

# Literacy is Child's Play: Making Sense in Khwezi Park

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The paper draws on ethnographic data on children's game-playing in Khwezi Park outside Cape Town. This unsupervised, child-choreographed play is seen as a site of meaning-making and identity work where children draw on a range of resources and influences to take and make meaning. These resources for semiosis and interaction are multilingual and multi-modal, and are sourced from social domains that are local, regional and global. This site of play is shown to be itself a distinctive domain where these children can mediate and model for each other the semiotics, practices and resources of school, local and popular culture, religion, mass media and home. These resources allow them to experiment as meaning-makers and sign-makers under conditions of peer feedback in a situated context where there is both contained specificity and freedom to innovate. Such sustained peer-play is seen to be a resource for this particular group of children, encouraging them to be inventive and reflexive in developing their sign-making potentials. The children's social semiotic activity is seen as productive of meanings that are seen as both hybrid in their sources, domain-specific and linked to the children's performances in other contexts, particularly that of school-based reading and writing.

**Keywords:** literacy, children, play, multilingual, multi-modal, global

## Global, Local and 'Speech Communities'

In keeping with more general ethnographic work of the past (see Ferguson & Gupta, 1997), ethnographies of literacy practices have tended to carry out research in relation to bounded, often marginal, social groups or communities as their objects of study. Such communities have included rural villagers in Iran, mill-worker families in the North Carolinas in the USA, working-class communities in Lancaster, England, islanders in the remote Central Pacific, unschooled adults without jobs living in shack settlements on the fringes of urban South Africa, amongst many others.<sup>1</sup> The impetus of that research has been to study the ways literacy practices of such local groups were rooted in local forms of knowledge and communication, and were consistent and coherent when seen as forms of cultural practice that were located in specific contexts.

Rather than being seen as people and communities who were pre-modern or marginal to 'bourgeois reason and the commodity economy' (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992: 5), such local groups have been seen as having fashioned their own versions of modernity, invisible as they might be from the centre. From a sociolinguistic perspective such groupings have been studied as 'speech communities' (Hymes, 1974) where the situated practices of reading and writing have been seen to take on distinctive forms and functions. The research has usually shown the cultural integrity of distinctive speech and literacy practices,

as well as sometimes showing the ways these practices are handed down intergenerationally (Heath, 1983). Because the focus was on group processes as distinctive, conflict and misunderstanding have been seen as occurring in the gap between integrated cultural and linguistic systems (Rampton, 1998: 8), such as those of local communities, on the one hand, and the school system on the other, or between local political or economic processes, on the one hand, and mainstream, bureaucratic and institutional processes on the other. This gap then sometimes comes to be seen as a place to focus critique or practical interventions that might help the proponents of these different systems (of homes and schools, for example) to understand each other and adjust. If, as Heath suggested, the distinctive 'ways of knowing' of children entering schools can be explained in terms of rules and models learned effortlessly in infancy, that operate as cultural scripts (or 'cultural models' as Gee, 1999, refers to them) in the heads of speakers, then they will all exhibit similar behaviour in interaction with a different system of meaning-making, such as that of the schooling system.

However, this construct of local communities as discrete sociocultural blocks has become more clearly problematic in contemporary times with the increasing geographic dispersal of linguistic and cultural groups (Appadurai & Breckenridge, 1988; Castells, 2000; Hall, 1992) and with the impact of mass communication and global marketing resources, images and values on local communicative practices (Kress, 2001). It is not surprising that recent studies have pointed to the multilingual dimensions of much of contemporary literacy practices (Gregory & Williams, 2000; Martin-Jones & Jones, 2000). Furthermore, cultures are by definition internally homogeneous – at least as far as they share the particular characteristic under study, so a model of culture which focuses on internal distinctiveness does not explain individual variability below the intercultural level and suggests a strategy for intervention based on the assumption of difficulties of understanding across relatively stable groups.

The case study presented here looks at a particular group of children and their emergent literacy practices, not primarily through the lenses of the literacy and language practices of their homes or schools but through their out-of-school peer play. From this perspective the children are shown to draw on a range of resources and influence to take and make meaning. These multilingual and multimodal resources are sourced from social domains that include the local, regional and global and are appropriated by the children and mediated for each other as sense-making and identity-shaping resources. The influences of home and school are shown to be just part of what is available to these children. In addition, the site of play is shown to be itself a distinctive domain which allows children to practise, learn, innovate around, reflect on, and synthesise the conceptual resources available to them from multiple social domains. It is seen as a site where these children can mediate and model for each other the semiotics, values and practices of school, local and popular culture, religion, mass media and home.

The children's social semiotic activity is seen as productive of meanings that are seen as both hybrids in their sources, domain-specific and linked to the children's performances in other contexts, particularly that of school-based reading and writing. Such sustained peer play is seen to be a resource for this particular

group of children, encouraging them to be inventive and resourceful and reflexive in developing their sign-making potentials.

### **Children Play**

It has been 'a pleasing idea' for some time now to see play and literacy sharing common boundaries in the minds of young children (Piaget, 1962; Roskos & Christie, 2001: 59; Vygotsky, 1978), pleasing in the identification of pedagogical value in activities that children do joyfully and willingly. However, studies commonly focus on structured or institutionally based play activities, where play with signs is often bent to explicitly pedagogic purposes. This case study is concerned with play that is entirely child-directed and choreographed.

The discussion focuses on one child, in interaction with her peers in a play context. The child, Masibulele, was seven years old when these data were collected, in her first year of schooling. She lives in Khwezi township, Khayelitsha, Cape Town, and attends a local school where she is presently learning to read and write in the Xhosa language, her home language. She will later learn to read and write in English which will become the predominant language of learning for her.

### **Family Scripts**

Masibulele's mother left school before finishing 'primary schooling', and her father left school during his first year of 'high school' (after six years of schooling) to go and work in the gold mines in Gauteng. Her father now works on the railways and her mother does not work. Masibulele does well at her school and likes to draw and write, but there are almost no books or paper in her house. Her interactions with her parents are not characterised by those 'scaffolding behaviours' which were once thought to be near universal but now are seen as mostly a Western middle-class practice: that is, her mother does not regularly engage her as a conversational partner, where the conversation starts at baby-talk level and gets increasingly 'normal' as the child matures. Nor does her mother try to prepare her for the interactive patterns of communication that are said to characterise the discourse of teacher and pupils, such as those of question, answer, feedback.

She is not receiving orientation towards an 'elaborated code' (Bernstein, 1996) involving 'decontextualised talk' (Hasan, 2000) with her parents at home. That is, Masibulele is not being informally groomed for success in writing at school by way of learning through interaction with her parents to communicate clearly with the outside world of strangers who cannot rely on the contextual clues available to intimates to make sense of her speech. Yet at school she is confident, assertive and successful at this stage of her career and at ease with her peers. She is in the 'strong group' in her streamed classroom and is often sent to assist those children who make up the two 'weak groups' that contain almost half the children and who are just not 'getting it' when it comes to the 'basics of reading and writing', much to the exasperation of their teacher.

Masibulele plays almost daily with other Xhosa-speaking children in her neighbourhood, in a group varying between 8 and 16 children at a time, of varying ages, mostly girls, but the group often includes one or two boys. Their

play is characterised by a mix of languages, narrative resources, images and artefacts from local popular culture (including 'traditional' Xhosa and Christian church influences) from the mass media (TV and radio) and schooling.

The following data are an abridged selection from several instances of play. It was recorded for the Children's Early Literacy Learning (CELL) research project, a research project that was carried out in the Cape, Gauteng and the Northern Province, concerned with studying children's early literacy learning in non-school and school settings.

The data here focus on children's interaction during two particular, overlapping games, those of 'rounders' and 'wait', versions of ball-tag and skipping games that are cross-cultural, if not global, in many of their details, including the terms used, though they are substantially redesigned and elaborated on by local children. The Khwezi Park versions that Masibulele and her friends play allow for substantial spoken, sung and danced displays at various stages. In between throws, and particularly when the ball is not fielded cleanly, the children in the middle have a licence to tease and show-off. This aspect of the game is signalled by them as *steji* or 'stage'. It is apparent that much of the fun of the game comes from the space for verbal exchange / jousting / experiment / play / display that the game makes possible, but the rules for playing are followed and continuously policed in verbal exchanges. In the 'wait' game one of the children, by saying the Afrikaans word *praat*, can nominate a particular chant routine to be followed while crossing the rope (made from old twisted 'panti-hose') when the children have to call out the name of a colour, in English, at the conclusion of each stage. The height of the ropes to be crossed can also be set by the participants, as a further variation, at ankle-, knee- or waist-height. In my discussion of the play below, I retain the original speech in italics so that the reader can see the extent to which the children mix Xhosa, English and some Afrikaans words, in particular patterns of use. I present the transcript first and then go on to discuss it. I refer to line numbers in my discussion. The mark // indicates there has been a deletion in the transcript. Upper-case indicates shouting.)

1. **Masibulele:** *Masidlaleni urounders maan.* Let's play rounders man.
2. **Masibulele & Thandeka:** *[in unison] Steji! STAGE!*
3. **Masibulele:** *Steji! Thetha thetha ngubani onothix'omkhulu emhlabeni? STAGE! Speak speak who's got a big God on earth? [they laugh]*
4. **Child:** *Hay'aba!* No you!

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

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

Children in the middle have licence to strut and sing. In doing so they call attention to their bodily selves and their social selves in a kind of identity work that often elicits comment from their friends. Masibulele, in line 5 above, draws attention to her clothes and to her relationship with her sister. Ntombephelo is her 11-year-old sister who is also in the game and is a vital part of Masibulele's sense of herself, her confidence, her access to valuable information and her sense of what her development trajectory might be, and she is marking here this relationship, while engaged in embodied sign-making practices where her physical and social selves are resources for meaning-making and social interaction. She then moves on to a different kind of teasing display, involving numbers and a subversive intervention in the game:

6. **Thandeka:** *Ukhona u one out? Ukhona u one out? Is there one out? Is there one out?*
7. **Masibulele:** *Ewe no five out, no six out, noseven out no twenty out. Yes and five out, and six out and seven out and twenty out.*
8. **Girl:** *Hayi u one out ukhona? No is one out there?*
9. **Masibulele:** *Ukhona ewe. Uyophela ku twenty-four. Ha, a out. Uyophela ku twenty-eight thousand out. Yes it's there. Up until twenty-four. Ha, a out. Up until twenty eight-thousand out.*

In lines 6 to 9 above, Masibulele can be seen to be making use of her licence on stage to be humorously subversive of the efforts of others to monitor the game. While the others are trying to find out if anyone has gone out, she turns this into an exaggerated display of numbering. In her first year of school she almost certainly has no precise idea of 28,000 but she clearly delights in the flamboyance of big numbers.

She does something similarly exuberant and excessive soon after this episode again with numbers, inviting a response from the others:

10. **Masibulele:** *Irighti lo nto. Kaloku mna ndimdala ndingange one hundred and million dollar. That thing is right. By the way I am as old as one hundred and million dollar.*
11. **Thandeka:** *Kodwa umfutshane kangaka kodwa ungange one hundred and million dollar. But you are this short but you say you are as big as one hundred and million dollar.*
12. **Nompumelelo:** *Ngekudala wasweleka. You would have died a long time ago.*

Masibulele uses the word dollar rather than South African currency (rand) because of its force as a non-local sign of value, or magnitude. The responses from the other girls (lines 11 and 12) enjoin in the playful spirit of the odd metaphor, not questioning its literal appropriateness in correlating amounts of age, size and money. Kress (1997) in his book *Before Writing*, which examines the

emerging sign-making practices of pre-school children, discusses a related example of original sign-making through metaphor where a child out on a walk describes a hill as 'heavy', a sign that works for the child because of the correlation with the effort required to walk up the hill. Kress uses that example to illustrate his point about meaning-making as being an *internal* sign-making process where meanings are made by children drawing on their own repertoire of interest, experience and semiotic resources, which in their first efforts do not resemble the conventional standardised forms of descriptive analogy that become the internalised versions used in later life. The point is that the game allows the children to engage in this playful and productive exercising of their meaning-making resources, in a communicative context that is permitting of fantasy and experiment, with peer feedback and also with boundaries and rules. The children can be seen to be working with notions of value and status and how these are discursively embedded in language and routines. Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982) and Kress (1997) trace a related dynamic in relation to children's emergent writing, where children are seen to develop their own versions and strategies of writing which over time in their assigning of meaning and shape move closer to the conventional, as they interactively respond to feedback. The contrast with the highly regimented rote-learning that characterises their early literacy in school could hardly be sharper.

### Playing by the Rules

The following extract is an example of intensive game-playing. The children, absorbed in the activity, are shown to be engaged in several tasks, including the managing of social interaction and relationships, and the maintenance and modification of rules of play. Their semiotic activity is seen to be multilingual in its resources, referenced to multiple other social contexts, and multimodal in its blend of kinetic movement, dance, language and gesture. The language is a 'social language' (Bakhtin, 1981; Gee, 1996): the meanings of words and movements of reference are internal to the social-semiotic domain of play that the children construct. Such an integrated nexus of social language-activity-identity is at the heart of the New Literacy Studies' (Barton 1994, 2001; Baynham 1995; Street 1984), concern with language and literacy as situated, contexted and sociocultural practice. The cultural practices are not those of reproducing inherited scripts or codes, but of situated production, which suggests a processual view of culture (Rosaldo, 1993) or what Bourdieu called 'regulated improvisation' (Bourdieu, 1977: 78). The meanings produced are only fully sensible to insiders, though the bits of language, as resources, come from outside of the domain. The frequent use of English (and some Afrikaans) terms in the game signals this process of taking 'status words' or 'fixed words' and using them as clear meaning markers. These words include 'rounders', 'cross', 'wait', 'colours', 'statue', 'numbers', 'out', 'duck', 'partners', 'praat', 'rules', 'score', as well as colours and numbers in English. Numbers are a useful form of division and pacing. Each number corresponds to a step in the dance across the rope. While the children are taught the numbers in isiXhosa at school, as well as the days of the week in the Xhosa language, they use the English words in everyday conversations as do their parents. The numbers and colours below are said in English by the children.

1. **Nompumelelo:** *Hayi ingatyekeleli sisi. Emakhwapheni ngoku. No, it must not be soft sister. At the armpits now.*
2. **Nompumelelo:** *Wait one chacha, One, two, one, two chacha.*
3. **Thandeka:** *Wait one chacha.*
4. **Ntombephelo:** *Out, one, two, three, four, out, one, two, three, four, out, one, two, three, duck, one, two, three, four.*
5. **Masibulele:** *Orange.*
6. **Ntombephelo:** *Orange, one, two, three, four. Yhu praat! Hey talk! ['praat' is an Afrikaans word]*
7. **Nompumelelo:** *One, two! one, two, three, four. One, two! one, two, three, four, one, two, one, two, three, four, White. one, two, three, four, black, two, three, four, orange.*
8. **Child:** *Yithi orange. Say orange.*
9. **Ntombephelo:** *Yhu praat! Hey talk! Yhu, two, three, four, and two, three, four, and one, two, three, four.*
10. **Nomha:** *Irules! Ayikho inzikinzane. The rules! There's no nzikinzane. [Nzikinzane is a cut under one of the toes].*
11. **Nomha:** *Esinqeni. At the waist. Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, out.*
12. **Thandeka:** *Ukhona u one out. There is one out.*
13. **Nomha:** *One, two, three, four, one, two, three, four, Yhu andidinwe! Bhekela Bhekela! Hey, I'm tired! Move back move back! One, two, three, four mustard, one, two, three, four, one, two, three, four, Asenzi praat. We don't do praat, Wait, wait, wait.*
14. **Mabhuti:** *Statue Masibulelele yiza ubulapha. Come you were here.*
15. **Masibulele:** *skozi? Score?*
16. **N:** *Seven.*

The transcript cannot of course capture the blend of words, rhythm, gesture and movement that is underway here. Line 1 shows Masibulele's older sister making sure the rope is at the right height for this stage of the game and that tension on the rope is right. Her own turn at the formulaic dance-shuffle movement across the rope is enhanced by her turning it into a cha-cha. In line 5 Masibulele intervenes by nominating a colour, but it is not her turn to do so. However, her sister accepts the prompt and then remembers (signalled by 'Yhu!' in line 6) that she should have said the word *praat* (speak) which is the cue to nominate the names of colours at the end of each sequence. In line 9 she switches off the nomination of colours by saying *praat* again, and then continues her sequence of movements without any more colours. 'Statue' (line 14) is a cue to freeze on the spot without moving, borrowed from another game. In line 10 the child Nomha makes an intervention about the rules, again invoking an insider language (*nzikinzane*).

'Wait' is what the children in the game do between moves. It signals a completion of a sequence or a pause, a marker somewhat like a comma or full stop on a page. The word 'wait' also signifies the panti-hose ropes that are stretched out and have to be crossed in elaborate patterns of movement and chant, as well as the name of the game itself:

17. **Thandeka:** *Yhu akemde uwait wakho ndimbone izolo. Yhu.* Hey, your 'wait' is very long. I saw it yesterday. Hey.
18. **Masibulele:** *Uqala pha kulapali aye kuphela ngapgha kwezilabs.* It starts at that pole and ends over at the slabs.

and this term travels to informal peer talk at school:

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

The children's collaborative production is thus seen to include their own development of an insider language that is constantly under construction and elaboration.

### Making meaning across social semiotic domains

The children in the study built situated meanings while playing, and learnt how to use these in context. They also displayed a meta-awareness of how words take on different meanings across different social sites and semiotic domains. Thus Masibulele, whose ability to use English is limited, turns the word 'cross', which is usually about crossing the rope in the game, into a teasing of a child that depends on the double meaning of cross as in 'a cross teacher' or 'maam cross':

1. **Nompumelelo:** *Awucrossi.* You are not going to cross.
2. **Masibulele:** *Thandeka cross.*
3. **Masibulele:** *Dlala maam cross. Maam cross, maam cross.* Play maam cross. Maam cross, maam cross.
4. **Thandeka:** *Hayi ke uyabona ke Masibulele?* Hey, you see Masibulele?
5. **Zintle:** *U maam cross ngubani Masibulele?* Who's maam cross Masibulele?
6. **Masibulele:** *Nank'epheth'ibhola u maam cross.* Maam cross is the one holding a ball.
7. **Girl:** *Andingomaam cross mna.* I am not maam cross.

### Crossing domains

What these children bring from school is varied but particular: school is one site for their English-language development so many of the English terms they are trying out have a school-echo to them, the authority relations of school are also echoed in their play, and the language drills of their schooling are reproduced as well, as in the example which follows. Masibulele has not yet learnt the routine below at school, so the following initiation of an episode around lists of 'comparative words' is probably something learnt from her 11-year-old sister or during the game at some other time. Masibulele is 'on-stage' when she initiates this exchange around 'school English':

1. **Masibulele:** *Anelisa unxibe la panty incinci. Leya wawuyinxibile.* Anelisa is wearing that small panty. The one you wore.
2. **Anelisa:** *Hayi ke mna andinxibanga panty encinci.* No I am not wearing a small panty.

3. **Masibulele:** *Whowu whowu! Good. Good gooder goodest. Wow! Wow! Good. Good gooder goodest.*
4. **Nompumelelo:** *Fire firer firest.*
5. **Child:** *Good gooder goodest.*
6. **Nompumelelo:** *Fire firer firest.*
7. **Child:** *Long longer longest.*
8. **Nompumelelo:** *Leg lenger longest.*
9. **Child:** *Eye.*

This child might have said 'Y' rather than 'eye'. Either way, she does not get any further. 'Eye' would have linked with 'leg' in the previous example, and 'Y' would link as a cue for 'girl' in the one that follows.

10. **Nompumelelo:** *Girl girler girlest.*
11. **Child:** *Bread breader breadest.*

The children's playful interactive parodies of 'school grammar' speak for themselves at one level. They are deliberate and humorous, and to the outsider provide a comment on the limits of such decontextualised teaching by rote which makes up a large part of their school learning experience.

### Children's Multiple Social Worlds

If we understand the children's social worlds of home, school and peer-play as distinctive but permeable, as does Dyson (1993), we can see them interactively examining the ways meanings adhere and shift across those domains. In the interaction below they reflect on the located meaning of cheating in each location, in their play, at school and in 'home culture'.

1. **Nompumelelo:** *OK, wena uzoqhatha mna apha. OK, so you've come to cheat me here.*
2. **Anelisa:** *Uqhatha uNompumelelo. You cheat Nompumelelo.*
3. **Nompumelelo:** *Uzosiqhatha elokishini. You have come to cheat us in 'the location'.*
4. **Girl:** *Uyeka ukuyoqhatha esikolweni. She doesn't go to cheat at school.*

'Cheating' in the game, 'in the location' and at school all mean different but linked things; they each refer to different sets of relationships in social practice. Running them together like the children do here is a form of collective, dialogical playfulness and display in relation to the shifts and the relatedness of meanings across contexts. The Xhosa term *elokishini* (line 3) is a borrowing from the English 'location'. The term 'location' was first used by 19th century colonial government in Natal and later by apartheid administrators to refer to segregated urban residential areas designated for Black South Africans. The Xhosa term has survived multiple substitutes for this term in English ('township' being the most contemporary term) and also survived the demise of formal apartheid. So the saying 'you've come to cheat us in the location' captures the children's parents' perception of 'outsiders' coming into their domain to exploit them, and signals a particular element of local identity that has been sustained despite the many shifts in the local/global context. 'Cheating' at school has a particular meaning, again,

that is school-bound and is linked to the threat of strong sanction. 'Cheating' in the context of game-playing is usually a term used in peer conflicts over control, direction of play and interpretation of rules, and of course does not carry the sense of transgression or threat of sanction that 'school cheating' carries.

### 'Local' resources for meaning-making

Xhosa home-language resources provide the children with a rich source for image, metaphor, rhythm and meaning-making, which surface unpredictably during play, as the following samples briefly illustrate.

1. **Masibulele:** [to Thandeka] *Statue! Awuvingcele endlwini yeempuku. Rayi rayi ndinanto yam jikelele ngqu.* Statue! Closed in a rat's house [idiomatic, suggesting close confinement]. I have something that goes around. //
2. **Masibulele:** *yatsho indoda endala. Yhu awumde ingathi usisikhonkwane esingabethelelwanga.* Hey, you are tall like a nail that hasn't been hammered in. //
3. **Masibulele:** *Uqale wabaphamanzi. Ubaph'isonka kushota ubaphe umngqusho uphinde ubathengele izihlangu.* [Chant] You first gave them water. Then you gave them bread. You need to give them samp [corn] and buy them shoes. //
4. **Nompumelelo:** *Bendithe nqa umam'umpumputhela angathethi!* I was wondering why the blind mother didn't talk. [She is being sarcastic, implying that Masibulele is normally very talkative.]
5. **Zintle:** *Hayi hayi hayi akho sesikolweni apha!* No no no we are not at school here! [Zintle's response to Nompumelelo is an indication that for her sarcasm is a school/teacher resource which is best left there.]
6. **Nompumelelo:** *Ndizakuniqwayita nina!* I'm going to keep you out of play for a long time! [qwayita (mqwayito) is a reference to biltong, which is meat that has been dried for a long time. Her meaning is: 'I'm going to be in the middle for long enough to make dried
7. **Masibulele:** [To Thandeka] *iphi ibhola? Yhe smathamatha somntwana iphi ibhola [three times].* Where's the ball? Hey you sleepy child where's the ball? (three times)

The rich metaphorical resources of the Xhosa language are deployed in the various examples above, and this productive work is constantly being responded to by the other children. In the last example, Masibulele is caught up by the music of the words she has combined, and they become a chant/refrain which she repeats three times.

### Language and musicality

Music of various sorts features in the children's play, as might be expected. Popular and church music are favourite resources the children draw on and play with. The pop music that the children draw on shows them connecting with a

wider youth culture, including local rap (*kwaito*) music, international pop music such as Britney Spears' songs and other 'hit-parade' music, and church music including Xhosa and English hymns. The following musical and spoken dialogue is illustrative of the children's playful interactive work around names, sounds and identity. If 'phonemic awareness' is as critical a predictor of children's reading success in schools as is widely claimed (Adams, 1991; Snow *et al.*, 1998) then there is no doubt that these children are demonstrating and enhancing such awareness in their play:

1. **Masibulele:** [sings] 'Say my name, say my name, igama lam nguNtosh. My name is Ntosh. [This is from a local rap or kwaito song which mixes languages].
2. **Masibulele:** *elinye igama lam ndingu Sibuy okanye undibize Bulele. My other name is Sibuy or you can call me Bulele.*
3. **Thandeka:** [sings] *My name is Thandeka. I live in Khayelitsha. / /*
4. **Masibulele:** [sings] *I believe I can fly. I believe I can touch the sky [pop song].*

### Permeable resources

Much of the pop music the children draw on is encountered from radio and TV. Television influences, in both English and Xhosa, are often drawn on by the children. The following is an example of how such resources are come by, experienced and mediated for the younger child by her sibling, at home:

[Days of our Lives starts on TV]

1. **Nompumelelo:** *uJack uzakumisa la plane kaPeter. Akahappy umama ka Jennifer kaloku ufunyenwe u Travis uthi uJack no Jennifer ba alright uyayazi loo nto. Hayi uRoman uthetha kakubi uyakhawulezisa xa ethethayo. Jack is going to stop Peter's plane. Jennifer's mom is happy because Travis has been found and says Jack and Jennifer are all right she knows that. No, Roman doesn't speak well he speaks fast.*
2. **Masibulele:** *Ubani? Who?*
3. **Nompumelelo:** *uRoman. Roman.*
4. **Masibulele:** *ngubani lowo? Who's that?*
5. **Nompumelelo:** *ukuba awumazi myeke sobe uphinde umazi. If you don't know him forget, you'll never know him.*
6. **Masibulele:** *ndizakukuthungela nodoli wam ungabi nexhala. I'm going to sew for you my doll, don't worry.*

On this occasion Masibulele accepts that the subject matter is out of her reach and interest, and her sister uses Masibulele's ignorance to mark out a sphere of interest separate from her younger sister's. But nonetheless, the reading of image and narrative from popular culture is being modelled for her by her 11-year-old sister, who in turn will have drawn on cues from her peers to make sense of the 'soapie' in relation to her own social identity concerns.

## Conclusion

This case study focused on the multiple semiotics of children at play. It showed children modelling and mediating for each other a range of resources and attitudes. These resources allowed them to experiment as meaning-makers and sign-makers under conditions of peer feedback in a situated context where there was both contained specificity and freedom to innovate.

I pointed out at the start of this paper that recent studies have pointed, firstly, to the multilingual dimensions of much of contemporary literacy practices (Gregory & Williams, 2000; Martin-Jones & Jones, 2000) and secondly, to the multi-modal changes in the modalities of representational communicational landscapes (Gee, 2001; Kress, 1997, 2001) where mixes of written, visual and aural modes of communication characterise new forms of screen-based and text-based communication. That focus on the multiple semiotics of communication has reminded us that even literacy traditionally conceived as written words on a page always draws on a multiplicity of modes (actional, visual, linguistic) all of which contribute to meaning. This discussion has focused on children's play as a distinctive multimodal, multilingual and multisourced semiotic domain. It was shown to provide a discursive, precursive and social space for these children's creative experiments in social semiotic meaning-making. While the distinctive semiotic domains or social worlds that make up these children's world have been identified following Dyson (1993) as those of home, school and peer interaction, the influence of signs, values and commitments from popular culture, by way of music and television in particular, have been shown to be pervasive in home and peer sites of interaction. Such semiotics are drawn on and mediated for each other by the children, in play and in direct conversation, and thus become part of their social worlds and their identity resources.

The wider study of these children's encounters with school literacy which is not presented here shows them encountering a highly circumscribed version of literacy which is mostly drill-based learning of phonemes and coding, and language drills. While Masibulele finds this school work easy, she is not protected from struggling later at school, as she receives almost no school-based exposure to the particular grammatical, discursive, sociolinguistic and strategic strategies that make up the specialised social semiotics of school literacies. Masibulele's rich and varied experiences of semiotic mediation go some way to explaining for us the potential she shows in school. However, at school she is encouraged to internalise concepts of relevance, and habits of engaging mentally, which are not those which will provide for future success in school. Her schoolteacher, like many others at non-elite schools in South Africa, understands literacy teaching to be simply drilling 'the basics' of alphabet and syllable coding and decoding. Literacy learning, very briefly, is understood to be the sounding out of letters and words and in the process moving from part to whole via pattern drills, both orally and in writing, in a communicative context where reproducing the one response which the teacher acknowledges as correct is the only permitted goal (see also Pluddemann *et al.*, 1998: 24). What gets lost in her school learning, in contrast with her play learning, is the development of rich, situated, permeable and reflexive ways of making and taking meaning (in 'school ways') that she will need to be a successful player in her later years of school learning.

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### Note

1. These include literacy studies of the Vai of Liberia (Scribner & Cole, 1981), villagers in an Iranian village (Street, 1984), local communities in a town in the North Carolinas (Heath, 1983), in Lancaster, England (Barton & Hamilton, 1998), in South African townships (Prinsloo & Breier, 1996), islanders on Nikulaelae in the South Pacific (Besnier, 1995), Garpuner villagers in Guinea Bissau (Kulick & Stroud, 1993), Seventh Day Adventists in an Australian town (Kapitske, 1995), amongst many others.

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