A high quality programme in early childhood implies child-initiative, play and involvement.
>
> (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.49)

188

This paragraph rightly emphasizes the need to recognize play as an essential tool in the early years. However, it does not make provisions as to how play can be incorporated within an early years setting. It also fails to address the issue of implementation and addressing the doubtful crowd about learning through play, which became evident through the parents' focus groups discussed in Chapter 5. The fun aspect of play that the children in this research talked about is not mentioned in the document.

Non-academic pursuits

During the circle time sessions children identified non-academic pursuits as being the 'fun stuff' (child-participant) that goes on at school. To respect the rhetoric of the children, I refrained from using the more commonly used term of extra-curricular activities. The reason for doing this came from the children themselves. They want such activities to be part of the curriculum in the early years, not extraneous to it. The ECEC document states that:

> Unfortunately, within the early years classrooms, fun activities such as story-telling, art and craft activities, water and sand play, cooking, music, drama, poetry and song, all of which offer a rich potential for learning in a meaningful and relevant context are often absent. This implies that these activities are squeezed in for a concentrated period of time during the scholastic year rather than offered as a part of the regular programme of activities.
>
> (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.39)

The ECEC acknowledges the lack of non-academic pursuits in the early years and also stresses their importance in the field. However, it fails to use its weight and powers to make recommendations to rectify the situation. It falls short of giving guidance as to how practitioners should incorporate more non-academic pursuits within their centres and how this should be monitored.

6.7 Conclusion

This work is situated within a re-conceptualist framework which advocates critical questioning of our assumptions and comprehensions of childhood (Ang Ling-Yin, 2007). My questions stem from within this framework, which sees its roots in poststructural theoretical frameworks. Some of the major outcomes of this research have permitted a better understanding of childhood and a profound respect for children's voices. Participants to my research have provided me with a wealth of information with which I can make recommendations for changes to the ECEC policy in Malta so as to allow it to reflect a more child-appropriate practice. I proceed to do this in the final chapter.

CHAPTER 7:

CONCLUSION

"Grown-ups never understand anything for themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them."

Antoine de Saint-Exupery

French Writer

(1900-1944)

Chapter 7

Conclusion

This research is a representation of what I heard, saw, read and thought about the early years in Malta. I am convinced that this research has provided insights into what children, parents and pedagogues in Malta want out of the early years. My research shows that the children, parents and pedagogues participating in this study want to partake in the policy making process where this concerns the early years. In addition, within the parameters of this research, I hope that early childhood education in Malta will benefit from the contributions that the participants in this study made. Based on my research findings, reconceptualisation in early childhood education in Malta is overdue.

In this chapter I will discuss certain strengths and limitations of this study, propose areas of future research, re-visit my initial research questions and reflect on how these have been answered. Subsequently, I will make policy recommendations based on the notion of child-appropriate practice.

7.1 Reflections on the research questions

My first research question sought to identify a relationship between policy and the desires of children, their parents and early years practitioners in relation to children's agency and voice. Based on my research findings, the relationship is an authoritarian one. The

191

children, parents and pedagogues participating in my study were not consulted about any of the issues mentioned in the ECEC policy document and neither did they know of anyone who was. From my interaction with the participants, it is evident that children, parents and pedagogues want to involve themselves in shaping the future of early childhood education in Malta. . Pedagogues expressed about the negative thoughts that they have with the ECEC policy, where they regard it as a way of regulating them and at times limiting their teaching creativity and individuality. Children, parents and pedagogues participating in this study want to partake in the policy making process in Malta, but this calls for a reconceptualisation of early childhood education in Malta, where the locus of power shifts from implementing the will of the dominant discourses and Universalist truths to listening to other voices such as children, parents, pedagogues and service providers.

When reflecting upon my second and third research questions which investigated the children's, parents' and pedagogues' desires in relation to early childhood education and how these can be implemented, participants expressed their desires to have their voices heard. The children's yearning to be listened to was compelling. The children talked about how grownups need to listen to children, how grownups need to involve themselves more in what adults consider to be the children's world. Parents talked about how intricate and demanding being a parent is and how they hoped that together with their children's school, the challenges of parenting can be somewhat alleviated. The parents also expressed their willingness to be more involved not only in formulating early childhood education policy, but also in the daily running of their children's schools. Parents want to be involved not just in fundraising activities that generate extra revenue for the school, but also in the general running of the school, such as involvement in

curriculum choices. Pedagogues conveyed their desire to be able to use their knowledge and experience in formulating policy in the early years. As a result of the in-depth interviews, pedagogues expressed their disenchantment with a policy which neither they nor any pedagogue they knew were consulted.

These findings corroborate most of the literature as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. For instance, the creation of docile bodies (Foucault, 1979; Cannella, 1999) featured highly within the themes of this research. So did the frustration felt by pedagogues at what Cannella describes as 'educational gazing' (1999). Another finding that was corroborated by the literature is the desire of children to be involved in decision-making processes on matters relating to their present and future. One of the main concerns of the children in this study was making grown-ups listen. There are various authors who have written about giving children a voice and whose work has been discussed in this study (e.g. Soto and Swadener, 2005). There are also areas where questions might have been left unanswered. These will be discussed in the next section.

7.2 Strengths and limitations of the study

One of the strengths of this study is that this research tells a unique story of early childhood education policy in Malta. This study involved the participation of children, parents and pedagogues and draws attention to the lack of participatory power faced by these key groups in the shaping of early childhood education policy in Malta. I am confident that through this research I have given children, parents and pedagogues the opportunity to tell their story and express what they want out of early childhood education.

I consider employing empowering methods such as circle time methodology with the children, and Grounded Theory Approach to analyse my data, made my research, and hence my findings, more representative of what the participants wanted to convey. By allowing the themes to emerge out of the words of the participants, rather than imposing my own agenda, has made my research more representative of the wants of children, parents and pedagogues. I hope that this research will make a valuable contribution to the debate on policy in early childhood education. I feel indebted to those who have contributed to this study and I am committed to try to build on what the participants have expressed to bring about change in the field. I am aware that some of the findings may not sit comfortably with other stakeholders in the field. However, I am committed to disseminating my findings through academic and practitioner channels in order to ameliorate the future of early childhood education in Malta.

Although I tried to be representative of the voices of children, parents and pedagogues, I feel that one of the limitations of this study was the limited time I spent in the schools. It is possible that if I had spent more time in the schools, I may have enriched the quality of my data. If I had spoken to different groups of children, parents, and pedagogues, and accessed the schools on different days, I might have obtained a different set of data. However, as I mentioned earlier, this is a snapshot, a representation of what the participants who so graciously accepted to have their lives paused so that I could gather my data told me.

Another limitation is, once again, related to time and maybe a fear of over-probing. On listening back to my recordings of the sessions with the participants I found instances

where in retrospect I could have probed deeper. There may have been issues that I did not fully explore with the participants. Maybe I have left unveiled aspects that I should have uncovered. Maybe in retrospect, I was at times too cautious of upsetting people and refrained from asking more pertinent questions.

7.3 Recommendations for future research

When I look back on this research I am cognizant that these findings may have identified a need for reconceptualization in early childhood education in Malta. I am mindful that this research may be the catalyst to other valuable research topics related to the field of early childhood education and policy. It would be interesting to explore the impact of child-appropriate practice on early childhood education. Another issue that could be investigated is the policy makers' view on reconceptualisation in early childhood education in Malta. Research that involves the participation of policy makers would enrich the field and provide invaluable data upon which to make further policy recommendations. It would be interesting to find out if a new policy based on reconceptualist principles and child-appropriate practice would in fact ameliorate quality in early years provision in Malta. Further research into policy contributions by pedagogues and how this affects their morale would also add another dimension to this research.

It would also be interesting to ask children, parents and pedagogues how changes in early childhood policy would affect them and when these changes are implemented, how they have affected them. In this way, children, parents and pedagogues would be participating in the whole process.

Further research is required to find out to what extent the current policy has been implemented within the early years settings in Malta. It would be interesting to explore the degree of importance this document is given within training facilities at teacher training institutions in Malta. Currently there are two main bodies that provide training for future pedagogues and Kindergarten assistants, namely the University of Malta and the Malta College of Science and Technology (MCAST) which offers courses for students at post-secondary level wanted to pursue a career in early childhood education. Differences of approach to the ECEC policy, if any, between the two institutions may be similarly instructive.

I also suggest that the field of early childhood education and its cost deserves further research. Given the current economic climate, cuts to early years provisions are already taking place globally. It would be detrimental to children, parents and society in general if 'the golden years of early childhood education are over' (Pugh, 2010). Such research would be useful in determining budget considerations on a national level and allow constructive planning of early childhood services.

In the next section and based on the data I collated during my fieldwork, I propose a framework for learning in the early years which I am optimistic that it reflects the desires of children, parents and pedagogues. I describe this as child-appropriate practice.

7.4 Child-appropriate practice

In Chapter 2 (Section 2.8) of this research, I presented the notion of Child-Appropriate Practice, where I proposed the reconceptualisation of Universalist truths that have been at the heart of early childhood education for decades. One of the objectives of this research was to problemetize Universalist truths, which are central to the perpetuation of social injustice and inequity (Foucault, 1980). In the words of Derrida (1981), I wanted to suggest that through reconceptualisation, the written word is re-read in terms of power. I have endeavoured to do this by deconstructing what is the only document to date that regulates early childhood education in Malta, 'The Early Childhood Education and Care Policy'. By going to one of the roots of generation of power in Maltese society, the echelons of the legislature, I attempted to unpick the stitches in the fabric of society that sustains dominant voices.

My unveiling of the dominant discourses in Maltese early childhood education shed light upon children, parents and pedagogues who were eager to tell me during my field work what they want out of early childhood education. As a result of this research I have spoken to parents who were frustrated that they did not know that there is a policy that regulates early childhood education. Pedagogues have shown their disdain at the lack of consultation with which the policy was formulated and later ratified. Children have expressed their views about what can ameliorate their years in early childhood education.

This reconceptualisation of Maltese early childhood education has guided me towards the configuration of the term – 'Child-appropriate Practice'. A discussion of child-appropriate practice challenges the centeredness of the child within traditional methods such as 'Developmentally Appropriate Practice', where the child is placed at the centre of

practice and removed from relationships, contexts and cultures that are central and meaningful to that child. In contrast, what I am proposing is a practice that is child-appropriate. This is a practice which considers a group of children, who are engaged in a number of relationships, contexts and cultures in a particular moment in time. It is for this reason that I have chosen the use of the term 'appropriate' so as to signify a practice which fits within all the parameters mentioned above. It is appropriate and meaningful to the child at that particular moment in time, and the appropriateness is a result of consultation with major stakeholders.

A policy that is considered to be child-appropriate would be one that, as one of its basic premises, celebrates the competence of children. A number of policies such as the Early Years Foundation Stage in the England and Wales and the Danish Curriculum stress the notion of creating a 'competent child'.

My experience after carrying out this research is that competency does not need to be 'created' in children. What child-appropriate practice assumes is that children are inherently competent and that the role of policy, early childhood settings, parents and pedagogues is to nurture those skills and abilities. Early childhood education is an opportunity to nurture the competencies of children. In this way the knowledge that the children acquire is readily available to them during their daily adventure in life.

Communication is at the heart of child-appropriate practice. One of the key themes that emerged as a result of this study was the children's plea for grownups to listen. This theme encapsulates the notion of reconceptualisation, where dominant discourses are unveiled to give way to voices which are barely audible in our society. Hence, it is

essential that to develop child-appropriate practice, major stakeholders such as policy-makers, early years settings, parents and pedagogues are trained to listen, value and respect the opinion of children. In order for the grownups to listen, they need to be ready to be challenged, to be creative and imaginative.

Communication is fundamental to child-appropriate practice. The children in this study talked about wanting grownups to lose their superiority and become partners to the children. They talked about pedagogues joining in their play; they talked about grownups not being afraid to ask for help. Against this backdrop, child-appropriate practice involves openness and readiness to consider children's points of view in the class-room, outside the classroom or in the arena of policy-making. In Chapter 2, I explained why I chose the term pedagogue in favour of other terminology. The etymology of the word pedagogue is central to child-appropriate practice. As I have previously discussed in Chapter 2, Section 2.8, *paedagogus* refers to a slave who escorted the children to school and generally supervised them. The notion of being at the service of children is fundamental within child-appropriate practice. Additionally, the notion of supervising children is an interesting one. Here, supervision entails watching the children whilst taking a step back. This entails allowing the children to be at the helm of their learning with the adult intervening when required to do so.

7.5 Policy recommendations

One of the issues that causes concern on reading the 'Early Childhood Education and Care' policy is that the discourse used is more directed at providing care services whilst the parents are at work, rather than providing quality education and care settings where children are nurtured and their intrinsic desire to learn is supported and encouraged. In

future policy documents the discourse should reflect a philosophy of education where the children are viewed as strong and competent individuals capable of initiating and influencing their own learning. Like other philosophies of this kind (for example the Reggio Emilia approach) this may mean that early childhood education in Malta together with key players in the field, will have to forsake deeply entrenched values and beliefs concerning education in the early years.

In order to formulate my recommendations, I want to take up Cathy Nutbrown's suggestion (1996). In her book, *Children's Rights and Early Education*, Nutbrown proposes to examine the issue of quality of provision in terms of children's rights (1994, p. 100). Building on Nutbrown's strongly influential work on Children's Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, I will make suggestions based on Article 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the questions that Nutbrown poses to educators.

Article 29 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child stipulates the goals of education which are:

a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.

b) The respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and for the principles enshrined in the charter of the United Nations.

c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own.

d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes and friendship among all people, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin.

e) The development of respect for the natural environment.

To satisfy the education goals as set out by Article 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a child-appropriate practice policy will need to address the following issues which expand on Nutbrown's questions for educators in *Children's Rights and Early Education* (1994). These are mere outlines and suggestions. To comply with reconceptualist views and child-appropriate practice as outlined in this work, consultation with children, pedagogues and parents will be required prior to the formulation of policy.

A   The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.

A1 The development of the individual child considering individual personalities, talents, thought development

A2 Pedagogues being witnesses and supporters of the way that the children entrusted to them develop their personalities, talents and thoughts

A3 Children's creativity in problem-solving

A4 Nurturing healthy minds and hearts

A5 Children's ability to extend their potential and how this may be encouraged

B   The respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and for the principles enshrined in the charter of the United Nations.

B1 Respecting the rights of the child within early years settings

B2 Creating early years settings that are respectful of the rights of the child

B3   Establishing respectful practices among pedagogues that are mindful of the rights of the child

B4   Children's understanding of rights

B5   Developing a respectful early years curriculum

B6   Children's understanding and learning on choices and their right to make choices

C   The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own.

C1   Working in partnership with parents

C2   Celebrating self and diversity

D   The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes and friendship among all people, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin.

D1   Encouraging co-operation and equality of opportunity

D2   Care practices that value children

D3   Valuing children's rights to challenge, question and assert themselves in a peaceful manner

E   The development of respect for the natural environment.

E1   Outdoor learning

E2   Learning about appreciating and protecting the world around us

The above are suggestions that might shape a policy that is mindful and respectful of individuals partaking in the early years education endeavour. By no means is it all encompassing, it is merely a direction towards a path that has been shown to me by the participants in this study. To heed the children, parents, pedagogues and theorists who have helped to shape this study, this is the beginning; a seed that through the collective participation of major stakeholders will show the way forward in early childhood education in Malta.

7.6 Epilogue

> There are obligations on governments, yes, but there are responsibilities
> for every citizen too.
>
> (Nutbrown, 1994)

I have chosen to conclude this work by making reference to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is because I am respectful of the fact that with rights come responsibilities. As educators, as parents and as citizens we should all strive to be respectful of the children entrusted to our care. Children are precious human beings who have a right to be heard in our communities, to have their wants and their needs listened to and acted upon. As grown up members of our communities, it is up to us to provide the medium through which children can be heard. In this way we can ensure that society is just and respectful to every person, regardless of age.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Children's Consent Form

Do I want to take part in this special circle time with Marika?

No Thank-you

I'm still thinking about it

Yes, I do

If you choose YES place stick your green sticker on the green light.

If you choose I'm still thinking about it, place your sticker on the orange

light.

If you choose NO place your sticker on the red light.

Thank you   psss Don't forget to write your name

Appendix 2: Adult Participants' Consent Form

Title of Project: Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education: Child Appropriate Practice

Name of Researcher: Marika Gatt Sacco

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet/letter (delete as applicable) dated *[insert date]* for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. *Insert contact number here of lead researcher/member of research team (as appropriate).*

3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses.

4. I agree to take part in the above research project.

_____ _____ _____
Name of Participant   Date   Signature
(*or legal representative*)

_____ _____ _____
Name of person taking consent Date   Signature
(*if different from lead researcher*)
To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

_____ _____ _____
Lead Researcher Date   Signature
To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Copies:

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed a dated participant consent form, the letter/pre-written script/information sheet and any other writt information provided to the participants. A copy for the signed and dated consent form should placed in the project's main record (e.g. a site file), which must be kept in a secure location.

238

Appendix 3: Circle Time Session

Circle Time with 5-6 year old children (approx 8-10 children)

Session duration approx 20-30 minutes

Aim: For children to voice how their learning can be made better.

Ethical Issues:

- Introduce self to children and explain why I need their help.

- Discuss ethical consent form, confidentiality and anonymity issues.

Ice breaker

Activity

Story using sock puppet

- I will recount a story about this character that has been given special powers to magic what goes on in schools and how children are taught.

- The story will be open ended and the children will be invited to take control of the puppet and make up their own endings.

Conclusion:

- Recapitulate the children's stories and fun ending

Appendix 4: Guide Questions – Parents

<u>Focus Group with parents</u>

<u>Consent form, confidentiality and anonymity</u>

<u>Questions to help guide the discussion</u>

- What is you experience of your son/daughter's early years education?

- How far did you feel that as a parent you had a voice in shaping your son/daughter's education and experience in early years?

- What would you change what?? And how would you go about it?

- How far do you think that the current economic situation will affect choices made by parents about child care and the availability of services?

- How can policies safeguard the interests of parents and their children?

- What kinds of policies should the government introduce to ensure the interests of parents and their children are taken into account in early childhood education?

Appendix 5: Guide Questions – Pedagogues

<u>**Interview with pedagogues**</u>

<u>Consent form, confidentiality and anonymity</u>

- To what extent do you think does the Early Childhood Education and Care Policy affect your practice?

- Have you been consulted in the process whilst the Working Committee set up by the Ministry of Education was formulating the Policy? Or do you know of anyone who was?

- Would you have liked to be consulted at some stage, either before publication or if there were to be a review of the policy?

- Do you think your practice might change if you were to voice your views in a review of the policy or a subsequent one? How?

- Do you think that the current policy is a reflection of Maltese society and responds to the needs of Maltese children, parents and pedagogues? In what ways?

Appendix 6: Adults' Information Sheet

1.   **Research Project Title:**

Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education: Child Appropriate Practice

This study will look into the making of policy documents which guide early childhood education in Malta. I want to find out to what extent parents, children and teachers are represented in these documents. I then hope to come up with suggestions for future documents where parents, teachers and children are fully represented.

2.   **Invitation paragraph**

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

3.   **What is the project's purpose?**

This study will look into the making of policy documents which guide early childhood education in Malta. I want to find out to what extent parents, children and teachers are represented in these documents. I then hope to come up with suggestions for future documents where parents, teachers and children are fully represented.

Participant children will be asked to participate in 2 circle-time sessions.
Participant parents will be asked to take part in a focus group session where ideas and suggestions about policy (documents which guide practice) in the early years will be discussed.

Participant teachers will be asked to engage in an in-depth interview where the researcher will ask about their views about the early years policy document and how they can impact such a document.

4.   **Why have I been chosen?**

I have asked 4 schools to participate in this study. Your school was chosen because I was granted access by the Head of School. I have chosen this particular age group because it lies within the parameters of what defines early childhood education.

5.   **Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time without it affecting any benefits that you are entitled to in any way. You do not have to give a reason.

6.   **What will happen to me if I take part?**

If you are a parent, you will be asked to attend a one hour session where you will be asked to participate in a discussion with other parents about how early childhood education documents can include what parents want for their children at this stage of their education. If you are a teacher or policy maker, you will be asked to share your views on early childhood education with the researcher for one session which will last for about an hour.
Children will be asked to take part in 2 sessions of circle time which will last for about 30 minutes.

7.   **What do I have to do?**

Share your views and ideas about early childhood education in Malta and how it can be improved.

8.   **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

One possible discomfort that can arise is taking part in a discussion which might be a bit awkward at first until we get the ball rolling. However, the researcher hopes to create a safe and comfortable environment where everyone will be free to discuss or listen.

9.   **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will be useful to policy makers when a new document is being set up or the present one reviewed.

10.   **What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?**

If this is the case the reason(s) should be explained to the participant.

11.   **What if something goes wrong?**

If something goes wrong, or you wish to raise a complaint you can contact the researcher's supervisor: Prof Jackie Marsh at the University of Sheffield. However, if you feel that your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction then you can contact the University's 'Registrar and Secretary'.

12.   **Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

All the information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications.

13.   **What will happen to the results of the research project?**

The main purpose of the results of this project is to assist the researcher in obtaining a doctorate degree. In addition, some of the results are likely to be published in academic journals. If you wish, you can obtain a copy of the published results through the researcher

14.   **Who is organising and funding the research?**

This research is being carried out as part of an Educational Doctorate course at the University of Sheffield. No other organisation is involved or funding this research project.

Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

The audio recordings of your activities made during this research will be used only for analysis and for illustration in conference presentations and lectures. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

15.   -   **Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

The University's Research Ethics Committee (University of Sheffield) has reviewed the ethics application.

16.   **Contact for further information**

Should you require further information or wish to ask any questions please contact:

Marika Gatt Sacco

Tel: 79707589

Email: marikags@hotmail.com

Finally ...

You will be given a copy of the information sheet and a signed consent form to keep.

Thank you for taking part in the project.

Appendix 7: Ethics Approval

The
University
Of
Sheffield

Marika Gatt-Sacco <edp07mg@sheffield.ac.

Ethics Part B

1 message

J.Gillott <Jacquie.Gillott@sheffield.ac.uk>   **29 June 2010 16**
To: edp07mg@sheffield.ac.uk

Hi Marika
Your ethics forms have been approved this is subject to receipt of a signed hard copy of Par
B (Declaration) of the School of Education Research Ethics application form which is
available at http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/education/ethics. This hard copy is then held on file.
This ensures that we comply with university requirements about signatures. Regards
Jacquie

--

Jacquie Gillott
EdD & PhD Programme Secretary
University of Sheffield
School of Education
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Sheffield
S10 2JA
Tel: 01142 228096
http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/education/courses

247

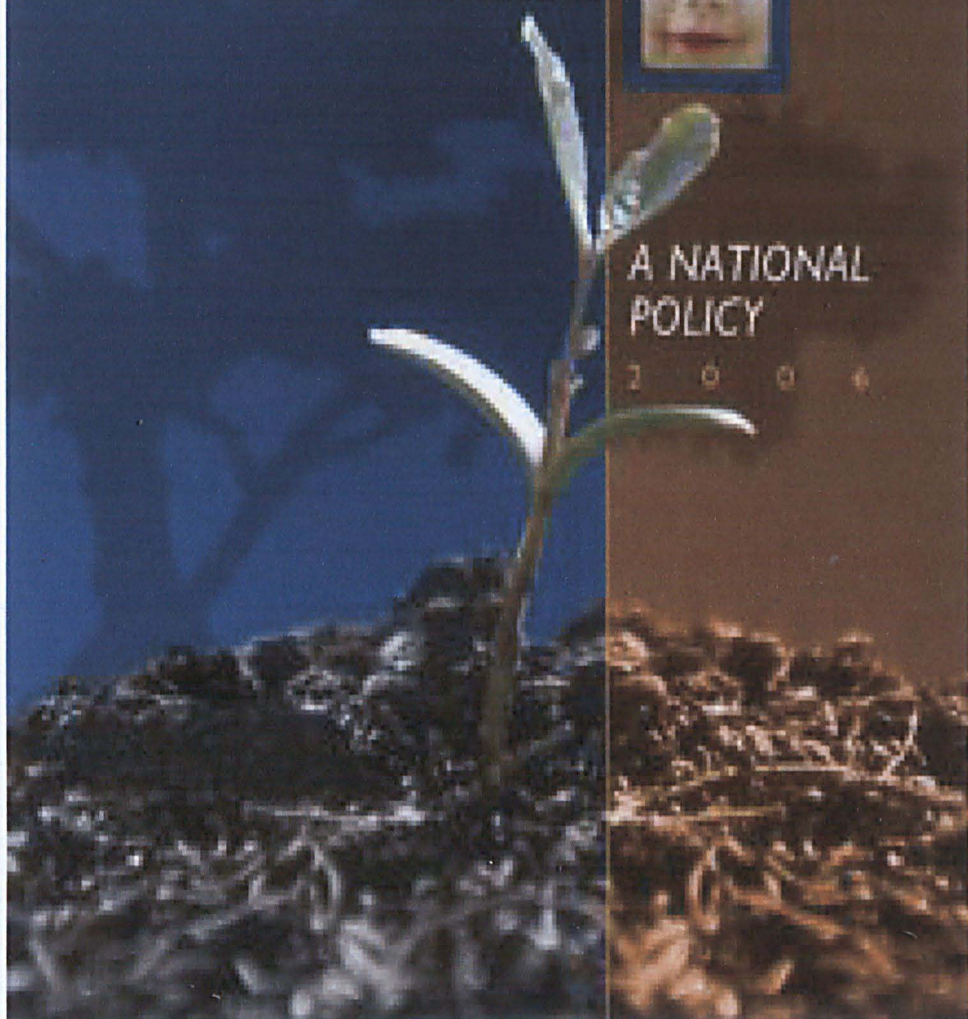## Appendix 8: Early Childhood and Care Policy Document

The Early Childhood and Care Policy Document can be downloaded from

www.education.gov.mt/ece.htm

EARLY
CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION
AND CARE

A NATIONAL
POLICY
2 0 0 6

Appendix 9: Press Handout – Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment (MEYEPR – 107/06)

MEYEPR 107/06

<u>Press Handout</u>   17/06/2006

A FIRST CLASS EARLY START FOR ALL CHILDREN

Early Childhood Education and Care: A National Policy

The Ministry of Education Youth and Employment this morning published the document "Early Childhood Education and Care: A National Policy" which is the result of work by a purposely set up working group, chaired by Dr Valerie Sollars, which focused on the sector.

At the launch of the document Education Minister Louis Galea said that the drawing up and publication of a national policy for early childhood education and care signals the acknowledgement for and awareness of this distinct and crucial phase of early childhood. "While being satisfied that early years provision has been locally available and accessible for a reasonable length of time in both the private and the state sector, we are now more conscious of and sensitive to the impact that good, quality education and care services can have on children, their families and society," said Dr. Galea who added that young children deserve the best education and care as early childhood is not only a distinct phase in the life of a human being but it has the potential to shape the future adult.

The working group which prepared the report was headed by Dr. Valerie Sollars, Senior Lecturer and Head of the Primary Department at the University of Malta Faculty of Education, and had as members Ms. Monica Attard, Education Officer in charge of early years education at the Division of Education, Mr. Brian Craus, Head of a state primary school (Żejtun Primary A), and Chiara Borg, from the Ministry of the Family and Social Solidarity. The policy was drawn up on the basis of international research and practices together with evidence, data and experience from the local context. The document is divided into three main sections:

Section 1 provides a brief overview of policy-related issues and recommendations drawn up by the OECD in conclusion of a review of early childhood services in twelve countries. This section is complimented by detailed information about early childhood education and care services in five countries. The literature emphasises the contributions of the family, the education sector and society's impact on the development of an ECEC policy.

Section 2 focuses on ECEC in the local context including child day-care services for the under threes, Kindergarten provision for three and four-year-old children and the first years in compulsory, primary schooling. Apart from mapping the historical development of the sector, data are included about the types of provision available and the qualifications of staff currently employed in the field, their pre and in-service training opportunities. Information about the methodology and practices, which are culturally accepted and promoted, transition issues across different services and the current situation concerning evaluation, monitoring and

research, is also included. This section also highlights issues that need to be addressed in the Maltese context.

Section 3 provides recommendations, which can contribute to the provision of good, quality care in the field. Recommendations are divided into broad areas relating to: financing, participation and access, transition; ratios; staff qualifications; learning programmes; monitoring and evaluation as well as evaluation and research.

The Report recommends and gives guidelines on the following:

1. Generous leave benefits for working parents could help reduce the need for costly infant provision and promote more equitable sharing of responsibilities.
2. Tax rebates, funding and/or subsidies for accredited day-care centres and small, private KG centres. Guarantee of affordable, quality provision is of paramount importance especially for low and middle-income parents.
3. Establishments responsible for young children ought to publish literature to promote their practices. This would result in a better-informed public.
4. Parents should be encouraged to visit different centres/to shop around and see what is available. Parents should be invited to spend time at centres when there are children.
5. Introduction of family-friendly benefits at place of work. Employers should be partners in child-care provision.
6. Ratios of adult to children need to be addressed. There should be a maximum of 15 three and four-year-old children with 1 qualified adult + 1 assistant. In child-care centres, there should be a maximum of two or three babies (under 12 months) with 1 trained/qualified adult; four children aged 12 to 24 months with one trained adult and a maximum of 8 children aged 24 to 36 months with one trained adult.
7. Staff at all levels and in all settings (state/private) should have appropriate qualifications. Over a period of time, current staff qualifications have to be upgraded until a situation is attained where all members of staff employed in the early years sector have a minimum qualification.
8. Practitioners in the field should have substantial skills, partly acquired in their personal and professional training to carefully observe, evaluate and alter the programme of activities being offered to children attending their centre in order to provide high quality experiences.
9. Programmes should be pedagogically sound and conducted by appropriately trained professionals. A high quality programme in early childhood implies child initiative, play and involvement. If a programme is over-focused on formal skills, it is more likely to provide opportunities for children to fail, and to develop a higher dependency on adults, promoting in them negative perceptions of their own competencies. Where KG centres form part of schools, a specific person has to be designated as the person responsible for the curricular programme at the centre.
10. Rather than working independently and in isolation staff at child-care centres should form networks or clusters. This could facilitate issues related to administration, organisation of training, negotiating with the authorities re issues related to salaries, training, holidays, insurance and setting of parental fees.
11. Centres should be encouraged to work in collaboration in order to find out more about appropriate and best practice. Such sharing of positive experiences could help to disseminate good practice across centres.
12. Within centres, there should be incentives to train and/or employ qualified staff to continually improve expertise. These incentives could also be linked to financial remuneration/subsidy for the centres themselves.

2

13. At a local level (centre/school-based) research ought to be undertaken in order to find out what immediate, short and long-term effects early childhood settings are having on the children in a range of skills one expects children to develop.

14. Each KG centre and early childhood institution should provide an annual report based on self-evaluation, reports from parents and children.

15. External monitoring and evaluation of practices at early childhood centres should be the responsibility of appropriately qualified staff.

16. When an application for a new centre is put forward and more importantly, once a license is given there should be careful scrutiny of premises, of staff and their qualifications and good standing.

17. Once a centre earns a license, unannounced inspections should be conducted periodically. A license should be renewed periodically.

18. The license can be revoked if premises or practice are not according to established standards. Transition periods may be allowed in order to allow for the service providers to upgrade premises, facilities or practices.

19. The license should be displayed in the main entrance of the building. Should there be a temporary license pending up-grading of premises or improvement in any sector, this should be clearly indicated together with a time-frame by when the situation is to be rectified.

Minister Galea thanked the working group for the valuable work they carried out and said he believes that the Sollars Report will positively influence the development of ECEC policies and strategies. "All stakeholders now need to deeply reflect on the findings and to strengthen their commitment to upgrade quality education in this area. The Government, through the Ministry of Education, has already taken on board many of the recommendations and we are working with those involved to map a programme of implementation."

Louis Galea said that the new education law, which will start being discussed this week in Parliament, makes very important provisions to set in motion a process of quality assurance in education. A Quality and Standards in Education Directorate (QSED) will be set up precisely to ensure that the whole process of educating a child is of the highest standard and that the outputs of the human and the financial resources invested in our children result in quality education for all. "The QSED will be responsible for ensuring the implementation of the Sollars recommendations on staff qualifications and licensing of kindergarten (KG) centres. Under the new College system all KG centres will be networked in clusters as part of the Colleges. We are working very closely with Minister Dolores Cristina on issues of standards, licensing and regulations of child care centres to ensure that in all child and KG centres the development of the personality, creativity, talents and intellectual potential of each and every child is boosted by the best practices and results possible. A first class early start for our children will be the best first step for all children to succeed," insisted Louis Galea.

Dr. Galea said that now that the document was published, a period of consultation will follow in order to obtain feedback from all interested parties and the stakeholders in general. The Document will have a wide circulation and copies may be obtained from the Ministry of Education in Floriana whilst digital copies of the document are available on www.education.gov.mt/ece.htm. Feedback should be sent in writing to Ms Micheline Sciberras, Director of Policy Development and Project Implementation, Ministry of Education Youth and Employment, Great Siege Road, Floriana, by e-mail on communications.moed@gov.mt or by filling in the feedback form on the website.

3