

Children's perceptions of democratic values: Implications for democratic citizen education



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A new generation of children are learning the importance of democratic values at a level which makes sense to them. Appropriate 'democratic values' for South Africa are set out in the Constitution, and the national curriculum aims to equip all learners with the knowledge and skills necessary for meaningful participation in society. In many schools, these values – responsibility, respect and the freedom of self-expression – are merely posted on the walls of classrooms, but are not integrated into the subject content. This article proposes that teachers need to determine children's perceptions of the values in question, and these should be the starting point for teaching democratic values. Young children need to understand and experience values in the classroom, suitable to the development of their moral reasoning. To concretise concepts of values, we used the 'pledge tree' activity in an intervention, in which 9-year-old children wrote their values on paper 'leaves' which they then posted on a huge polystyrene tree. The paper reports on this experience as a research investigation, capturing children's ideas.

Introduction

As part of a cohort longitudinal study, we explored young children's interpretations of their values in everyday life and their ability to critically reflect on them. More specifically, we asked 9-year-old children in an inner-city school to reflect on their views of democratic values and responsibilities in South Africa, and their future participation in a democratic South Africa as democratic citizens. The participants in this research were 9-year-olds and thus the terms 'values' and 'democratic values' had to be explained to them well. They were also introduced to an understanding that they were members of a society or a community where they had certain responsibilities to fulfil. It was also explained that their roles in society eventually lead them to becoming members of a country where they live. The term 'democratic citizenship' was not used. We conducted our research activity according to the viewpoint of UNESCO that it is important for children to participate meaningfully and practice civic life in a democracy (UNESCO 2003). This aligns well with one of the three models of citizen education as proposed by Halstead. In the third model for citizenship education, Halstead states that children should be prepared for active participation in the civil, political and social life of the community. He calls it education for active citizenship (Halstead 2006:204).

We used young children's voices and participation to find out how they viewed the world from their value perspective and to link this view to one of the primary rights, to be listened to, to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989). The Convention brought together new ideas about the rights of children. Included in the rights of the child are the rights to seek and communicate information, to express thoughts and feelings, to have these listened to and to participate in decisions affecting them.

We argue that young children must be allowed to seek and communicate information, to express thoughts and feelings, to have these listened to and to participate in decisions.

Although some researchers view children as active change agents who can transform society, we argue that adults have to listen to what children have to say about democracy. By doing this, the adults who are part of children's lives can ensure that the children acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to listen to others and to live together peacefully in a democratic, diverse society. The children not only talked about their views, they also knew what their own responsibilities were and what action plans they would take.

When introducing the new curriculum, the then Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, encapsulated the vision for the South African youth when he said: 'We need to educate our young people not

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only for the marketplace, but for responsible citizenship; young people who will embrace the democratic values in their everyday lives' and 'learners with knowledge, skills and values that will enable meaningful participation in society ... as good citizens' (Ministry of Education 2001:10). Mr Kader clearly stressed the important issue that education is not only about preparing the youth for the working place, but also to prepare them to be democratic citizens who one day will support democratic values. The importance of citizenship education is also a priority in other countries, such as Australia. Wainman *et al.* (2012:137) state, for instance, that in recent years the Australian government emphasised many issues related to citizenship education and values for democracy. There is also a growing interest in values in education, democracy in schools and in children's rights: 'A significant right of children relevant to this study is the right to be heard. To be heard relates to the freedom of opinion, discussion and critical thought which encourage a culture of dialogue and debate' (Department of Justice 1995). Joubert (2010) stated that her 'research revealed the desire of young citizens to be heard in respect and that they aspired to participate in democratic processes'.

An educational philosophy and practice that seek to promote the importance of valuing self and others are important. Subba (2014:38) states that the pivotal concept when teaching democracy is based on the belief that each single person is significant and has dignity and that education should aim to develop each individual's personality to the full. No person does, however, live and develop alone, and thus teaching democratic values should also guide young learners to live harmoniously with other people.

Social justice is one of the characteristics of democracy. Jackson (2014:1070) stresses the important relationship between emotions and social justice. She uses the research of other to prove that experiencing certain feelings is not the end goal of educating young people about social justice as a democratic value, but something that can be exposed and critically used to lead to 'new understandings of social relations and new ways of being in the world' (Zembylas 2008:5). The challenges in developing learners to become active citizens based on emotions such as caring, empathy and pity should, however, always be kept in mind as it could be difficult to develop and regulate emotions (Jackson 2014:1070).

When working with young children, it is necessary to take cognisance of Kohlberg's famous six stages of moral development. Kohlberg opines that people's morality develops throughout their lives. Young children operate in the first three stages until adolescence when they could also incorporate the fourth stage. During the first stage, children learn to simply be good to avoid punishment. After that, they start to behave well to receive rewards. During the third stage, they start to make good decisions because they want to be known as a good boy or a good girl (Scobey 2015:42). Moral development like intellectual development takes time as it is a process. Parents and, for that matter, teachers could

first find out in which stage of moral development a child is, and then by asking questions and by making observations the child can be helped to move to the next stage (Scobey 2015:42-43).

For teachers to know where to start with moral education, they also need to know what the children think, how they think, what they understand about democratic values and what values vocabulary they use. As 'values' is a new word with a new meaning to young children, teachers in the Foundation Phase should ensure that their young custodians understand the word. Halstead and Pike's definition (2006) could be rephrased and simplified:

Values are principles and fundamental convictions which act as justifications for activity in the public domain and as general guides to private behavior; they are enduring beliefs about what is worthwhile, ideals for which people strive and broad standards by which particular practices are judged to be good, right, desirable or worthy of respect. (p. 24)

When both teachers and children understand each other's thoughts about issues concerned with ethics and morality, this can act as a platform to encourage reflective thinking. Reflective thinking could lead to an understanding by the teachers and the children of what according to their opinions ethically based behaviour should entail. If the concepts can be discussed often, we can assume that they will be internalised in the subconscious mind and act as a check on the behaviour of the individual citizen. As citizen, we are members of a nation, but citizenship requires involvement and behaviour. Citizenship is the process of how jointly we make society work. Children should realise that they are already citizens here and now and not merely future citizens. Thus, young learners should be made aware of their roles as members of a society in which everybody's well-being is considered. Splitter states (2011:498) it clearly when he says that the school should prepare children 'to be well-informed, more active and critically reflective citizens of society-at-large'.

Can we assume that such a vocabulary will not generally be introduced to children unless the schools plan to do it through a curriculum? Although the answer may be debatable, we know that a teacher who believes in the value of discussing and reinforcing value concepts and behaviour can obtain positive results.

In our study, we wanted to find out what vocabulary exists in the children's minds. As a secondary theme, we also wanted to find out whether the children's intrapersonal intelligence could be enhanced with knowledge that they already had. Values-based education is a process of instilling values in learners. We ask the question whether this is not the very meaning and purpose of education which in the end determines the quality of education. Values-based education can have a profound impact on society and the world. By listening to children, educators can view the role and goals of children and the important information that exists in their minds.

Democracy: A child's view

For the purpose of this research project, we interpreted the voices of children and compared this interpretation with democratic values. We focused on the interpretation of democratic values in an early childhood education classroom and looked at the links to the broader community and government:

[...] the role of the adult is vital in organizing the early childhood environment as well as the curriculum so that children are participating in a meaningful, individualized, and active way. Democratic classrooms can be characterized as those where frequent opportunities are provided for children to decide what, where, when, and with whom they want to play, work, or relax. (*Early Childhood Education Journal* 25[1]: 57)

The 10 fundamental values of the South African Constitution and their relevance to education are summarised in the publication from the Values in Education Initiative, which connected with universal values. These 10 values are democracy, social justice and equity, equality, non-racism and non-sexism, Ubuntu (human dignity), an open society, accountability (responsibility), the rule of law, respect and reconciliation (Department of Education 1993). For this study, it was important to understand the meaning of the 10 fundamental values, which can work only if we understand that the data that we collect reflect on the responses from the children and act upon our conclusion.

We interpreted the 16 key strategies or approaches for seeding the values of the Constitution in young South Africans through the educational system. These are strategies to which we can all commit ourselves and which can work if they are executed in partnership between the school (teacher) and the children. Are there similarities between these strategies and the children's thoughts? The 16 strategies are the following: nurturing a culture of communication and participation in schools; role modelling promoting commitment as well as competence among educators; ensuring that every South African is able to read, write, count and think; infusing the classroom with a culture of human rights; making arts and culture part of the curriculum; putting history back into the curriculum; introducing religious education into schools; making multilingualism happen; using sport to shape social bonds and nurture nation building at schools; ensuring equal access to education; promoting antiracism in schools; freeing the potential of girls as well as boys; dealing with HIV and AIDS and nurturing a culture of sexual and social responsibility; making schools safe to learn and teach in and ensuring the rule of law; ethics and the environment; and nurturing the new patriotism or affirming our common citizenship (Department of Education 1993). For our study, there was much that we could incorporate when we analysed the data, and for this reason it was important to understand and reflect on the 16 strategies to link the life experiences of children.

The *Children's Act* defines early childhood development as the process of emotional, cognitive, sensory, spiritual, moral,

and physical and communication development of children. This was important to bring our project into line with the values embedded in the *Children's Act*. The *National Education Policy Act* (1996) stipulates that the minister shall determine national policy in accordance with both the Constitution and the Act. The Act states that 'public education should enable learners to seize the opportunities afforded by democracy to effect changes to their lives as well as society as a whole' (Le Mottee & Keet n.d.). In the Constitution, it is clearly stated that there should be no discrimination against any person and that every person has the right to have his or her human dignity respected and protected. These sections of the *Children's Act* and the Constitution align well with democratic values.

We found the philosophy of Loris Malaguzzi in the Reggio Emilia schools very informing. In our project, we wanted to listen to learners and find out what they knew and how they wanted to live their lives when we talked about their life experiences. In the Reggio Emilia schools, the participation between the teacher and the learner, the active attitude of listening between adults and children, and the environment in the school and in the class are the premise and context of every relationship. It is an indispensable condition for dialogue and change:

Listening is the on-going process that nurtures reflection, welcoming, and openness towards oneself and others; it is an indispensable condition for dialogue and change. The attitude of listening raises the threshold of attention and sensitivity towards the cultural, values-related, and political scenarios of the contemporary world. (Morrow 2010)

The important issue of listening to what the children said was an integral part of the research project. In many classrooms, children have to listen most of the time, which could lead to a transmission of knowledge about, for instance, values. Often, the children are not given ample time to express their personal opinions. We agree with Reggio Emilia that research has the responsibility to foster and make visible these processes by means of the pedagogical documentation. Reggio Emilia also highlights the fact as follows:

Documentation is an integral and structuring part of the educational theories and teaching practices, as it gives value to and makes explicit, visible, and assessable the nature of the individual and group learning processes of both the children and the adults. (Morrow 2010)

The undergraduate early childhood teacher education students at our institution may work with young learners from diverse backgrounds and cultures, and we wanted to find out who the children are and what they think about. The teacher education students at our institution are predominantly young women and most of them are white. We do, however, have students from other race groups. Most of the students grew up in middle-class socio-economic circumstances, and most of them have not been exposed to the richness of cultures and languages in our country. One important task of an educator is to help children understand the values of a democracy, as outlined above through

referring to the Constitution, and to prepare future teachers for this important life science.

We argue against the mere transmission of values and a curriculum that does not make values part of the subject content. Young children need to understand and experience values in the classroom. Therefore, teachers need to understand children's perceptions of values, and this should be the starting point for teaching democratic values.

Two theories frame this research where children are the active meaning-givers who give meaning to themselves and their social world that allows them to interact with others in their everyday lives. They are the theory of ecological zones, or the bio-ecological model, which was developed by Bronfenbrenner (Bergin & Bergin 2012), and the transforming society theory, which helps understand the micro- and macro-world of children's interactions with themselves and others (Mac Naughton 2003). The ecological zones model examines different influences on children's development. It refers to the environment and the communities in which a child grows up, as well as the people and the relationships in these spaces. The model reiterates the importance of looking at all the systems that could influence children's behaviour and development, whether on the micro-, meso- or macro-level. Bronfenbrenner's model also includes a chronosystem which includes time frames and the exo level which refers to one or more environments that could influence children's development although the children are not actively involved in these environments. Children are seen as developing personalities who interact with their environment on the various levels, but they simultaneously have the potential to influence it. 'Therefore children are seen as active meaning-givers and not merely as objects in society' (Joubert 2012).

The theory of transforming society falls within a postmodern view of society and what is known as the 'new sociology of childhood' (MacNaughton 2003:71–72). Social constructionists and postmodernists hold the view that we both transform and are transformed by nature and culture and that our capacity to be transformed holds the key to maximising young children's learning (Mac Naughton 2003). The theory of ecological zones and the transforming society theory regard the child's development as a cultural construction in an incoherent and disorderly world. Both theories stress the importance of the child's development within a specific society and how the child is influenced by what is happening in the society. These influences help the child to develop his or her value system, and eventually they will learn and understand about the democratic values in society. Children's democratic values play an important role in educating them to become democratic citizens.

Adults often either describe the child as weak and incompetent or believe that children can construct their own ways of knowing or meaning-giving of their social world. We agree with the second view of social constructionists and post-modern theorists that it is important for adults to listen

to children's views and, with their participation, to act upon them. We asked the question whether educators can work collaboratively with children to support their young custodians to develop their potential to the full.

In the context of this study, we used the child's circumstances as a major learning resource that adults can reflect on. We regard children as capable agents who could act as instruments for transforming South Africa into a prosperous democracy if their participatory roles were made practical and relevant (Department of Education 2002). This is the reason for the investigation of children's understanding of democratic values with the idea to foster the growth of democracy in South Africa.

Methodology

This research is part of a larger cohort longitudinal study that started in 2010. The project was carried out in the third year of the longitudinal study. The children were then in Grade 3 and between 9 and 10 years old and were selected with the parents' consent. This study took place at an urban government primary school in Sunnyside (Pretoria, Gauteng). This is an inner-city environment consisting mostly of flats where people from diverse cultures, different home languages and different races live. Although the children speak various home languages, they were taught in English from Grade 1 and thus their command of English as the medium of instruction was good. The children were asked to participate in a 'pledge tree' activity. Each child was asked to write a sentence about a value that he or she promised to uphold on a 'leaf' that was pasted to the 'pledge tree'. Before the activity, the term 'values' was explained in easy language to the children, and it was discussed as well. Personal and democratic values were explained in order for the children to understand their role as members of society. Personal values are your own choice and this is where you as an individual can make a positive difference. Democratic values are the values that a community or country expects from its members and where you as an individual act as a member of the community or the country.

Twenty-one children (boys and girls) completed the activity, and each sentence was analysed for meaning and comparison. The children were also asked to participate in the reflection and the final construction of the pledge tree. Care was taken to ensure that the reflection was carried out in language and on a level that the children could understand. This method was chosen to help strengthen the voice of the participants. After what they had to write on the leaves of the pledge tree had been explained, they all wrote their own ideas. This was an individual writing exercise to enable us to identify each individual's own meaning. The reflection helped to build communal space, whereas the individual writing exercise built individual space. This active involvement of young children in shaping decisions that influenced their lives allowed them to be research partners (Henry *et al.* 2010). The different roles of the researcher and the research partners helped the researchers to gain access to the participants'

views of democratic values (Nelson & Christensen 2009). This happened because the children as research partners gave their written opinions and they also took part in a reflection exercise.

Ethical permission for this project was obtained from the University's Ethical Clearance Committee and consent was obtained from the Department of Education, the school and the parents. We coded each child's work line by line to identify the themes that emerged. Once we had independently coded all the information, we collapsed the codes into broader themes and then returned to the literature to check the veracity of the themes and the fit between the conceptual ideas we were identifying with the coded data.

The terms 'values' and 'democratic values' were explained and discussed with the participating children before the 'pledge tree' activity started. We used the 'pledge tree' activity to reflect on values and to find out what the children thought. We introduced the activity, showed them the big polystyrene tree and explained that they were going to write down their beliefs and their values on the leaves we provided and then they were going to paste their leaves on the tree. After democratic values were discussed, the children could also write their ideas about democratic values.

After we had explained to the children how they could write on the leaves provided, we asked them to explain to us what they think their values are and what democratic values are. As English is the language of instruction in the school, all discussions were made in English. We videorecorded the whole activity, and we interpreted their comments, oral discussions and our field notes in order to understand their views about values.

Data analysis and findings

To understand the content of the children's responses from a child's perspective, it was important to write down all the comments and oral discussions and categorise them into themes. This enabled us to create summaries of the data to display emerging patterns. We analysed each word and sentence of the data to construct meaning and understanding of the children's views on values and democratic values.

We interpret the content and list the same concepts so as to compare all the different themes. It was with great respect that we viewed the diversity of the children's comments. Our initial discussion about values and democratic values enhanced the children's thinking about values and eventually about democratic values. The children felt important to be part of the research. In our final discussions with the class, we noticed that the children appreciated it that we valued their opinions.

The children responded that respect is the most important of the four core values (caring, honesty, respect and responsibility) mentioned in the literature, and the children demonstrated that is important to them too. For the

researchers, it was interesting to note the similarity in the thinking of adults and children and the universal values of the human race. Respect for the self and for others is crucial in developing democratic citizenship in schools.

Respect was the most important value for the majority of the children:

to respect older people, to respect my parents, to be helpful and respectful at all times, to have respect for myself, to respect people, to respect our teachers, to respect God.

Another example of respect was reflected in the comments about listening: 'I promise to listen, listen in class, listen to my mom and listen to my teacher'. Respect and obedience that are indicated as core values from the research align well with the ethos of the school. It was noted by the researchers that the children spoke politely and respectfully to older persons.

The themes emerging from the comments of the children correspond to literature such as Subba's (2014) views about dignity for the self and for treating others. It also demonstrates the children's sincerity about democratic values and how they interpret them in their daily lives. We value the fact that the children spontaneously regard 'respect' as important.

The other concepts in the children's reasoning (to listen, to be good, to not bully, to be helpful, to love, to behave, to have good manners and not to be rude) can be interpreted as various expressions or manifestations of respect. It was evident that although the children did not always use the word 'respect', they had a clear understanding of how respect manifests itself in their daily lives. Terms such as 'to listen', 'to behave', 'to love' and 'to have good manners' are ways in which young children can show respect. Bullying seems to be a problem in some schools and thus it was a positive sign that the children in this research project indicated that they would show respect for a classmate or peer by not bullying somebody.

The children ranked 'listening' as their second important value. One of the significant rights of children is the right to be heard (Department of Justice 1995). This is also in line with our Constitution in which the rights of all persons are protected. The children interpreted this value as their own responsibility to be good listeners, but they also expected others to listen to them. Listening to others can also be interpreted in different ways: Do you have to listen out of respect, or do you have to listen in order to obey others? In the context of the children's responses, it seems as if they interpreted listening to others as obedience and following the rules. This is a central issue in the development of democratic citizenship.

We further argue that it is also important for adults to listen to children, because children often think their views are not valuable. Although it was not the purpose of the research, this activity also illustrated to the children that adults do

respect the children's views, listen to their ideas and record their comments about important issues and their understanding of their world.

The third value that was important was 'to be good'. This aligns very well with the first three stages of Kohlberg's theory on moral development. The three stages describe the young child's stages of moral development. In their comments, we read about how the children want to respect others, and that was the reason they wanted 'to be good'. Did they experience themselves as 'not good', and if so, was this because that was the way others treated them and therefore this was how they viewed themselves? Reflection on what the word 'good' means to young children could be valuable when the purpose of democratic values is discussed. This activity gave adults a vehicle to reflect on their own actions and on their words when they interact with children. Adults tend to use the word 'good' in many contexts and thus it necessitates a reflection on when and how to use the word.

The fourth value that was important for the children was about bullying and fighting. Although they were Grade 3 learners, they were well aware of what bullying is and that it jeopardises someone's well-being. It is thus not in line with a person's right to dignity and not in line with democratic values. Bullying is an international phenomenon and it can affect a child not only physically but also psychologically. Various researchers such as Prinsloo and Liang have written about the increase of acts of bullying in South African schools and that it has become a major problem in many schools.

To the researchers, it seemed as if the children were well aware of what bullying and fighting were. What emerged from the comments was that the children knew that bullying was not a good habit, but that it was happening. The children expressed their willingness to stop bullying. The opinion of the Grade 3 learners in this research activity also has an important message to teachers, as well as to parents. As a recommendation, teachers and parents could be informed how strongly the children spoke against bullying at school. The comments of the learners also align with Jackson (2014:1070), who is of the opinion that emotions such as caring, sympathy and pity form part of citizenship but it is difficult to regulate these emotions.

The fifth important value which arose from the research was to help and to be helpful. Some of the comments of the children were as follows: 'I promise to be helpful' and 'I promise that I will help my mother and my father and my sister and teacher and my friends'. The researchers realised that these remarks could reflect the typical behaviour of young children. The researchers also realised that the children could have provided these statements about values because they felt they had to impress the researchers or to be important.

The sixth important value was love: 'Love for myself, love for friends, love for my family and my teacher'. Although this a wonderful value, it could be seen as typical of young children

to love and to be loved. White (2015) states that the important role that love, or also referred to as attachment, plays in a child's life is often forgotten. In many research articles and in books, every aspect of a child's development and emotional state is discussed without any reference to love. Therefore, it is important for adults who educate and raise young children to know how important the value of love for young children is.

The other important values were good behaviour, good manners and not being rude. These are all important messages that the 9-year-old children were communicating. The underlying meaning is that adults and children could have viewed the world from the same perspective.

The four themes mentioned are also important. Caring, honesty, respect and responsibility link to the rights of the child to seek and communicate information, to express thoughts and feelings, to have these listened to and to participate in decisions affecting them. During this activity, we experienced that children want to learn, they know how important education is, and they also know that they themselves have a responsibility: 'I promise to be clever enough to learn'. The importance of this data is that it conveys, about responsibility, not only the power and importance of education but also the burden placed on children to be 'clever' in order to be 'good' and in order to learn.

Honesty is an important value, and the children who were engaged in the research project clearly knew the importance of being honest to others and to oneself. Honesty is a desirable quality of character that should form part of any values education. The neighbourhood where the school is situated consists predominantly of flats and thus has a high population density. There is lots of crime in this area and the children are exposed to criminal activities from an early age. The children expressed a strong message about bullying and fighting, but the comment 'I promise I will never do crime' is on another, deeper level. The children indicated that not only do they expect others to be honest but also they themselves undertook to be honest.

Caring for the environment is another important theme, and this is the reason why comments such as the following are important: 'I promise to love every tree' and 'I promise to keep the country clean'. Although most of the children lived among high buildings with no gardens and little open spaces to play, they were aware of the environment. The researchers realised that environmental education was integrated into the curriculum of the school.

We list the themes of what the children respected and what they promised. The data reflect the themes of 'myself, teacher, parents, other people, God, my country, bully, work and crime'. The children thus saw themselves as members of a society. The themes and words they chose also reflected the various systems of the society and that these systems were on different levels. This relates to Bronfenbrenner's ecological zones model and the different influences on children.

The children commented on what they respect and also on what they promise. The strong message 'I promise...' tells us about the young children and their commitment to their own responsibility to change negative situations. This could strengthen their own value systems and help them to become democratic citizens. A promise is part of a person's integrity, and for children promises are very important. If they are promised something by a parent or a friend, they will keep the person to his or her promise. When parents do not keep their promises to their children, the children feel unimportant and unvalued. This could lead to reduced levels of self-esteem. The children could also in future become promise breakers (Daniel 2016). The researchers are of the opinion that the children's strong messages about promises are a positive indication of their personal development.

Discussion and conclusion

In this study, we explored young children's interpretations of their democratic values and their ability to reflect on them critically. What happened when children were asked what values they thought were the most important, and how they were going to help make positive changes in their lives and in the lives of other people? We argue that it is important for children to experience what it entails to be a good citizen of a country and what democratic values in their everyday lives are. The children should participate in democratic processes and practices in their school and class environment, otherwise democracy itself might be under threat (Joubert 2010). As a result of this research activity, the children reported that new understandings were formed, that they think differently about values and those they know for the first time, that they have a responsibility and that they promise to act upon these responsibilities. As a result of their thinking and listening to others, they had a new-found respect for how they treated others and how others treated them.

Before one can understand another person's view, one has to listen very carefully to that person's reasoning. In the classroom, the researchers made sure that the children were at ease with them and that they could talk openly to them. Each and every child in the class had the opportunity to speak and each answer of a child was valued as important for everybody who was present. The children were encouraged to explain why they had certain views, and the researchers repeatedly asked why somebody said something or why a view was important for a child. For adults to interpret the 'voices of children', it is important to know their environment and their way of communicating their thoughts. This is the point where the two generations meet and work together. Only then can researchers and policymakers help schools, teachers and children to be responsible citizens according to universal democratic values.

Conclusion

We learned from the philosophy of Reggio Emilia that listening to the voices of children enables us to see possibilities of moving closer to one another by the rights to seek and

communicate information, to express thoughts and feelings, to have these listened to and to participate in decisions affecting them. If we combine this idea with the philosophy of Ubuntu ('I am what I am because of who we all are' (humanity to others)), then it is important to listen to children's views about democratic values and together act upon this. We experienced how children opened our eyes to see new possibilities. We were part of their world and their thinking. They valued the fact that we were listening to them and that we asked their meanings. They were very professional when they reported back and the seriousness of the discussions was an unexpected experience. It was important to listen and not to interrupt their thinking and to compare the different thoughts and to understand their views. We experienced how they view their responsibilities and what actions they are going to take of listening to one another and to be responsible citizens in the democracy of South Africa.

The role of the adult is vital in organising the early childhood environment as well as the curriculum so that children are enabled to participate in a meaningful, individualised and active way. Listening to others serves as a universal form of communication between and among people, teachers and learners. It is when teachers listen and pay attention to children's views that children experience that their teachers respect their opinions. Apart from listening to what children have to say, we must also explore what activities we can use to help children develop into democratic citizens. Young children should be made aware of their roles as members of a society in which the principles of democratic citizenship are fostered. We need to plan and set the stage and give them the opportunity to tell us what they know and how they view the world. Children's perspectives should be well understood by adults and be valued.

Although the goal of democracy in early education is interpreted on the level of 9-year-old children, the goals of democracy as set out by the government are parallel to it. Democratic citizenship is the core of any democracy and thus children should learn from an early age what democratic values are. To live and react according to democratic values necessitates choices made by the individual. The freedom to make meaningful choices regarding their daily lives and future helps improve children's self-esteem by naturally fostering the feeling of competence and independence. Too often, well-meaning professionals make decisions for their learners without actively involving them.

Even though democratic values are not explicitly taught through the current curriculum, the school as an educational institution has an important role and responsibility with regard to the moral development of the learners. The moral development of learners relates closely to the development of values and eventually democratic values. Moral development entails personal assets such as respect and honesty, which arose as values and themes in the research. As discussed earlier in the article, the children live in the midst of an inner-city community characterised by crime. From the learners'

responses, it was clear to the researchers that the school – and more specifically the class teachers – had an important impact on the moral development of the children. Democratic values were nurtured in the hearts and minds of young learners through the examples set by teachers, the disciplinary system at the school, the class rules of each teacher, as well as the way in which conflict between learners was resolved in the classroom and on the playground.

The research project provided the researchers with the opportunity to look into the world of children living under difficult circumstances in flats in an inner-city area. It also provided the researchers insights on how young learners reason about difficult issues such as values and one's role in a community and, eventually, one's role as a citizen of a democratic country. The honesty and sincere way in which the children reacted to and contributed to the 'pledge tree' was an eye-opening experience.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

A.B., I.J. and A.H. equally contributed to the research and writing of this article.

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