



THE LIFE EXPERIENCES AND UNDERSTANDINGS
OF CHILDREN AS CITIZENS IN A DEMOCRATIC
SOUTH AFRICA

by

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S.A.
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THE LIFE EXPERIENCES AND UNDERSTANDINGS OF CHILDREN AS CITIZENS IN A DEMOCRATIC SOUTH AFRICA

by

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UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
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YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

DEDICATION

For my own children and for the children of South Africa.

Different faces

Many races

Different people

Many places

The past behind us

The future and freedom in front of us

For children of Africa

We stand together

In these troubled times

We stand together

We come from one land but we are so different

Yet, we stand together.

Stephen-John Martin (in Smuts, 2001:15)

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Soli Deo Gloria!

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Date

ABSTRACT

This inquiry is the exploration and understanding of a case study: the nine-year-old learners of an inner-city school in South Africa and their experiences of democratic South Africa as citizens. Their expressions informed me on how they perceived their democratic identities and their understandings of their citizenship. From the acquired understandings and identities I sought to extend the current conceptions of citizenship education. This study was informed by the interpretivist paradigm and guided by a conceptual framework.

The literature on citizenship and citizenship education concerning the young child highlighted associated concepts and theories. I employed Dewey's theory on building a learning community and Waghid's expansion of compassion and imaginative action. Theories used concerning young children and their construction of citizenship were the postcolonial and transforming society theory, informing that children as young as nine years can engage in notions such as citizenship and democracy. From the literature, I identified the knowledge, skills and values needed for a child to participate as an active and accountable citizen; content also offered by the South African national curriculum. This curriculum envisages the future citizen as the responsible citizen who will embrace democratic values in their everyday lives and contribute to nation-building. The data collection methods and data collection instruments were designed in a child-centred way to facilitate self-expression. The constructivist grounded theory analysis assisted in generating significant insights.

The nine-year-old learners expressed their identification with the South African democracy and its values such as social justice, which aligned with the South African ideal of social cohesion and nation-building. However, they expressed little knowledge about and no active participation in democratic processes. They expressed concern about their unsafe neighbourhood and the social injustices they encountered in their community. The young learners expressed the desire for change to transform South Africa into a 'better nation' to secure their and other citizens' future.

Key findings confirmed statements made by scholars in this field: citizenship education has to acknowledge the life experiences of children in order to be meaningful (thus contextualize citizenship) and to assist young children to contribute to democracy. However, the democracy can

only be sustained and strengthened if the learners are knowledgeable about democratic processes and possible threats to these processes. In addition, young children need to be participants in the democracy and not only observers. The nine-year-old learners expressed the passion to do what is expected of them but seemingly lacked the participatory skills and opportunities they needed.

KEYWORDS: Young South African children's citizenship experiences, democratic identity, citizenship education, democratic values, Dewey's building a learning community, Waghid's compassion and imaginative action, postcolonial theory, transforming society theory, high social awareness, lack of participation, lack of democratic knowledge