

RETHINKING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT FOR GREATER PARENT AGENCY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

Internationally, the focus on parents in their variety of forms and how to enable their resourcefulness continues to invite debate in early childhood development (ECD). In South Africa, the change in the function shift in ministries, the development of curriculum and teacher education policies for ECD has necessitated a key focus on parents as knowledge holders with agency. This article aims to rethink the constraining model of parental involvement to enable greater parent agency in ECD. A qualitative case study utilising purposeful sampling of eleven parent participants in the Dr Kenneth Kaunda District of the North West Province was undertaken to accomplish this. The sociological perspective of parent agency and the continuum from parental involvement to parental engagement theory, as posited by Goodall and Montgomery (2014), is used to make sense of parents' positionalities. The findings show that the centres were strongly positioned as the agents who cast parents as helpers in the activities of the centre as well as providers and consumers of information. This made the parental involvement conceptualisation dominant. The lack of focus on parent agency has created a need for urgent intervention to support parents as primary caregivers and to enhance the theme of "no parent left behind".

Keywords: Parents, Early Childhood Development, Involvement, Agency, Engagement, South Africa

Introduction

As early childhood care, development and learning rise on the agenda for government-led provision from birth to five years, especially in low and middle-income countries, one of the key issues that continue to invite debate is the constitution of early childhood as a system when centre-based provision is implicated and when children's individual learning becomes a focus. At this intersection lies the notion of bringing about investment in parents as resources for understanding and contributing to the centres' operations and, more importantly, supporting children's learning. Evangelou, Sylva, Edwards, and Smith (2008) show tensions in approaches to parents in early childhood practice. The authors draw attention to a reactive approach that makes parents "add-ons" to the system of ECD - parents are only involved in activities that the centres dictate. On the other hand, a pro-active approach allows parents to claim their position as primary educators of their children. As such, they engage with early learning and subsequent educational outcomes. This approach is located within the literature that accentuates engagement, partnerships, collaboration and participation (Epstein 1992, 1996).

The focus on conceptualising and enabling parents as key actors in ECD (especially from birth to five years of age) is coming to the fore more strongly in the Global South as national curriculum frameworks and guidelines are being developed. There is a pressing need to engage with goals and modalities for how parents can continue to function as primary educators when their children transition to early childhood centres. Tronto (2013, p. 17) alerts us to framings of parents that can lead to a “democratic deficit”. A top-down curriculum development process could mean that parents as a stakeholder group have been excluded from having their values and ideas as citizens incorporated into key documents about their children. This curriculum development is perceived as a difficult process that runs the risk of being glossed over in the public comment process during policymaking. Such circumstances lead to thinking *for* parents and not *with* them (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000). Where this happens, parents' voice and agency are side-lined and they are cast in passive terms.

South Africa is a fascinating case for examining how parents are positioned in early childhood centres. This is becoming increasingly important due to the roll-out of the function shift from the Department of Social Development (DoSD) to the Department of Education (DBE), the use of the South African National Curriculum Framework (NCF) and the imminent implementation of the Policy on Minimum Requirements for Programmes Leading to Qualifications in Higher Education for ECD Educators (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017). The latter was instrumental through the Project for Inclusive Early Childhood Care and Education (PIECCE) (2017-2020) in developing ten knowledge and practice standards. One of the standards is about building family and community relationships. This makes it imperative to focus on enabling parents' resourcefulness to support early learning.

In light of the above, it is essential to unpack family structures in South Africa. Assuming that parents come from nuclear family structures (mother, father, child) is detrimental considering South Africa's diversity. The White Paper on Families (Department of Social Development, 2013) shows eight family structures besides the nuclear family. A significant family structure for ECD relates to female-headed and grandmother-led families. While some parents forge ahead with supporting their children's learning, Ebrahim and Waniganayake (2019) contend that poverty, HIV/Aids, migrant labour practices, and complexities of multi-generational caregiving practices in South Africa complicate parents' capabilities for supporting their children. The authors also note that the NCF recognises parents as knowledge holders whose contextual circumstances must be engaged to allow them to function in a way that suits their needs. ECD teachers should then seek to implement an ubuntu pedagogy where connectedness for the individual and the public good is valued practically. This approach, of course, needs to take into account that parents are not a homogenous category. Race, social class and gender, for example, continue to shape conditions on how parents engage in supporting their children's learning. Research looking at parents in this way remains scarce and under-theorised in ECD in South Africa.

Considering the policy changes for early childhood practice and teacher education for ECD in South Africa, this article focuses on the parents and how they should be thought of and enabled for greater collaboration in their children's learning. The main aim is to explore the constraining model of parental involvement to enable greater parental agency in ECD. In so doing, the article fills the gap in understanding parent support through a focus on parent agency and its complexities. Rethinking parental involvement comes at a critical time when early childhood is making strides to be visible in the education system.

The Conceptual Framework

In this study, we used two theoretical concepts: parental agency (Billet, 2006; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Leslie, 1993;) and the continuum of parental involvement to parental engagement (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014).

Parental Agency

Parents are constructed as agents – people who have the capacity to act. Agents are driven by internal and renewable sources of energy (Leslie, 1993). According to Emirbayer and Mische (1998), agency needs to be understood with temporal human experiences. As such, they will be influenced by the past, the present and the future. The strengths of the perspectives will depend on the context of experiences and the relational dynamics that guide them. Where agency is strong, individuals are very goal-directed and use their perceptions to re-act in the environment they find themselves in. When they are in proximity of others, they interact. This activates relational agency – interdependency, reciprocity and mutuality (Billet, 2006). This relational agency can be between the individuals and the sociological or educational aspects in life as espoused by institutions (structures). The parental agency is influenced by differences in categories such as race, class and gender.

Continuum of parental involvement to parental engagement

The continuum of parental involvement as posited by Goodall and Montgomery (2014), is used in the study to make sense of parents as social actors in centre-based provision for early learning. Goodhall and Montgomery (2014) emphasise that parental involvement with the school/early childhood centre is an entry point on a continuum. Where this is strong, the agency of the centre is strong. The centre-based staff are then in control of the relationship with the parents. Parents are viewed as passive consumers of information. The information flows from the centre to the parents and is not necessarily actively sought by the parents. The centre's priorities dominate, and activities for parents are predetermined irrespective of their contextual positionalities. Parent meetings, specific interventions for parental involvement and homework, involve parents. The parents benefit from such activities as they receive useful information on what is important for their children's learning and how to support them.

However, Goodall and Montgomery (2014) note that although this is not ideal, it does build parents' knowledge of the fundamentals needed to work with their children. Parents will benefit if they do not experience barriers to their involvement. Parents' agency is relative to the opportunities provided by the early childhood centres.

Parental involvement with the centre is the next level on the continuum (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). Here, the agency is expanded to include the centre and the home. Information sharing is bi-directional between parents and the school. This interaction is helpful as the children's cultural backgrounds come to the fore, and teachers can use this to support children's learning. This interaction also allows for the building of relationships and trust. Parents and teachers can build shared understandings of the best ways to support individual children's learning. There is flexibility, and the interactions help to foster a commonality of purpose. The information flow is from the centre and from the home to the centre. Parent meetings are interactive. There is more power-sharing and co-construction where parents feel valued as partners. Agency is thus a feature of both sides—the early childhood centre and the home. Parents help children with activities. They feel motivated to help their children by choice. Interactions between the parents and the child make learning personalised. The child benefits from support from both the centre and parents, but only if the parents' literacy levels, specific circumstances and conditions enable this.

The highest level of agency is exercised on the continuum when parents engage with their children's learning. Their actions can be motivated generally by the early childhood centre or specifically by internalising and reinterpreting information emanating from centres or just through their own ideas of what needs to happen for their children to succeed. Several combinations can exist. Parents have aspirations for their children and support them to realise this. They are likely to be in dialogue with staff and can co-construct activities to support their children's learning. They position themselves as engaged supporters of their children's learning. They actively use the resources from school, home and relevant solutions to help their children. There is less dependency on the centre. Where parental engagement is strong, parents take on leadership roles and can enable innovations to support learning, e.g. parents assembling mothers that are literate in African languages to support oral activities such as storytelling at early childhood centres. The agenda is shaped by parents when they are engaged with learning goals and are motivated to find ways to support them. In this context, parents are highly aware of who their children are and how to leverage the best resources to educate them. Children can achieve academically and develop more holistically when parents are engaged.

Both the agency view of parents and the continuum by Goodall and Montgomery (2014) was helpful in this study as it created sensitivity to where parents were *located* on the continuum.

It also assisted in understanding how parents' agency is *addressed* on the continuum. We learnt that the engagement model is valuable and that responsibilities are weighed more towards the parents. This view, however, is always bound by context.

Methodology

This study emanated from a broader study on *Transformative Pedagogy in Early Childhood in South Africa*. Specifically, the study focused on the parent component to move towards more enabling models of how parents should be conceptualised and how support for them should be actioned. A qualitative approach employing an interpretivist epistemological paradigm was used to hone in on parents' involvement and rethink the possibilities from the vantage point of foregrounding parent agency in early childhood centre-based provision (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Nieuwenhuis, 2017).

A paradigm is the way or perspective used to look at a topic or events and serves as a frame of reference to understand and interpret what is observed (Lombard 2016, p. 8). The interpretivist paradigm was particularly suitable for use in this study, as parents are people who interpret events and situations according to their own experiences. They use this paradigm to form their perspectives. To understand how people construct meaning, we must enter their life-world.

A descriptive case study approach with open-ended questions was used as the key data generation method. Creswell (2015, p. 45) argues that investigating several cases leads to better comprehension and better "theorising". Eleven parents participated, sharing their experiences with early childhood centres. Purposeful sampling was used to identify the participants, who were parents of children between birth to four years of age and who had a relationship with centres for at least three years. In this way, the author team felt that the participants' knowledge and experiences would deepen their understanding of the research problem (Grosser, 2016; Henning, Van Rensburg, & Smit, 2013).

The centres selected were located in the Dr Kenneth Kaunda District, within the North West Province. One of the centres accommodated toddlers from a previous socio-economically disadvantaged community. The second centre housed toddlers from both previous socio-economically advantaged and disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Both centres are registered sites with the Departments of Social Development and Basic Education. They accommodate babies, toddlers and young children. Kelliher (2005, p. 125) believes there is a greater opportunity to understand people's perceptions of their own activities in their natural environment. This was adhered to.

According to Merriam (2009, p. 35), the credibility of a study largely depends on the ethical values and procedures followed during the study.

McMillan and Schumacher(2010, p. 447) define ethics as what is good and right and what can go wrong during a research study. One of the most important aspects to consider during the research study is the well-being and protection of the rights of the participants (Maree 2017, p. 44). Consent for the study was obtained from the ethics committee of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. Consent was also granted by the North-West Department of Basic Education and Social Development. Informed consent was obtained from the centre managers and affected parents before data generation. The parents and centre managers were briefed about the nature of the open-ended questionnaire, their voluntary participation, anonymity and their right to withdraw before they agreed to participate in the study. Each parent was provided with a letter of information and completed a consent form before their participation.

The parents were diverse in terms of age, gender, profession and qualifications. The data consisted of 11 open-ended questionnaires to which 11 parents from two centres responded. The identity of all participants was protected by using only codes or pseudonyms (Creswell, 2015, p. 91). The table below describes the codes used for the participants.

Table 1: Profile of participants and background information

Parent	Age of parent	Gender	Relationship to the child	Parent's/guide profession	Education qualification	Race Group
P1	31-40	Female	Mother	Lecturer	MEd	White
P2	20-30	Female	Mother	Domestic worker	Grade 12	Black
P3	41-50	Female	Grandmother	Unemployed	Grade 9	Black
P4	20-30	Female	Mother	Unemployed	B Com	Indian
P5	31-40	Female	Mother	Lecturer	MEd	White
P6	31-40	Female	Mother	Till operator	Grade 12	Coloured
P7	20-30	Male	Father	Lawyer	LLB	Chinese
P8	20-30	Female	Mother	Educator	B Ed FP	White
P9	31-40	Female	Mother	Photographer	B Ed Hons	White
P10	31-40	Female	Mother	Administration	B Ed Hons	White
P11	41-50	Female	Mother	Lecturer	PhD	Indian

Participants were allowed to read their written responses before handing in their questionnaires. Eleven data sets from a diverse parent population allowed for data triangulation and made it possible for rich narratives to reveal the nature of parental involvement and engagement to be explored, analysed and presented for this article. Data was analysed using an adaptation of Miles and Huberman's (1994) technique for qualitative data analysis. The team read and reread the data to understand its contents.

Units of meaning were identified, the patterns clustered, and two themes emerged to address the aim of the study.

Findings

This section discusses two themes related to parents' relationship with the early childhood centres. The first theme sheds light on their positionality as providers and consumers of information. The second theme deepens understanding of parents as helpers in the context of early childhood centres. Together these themes send messages about parent agency and their positionality on the continuum from involvement to engagement to support children's learning. The discussion section engages with this thread.

Parents as Providers and Consumers of Information

In the study, the dominance of the agency of the early childhood centres was evident. The teachers were at the forefront of connecting with parents. Parents were positioned as consumers and providers of information as needed by the centres. They were alerted about procedures, activities and learning support. As agents of information, the teachers used mechanisms to make parents "literate" about how the centres operated and what they considered important for children to adjust to the centres and achieve the learning goals.

The parents spoke about their connection with the centre being enabled at registration. They were asked to fill in details:

"We complete registration forms in the beginning of the year with family information on" (P1, P2, P4, P3, P6, P8, P9). This was the entry point for teachers to get to know the children's backgrounds, and it also led to follow-up conversations. These conversations took place during contact times with parents, e.g. arrivals and departures. P7 and P8 noted the teacher: *"Talks to us when we come and fetch our children"*.

There was also structured face-to-face sessions to allow parents to gain information. Parent evenings and workshops were conducted at the centres. Parents noted that these sessions helped them to gain important information to help them and their children. The following were some of the issues discussed at the face-to face-session: *Information about taxis and buses* (P3), *packing lunch boxes* (P6) and *the operations of the centre as well as the "expectations" of parents by teachers* (P1).

The focus was mainly on what parents must know and do to be compliant with the parental expectations of the centres. Parents also appreciated the safety and security the centres offered their children. P9 said that the greatest benefit she derived from her involvement was to know that *"my child feels secure and cared for with love and affection –this relieves a lot of stress"*. This concern can be understood in the context of child abuse and other forms of violence against children in South Africa.

Some teachers also used the face-to-face session to report on children's progress at the end of every term. P5 welcomed the opportunity to discuss a child's progress with the teachers. P1 also welcomed the face-to-face sessions as she learnt about both the social and academic aspects of her child's development. The information on her children's progress enabled her to create a supportive learning environment at home. She had the following to say:

"I know what my children are learning, who their friends are and mostly what they struggle with as I repeat at home what the teacher is doing in the classroom."

The face-to-face sessions were problematic for some parents due to the timing. Parental circumstances such as ill-health, financial or employment stress (Hilado, Kallemeyn, Leow, Lundy, & Israel, 2011), conflicting work schedules and time pressures (Hamilton, Roach, & Riley 2003; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2006) prevented meaningful involvement of parents in supporting their children's learning. In the study, the issues related to demands of full-time work, choice of days and transport difficulties.

"I cannot go due to my work, I cannot get off early" (P2).

"The parent meetings must be on Sundays when we do not work, and it will help if the school can arrange transport for us" (P6).

"Centres should have parent meetings on Sunday when most of the parents do not work" (P3).

In light of the constraints the parents experienced, the centres experimented with other means of disseminating information to the parents. Newsletters and technology such as emails and WhatsApp communication were used. Hall and Bierman (2015) contend that the rise of mobile technologies presents novel opportunities for using technology to support parents through information on a variety of issues. Teachers valued the mobile options in light of the non-attendance of parents at face-to-face sessions.

Parents as Helpers

Parents actively interpreted the messages they received about their roles and actions concerning the centres. When participants were asked to share their views on how they were involved with the centres their responses were aligned to issues related to parental involvement. None of the participants invoked ideas that resonated with the issues of parental involvement with centres and parental engagement in a strong way. The views of parents positioning themselves as helpers featured strongly in the participants' responses. These were also not directly related to helping children learn. The excerpts below illustrate parents' positioning as helpers:

“To help with activities at my child’s school such as activities held at the school during fundraisings and graduation at the end of the year” (P2).

“Helping with things at the school if the school needs parents to help during a function at the school. Helping bake pancakes during sport events” (P6).

“I just help with making clothes and tafeldoeke [tablecloths]” (P3).

“Being part of activities at the centre, such as repairing toys, tables at the school and helping with painting the outdoor equipment” (P7 – male parent).

The helper role can also be understood in terms of parents taking a cautious approach to building relationships with the centres. Their literacy levels, competences and confidence affected the nature of their involvement with the centres. P1 spoke about the challenges when her child had a new teacher. She noted that it *“takes time to get used to the way she does things compared to the previous teacher”*. When parents dealt consistently with the same teacher, there were also challenges. There were also positive experiences. P9 noted that although her child’s teacher was *“open, she is very young and seems a bit intimidated sometimes”*. P2, on the other hand, described her relationship with the teacher a *“friendly and helpful”* and others (P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8) appreciated the *“great communication”* and the professional manner in which the teachers conducted themselves.

The above shows that the parent’s agency was constrained and dictated to by the centre staff. P1, P2, P3 and P8 spoke about the planning of the learning activities and broader activities perceived as being outside their control. However, it was clear that parents were given more opportunities to position themselves as decision-makers depending on how they inserted themselves in the centres’ operational/administrative structure. For example, P4 noted that she was part of the finance committee. As such, she played an important part in making decisions about running a viable centre. P7 was a member of the parent-teacher organisation and had the following to say:

“As part of the parent-teacher organisation, I have some power to influence certain decisions that apply to the management of the school and appointment of new staff members”.

P9 stated that she has volunteered to serve on the centre’s governing body. She hoped that her involvement in the governing body might be the way to influence the decisions made in the centre.

None of the parents was invited to actively participate in any teaching activities or position themselves as teacher assistants to support early learning at the centres. This reluctance can be understood in the context of working parents and teachers’ distrust of parents’ knowledge and skills to assist with supporting learning. P5 articulated the boundaries set by the centres.

This approach made the control of the learning one-directional with tight borders between the centres and the home. Parents were supposed to be active in the home but only active in terms of how the centres wanted them to perform. P5 had the following to say:

“Parents are not allowed in teaching activities at the centre. Parents teach activities to their offspring at their homes”.

According to our findings, where involvement with the ECD centre is strong, the power relations are skewed towards the centre. When parental engagement is strong, a more equitable relationship exists. Possibilities for co-construction and parents taking the lead become possible when shifts from involvement to engagement happen. These ideas enabled the thrust of rethinking the positionality of parents in ECD centres and beyond. We understand the movement along the continuum as a complex rather than a linear process.

Discussion

The findings in relation to the aims of the study show that when Goodall and Montgomery’s (2014) continuum of parental involvement with the centres and parental engagement with children’s learning is used, the early childhood centres are located in the entry point of parental involvement. The early childhood centre staff directed the activities and events in which the parents could participate. The activities involved information gathering by parents, meeting the expectations of the centres and being involved in activities that are more peripheral to support children’s learning. The relational agency was skewed. The balance of power was weighted towards the early childhood centres’ operations and staff. The object of the relationship and children’s learning, receives some attention but not optimally. Parents directed their energies towards helping the centres and the teachers to meet their requirements and expectations. The model of parental involvement with parents as assenting to control by the early childhood centres can be understood through the conditions that shape certain possibilities.

Considering the un- and under-qualification of teachers in early childhood centres and the lack of funding to sustain centres, it is not surprising the parental involvement model is dominant. This model allows the centres to enable activities, control the flow of information and use parents as a resource to sustain themselves and to cast themselves as “good early childhood centres” where parents have a role. In the study there was information sharing about children through collating family background information and having conversations with parents. Deep conversations where there are exchanges on funds of knowledge (Daries, 2021) from the home were largely absent in the study. For this to be forthcoming, the teachers would have to embrace the idea of parents as partners in a collaborative relationship.

As the parents transitioned their children from home to school, the parental involvement activities served as orientation for them to gel with the priorities of the centres. This set of circumstances offered a specific type of agency that makes salient social engagement as a process possible. Parents could look at their past and the present circumstances as offering possibilities for choice and action and a future for their children (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). When this type of agency is applied to parents in South Africa, adult literacy, and preschool as a repertoire of experience in the formative years, negative experiences of schooling and language barriers influences parents' agency and the uptake of possibilities offered by early childhood centres.

Social class, race and the gender of parents are important to consider in the rethinking of parental involvement. Msila (2012) argues that complexities that engulf the daily lives of mainly poor black parents in South Africa are not sufficiently considered in the schooling context in exploring the link between race, social class, and parental involvement. These parents have low educational capital, which can lead to deferring agency to institutions due to confidence levels in supporting children. The internalised assumptions of having little to offer the teaching and learning space in early childhood centres constrain parents. Middle-class parents are more informed about the social capital they would like to develop in their children for upward mobility (Ebrahim, 2010). Hence, they can lean more towards a parental engagement model to assert their agency in shaping how their children learn. Gender also plays out strongly in ECD. This study included only one male as others were not readily available. It is a normative expectation that women will be dominant in caregiving and supporting early education. While nurturance is natural for some women, they might have to cope with the complexities of multi-tasking due to competing priorities. Hence, there might be a readiness to accept tight boundaries set by teachers in how to support their children's learning.

The movement from parents-supporting early childhood centres to parents-engaging with their children's learning needs specific, deliberate shifts to become a reality. The shifts do not progress linearly, and neither can early childhood centres adopt a one-size-fits-all approach (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). The model adopted with parents has to be according to their categories of difference and other contextual needs.

The relationship between the early childhood centre and the home has to be thought of in terms of equity to address the power imbalances and the passive view of parents. The parents are the primary educators who set the stage for early learning in the home. When children transition to early childhood centres, the teachers must acknowledge their role and create enabling environments for parents to exercise their agency. A more equitable relationship needs to be developed where shared understandings of children's learning develop from learning exchanges between the parents and the early childhood centres.

The distribution of agency between the parents and the early childhood centres in the context of the realities that dictate the lives on both sides allows for greater cross-fertilisation for the co-construction of supporting children's learning.

The valuing of the relational agency is built on trust, and a non-judgemental stance serves as an enabler for developing shared understandings and a fertile climate for engagement. Fairness, respect and embracing of human differences from the early childhood centres and parents must form firm foundations where dialogue, reciprocal exchanges, and joint decision-making become highly possible. The nurturing of supportive relationships is necessary on both sides, given the conditions under which teachers in ECD work and the nature of parents' circumstances driven by many categories of differences such as social class, gender, and race.

Conclusions

This article provides a snapshot of parent positionality and agency in parental involvement. Moving towards a parental engagement model of investing in parents and a more supportive stance for connectedness and collaboration in South Africa is complex. It is tied to race, class, gender, adult literacy and a host of other factors. Therefore, it is imperative to have research-informed policies and guidelines that emphasise respecting parents as agents and offering culturally and linguistically responsive engagements. Professional development that unpacks the standard on building partnerships with families and communities is essential. ECD teachers should deepen their knowledge, skills and practices on engaging meaningfully with parents to support their children's learning. ECD managers need to embark on the mobilisation of their boards and the communities in which they work to build high expectations for all children, especially those who experience vulnerabilities. The overarching intervention for action to support parent agency for children's learning must make the theme of *no parent left behind* a reality. Future research needs to be conducted to deepen understanding of enactments of early childhood centres and parents in different contexts. Such studies from an agency perspective have the potential to shape culturally responsive policies and practices in ECD.

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