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CONTESTING SCHOOLIFICATION THROUGH SNAPSHOTS OF PEDAGOGY- IN-PARTICIPATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT CENTRES IN SOUTH AFRICA

ABSTRACT

This article attempts to contest schoolification using snapshots of pedagogy-in-participation in ECD centres in South Africa. Educational research confirms that early childhood education can positively influence the lives, well-being, safety, growth, development and academic performance of young children in the birth to 4 years age group. In South Africa (SA), Early Childhood Development (ECD) has been recognised and identified as a critical nodal point for the country's social and economic transformation and development. However, "schoolification" has become an epidemic that has promoted standardisation of education, reduces teacher autonomy and envisions ECD centres as preparation for school rather than preparation for life. The study investigated the perceptions of practitioners and centre managers of 5 well-resourced and 5 under-resourced centres in 5 of the 9 provinces in SA. This article forms part of a larger funded project on Transformation Pedagogy. The most illustrative examples from the data collected were used to elicit alternative quality practices for pedagogy in participation. The findings encourage practitioners and policy makers to reconceptualise ECD as a co-constructive process. The article offers recommendations for teacher preparedness and child-centredness by provoking a reconceptualisation that involves making schools children-ready rather than making children school-ready.

Keywords: *Early childhood development centres; pedagogy in participation; schoolification; South Africa*



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1. INTRODUCTION

In the current Early Childhood Development (ECD) context in South Africa, it is imperative to provide alternatives to "schoolification". More than a decade ago, Doherty (2007:7) defined schoolification as

an emphasis on the acquisition of specific pre-academic skills and knowledge transfer by the adult rather than a focus on broad development[al] goals such as social-emotional well-being and

the gaining of understanding and knowledge by the child through direct experience and experimentation.

Schoolifying ECD risks making educational practices merely places for “adjustment”, instead of places where children and parents can participate in democratic educational practices (Broström, 2006). Pedagogy that recognises children’s agency might be a useful strategy to make sense of the participatory rights of children. This was outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which was ratified in 1995 in South Africa (Ebrahim, 2011). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) signal that early childhood development (ECD) would be a priority focus in the twenty-first century. Explicit mention is made in SDG Target 4.2, which states that by 2030, countries should “ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education” (United Nations, 2015). According to United Nations (2015), SDG commitments to ECD are much broader than this education-focused target. The achievement of other SDG goals (poverty alleviation, hunger, health, education, gender, water and sanitation and inequality) hinges on the strengthening of ECD. As such, it represents the bedrock on which all other development goals rely for their successful achievement.

The strongest evidence demonstrating the potential of ECD comes from well-planned and well-resourced programmes that are “developmentally appropriate”, ones that respect children’s rights, needs, capacities, interests and ways of learning at each stage of their early lives (World Bank, 2016). The global “schoolification epidemic” has led to “an increasing focus on emergent curriculum and prescribed curricula, and presents as a serious threat to the quality of dispositions of children’s early years experiences” (Ring & O’Sullivan, 2018:404).

Investing in young children is one of the smartest investments that countries can make (Sayre, Devercelli, Neuman & Wodon, 2015). Interventions to influence a child’s development should address four key domains: cognitive development, linguistic development, socio-emotional development and physical well-being and growth (Vegas & Santibáñez, 2010; Naudeau, Martinez, Premand & Filmer, 2011). Intervening during early childhood has the potential to mitigate the negative effects of poverty and promote equitable opportunities and better outcomes for education, health and economic productivity (Heckman, 2008; Naudeau *et al.*, 2011). This article attempts to contest schoolification using snapshots of pedagogy in participation for early years in South Africa.

In the discussion that follows, a review of schoolification in ECD pedagogy has come to dominate the literature and the effect that it has had on pedagogy-in-participation in the early years. We argue further the teacher and child are co-constructors of their learning. Prochner, Kirova and Massing (2020:81) explain the proposition that “children and adults are co-constructors of knowledge and partners in learning”. Vygotsky’s theory of mediation highlighted that the development of children’s mental functions depended on the presence of mediating agents in their interactions with the environment. In an ECD centre, the mediating agent is the teacher. The teacher needs to ensure pedagogy-in-participation, which is a socio-constructive participatory pedagogy for early childhood education. Pedagogy-participation is a rights-based approach under development since the early 1990s and is used in many ECD centres in the northern hemisphere (Formosinho & Figueiredo, 2014). In a participatory pedagogy, children and teachers are viewed as constantly developing their relational identities and having the right to participation in their learning journeys. Pedagogy-in-participation

centres around the practice of listening as an active process where the actors (teacher and children) are engaged in the decisions and meaning making processes.

However, according to the 2014 audit of ECD centres in South Africa, the majority of ECD practitioners are mostly un- or under-qualified and "...roughly 70% of practitioners nationally, do not having any specialised training in working with children" (Gustaffson, 2017:5). In South Africa, more than half of the ECCE teachers are unqualified. One wonders how these practitioners would manoeuvre co-construction of children's learning journeys or will they be inclined to practise schoolification.

2. SCHOOLIFICATION AND ITS EFFECTS

The global "schoolification epidemic" has led to an increasing focus on emergent curricula. "Prescribed curricula present as a serious threat to the quality of disposition of children's early years experiences" (Ring & O'Sullivan, 2018:404). The "schoolification epidemic" refers to a global trend whereby, in preparing children for primary schools, pre-primary settings are required to implement a prescribed curriculum and focus on the development of children's academic skills, to the detriment of child-centred curricula and pedagogy (Brooks & Murray, 2018; Ring & O'Sullivan, 2018). This trend is in danger of gaining unstoppable momentum through the influence of the global education reform movement, which promotes the standardisation of education; an emphasis on core subjects; low-risk ways to reach learning goals; corporate management models; a reduction in teacher autonomy; curriculum prescription and intensive assessment and performance (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006; Berry *et al.*, 2016).

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2006) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2010) use the term "schoolification" to describe the downward pressures of school systems placed on the early years. We are alerted to the "enhanced risk" caused by schoolification, due to the pressure put on early years "as a preparation place for school" and not "preparation for future life" (Dewey, 1916 in Formosinho & Formosinho, 2016; UNESCO, 2010). For Dewey, schools were not only a place to gain content knowledge, but also a place to learn how to live. Freire (1970) also interpreted schoolification as oppression, since it is based on an oppressive power relationship (Freire, 1996: 53). Dahlberg and Moss (2005:24) challenged the "imperial" position taken by schooling towards ECCE, which assumes that young children only learn if they are assimilating "early literacy, language and numeracy skills": schoolified knowledge. The image of the learner was seen in a passive role of repeating the transmitted content and teachers were seen as merely passive transmitters, filling learners with content to be transmitted.

This paper argues that the onus should shift from children being readied for schools to schools being readied for children and that schools should accommodate children's "emotional and cognitive needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness" (Whitebread & Bingham, 2014:4). Likewise, Evans (2016:72) proposed reframing school readiness as "potential and possibility". However, Lenz Taguchi (2010) argued for an open-ended approach to school readiness, rejecting simplistic goal-centred pedagogic approaches in early childhood in favour of egalitarian models, where meanings are co-created through communicative, complex relationships between people, ideas and material objects. The image of the learner is seen in an active role of participation in the process of learning and the image of the teacher is seen

in an active role of promoting meaningful learning experiences involving learners. In these are spaces where children's voices emerge and are valued (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2016).

Schoolification pressurises early years' communities and the promotion of individual competitive assessment to create an accountability culture, where performance pressures threaten democratic values in the early years (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Pugh, 2010; Rose & Rogers, 2012; Kampmann, 2013; Faulkner & Coates, 2013; Moss, 2013). Dewey's concept of the child and the curriculum is presented as a panacea to stem this epidemic and its associated threat to the erosion of childhood.

In South Africa, Ebrahim (2015) interrogated the National Early Learning and Development Standards (NELDS) document to foreground the silences in the light of the transformative pedagogy. Okwamy and Ebrahim (2019:3) argue for a "shift away from the constructed notions of learning to more expansive conceptions consistent with holistic Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)". They engage with the marginalisation of situated knowledges by troubling the stunting impacts of received knowledge and its contribution to epistemic inequalities in ECCE. We too, in our article, contest the constructed notion of "schoolification" in favour of "pedagogy-in-participation". To illustrate, we include the voices of children and their caregivers in the form of snapshots.

3. PEDAGOGY-IN-PARTICIPATION

Framed by an educational perspective of pedagogy-in-participation, as developed by Formosinho and Formosinho (2016) for early childhood education, this article subscribes to a democratic worldview as inspired by Dewey (1902) and Freire (1996). Both pedagogical theorists contested the notions of transmissive pedagogies and advocated for alternatives to bring about social change. Dewey (1902) drew attention to the limitations of a curriculum-centred pedagogy that bordered around teacher centrality, subject delivery and child passivity. His criticism of the narrow educational goal of transmission of facts and its constraining effects led to the development of a child-centred pedagogy. This pedagogy, grounded in the ideas of progressive education, values the child as a knower and as a curious explorer whose prior knowledge needs to be harnessed to scaffold education not just for schooling but for life. Freire (1970) was equally concerned about the oppressive dynamics of a transmissive pedagogy in adult education. As an activist and a pedagogical thinker, Freire (1996) saw education as a political act. He contested the "banking" (Freire, 1996:53) concept of education that rendered teachers as depositors and students as depositories. This gave rise to the development of critical pedagogy and the notion of dialogue and participation as key to social interaction.

Pedagogy-in-participation broadly aims at making learning an interactive process embedded in experience on a continuum (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2016). The teacher and the child are respected as social actors who actively exercise their agency. When a child is engaged in an activity or a particular experience, these are understood as important opportunities for learning in a meaningful way. The teacher intentionally sets up the learning environment (ideally with children) or, we would argue, with a learning goal that enables active participation of children through experiential learning. The teacher then observes, listens with the view to understand and records how a child is making meaning of what is on offer. A responsive stance is enabled when the teacher naturally blends herself into the learning space using context information and the theoretical support of her beliefs, values and knowledge to intervene at appropriate times. There are opportunities for collaboration and co-construction

of knowledge through participation. Hence, the child and the teacher can be co-learners and collaborators who learn through different encounters. This type of democratic practice allows for the promotion of equity and inclusion of all children. The pedagogy is constructed from knowledge that is gained from situated actions.

This article investigated whether the snapshots in South African ECD centres were more illustrative of schoolification rather than pedagogy-in-participation.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Epistemology

This research is underpinned by a constructivist epistemological paradigm. This paper is part of a larger project (TPEC) that examined a transformative participative pedagogy for young children (birth to four years) project in South Africa. The researchers aimed to gather information about pedagogical approaches that practitioners used when interacting with young children, ages birth to four years. According to Leedy and Omrod (2013), qualitative methods can be used to better understand any phenomenon about which little is yet known. For instance, in this study, little was known about the type of pedagogies that were used in South African day-care centres when teaching young children between the ages of birth to four.

A descriptive case study approach with semi-structured interviews as the key method of data generation was used to study participative pedagogy between practitioners and children ages birth to four years. Qualitative researchers recognise that historical and cultural settings shape human interactions and the meaning that is constructed and they seek to understand by embedding themselves in the context by personally gathering information and generating meaning from data collected in the field (Cresswell, 2015).

4.2 Sampling

Sampling involves the selection of a portion of the finite population being studied and subjective methods are used to decide which elements are included in the sample (Castillo, 2018). The purposive sampling method was administered where the researchers chose participants randomly for their unique experiences and perceptions on the phenomena being studied. To engage in purposive sampling, the researchers chose a sample that could “produce credible descriptions, in a sense of being true to real life” (Nieuwenhuis, 2019:85). The participants were ECCE practitioners who spoke about their real-life experiences whilst caring for young children between the ages of birth to four.

4.3 Participants

The centres selected were situated in 5 well-resourced and 5 under-resourced day-care centres in the Western and Eastern Cape, the Free State, North-West and Gauteng provinces in South Africa (N=10). The centres were chosen based on the age groups they catered for, their location and their multicultural composition. The centres were located in rural and urban areas.

The following criteria were paramount in choosing the purposive sampling of centres in each province and participants for this study. Two community-based centres, one in an urban and one in a rural area, were chosen for data collection in each of the 5 provinces. We ensured that the centres should be registered sites with the Department of Social Development. Centres

had to accommodate all 3 age categories (babies, toddlers and young children). They had to have been an established centre for two years or more. Another criterion for the choice of sample was that the practitioners had to have qualifications of Level 4 ECD certificate trained NCF or higher. The practitioners at the urban centres were generally higher qualified with a Level 5 ECD certificate. The table below describes codes, sites and qualifications where the participants hailed.

Table 1: Descriptions of sites and codes and qualifications of practitioners

Centre	Province	Codes for Practitioners	Under-resourced	Resourced	Qualifications of practitioner
A	Western Cape	APR 1	✓		ECD Level 4
B		BPR2		X	ECD Level 5
C	Free State	CPR3	✓		ECD Level 4
D		DPR4		X	ECD Level 5
E	Gauteng	EPR5	✓		ECD Level 5
F		FPR6		X	ECD Level 4
G	North West	GPR7	✓		ECD Level 5
H		HPR8		X	ECD Level 4
I	Eastern Cape	IPR9	✓		ECD Level 4
J		JPR10		X	ECD Level 4

4.4 Ethics

The data examined in this article were collected from 5 provinces based on geographical location and willingness to participate. Consent for the study was obtained from the ethics committee of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. The different provinces' Department of Basic Education and Social Development also gave consent for the study to be conducted. Informed consent was obtained from the different centre managers and practitioners prior to data collection. The practitioners and centre managers were briefed about the nature of the semi-structured interviews before they agreed to participate in the project. After expressing interest in participating, each teacher was provided with a letter of information and completed a consent form prior to their participation.

The practitioners who consented to participate in this study were diverse in terms of years of teaching experience and qualifications. Children in their class were between birth to four years old. The data consisted of 40-minute semi-structured interviews with each of the practitioners that were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews were conducted with 2 practitioners (from well-resourced and under-resourced centres) in each of the 5 provinces that participated in the project, regarding their perspectives on using pedagogy-in-participation or schoolification.

4.5 Data analysis

Thematic analysis, the process of identifying codes, patterns or themes within qualitative data was used in the study (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Thematic analysis was utilised to derive codes. After data driven codes were developed, a method of constant comparison was used to compare practitioners' codes. Three themes, namely, developmental responsiveness, cultural responsiveness and linguistic responsiveness, emerged. Instead of the traditional 3Rs, as in elementary school education, Reading, wRiting and 'Rithmetic, this article highlights that

pedagogy-in-participation in the early years consisted of teachers having skills in the 3Rs – Developmental responsiveness, Cultural responsiveness and Linguistic responsiveness in the playroom.

4.6 Trustworthiness and credibility

The aim of trustworthiness in a qualitative inquiry is to support the arguments that findings are worth our attention (Lincoln & Guba, 2005). Three researchers kept a data trail to ensure trustworthiness and credibility. Engagement with the data was done intensively to demonstrate clear links between the data and interpretations.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

We established illustrative practices of alternatives to “schoolification” through snapshots of pedagogy in participation. Surprisingly, both practitioners from the urban and rural schools displayed a leaning towards responsive engagement with young children, rather than schoolification. Developmental responsiveness, cultural responsiveness and linguistic responsiveness by practitioners were the strands discussed. Although most of the teachers have the minimum qualification (Level 4 ECD Certificate), their practices in their playrooms showed the strands of pedagogy-in-participation.

5.1 Developmental responsiveness

Use of appropriate materials to respect children’s developmental needs and to hear their voices to get them involved in the learning process was prominent in the data. HPR8 described how she used a puppet to allow children to freely express themselves. The teacher uses talk to invite children’s feelings. She is concerned about their emotional well-being in the learning experience as children “open up” when they feel included. She says that

...most of the time I use puppets. Because when they think they talking to a puppet then they it's easier for them to open up. And talk about how they feel what they like and what they do not like. So, I would usually just use a puppet and they puppet will be asking them what would you like to do; what is it that you feel? And then they think they are talking to the puppet and then that way, their voice is heard.

It is clear that the use of the puppet acknowledges the child’s right to co-author his/her learning experience. It provides a non-threatening approach used as pedagogical support to allow children to be responsive to the learning experience.

Illustrative snapshots also portrayed teachers’ practices as responsive, sensitive and scaffolded. The strategy for scaffolding is carefully nurtured through considering what children are capable of at different stages and ages. This practitioner (CPR3) is aware of how babies and toddlers learn to communicate and she utilises the best approach she knows to stimulate communication skills amongst the little ones. She notes,

The children love to move around, so that is the reason that I make use of singing songs and saying rhymes. At the beginning, they only sing one of [or] two words, but later on they start sing the whole song. After a year, they know the songs and it is wonderful to see that they start to use the word from the songs to communicate. Then you realise that all the effort you put into learning [teaching] them the songs is worth it. So, I usually communicate to them by using words and sing songs (CPR3).

Another practitioner created an environment for success through a thoughtful developmental trajectory for the children. For non-mobile babies, the practitioners creates accessible opportunities to select different toys. Babies' choices are enabled and this creates possibilities for manipulation, exploration and meaning. The practitioner (EPR5) passionately says:

Although they are still small, I allow them to choose their own toys when they are sitting in their little chairs or apple boxes. I will bring different toys to them and then they take the one that they wanted to play with. For the babies that is 5, 6 months old, I will make the choice but for the elder ones, I allow them to make their own choices.

The practitioner portrays a humanising process, as she intends to give the child the power to choose and if they are immobile, she takes the toys to them and allows them their choice. These interviewed practitioners realised that children are "strong, powerful and competent" and have the ability to connect with adults and peers (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005:155). Ebrahim (2011:195) foregrounds "young children as agents" and her findings show that the children are knowledgeable, intentional and skilled actors who use strategies such as resistance, avoidance, ignoring and collaboration, to actively participate in the construction of early childhood as a structural space.

5.2 Cultural responsiveness

Children as "socio-cultural beings have a right to educational contexts that are respectful, welcoming of children and families alike" (Formosinho & Pascal, 2016: 47). This practice is illustrated through the following excerpt:

They always welcome, they always welcome. When Mummy's come and Daddy's come to drop off their kids, we, we don't call them on Mr and Sir and Mrs. We say Hello Mummy and Hello Daddy, like they feel at home, they feel at home (IPR9).

The practitioner's instinctive care and respect for the parents shows that she values the presence of the parent and wants to build up a partnership.

Early years classrooms and settings can be seen as potentially rich meeting places for children, families and teachers from diverse backgrounds to play and interact (Broadhead & Burt, 2012). However, as Moss (2007: 12) argues, it requires intentional action and a shift in thinking for settings to become genuine places for democratic "encounter and dialogue". Parents need to perhaps be invited to involve themselves in the children's play and learning. Formosinho and Araujo (2011: 223) have proposed that early childhood education centres should be organised for democracy to constitute, simultaneously, an end and a means, to constitute a presence, either at the level of central educational aims and in the realm of daily life of all actors. The practitioners explain,

And I always try to encourage each child with his culture or, as I also have a different culture so I like to learn in everybody's cultures; it's nice and learn from it and try to teach them, in that way that they were brought up to make it easier for them (GPR7).

BPR2 explained that:

There is one girl in my class, I have a plastic bag with sponge in my class and as soon as we sing Bible songs, she takes the plastic bag and hits/punches it. I then asked one of the assistants if they do something like this in church and she said yes, when they sing

in church, they have something accordingly that they hit/punch while they sing. So I allow the girl to do that when we sing religious songs (BPR2).

Here the practitioner is aware of the cultural practice at the church, and therefore, does not disturb the child's action. The child is given the freedom to enjoy and be herself while she sings her song. In this way, children's self-identity and self-esteem are also built; in the case of this child, her cultural practice is allowed. These "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff & González, 1992:132) offer an alternative lens through which teachers can interpret children's actions and behaviour, analyse their practice and articulate the ways in which current provision for young children's optimal development may serve to privilege certain interests over others.

5.3 Linguistic responsiveness (listening pedagogy)

The pedagogy of listening is not just about dealing with the spoken word. It is infused with an ethic of care and responsibility in an encounter (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). It makes salient the importance of relationships and a sense of belonging. Practitioners in early childhood need to be skilled and patient in understanding the meaning children are making of actions and experiences. In the excerpt below, the practitioner showed that listening is an active process that requires interpretation and that she is relationally attuned to the babies in her care. In the situational encounter with the verbal communication of babies, she is attentive and is able to "pick up" (make sense of) their efforts to connect with "words" and "utterances". This "attentiveness" allows for prompting and repetition, which is important for speech and vocabulary development. Listening to the babies provides insights regarding how to support them. This way of working with very young children is respectful of their competence and their attempts to communicate what is meaningful for them.

When the children are playing, there are some words or utterances that you can pick up from the speech that the [they] repeat. We are attentive to these utterances and prompt the children to try and repeat them (GPR7).

This excerpt shows the practitioners' attunement to the baby's communication when she says:

When the other one wants the bottle, some of them they use the bottle to drink. So they come to me (making sound), I know that she wants her bottle. So she actually make a sound and she... yes can make a sound. And she shows it. Yes and shows with the finger what is happening. They show her bag. So I go to that bag and open it. What you really want. I see the bottle. I take the bottle and give it to her and go away on the bed and sleep.

It is visible and evident that the practitioners use the image of the competent child to tune into the child's needs as illustrated by sounds and body language. The child is given the space and power to articulate her needs. The practitioner is in service of the child and this promotes joint learning through listening and respecting the child, although she is only 6 months old. This co-construction of meaning, although the child cannot talk, highlights the motherly instinct of practitioners, who were all female in the sample.

A listening pedagogy invites democratic practices. Where this is evident, then young children are positioned as decision makers. In the study, the practitioner working with the two- and three-year olds illustrates a collaborative effort made to listen and respond to children. Supporting children in this way provides them with an audience and confidence to share their views, opinions and commentaries. Instead of a teacher-imposed activity, the children make choices based on their interests. The reference to "child-involvement" and being "interactive"

in the learning process is suggestive of inclusion of the children in the agenda setting for learning. This is a powerful way of valuing children as knowers of their lifeworld and as contributors to their own learning and those of others. Working in this way requires open-ness and a willingness to learn. One teacher said,

We all listen to them and hear what they have to say and if they are going to choose activities. I let them make their own choices so that they have a say in the kind of activities they want to do. I let them choose things that are interesting to them. I want them to be involved. I want them to be interactive all the time with what's going on (HPR8).

Another practitioner (FPR6) notes: *“Each child is an individual. Some point to what they want. Others you need to think what they are saying to you. I listen to them. I allow to use their toys from home”.*

Practitioner GPR7 added,

Her language is a smile, I am with them crawling. I use language in the ring, in an action rhyme. We sing songs. We mix...Zulu songs, sometimes Afrikaans songs, with English. A bit of Sotho – Shaya, Hamba, Lala...like – Hamba ahmba we are walking, walking. (the teacher smiles and sings like she is with her babies group. Lala phansi,,,(laughing) And I sleep on the mattresses with them, and they all sleep... start getting ready to sleep (teacher laughing sweetly).

It is clear that this practitioner allows the children to be free and independent and to use their own creativity and ideas. When “listening to children” moves beyond tokenistic practices that devalues the high potential of child-led agendas, attention is given to the emotional climate of learning. In order to forge two-way communication, the presence of a warm and responsive adult is of paramount importance. Young children are interpretive beings. They read the emotional climate and this affects their receptivity to interactions. The excerpt below of a practitioner with four- and five-year olds, illustrates the positive emotional triggers used to make children receptive to her. She is knowledgeable about how adult aggression can result in children withdrawing their participation, she says,

Whenever you are talking to them you need to have as smile, laugh so that they too can be comfortable listening to you. If you are aggressive with them, it will be difficult for them to listen or talk to you (FPR6).

APR1 explained how in difficult situations e.g. dealing with babies who cannot talk, the practitioners connect with the child through tuning in via an educated guess. This evokes a response from the child and opens up for the child “possible worlds of meaning” (Formosino & Formosino, 2016:35). This pedagogical mediation style was essential when dealing with babies and we were in awe of the practitioners who used this, as they were not trained. There seemed to have been an automatic attunement to the gestures of babies.

The practitioners use the image of the competent child to attune to the child’s needs, as illustrated by sounds and body language:

It's difficult, sometimes the children come and stand and babble in front of me. One of the little girls will “talk” to me by making some coo and babble noises. Then I say to her, “Mommy are coming in a little while”. She gets so excited and will keep on and on talking to me (EPR5).

The child is given the space and power to articulate her needs. The practitioner is in service of the child and this promotes joint learning through listening and respecting the child as a person (Formoshino & Pascal, 2016). The teacher instinctively notices that the child is anxious about her mother coming to fetch her and pacifies her, stating that her mother will be there in a little while. The teacher realises that listening is a “process of hearing the children’s thoughts on their collaboration in the co-construction of knowledge” (Formoshino & Formoshino, 2016:46). Children are given an opportunity to discover themselves as people with motivational dynamics, although they are just 6 months old.

Although most practitioners in South Africa are not qualified and are generally in their profession out of a need to be employed, the snapshots are powerful and show the pedagogical love, care and concern that the practitioners have for their children. In the study, this allowed for a reciprocal relationship to be formed between teacher and child and together they co-constructed learning moments. The findings and discussions show that the motherly and nurturing instincts of the female practitioners seemed to allow them to be natural in the pedagogy-in-participation practices.

The portrayal of teachers’ practices as responsive, sensitive and scaffolded and taking into account the developmental appropriateness of the teachable moment was really a positive snapshot of South African practitioners, who in most cases, are underqualified. These practitioners created possibilities for immobile babies to have a choice for a meaningful exploration by allowing babies to choose their own toys. The child was given the agency and respected as a competent and capable human. Some of the snapshots showed the warmth that practitioners offered to parents, knowing that parental interactions and relationship-building is paramount to optimal development of young children. An ethic of care and responsibility in the practitioners’ encounters with children and their parents illustrated their understanding of the importance of relationship-building and creating a sense of belonging. One of the practitioners actually listened to the gestures and non-verbal body language of the babies, showing just how attuned practitioners were with the toddlers and babies in their care. This was inspiring as practitioners were not trained in the pedagogy of the young child.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ECD POLICY AND PRACTICE

Although some practitioners interviewed had the minimum qualification, an ECD Level 4 certificate, they also showed snapshots of some understanding of responsiveness towards the young children in their care. Therefore, professionalising the ECCE sector will definitely enhance the practices and uplift the development of children. Practitioners will become more intentional in their responses towards children. The Policy for Minimum Requirements for Programmes Leading to Qualifications for Early Childhood Development Educators (DHET, 2017) is a positive step for training ECCE teachers. Transformative pedagogy, reciprocal and responsive relationship-building between adults and children, should be a core module in the programme development. Higher education institutions need to make provision for the professionalisation of the existing workforce as well by providing Higher Certificates in Education, Advanced Diplomas in ECCE and online diplomas in ECCE so that these ECD Level 4 practitioners can also have a chance to upgrade their qualifications. Attention needs to focus on the transformative pedagogies that qualified teachers develop in order to create centres that would be more “children-ready” rather than “school-ready”.

7. CONCLUSION

This study explored whether practitioners applied “schoolification” or “pedagogy-in-participation” in their centres. The major finding was that practitioners, in both well-resourced and under-resourced centres, showed warmth, care and respect to young children in the class. Fair enough, few practitioners spoke about teaching children letters of the alphabet, counting and the days of the week, however their caring instinct stood out in the data. An innovative way of ensuring that practitioners are shown the correct way of stimulating and interacting with young learners could be setting up an ECD centre of excellence linked to a university or TVET college. Good practices could be highlighted at the ECD centre of excellence and made into short 3-minute videos that could be shared via WhatsApp by training institutions. If good practices are shared amongst the practitioners, they would become more confident in using their built-in instincts when dealing with the developing, capable young citizens (the birth to four child). Co-construction between the adult and child for teachable pedagogical moments as well as jointly setting up the environment for developmental, cultural and linguistic responsiveness would ensure that all young children perform optimally during their formative years. This would enhance the confidence and capability of the young child to be “prepared for life” as their teachers would be professional scaffolds for pedagogy-in-participation.

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