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Uncertainty and practical judgement in research

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Uncertainty and practical judgement in research: a call for attentive 'listening'

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Abstract

This paper draws upon research projects in which efforts have been made to find ways of listening to young children's voices in early years contexts. This listening, namely in the mosaic approach, helps us to see how children make sense of their world, and adopt our planning and 'being with' young children. After setting the context of early years pedagogy and ideology of mosaic approach, this paper focuses on the researcher's journey to turn her gaze inward before making any claims about her engagement with and listening to young children. Since this approach purposely leaves unanswered the question what kind of data is going to be collected, researchers have to decide what data is in the course of a research project, through their engagement with children. We argue for befriending uncertainty and dilemmatic thinking as it provides us with a different way of seeing, knowing and listening the hard to know. Through writing about phronêsis, this paper focuses on the process of decision-making and judgements that researchers undertake. The final argument calls for attentiveness and aims to acknowledge practical judgements as a fundamental part of researching early years.

Keywords

phronêsis, uncertainty, judgements, early years, educational psychology, listening, research

Introduction

The parents, teacher, support-teacher, and inclusive coordinator are all gathered for their annual meeting to agree on Alexander's learning plan for the year. Alexander is seven years old with

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physical impairment and the inability to walk. He is invited for part of this planning meeting. The teacher askes him: what is your greatest fear? Her thinking is that his physical limitations would feature in the answer. Alexander answers: 'spiders – obviously!' (adapted from Psaila, 2016).

As soon as we entered the yards, the children took me to the drainpipe and told me stories about how they tried to kill the cockroaches that come out of the drain. One of the participants added details of her encounter with a cockroach that went up her leg, which she then managed to kill. I remember mentioning this episode as a side-note to my supervisor, as I had clearly discarded it as meaningless in my understanding of the children's school experience. I was taken aback when my supervisor made me aware of how my discourse had played very well into the dominant discourses, that not everyone's knowledge and not all knowledge counts. My adult and professional lens did not let me see or listen to the fact that this is a valid and meaningful experience, which for the participants was part of their school experience. (Piscopo Mercieca, 2017: 40)

The above two excerpts are taken from two separate research projects conducted by two post-graduate students, both of whom questioned how children in early years contexts (aged between 0 and 8) make sense of themselves and their learning environment. In our own research and supervision of post-graduate students we are becoming more aware of the complexity in conducting research within early years learning contexts. This complexity is multi-faceted and needs careful deconstructions partially due to the role that adults have in the processes of researching young children. While recent years have given us examples of research that has the aim of 'listening' to children's 'voices', and trying to understand children as co-constructors of knowledge, the role of the adult researcher is necessarily very much there and plays a significant part in these research processes. Particular attention needs to be given to how the concept of childhood is constructed and to our 'need' to create research methodologies that try to capture children's perspectives. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) and Elwick et al. (2014), both from a Levinasian perspective, argue that 'understanding' children as *others* necessarily implies that adults cannot assume to fully understand children or capture them in their own sameness. The idea of 'otherness' is caught in a double bind. When we say that children are *others*, it implies that they are not part of sameness, and therefore efforts need to be made to get them in this sameness. But it is precisely their getting into sameness that these authors question, because if we assume that we have understood children, then their 'otherness' is completely lost. 'Otherness' is that which cannot ever be captured, understood and fully comprehended – it is that horizon that constantly recedes. It challenges us and helps us question who we are. Elwick et al. (2014) set out three major difficulties when assuming that we can come to know 'how children experience their world with any certainty and, indeed, whether they do or do not possess well-worked out "perspectives" on their experiences' (196). There are first difficulties to interpret non-verbal expressions and behaviour; second, difficulties 'of knowing whether researcher's constructions of the "infant's perspective" align with the infant's experience of the world' (196); and third, 'the difficulty of providing opportunities for children to disrupt researchers' predetermined categories of understanding, meaning and expectations' (196). The question that Elwick et al. (2014) pose at the end of their paper is central: 'how can they [researchers] embrace uncertainty when research generally demands certainty?' (210). We argue that acknowledging uncertainty and engaging in the continuous process of making

judgements (rather than engaging in a research process where one allows the methods to take over her judgements) are fundamental aspects of the research process, particularly in early years research. We have argued for the idea of working with uncertainty as opposed to working to reduce uncertainty when conducting research (Mercieca, 2011; Mercieca and Mercieca, 2013), and believe that uncertainty is productive in research if engaged with, giving the possibility of 'making room for something else to come about' (Lather, 2007: 7).

One of the authors of this paper is a post-graduate student reading for a degree in professional educational psychology. In a 'supervised' research project, 'working with uncertainty' has a double side to it: on the one hand, it is the student who is 'working with uncertainty' in a research context that involves children. We believe that if the researcher works with uncertainty, she will produce research that 'seeks alternative possibilities' (Kress, 2011: 262, in Elwick et al., 2014: 210) and 'look at things as if they could be otherwise' (Green, 1995: 16). On the other hand, the supervisor needs to allow for uncertainty in her supervisory role with the post-graduate student. If the supervisor allows for openness for uncertainty in the research process, she will support the supervisee to produce a research process that 'seeks alternative possibilities' (Kress 2011: 262, in Elwick et al., 2014: 210) and 'look at things as if they could be otherwise' (Green, 1995: 16). While this latter aspect does come out at different moments in this paper, the focus of this paper rests on the former.

This paper highlights some aspects of the research process that Sarah, a post-graduate student, training to become an educational psychologist (EP), was engaged in when researching young children labelled with Social Emotional Behaviour Difficulties, which children attend a nurture class in Malta. She was interested in gauging how these children make sense of themselves and their learning environment. Sarah's initial motivation in doing such research stemmed from her earnest desire to become an EP who listens to children's voices. The thought process that she came with on her first supervisory meeting ran along these lines: *EPs work with children; they should try and listen to children's ideas and voices – EPs cannot assume they know all about children; so this research experience needs to help me as an EP find a way of listening to children. This research experience will help me find a way in my future work when I am engaged with children* (Piscopo Mercieca, 2017: 10).

Readers cannot miss the linearity of the argument as expressed by Sarah. Sarah was initially on a search for a method, a 'how to' into listening to children's voices. She assumed that she could find a method that helps her listen to and understand these voices. One needs to see this within the whole context of EP training and question how much of this training is positivist in nature. Terms such as 'evidence-based', 'raising educational achievements', 'evidence of effectiveness in real-world contexts' and 'systemic-oriented' are commonly found in EP training courses. In themselves, of course, such terms have connotations of robustness and validity. We are part of these discourses; our concern is about the totalitarian use of such terms, so that anything which does not fall within these parameters is seen as useless, or worse, bias, and consequently discarded. Children and their carers, educators and, in this case, EPs, are constructed and construct each other using such parameters. Thus, assumptions and judgements are made about children and the contexts that they live and learn in. They are measured and judged according to this

preconceived yardstick. We ask therefore, what particular assumptions do EPs makes about children and the adults around them, and how does this influence their choices in research? Sarah eventually opted to use the Mosaic Approach. Although it is not about the Mosaic approach per se, this paper introduces this approach as it contributes towards Sarah's research project and her reasons for taking it on. The paper moves on to discuss (un)certainty and its implications in research, followed by a discussion of practical judgements, relying heavily on Aristotle's work on phronêsis. We link to this Richard Smith's call for attentiveness. The co-authorship of this paper is important as it brings Sarah, the post-graduate student, together with her supervisor and advisor, and points the reader to moments of working with uncertainty in this research process in an 'attempt to theorize from a different place' (Gallop, 2002: 11).

As an aside, in the process of writing this paper, we became aware that both Elvira's and Sarah's quote in the beginning of this paper refer to creepy crawlies. Amused by the almost uncanny coincidence, we see a resemblance in the unexpected suddenness of their appearance in everyday situations, to their unexpected appearance in their respective research projects. They almost epitomise the arguments we outline in this paper below. This paper will not draw from Elvira's work but will focus mostly on Sarah's experience.

The mosaic approach: a possibility of listening to children?

Children are often viewed as incomplete adults and always in the process of becoming adults. Much research on children is based on retrospective views of adults or based on the views of the parents and professionals involved in the children's lives (Watson, 2012). Children are considered incapable of participating in meaningful understanding of themselves and their environments (see Aries, 1986). The mosaic approach was designed by Clark and Moss (2005) and was developed as research tool to work with young children. It is based on the Reggio Emilia Approach (Clark and Moss, 2011a, 2011b) and combines visual and verbal input (such as child friendly conferences, role-play, guided tours, puppetry, map making, cameras, taking photos, making videos, drawings and painting and other construction material such as blocks or play dough). The simultaneous use of participatory and more traditional research tools leads to the generation of data and to the construction of a 'living picture' of children's lives (Clark and Moss, 2005). It requires the researcher to view children, no matter how young, as experts in their own lives; as skilful communicators; as rights holders and as meaning-makers (Clark and Moss, 2005: 5).

The mosaic approach highlights the need and importance of listening to young children and also acknowledges both the possibilities, and the challenges, that listening to young children pose to the researcher and to the research findings (Clark and Moss, 2005). Unlike other methodologies and methods that promote 'hygiene' and 'tidiness' (Clark, 2010: 230) and also a clear separation between process and content, this research approach involves a way of researching where the interaction between the researcher and the participants is essential for the co-construction of knowledge (Mercieca and Mercieca, 2013, 2014b). The researcher using the mosaic approach makes visible children's lived experiences (Clark and Moss, 2011a, 2011b). Childhood occurs in a context

where children's everyday life is understood as made up of objects, people, spaces, time, activities and practices (Clark, 2013). Therefore, through using this framework of listening, researchers encourage children to explore and reflect about these aspects of their lived experiences. This is different from listening to children as though they are consumers to assess their satisfaction with the services they are receiving, for example at nurseries (and schools). This framework involves listening to children as valued members of our community to reach a greater understanding of how they experience life (Clark and Moss, 2011a, 2011b).

The perspective of adults is also given importance in the mosaic approach methodological framework as it aids the development of a complete 'mosaic' picture of the child's life and experience. The data generated is used to facilitate an active discussion between the child and the adults in order to review, discuss and negotiate meanings and perspectives (Clark and Moss, 2005). This gives the possibility for the children's perspectives to remain at the centre of the discussion with the adults (Clark and Moss, 2011a, 2011b), rather than to nullify or validate the child's or adult's point of view.

The approach thus incorporates a set of values and beliefs about conceptualising childhood, children and listening (Clark and Moss, 2011a, 2011b). Researchers who adopt this approach are invited to commit and embody these beliefs and values and to furthermore take on a certain way of being and existing (Law, 2004). This implies a relearning and revaluating of the researcher's own understanding of listening (Moss et al., 2010).

Introducing Sarah

The following quotes is taken from Sarah's dissertation:

These incidents motivated me even more to take up the Mosaic approach in the hope of helping these adults listen. However, as I immersed myself in this approach I became aware that I had to clear fog from my own lenses, as I too could not see the children clearly. This process proved to be an arduous exercise demonstrated the challenge that listening brings, that required changes within for me to be able to listen (Mercieca and Mercieca, 2014a; Law, 2004).

The first realisation of this challenge involved my struggle to stop myself from extracting knowledge from what the children were sharing. During a supervision session, I proudly spoke about a table I had organised, where I made a list of sandwiches the children said they liked during lunch time, as seen below:

Student	Sandwich
Samantha:	*Ham and cheese sandwich*
Miriam:	*Toasted ham and cheese sandwich*
Nick:	*Ham and cheese sandwich*

My experience of collecting data, giving it structure and extracting its meaning or themes, had distracted me from noticing the process of how this discussion of sandwich preferences was brought about and what about these sandwiches the children liked. I found myself struggling with what to consider what was relevant to my research, since

the children were sharing a number of things that were not necessarily related to their school experience. An example of this dilemma occurred during a guided tour the children gave me of one of their outdoor schoolyards. As soon as we entered the yards, the children took me to the drainpipe and told me stories about how they tried to kill the cockroaches that come out of the drain. One of the participants added details of her encounter with a cockroach that went up her leg, which cockroach she then managed to kill. I remember mentioning this episode as a side-note to my supervisor, as I had clearly discarded it as meaningless in my understanding of the children's school experience. I was taken aback when my supervisor made me aware of how my discourse had played very well into the dominant discourses, that not everyone's knowledge and not all knowledge counts. My adult and professional lens did not let me see or listen to the fact that this is a valid and meaningful experience, which for the participants was part of their school experience.

This was one of the many instances that made me stop and delve into my own internal listening, as I became aware that my immersion into the Mosaic approach involved more than the use of a set of methods or a methodology. Law's description of social sciences' research methodology is eerily close to the experience I was going through as:

> *What we're dealing with here is not, of course, just method. It is not just a set of techniques. It is not just a philosophy of method, a methodology. It is not even simply about the kinds of realities that we want to recognise or the kinds of worlds we might hope to make. It is also, and most fundamentally about a way of being (2004, p. 10).*

The more I delved into this approach the more I saw myself changing. It required me to relearn and revalue other languages that the children were presenting (Moss, 2006). This change helped me reach a deeper understanding of what is meant by considering children as competent experts (Langsted, 1994), which freed me to question my interpretations and to let the children lead. Only then could I see how my previous way of being was limiting my understanding of my participants' school experiences (Tolfree and Woodhead, 1999).

Uncertainty and dilemmatic thinking

We invite readers to view the above excerpt from Sarah's research in the light of assumptions that are made about research, science, listening to children and data gathering. Texts which come highly recommended for supporting students in their research give clear guidelines which students follow almost religiously, haunted by the fear that if they were to stray from the straight and narrow path, then that would expose them to risks. Law (2006) sums up the argument in the following manner, prior to outlining his own opposing views: 'If you want to understand reality properly then you need to follow the methodological rules. Reality imposes those rules on us. If we fail to follow them, we will end up with substandard knowledge, knowledge that is distorted or does not represent what it purportedly describes' (5). Law in fact calls such an understanding of methodology as 'doing' and instead advocates research in which the 'being' of the researcher is given more importance, as indeed noted by Sarah's writing above. Richard Smith

(2006) agrees and quotes Sayer (1994) who compares the importance given in social science courses to the narrow sense of methods ''with the blithe disregard of questions of how we conceptualise, theorise and abstract. ('Never mind the concepts, look at the techniques' might be the slogan)'' (160). David Goode (1984, 1990) reinforces the point of 'being with children'. His research on children with disability, and in some research, focusing on the lived experiences of children with profound disabilities, challenges how methodologies are conceived and carried out. For Goode (1990) 'if a methodology fails to retrieve the details and structures of everyday existence in a relative unprejudiced fashion, it will be possible to have elegant, refined and technically impressive knowledge that will bear little, or even a contradictory relationship, to the actualities of persons' lives' (3). Goode's warning here is important, that this paper addresses: what research judgements do researchers engage in when researching children in order to capture that child's life? The focus here is on the judgement processes that we researchers go through. We are arguing a move away from an attitude and discourse of technique, to reflect on the judgements involved in the process, and in the moment, when being with children who are the object of research.

A focus on technique tends to generate an approach towards research which is rather performative and which follows means–end thinking. We use Jean-François Lyotard definition of 'performativity', where he argues that 'the true goal of the system, the reason it programs itself like a computer, is the optimization of the global relationship between input and output – in other words, performativity' (Lyotard, 1984: p.11). It is research systems (the research methods and activities) that create fixed relations, in which particular roles and procedures are assigned, and there is almost no way of getting out of such systems. Patti Lather warns that in this 'worldwide audit culture with its governmental demands for evidence-based practices (Strathern, 2000), scientific methods are being (re)privileged as if the last several decades of the critique of positivism had not existed (Lather, 2004a, 2004b; Lather and Moss, 2005)' (2007: 3). Researchers influenced by this thinking (we must acknowledge we are ourselves sometimes caught in this thinking) tend to hurry through Bannister's (1981) circumspection phase and rush to start following methodological procedures in order to gather their data. In this phase, '. . . we are bound by no rules and where our minds may and should wander happily . . . it is the time when we fantasize, erect preposterous questions, and propose nonsensical answers . . . [using] humour, poetry, daydreaming and the wildest kind of speculative argument . . . [until we] begin to see the kind of question we want to ask' (Bannister, 1991: 192–193 in Mellor, 1998: 460). Without this phase, thought about how students are to engage with the research and researched, and about challenging their fixed ideas of what data is and is not, is limited. It further restricts the way researchers deal with unexpected occurrences in the process of data collection, and this risks that what is unexpected is viewed as not relevant because it does not conform to the clear guidelines outlined in the texts mentioned above or in neat power point presentations which lay out data gathering procedures.

We are influenced by Michael Billig et al.'s (1988) writing that emphasises how everyday life is shaped by contrary themes and dilemmatic qualities so that confused thoughts within persons are seen as more common than is allowed in research. As Billig et al. (1988) claim, this dilemmatic approach brings forward a different image of the

thinker from the individual with inner unity. We also draw upon the writing of Wendy Hollway (1994) who critiqued the unitary individual subject as one that suppressed inconsistency and variability. Hollway's concept of subjectivity is multiple and dynamic, non-unitary and contradictory. Through these and other authors, we started to think about the possibility of research in which the researcher is less clear about the process, and hence might be more receptive because they have fewer boundaries around their expectations. Billig et al. (1988) and Klein (1997) highlight that contradictions, uncertainties and lack of clarity are very much present in our lives, experiences and thoughts. Yet we seem to dismiss them and believe that only our deliberate actions and thoughts matter and count. Through these authors we seem to give ourselves permission to shed light on and give space to what is not deliberate, what is incidental and spontaneous, and to be open to what such thoughts and experiences tell us.

In Sarah's case, she came to supervision with numerous ideas about possible activities with the children. While acknowledging her eagerness to engage with the children, we cautioned her not to fix on any plan prior to spending some time with them, advising that the children would show her the way, or at least, would challenge her ways. In fact, Sarah's experience of her research involved a process of 'undoing' as she captures in her words above – she underwent a process of 'struggling to stop herself from extracting knowledge', 'relearning and revaluing other languages', searching through an 'immersion' for a 'deeper understanding of children', as her being a researcher was opened up and questioned. When she allowed herself to 'not know', to be uncertain and to live with the dilemmas which she acknowledged, she became aware that she was engaging in a listening '*that required changes within for me to be able to listen'.* Thus, she reports being shaken in how she engaged with children, and this spilt over to how she engaged with what she believed was data and how it made sense. Here the verb 'engagement with' is used with purpose, as 'understanding' often implies knowing all, while in this case, 'engage with' implies openness, that allows agency of *other(s)* to influence the being of the researcher. Such a process of unlearning or undoing renders the researcher vulnerable and may cause considerable unease and anxiety. However, as Sarah explains in the beginning of the excerpt, she had opted for this kind of research, in this case the mosaic approach, because of incidents that had prompted her to aim to help adults listen better to children. Sarah's writing reflects the struggle between her wish to carry out research that engaged with children, and her prior experiences *'of collecting data, giving it structure and extracting its meaning or themes'.* This resulted in her realisation that her own listening(s) needed to be challenged, which challenge is not a one-off, but becomes a habit of engagement. Sarah's strong wish to open herself to children with the uncertainties and dilemmas that this brings, enabled her to tolerate the anxiety which such challenging prompted and thus to follow her longing of engagement with children (see Mercieca, 2012). This opened the possibilities for the children to affect her and consequently her research.

We believe that openness in research, and, for the purposes of this paper, openness to listening to early years children, necessitates the acceptance of the challenges posed by children, and, indeed, the acknowledgement of uncertainty and dilemmas as prevalent in our research. The mosaic approach, in fact, even tries to distance itself from connotations of fixed guidelines by calling itself an approach, rather than a methodology. We argue

that the researcher needs to be 'one who has learnt to live with not knowing, with the lack of stability, uncertainty and unpredictability which this brings about' (Mercieca, 2011: 28). This is essential if we are to strive for seeing and listening to what is hidden and hard to know. Uncertainty and dilemmas give us a different way of seeing, knowing and listening, which we stress is of particular importance in early years contexts. Early years contexts emphasise the formation of relationships and engagement between the teacher and the children within a particular environment. That of the researcher is no less important, and she is excellently positioned to unpack these engagements and relationships.

Thus, rather than suppressing or ignoring inconsistency and variability, the researcher can acknowledge differences and contradictions in her own accounts and also in those of others without needing to suppress them or dismiss them as distortions. Whereas Sarah's initial response to her experience with the children in break time was to draw upon prior training about research, she eventually managed to look at how her assumptions were distorting her listening to early years children. In the beginning of her 'data collection' she came for supervision with a table in which she quantified the children's responses to her question about what they had in their sandwich:

Student	Sandwich
Samantha	Ham and cheese sandwich
Miriam	Toasted ham and cheese sandwich
Nick	Ham and cheese sandwich

In a previous tutorial, we had suggested this question to her as a conversation opener, and ice-breaker, which children often respond to. In an almost Kafkaesque pictorial way, she moved from boxing the children's responses about their lunch to allowing the inclusion of their discourse about cockroaches in her dissertation write up. When she recounted the story to us, we enjoyed thinking about the metaphorical difference between the sandwich that stays reassuringly in its box, and the cockroach which runs unpredictably here and there (often scaring us by its sudden fast movement).

Practical judgements

Sarah's research journey, which as stated above is marked with a process of 'undoings', necessarily incorporates continuous moments of judgement on Sarah's part to achieve this. When explaining the process of listening to children's voices, Alison Clark's main question is 'what is important here?' (undated) as she strives to look and hear with fresh eyes and ears. The answers to such a question may be varied and continuous, which requires the researcher within the mosaic approach to make numerous decisions and judgements. In order to appreciate the position of such a researcher, we have to compare it to that of the researcher who is following a more formal and prescriptive approach to data collecting and thus a more linear approach to judgements. Law (2006) insists 'that methods, their rules, and even more methods' practices not only describe but also help

produce the reality that they understand' (5). He argues that, since methods inescapably shape the world, then it is important to acknowledge this process and work within it. Sarah's research follows the mosaic approach, which acknowledges that judgements on the part of adults actually form the research. Her research, which is imbued with judgements, gives her, and us her readers, an understanding of children in the early years settings in her research. She provides those insights on children which would otherwise be unseen and unheard. But how do these judgements decide what data is included and constructed? How does Sarah make judgements about her being with the children and engaging with them? The following excerpt from her write up is an example of one of the many moments in which Sarah tentatively explored an almost 'technical' (Smith, 2006 from Sayer, 1994) collection of data to a reflective and deliberate judgement about the moment when Sarah was engaging with Miriam.

> Apart from my own journey of learning how to listen, I became aware that the children also passed through an acculturation and relearning phase since the role I was asking them to take on within the Mosaic approach was very distant from their role in their everyday life (Clark, 2010). A difficulty the participants seemed to share was their desire to provide me with a 'correct' answer to my questions. An example of this involved Miriam who disclosed that she did not like coming to school. When hearing this disclosure I became very curious about what this meant to the child. However, as soon as I asked her to clarify she retracted her statement and told me that she likes coming to school because she likes to learn. This unveiled her expectation of what she expected that I, as an adult wanted to hear at the expense of hiding her experience. This was later confirmed in a later session where as she became accustomed to this new way of being listened to, she could express the reasons behind her real experience of not liking school.

These are judgements that allow for uncertainty and dilemmatic thinking, since, as Clark says, this is an interpretative process, which may lead to more questions than neat and tidy answers. In turn, such dilemmatic thinking allows for these judgements (as mentioned above) so that children, as co-creators of knowledge, become fundamental agents in the process. Jon Nixon (2004a) terms the process of judgements a risky and unpredictable business and as one which has a complex and indeterminate nature:

> Judgments do not come ready made: they cannot simply be read off from evidence. They require the tacit or personal knowledge of whoever is making the judgment. The notion of wisdom is often attached to judgment precisely because it makes this necessary connection between the evidence upon which judgment is based and the tacit knowledge which the professional [researcher] brings to bear upon that evidence (Nixon, 2004a: 30).

David Carr (2006) mentions deliberation, reflection and judgement as constituents of the virtue phronêsis. This virtue allows the researcher to work with dilemmas and uncertainty:

> Deliberation is necessary because, unlike techne, phronêsis is not a methodical form of reasoning about how to achieve some specific end, but a deliberative process in which both means and ends are open to question. Such reasoning is reflective because the means are always

> modified by reflecting on the end just as an understanding of the end is always modified by reflecting on the means. And judgment is an essential element of phronêsis because its outcome is a reasoned decision about what to do in a particular situation, that can be defended discursively and justified as appropriate to the circumstances in which it is being applied (426).

Phronêsis (practical judgement) is the ability to think about how and why one should act in order to change things, and especially to change one's life for the better. This also involves the ability to reflect upon and determine one's end which is termed eudaimonia (the good / happy / flourishing life). 'Phronêsis, to simplify a complex picture, is characterised by sensitivity to situated particulars and concrete cases, and by flexibility; it is the property of people of a certain character, who have relevant experience and know how to use it wisely' (Smith, 2006: 166–167). Phronêsis has a double character: on the one hand, it apprehends those ends which constitute human flourishing or the good for man (Nicomachean Ethics, 1140b: 8) and on the other it involves a certain ability or cleverness which converts mere apprehension of what is to be done into the actual doing of it. For Aristotle, acting ethically is never simply a question of good intentions (though it is that); it also involves that practical intelligence or ability which converts ideas into results (Hinchliffe, 2004: 537). Phronêsis is the virtue, within the individual, that always helps her to do the right thing, at the right time, and for the right reason. Aristotle makes it very clear that phronêsis is not 'reducible to opinion, or to guesswork or conjecture, or to cleverness' (DePew, 2004: 1 70 in Surprenant, 2012: 223). Phronêsis is practical judgement of the changing world. The focus is combining 'intellectual ability with the character and wisdom necessary to make wise and sensible decisions in particular human situations' (Mulgan, 1987: 10) that are often 'extremely messy' (Russell, 2014).

So what is this developmental nature of practical judgement? In other words, how does one become *phronimos*? Education and habituation seem to be, at least two fundamental points in this developmental process. Education is about acquiring a universal theory of the good life through teaching. Kristján Kristjánsson (2014) refers to this as a blueprint of the good life, and he quotes Aristotle: 'Here, too, [as in medicine] there is a ruling [science]' (Aristotle, 1985: 159 in Kristjánsson, 2014: 165). This blueprint is 'constantly available to her [the person of practical judgement] as background concern although she does not draw on it consciously and reflectively on each particular occasion' (Kristjánsson, 2014: 165).

So would the 'blueprint', as advocated by Kristjánsson (2014), be in a process of constant development rather than that of completion? Kristjánsson (2014) reminds us that Aristotle 'warns us repeatedly against the assumption that the universal theory can be implemented and applied to specific cases in a codified rule-based manner' (165). This is what many refer to as the fundamental basis of practical judgements: 'deliberative judgments involving complex interactions of the generals and particulars' (Ellet, 2012: 19). As Aristotle (1985) himself argues, '[phronêsis] is concerned with action and action is about the particular' (92). This highlights the agency of the person engaging in practical judgements in judging and deciding the 'reasonable action to perform in a concrete situation' (Ellet, 2012: 19). She is involved in some form of deliberation: weighing of the pros and cons. Daniel Nyberg (2008) articulates this clearly for us when he writes:

'phronêsis is not the "right" way of doing things in a particular community, but the ethically good action a practical wise person would take' (589). So it is not so much about if the action is right or wrong (which discourse is often preferred by structures of accountability and measurement), but whether one is acting for the self's own good and for other's goodness. As Black (1972) points out different people involved in the same situation may judge differently the situation and yet all will be reasonable.

How is this judgement achieved? The Aristotelian answer is that the person involved in practical judgements is *habituated* in these judgements. One learns the virtue of practical judgement through exercising practical judgements. 'I become virtuous through the practice of virtue' (Nixon, 2004b: 118). This habituation is particularly indispensable for the practitioner to continue practicing with integrity when faced with 'institutional expediency' (Higgins, 2003: 281).

A call for attentiveness

Ironically, my personal and professional transformation can only be depicted through further questions. In his book *Working with Children*, Tom Billington (2006) asks the readers to reflect on their practice by asking the following question: 'How do we speak of children? How do we speak with children? How do we write of children? How do we listen to children' and 'How do we listen to ourselves (when working with children)?' (p. 8). I remember highlighting these questions vigorously during the first phase of this research study, hoping that by the end of it I will be able to provide answers. However, through adopting the Mosaic approach as a way of listening, being and researching I came full circle back to these questions. I concluded that in order to listen to the five participants' school experiences, I needed to constantly ask myself Billington's (2006) five questions. An insight that my supervisor helped me recognise during this research journey that exemplifies this rationale was that once you think you are a competent listener and stop asking yourself these five questions you stop striving to listen. Thus the answer is within the questions we ask (Piscopo Mercieca, 2017: 146).

We follow Smith's (1999) idea that practical judgement needs 'attentiveness' (333–335), which we think Sarah apprehends in the last sentence of the above quote. Smith contends that in all situations 'it is in our perception of the meaning of things, . . .that truth or error lies' (333). It is in these moments of attentiveness that practical judgement calls for attentiveness and attentiveness calls for practical judgement. Smith's (1999) quote from Murdoch (1975) captures the argument: 'getting things wrong, even horribly wrong, is often 'the product of a semi-deliberate inattention. . . We never allow ourselves quite to focus on moments of decision. . . we allow the vague pleasure-seeking annoyance-avoiding tide of our being to hurry us onward until the moment when we announce that we can do no other' (Smith, 1999: 333). We all agree and hold just the main premises of an argument. But somehow, Smith argues, the minor premises can be revisited when we place the emphasis on a different take. It is in this 'murky area. . . where we live a great part of our moral lives' (Smith, 1999: 334). The quality of our moral lives, Smith continues to argue is 'often a matter less of our principles or the soundness of our reasoning than of how we see the ordinary world around us' (334). The following excerpt is we believe a good example of Sarah's attentiveness to the 'minor premises' in this research project.

Before starting this study I was adamant about being equal to the participants and abdicating all the power that comes with being an adult and a professional. However, during my initial contact with the children I became immediately aware of the asymmetrical relationship between the participants and I (Eide and Winger, 2010). This growing awareness that 'power is always present (Foucault, cited in Moss et al., 2010) opened up a new set of questions and a sense of uncertainty especially when I was interacting with the participants. I found myself continuously asking myself 'Am I leading the child to do this activity?', 'Should I just observe and refrain from interfering?', 'Am I influencing the children's responses?' and 'Is this relevant to my research question and topic?'. Upon reading in order to answer some of these questions I came across another question that left me feeling confused: 'what gives us the right as grown-ups to search for children's point of view?' (Eide and Winger, 2010: 50). These questions illustrate how torn I felt between following the child's agenda, being preoccupied that I was influencing the children when my research purpose was to listen to them and the dilemma I felt about my own research agenda (54).

Concluding note

Smith (1999) argues that 'the phronimos [the person of practical judgement] sees clearly, truly, because she attends to the world as it is and not through the distorting mists of self-deception or fantasy' (334). This is what Smith calls 'attentiveness', where the person of practical judgement needs to be habituated into 'the need to develop even greater moral sensitivity rather than a closed deductive code' (Dunne, 1993: 310, in Smith, 1999: 333) as attested by the final excerpt in the last section. Thus, the attentiveness required is not only that towards the other(s) but is also attentiveness on behalf of the researcher to herself in formulating the minor premises of arguments. This attentiveness enhances our awareness of the kind of not knowing and openness to the other (the child) and to what the other shows us. The children's eagerness showed a willingness to share, and ostensibly, all that Sarah needed to do was look and listen. Yet this required her to divest herself of the various research and educational psychological trappings which blinded and deafened her to the children's sharing. We become more aware of the limitations as well as the possibilities of researching children. This paper significantly argues that as researchers we need to be able to work alongside uncertain and dilemmatic processes and dynamics to engage with different ways of seeing, knowing and listening to the lived realities of children. It is in this way, that the idea of the good for oneself, the other and the community is propagated and exercised. It is in this way that we can get closer to that which is hidden and hard to know.

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