

'We grow together.' Parent participation in an early childhood care and education centre



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Background: The importance of parental involvement in children's education, from the start, has been established by global research. Despite this rhetoric, there is limited research in South African Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) centres that explore how parents can participate democratically in early education, especially in areas of low-socio-economic standing.

Aim: The aim and objective of this study were to explore parents' and teachers' understanding and experiences of parent participation in one ECCE centre in Lavender Hill, Cape Town.

Setting: The research was conducted with the parents and teachers in one ECCE centre in Lavender Hill, Cape Town, South Africa.

Methods: This interpretive, qualitative research provided opportunities to give voice to all participants through semi-structured interviews, analysis of school documents, appreciative inquiry and parent journaling. Reflexive thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data.

Results: The rich data collected provided a platform for open dialogue, allowing stakeholders in the setting to listen to one another fostering meaningful connections and empowerment within the community. The findings revealed the importance of promoting parent agency through participation, which strengthens community ties and social cohesion.

Conclusion: Parents want to have an impact on the ECCE centre and are interested in their children's lives within the setting. Meaningful participation and collaboration support individuals as a community of practice, which has the potential to influence the broader community surrounding the centre.

Contribution: The ongoing research impact focusses on co-constructing an ongoing, iterative and democratic model of parent participation.

Keywords: communities of practice; democracy in ECCE; early childhood education; humanising dialogue; parent participation.

Introduction

Parental involvement in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) has come under the spotlight in recent years (Cox-Petersen 2011; Fenton, Ocasio-Stoutenburg & Harry 2017; Meier & Lemmer 2015; Venter, Joubert & Chetty 2014). It is important to consider how parents perceive the value of their children attending ECCE centres, as parental involvement significantly influences children's successes or failures in school and social settings (Epstein 1985:19). Researchers have also highlighted the notion that teachers should cultivate an understanding of the lives of the families within the school (Epstein 1985; Formosinho & Formosinho 2015; Kambouri et al. 2021; Munje & Mncube 2018; Venter et al. 2014) to enhance the levels of education and emotional and social well-being of children.

Early childhood care and education are the foundation of creating a relationship between schools and homes that acknowledge the role parents and teachers have in the life of the child (Kambouri et al. 2021; Munje & Mncube 2018). Suggested models of parent involvement (Epstein et al. 2019; Kambouri et al. 2021; Keyes 2002) rely on the school being the initiator of interactions creating opportunities for parents to be involved. If parents are not able to make use of school-initiated opportunities, they may feel excluded; and the school may view parents as not being interested (Krijnen et al. 2022:268). This is a deficit view and needs to be challenged by providing opportunities for cooperation and communication that values the cultural wealth of the family with an

acknowledgement of the challenges that parents may face (Yosso 2005:70). In impoverished areas like Lavender Hill, parents rely on ECCE centres to care for and support their children when they go to work. Early Childhood Care and Education centres are by and large privately funded, and while playing a valuable role within the life of the families, they may not feel that it is necessary to have parent support as they go about looking after and educating the children in their care (Bayat & Madyibi 2022; Collins & Fields-Smith 2023). Equally, parents may believe they do not need to be involved as they do not have enough knowledge of education.

The research study considered how parents and teachers understand and experience parent participation within the community. This includes how the voice of the parents can strengthen parent participation in their child's ECCE setting (Pascal & Bertram 2012:484). The intention is to reflect on how providing the opportunity for participation could also encourage social cohesion through the democratic inclusion of all the stakeholders within the ECCE setting. This inclusion would support the development of equity in relationship building between the parents and the ECCE centre, building a strong community (Kral et al. 2021:12). The South African Schools Act (South Africa 1996), the Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development (South Africa: Department of Education 1995) and White Paper 5 on Education (South Africa: Department of Education 2001) indicate that parent support of the school community is valuable to the success of the children and the school community. The documents also allude to the importance of a democratic approach to including parents in their child's education as 'it takes a village to raise a child' (South Africa: Department of Basic Education 2017).

Aims and objectives of the study

This article is a component of a research project that is co-constructing a model of parent participation through the democratic inclusion of parents' and teachers' voices in one ECCE setting in Lavender Hill. Before co-constructing a model of parent participation, it was important to explore individual understandings and experiences of parent participation as this influences expectations of participation.

Literature review

Parent participation is often conflated to be the same as parent involvement or parent engagement. Providing clear definitions of each of these approaches provides clarity on the intention of parent participation. *Parent involvement* is described by Venter et al. (2014:1228) as a school-centric approach to how parents can offer support. How parents are encouraged to be involved in a setting is often created by the parameters set by the policy documents of the setting, as well as the approach the principal and teachers have towards parent involvement. Epstein's (2019:19) typology of parent involvement is often referred to; however, parents are considered 'invited guests' into the setting and comply with the spoken and unspoken rules set by the centre on how they are allowed to be involved. Parents are

encouraged to be interested in their children's education by attending prescribed events, supporting homework and being compliant with the demands the setting makes, including paying school fees. When parents are involved in ways considered appropriate by the setting, they are labelled involved and supportive parents. The levels of involvement discussed do not necessarily provide agency and voice to the parents. *Parent engagement* includes definitions ascribed to parent involvement and includes parents sharing information creating a link between school and home (Baxter & Kilderry 2021; Kustiani & Fauziyah 2019). Parent engagement encourages community building through connections between the culture of home and the school with common goals and shared practice (Collins & Fields-Smith 2023:97). Learning together and cooperating with each other supports parent engagement (Fenton et al. 2017:217). *Parent participation* is best described by Cox-Petersen (2011:5) as parents and the school collaborating to create common goals. Being part of decisions that allow for sharing of thoughts and ideas in a meaningful way allows parents and teachers to work with the best interests of the children in mind (Kambouri et al. 2021:12). Parent participation supports the diversity of the parent body and values the unique contributions families make to strengthening the life of the centre (Daries 2021).

It is important to reflect historically on approaches settings have towards parents as these have set the social norms for involvement. The Department of Basic Education Action Plan (2015) asserts that parents need to know what happens and to offer support as required. Teachers may have expectations of parents being involved based on socialising parents into the norms of the setting to ensure the ECCE programme is successful (Bayat & Madyibi 2022:2). To make the move to parent participation and how it can support the whole community and create social cohesion and communities of practice, it is beneficial to explore how this shift can occur and what the role of the stakeholders in the setting are (Van As et al. 2020:2). Influences on parent participation include their own experiences of their parents being part of school life. If parents have not had a role model of parent participation, they may be unsure of how to contribute to the setting (Segoe & Bisschoff 2019:169). Equally, they may have the belief that they have nothing of value to offer the setting, especially if they are from poor and vulnerable areas (Mokibelo 2022:47). Parents and families may underestimate the value they bring to the setting and the impact this has on the children. Including parents and families in the daily life of the ECCE centre fosters a sense of community and enhances the centre's success by creating support between the setting and the home (Bayat & Madyibi 2022:2). Parent participation goes beyond just helping; it also includes being part of decision making within the ECCE centre. Parents are valued for the contributions they can make by sharing their experiences, practices and family culture with the setting (Soltero-González & Gillanders 2021:969). The intention is to shift from parent involvement, often defined by ECCE centres, to parent participation, which is rooted in dialogue and community building through collaboration.

Theoretical framework

Establishing a strong basis of parent participation requires ECCE centres to consider the importance of having parents and families contribute to the daily life of the setting. Early Childhood Care and Education centres should work with parents and the community in a supportive way to reduce feelings of oppression and autocratic approaches towards education (Van Wyk 2011:200).

When considering how parents and teachers can build meaningful connections and conversations, the work of Freire (2005:18) provides the opportunity to have a more democratic and inclusive approach. Building truly democratic relationships relies on teachers offering supportive, inclusive relationships to the parents (Bipath 2022:146). Freire (2005:96) highlights the potential power imbalances that exist in organisations and challenges the status quo by suggesting that a humanising pedagogy that includes not oppressing anyone is vital as part of working together in a democratic and meaningful way.

Building a community of practice (Wenger 2008:11) requires the acknowledgement of individual skills and experiences to build common interests, share ideas and learn with and from each other. Although parents have personal reasons for making choices of where to send their child to ECCE, they unwittingly become part of a community through this choice. The intention is to harness this shared choice and build a socially cohesive community within the setting. This community of practice provides children and the community with a positive role model of collaboration and has the potential to ripple out into the wider community around the setting (Padayachee 2021:50).

Formosihno and Formosihno (2015:26) explored pedagogy-in-participation where the community of the school is co-constructed through the experiences of those who participate in it. This is active participation that is inclusive with participatory dialogue at its core. Children learn how to participate and have agency from the adults around them (Smith et al. 2022:279). When teachers engage in a participatory approach with the parents, personal understanding and experiences are valued in the construction of the community (Huang, Yang & Li 2019:82).

The three theoretical approaches work together to create a democratically based community of practice that supports social cohesion. There are strong links to the concept of Ubuntu (Bangura 2005:32) that espouses the idea that we have a shared identity and become stronger because of what we contribute to and learn from those in our community. Ubuntu relies on open communication that supports collaboration and acknowledgement of the individual in the community (Mugumbate & Nyanguru 2013:92).

Research methods and design

Study design

This qualitative research is based on an interpretivist and constructivist paradigm (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill

2009:123). How people socially construct their world based on their personal understanding and experiences plays a role in how they construct their personal identity and agency (Jevtić 2023:130). To understand this social construction, the researcher also took into account their own epistemological and ontological approach, as it influences the interpretation of the participants' experiences (Kamberelis, Dimitriadis & Welker 2018:696). The researcher recognised that they were interpreting and sharing the stories of others. To clarify their understanding, they conducted regular check-ins with the participants. The intention was to ensure that the uniqueness and individuality of each participant were respected.

Setting

One ECCE centre based in Lavender Hill, Cape Town, was the site for this research. Lavender Hill is a low socio-economic setting renowned for high levels of crime and poverty (Hodkinson, Pigoga & Wallis 2020:2). The ECCE centre admits children between 2 and 6 years old. The centre is supported by a local NGO, which also runs workshops for the parents and the community around the ECCE centre. The centre is based in a building that is used as a church on the weekends. There is a teaching principal, two teachers and two assistants. The families who use the centre live in the area and for the most part are single mothers, with some support from fathers and extended family.

Study population and sampling strategy

The sample for the research consisted of one ECCE setting, which included five staff members and the parent body, to explore their personal understanding and experiences of parent involvement and participation. An initial meeting was held for all parents and teachers at the ECCE centre to explain the planned research. Using purposive sampling (McMillian & Schumacher 2010:136), the principal, four teachers and seven parents agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews (Saunders et al. 2009:321) provided the basis for exploring understandings and experiences of parent participation in the setting.

Data collection

Data collection provided the opportunity for participants to share their stories, and it was important for the researcher to be open and honest with the parents. As the community of Lavender Hill is often perceived as difficult, it was essential for the researcher to take the time to build a relationship that would give them a sense of security, ensuring they felt they were not being judged (Krijnen et al. 2022:263). Data collection began on 25 October 2022 and was completed by the end of October 2022.

The initial data collection was performed using semi-structured interviews (Merriam 2009:89) with the parents and teachers in the ECCE centre. The semi-structured interviews focussed on one aspect of the research, which is understandings and experiences of parent involvement and participation in the ECCE centre. Challenges of the

semi-structured interviews included potential language barriers and participant uncertainty about answering the questions 'properly'.

The parents who participated in the semi-structured interviews agreed to keep a personal journal of their experiences of participation in the setting. The journals were an opportunity for parents to anonymously provide insight into practical experiences of participation within the setting (Mukherji & Albon 2015:303). A standard template was created for parents to complete, with space for them to add more information if they wanted to. Challenges of the journals included parents not completing them and possible language barriers.

The appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros 2005:7), facilitated by the researcher, was held in the ECCE centre over 1 day. It was well attended by all the mothers and teachers of the ECCE centre. The opportunity to share ideas and work together on creating an initial model of parent participation was embraced by all those in attendance. The appreciative inquiry was a dynamic example of democracy in action with many conversations, laughter and community building.

The setting's policy documents provided insight into expectations that exist regarding parent participation. These documents also set the tone for how parents can participate within the ECCE setting as they provide clear information to the parents on how they can contribute to the life of the setting. In reviewing the policy documents, The corresponding author was aware that they had been created by the setting without consultation with the parents. For clarity, the author met with the principal to clarify aspects of the documents.

Making use of four sets of data collection provided the opportunity for multiple perspectives on parent participation within the setting (Mukherji & Albon 2015:355). Multiple data sets also provided rich, thick descriptions of how parent participation is experienced within the setting (Merriam 2009:16).

Data analysis

The four data sets were merged into a data corpus, which was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2024). The researcher moved between the six phases of data analysis, namely, familiarising themselves with the data making note of key ideas expressed by each of the participants. Initial codes were generated based on these key ideas that helped in the development of potential themes. Through discussions the initial themes were reviewed, defining and naming key themes and subthemes to help tell the story of how parents and teachers understand and experience parent participation in this ECCE centre. Throughout this process, the researcher also had opportunities to check in with the participants clarifying interpretations of their personal experiences and understandings. This approach supports the participatory

nature of the research, emphasising that it is happening 'with' the participants rather than 'to' them.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology Faculty of Education Ethics Committee (reference no.: EFEC 2-06/2022). The researcher was responsible for being aware of the factors that may influence the research. These include the ethics of understanding the research setting and how the social and pedagogical approaches within that setting may impact both the participants and the researcher.

Informed consent, anonymity and the right to withdraw at any point were discussed and explained to all the participants in the research (Merriam 2009:213). Anonymity and confidentiality of participants are respected by ensuring they are not named or identified in the research. The researcher ensured that no participants were coerced or felt obliged to participate and that they clearly understood how the information would be used for the research and what time commitments they would need to make, especially with the journaling and the day-long workshop (Merriam 2009:37). All aspects of the research were discussed with all participants, and they were provided with documents that explained the research in detail. The participants signed an agreement that they were happy to be interviewed for the study.

Results

Interpreting parent and teacher understanding of parent participation highlighted the assumptions made that it is the same as parent involvement. Initially, there was awareness of the more traditional and authoritarian approach to parent participation by the teachers. This also reflected in information from the parents who spoke about wanting to participate but with social and personal challenges feeling 'bad' that they could not give more time to the ECCE centre but tried to make sure they supported their children at home.

Merging the four datasets into a data corpus, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2019), resulted in the development of three major themes each with their own subthemes, as illustrated in Figure 1.

The key themes and subthemes provide insight into parent and teacher understandings and experiences of parent participation. Parents and teachers expressed the value of parent participation as the opportunity to connect with each other, offering meaningful support while building relationships that both help build a community of practice with the aims of offering the best opportunities for the children. Parents and teachers in this one setting expressed the belief that through building relationships, being supportive and working together as a community they would build strong connections that support children being successful, as well as developing a strong sense of community.

Discussion

Participation as connection

Participation as connection explores parent and teacher personal understanding of parent participation. The participants in the research expressed their belief and understanding as being vital for the success of the children, which will help build a stronger community. This was reflected in the school documents as including parents in the life of the ECCE centre is valued as 'a child's education is not the schools alone'. Being connected provides the opportunity for everyone in the ECCE centre to take responsibility for the development and well-being of the children (Twala 2021:7).

The subthemes of participation as connection provide insight into how connections occur within this ECCE setting. These subthemes feature building *relationships* through a *supportive* community that *collaborates* for the good of the children, the ECCE centre and the *community* the families live in. Connections provide the opportunity for participation where knowledge is shared to build confidence and provide agency within the setting (Nutbrown & Cook 2023:60).

Building relationship is at the heart of parent participation in this setting. Relationship building is central to building connections. These relationships are based on trust because there is consistency, and everyone is treated as an equal (Baxter & Kilderry 2021; Segoe & Bisschoff 2019; Uitto et al. 2020). The parents in this setting expressed the ease with which they could approach the teachers and share information. Parents acknowledged the approachability of the teachers in the setting and emphasised the importance of dialogue with the teachers:

'If there's problems, you can talk to them. There is always [a teacher] out of the school [you] can chat maybe in the morning when you bring your child to school.' (Parent 3)

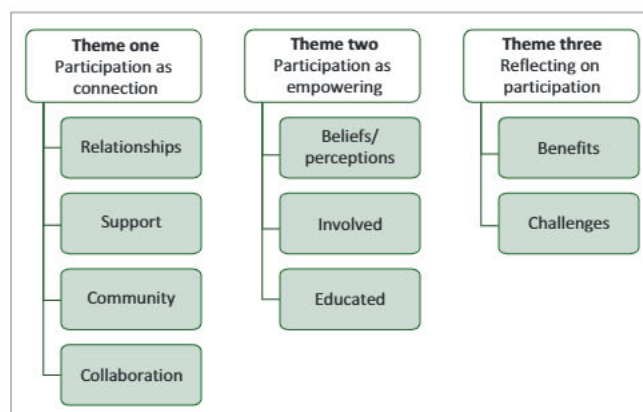
'The teachers make themselves available to the parents as part of the school day. We have open communication.' (Parent 1)

'Yeah, you feel welcome. If my child come out of school and say mummy, I didn't like what teacher say, then I will come and I tell them this was the problem and that was the problem.' (Parent 6)

Because of the approachable nature of the teachers, the parents feel comfortable engaging with them on a regular basis. Trust is an essential part of relationship building, and this requires regular connections between parents and teachers (Formosinho & Passos 2019; Janssen et al. 2012). Teachers also experience themselves as being approachable:

'I obviously feel that parents, some things don't work for them, and some things do, so I do feel that they should speak up and say what doesn't work for their child and what does.' (Teacher 1)

There is an acknowledgement that teachers are open to learning from the parents to give children the best opportunities. The parents appear to be open to sharing information with the setting letting them know when they



Source: Connolly, A., 2024, 'Developing a model of parent participation in an early childhood care and education centre in Lavender Hill, Western Cape', Unpublished PhD thesis, Cape Peninsula University of Technology

FIGURE 1: Key themes and subthemes resulting from four datasets into a data corpus.

have concerns. What is not addressed is what teachers do to make changes when the parents voice concerns. The ECCE centres policy documents address this as it includes relationship building as a valued element of the success of the setting:

The success of the school is largely dependent on the quality of relationships which exist within the school and between the school and its community. Relationship building between home and school is essential to a solid foundation and that there should be an open and supportive relationship between the school, your child's teacher, you the parents and your child. (School documents)

Being aware of historical and social biases in the relationship between the setting and the parents helps address potential limitations of parent participation (Collins & Fields-Smith 2023:100).

One teacher expressed the need to initiate conversations with some of the parents who may feel they do not have the right to contribute their ideas and experiences:

'Sometimes you [the teacher] need to initiate that conversation because the parent's personality might be introverted. Insecurity plays a big role here ... they [parents] might feel intimidated. [The teacher] ... so already that sets them maybe on a higher bar than what the parent does, so some parents fear.' (Teacher 3)

This may reflect the community where there is a sense of parents feeling they are not good enough to be involved (Boyle, Hanafin & Flynn 2018:187). It is important to develop an asset-based approach to what the parents can contribute (Jacobs & Daniels 2020:162). Encouraging and promoting participation helps to develop relationships within the setting and this helps develop a supportive community.

In Lavender Hill, having a support system within the ECCE centre is a vital part of parent participation. One parent acknowledged support for her personal issues:

'Yeah, they're really supportive. Uhm, even in my, the time that I went through the drug story, they were really supportive of me stopping and they're really excited for my part and encouraging me to keep it this way.' (Parent 1)

Being aware of the personal challenges and not being judgemental about them is instrumental in creating a supportive community (Fenton et al. 2017; Formosinho & Passos 2019; Uitto et al. 2020). The intention is that support should be mutually beneficial where caring and concern are the responsibility of parents and teachers. Speaking about the benefit of having parent support one teacher mentioned it taking the strain off them:

'If parents is participating and they're helping us, I think we wouldn't maybe worry or [*the principal*] wouldn't worry to stand outside or to feel any harm because they know here is parents walking up and down.' (Teacher 4)

At times, parents may need practical support from the teachers, and likewise, the teachers know they can rely on parents to support events and participate within the setting as this improves and builds the community in the ECCE centre. Being supportive also means everyone knows they are approachable and feel empowered to help each other (Kustiani & Fauziyah 2019:14).

Through relationship and support a strong community occurs naturally. This happens through supportive interactions that embrace mutual decision making (Segoe & Bischoff 2019:173). The interactions create a caring community as described by parents as:

'I felt part of the school because we had to make dough that we could give our kids to play with.' (Parent 1)

'They involve us parents, like when they tell us like every Fridays then some parents come to clean here and so they involve us into things here.' (Parent 2)

'It hasn't made me think I want to be involved or I don't want to be involved. For me is it I need to be involved for the sake of her because, like I said, I can see she is learning a lot.' (Parent 7)

The simple inclusion of parents into the daily requirements of the setting provides a sense of community and connection where contributions are encouraged and valued (Hughes, Jewson & Unwin 2007:3). The intention is to also be a role model to the children by showing that participating in the setting builds a cohesive community. The children know their parents are included in supporting the setting:

'It's always a benefit when you know that you are part of like improving the school where your child is. It's a benefit knowing that your child is safe, and you can keep an eye even if you part in it.' (Parent 3)

Parents get to know each other and the children in the setting and have a shared responsibility for caring:

'To come and to learn like a other child for me is my child also. So, I can't net [*just*] look for my child, but I must look out for a other parent's child also, to come learn for them also.' (Parent 5)

A teacher spoke about wanting the parents to really understand how the setting works and then take the same approach at home:

'I would love to see the parents come out to do [*work*] with us and support what is happening in the school. So, the benefit is

that the parent will now understand the child better and kind of see OK, so maybe I should just tone a little down at home or I should get him more involved in doing the dishes because that's what he loves doing at school and stuff like that.' (Teacher 4)

Building the community requires ongoing collaboration as parents and teachers work together to align their practices (Smith et al. 2022:279).

Through parent-teacher participation everyone is working towards providing the children with the best possible outcomes. Working as a team in the best interests of the community of the ECCE centre ensures collaboration (Collins & Fields-Smith 2023; Smith et al. 2022). Collaboration is also connected to the pedagogy of the ECCE centre to build a community that takes responsibility for creating their preferred way of being. The pedagogical nature of the setting and the training the teachers have had helps them value parents. The teachers have a desire to have the parents feel comfortable and contribute to the running of the setting daily:

'An absolute amazing thing if you as the parent involve yourself and see what happens in class during the day.' (Teacher 2)

The data identify the understanding parents and teachers have of the value of a strong connection between home and the setting and the positive impact this has on the parent body to build a community of practice (Wenger 2008:46). The mutual sharing of knowledge and information allows teachers to educate and share practice with the parents while allowing the parents to bring their personal skills and abilities as well as their understanding of their children to the centre. Feeling connected to each other and the ECCE centre has the potential to build a democratic and inclusive community where everyone feels valued through the connections and contributions they make (Keengwe & Onchwari 2022:314).

Open, democratic dialogue helps identify a variety of possible connections in the understanding the parents and teachers have of parent participation. Sharing of experiences and knowledge is beneficial and can reignite community values through ubuntu (Padayachee et al. 2022:5). This is not a one-way process, but rather the parents seeing value in what they have to offer the centre, and the teachers know how they are valued by the parents and the community in the ECCE centre.

Participation as empowerment

Participation as empowering occurs when parents and teachers provide opportunities for practical participation. The policy documents of the setting as one way to empower all in the setting:

The smooth running of our school and good communication practices as well as bringing in diversity of thought and creative energy. (School documents)

Providing practical support and learning together empowers the community through interactions as diversity and open

honest communication are encouraged (Freire 2017:12). Being empowered to contribute to the daily life of the setting is beneficial as it provides a sense of belonging and self-worth as all contributions are valued (Formosinho & Formosinho 2012:6). Empowerment of the individuals within the setting aligns with the concept of ubuntu where the community is cohesive through learning together and building supportive relationships (Bangura 2005:32). Encouraging parent participation empowers the community as links are made between the culture of the setting and the homes the children come from (Boyle et al. 2018:187).

The three subthemes of participation as empowering illustrate how parents and teachers can work together practically to provide meaningful participation. These include *perceptions and beliefs* around parent participation, and how *learning* from each other helps create opportunities for parents to be *part of the daily life* of the setting. Empowering the parents is based in understanding of the value of participation to support the community meaningfully. Freire (2017:76) ascribes the importance to shared beliefs and experiences to supporting empowerment.

An awareness of historical influences on parent participation is also relevant, especially within a community created in an authoritarian era in apartheid South Africa (Van Laere, Van Houtte & Vandenbroeck 2018:194). During data collection, teachers used potentially autocratic phrases:

*'Parents must,
Compulsory to volunteer,
We allow parents to ... and,
Entice parents with food and drink.'*

Personal beliefs held by the teachers and the parents have an impact on how parent participation is supported within the setting and are often informed by personal experiences. Teachers may believe that parents are not interested and need to be drawn into the setting (Jevtić 2023:128). These beliefs may not reflect the pedagogy of the ECCE centre, which focusses on personal agency and participation in the life of the setting. Teachers must consider the approach they take to parent participation by addressing potential power imbalances that occur unintentionally because of perceptions they hold (Cox-Petersen 2011:90). The challenge parents may face include their own experiences of parent participation where their parents had a hands-off approach, and they perpetuate this. The lack of their own parents' participation has a marked effect on their own beliefs regarding participation:

'It actually had influence on me, because they were actually never around. OK, so I always feel left out even with the programmes at school, I couldn't have part of it because we had less, or we couldn't afford it, or if there was, I still couldn't get.' (Parent 3)

Experiences of lack of parent participation may perpetuate a sense of disempowerment. Parents may also believe they

have nothing of value to add to the setting and may feel uncomfortable by their lack of participation based on their focus on daily survival. One parent expressed embarrassment at not participating:

'I can't say that I have a voice because I'm never actually ... I'm, I actually also have a lack of saying because I'm not around to help.' (Parent 3)

Although there may be a sense of unease about how parents perceive their participation, there is an acknowledgement that parents want to participate in the ECCE centre:

'I want to put more [in] to get the best out of it, because as the days go by there is no benefit sitting at home, the more I can put in, the best for education [for my child].' (Parent 4)

The benefit of parents contributing practically to their children's school life is well documented (Collins & Fields-Smith 2023; Smith et al. 2022; Uitto et al. 2020; Janssen et al. 2012). Parents and teachers in this setting provided many references to opportunities for practical involvement in the setting. The teachers appeared to associate practical involvement as a compulsory requirement for parents to have their children in the setting:

'Most of the children have their bursaries, so it is compulsory for the parent if we do need volunteers, they need to attend.' (Teacher 1)

It is possible that the teacher is aligning a belief that parents pay in kind; however, this could be misconstrued as an authoritarian approach to parent participation. The practical ways parents can support the setting create opportunities for connections and benefits the children. Asking parents to participate in the setting is the opportunity for them to share their knowledge and skills within the community. Parents expressed a sense of pride:

'Being part of the school can also help my child. Just an hour of my time makes a big difference. We actually play a big role in our kid's life at home and school.' (Parent 4)

'You can see your child is learning and to be part of your child's life also. They are in a safe environment.' (Parent 6)

'It will mostly reflect on the child because they know their parent is at home, but if they see the parents participating in whatever they are doing, I think it, our place will be, become much more respectful in a way.' (Parent 2)

Participation is considered beneficial providing a sense of purpose and hope to the parents and the community. The parents spoke enthusiastically about the contributions they make to the life of the setting. Opportunities for practical participation in the life of the setting appear to support the whole community as everyone gets to know all the children and families within the ECCE centre. Teachers also value daily support from the parents. Providing opportunities for parent participation provides a sense of purpose for everyone and helps build the community through learning from each other:

'Being involved in activities and the school playground, school grounds, do gardening at some stage and look after the garden, but also, you know, at home also involving ourselves with the kids and learning what they learn.' (Parent 1)

'Trying to help the school with the garden, when you need me, I'm available. Yeah, and lots more but so far, I am so glad that I can just be there when they need me to do something.' (Parent 5)

'They are interested also in the school. But I'm sure they won't mind being involved, and I'm sure they don't mind me as a teacher maybe showing them and giving the idea of the, how the materials are used. In the classroom it would benefit a lot so that they know what's happening.' (Teacher 3)

Empowering participation is rooted in providing opportunities to learn from each other. This aligns with creating a community of practice and building on the concept of ubuntu (Bangura 2005; Mugumbate & Nyanguru 2013). Learning together and from each other is at the core of supporting participation. The knowledge and skills everyone has are valued through supporting contributions to the ECCE centre. Parents and teachers are considered experts in their experiences and are encouraged to share ideas (Jevtić 2023:128). Because of the pedagogical approach of the setting the policy documents state:

Families are required to attend compulsory, preparatory workshops. Books are an important resource to a school, and it takes time to build up a library. We have a collection of parenting and Montessori books for parents of the school to loan. (School documents)

The intention is to educate parents on how to interact with their children to support independence and agency in line with the pedagogical approach. Parents value knowing how the teachers interact and work with the children during the day:

'I enjoy how they learn stuff and, she is excited when she comes, comes home because I see the working environment and the learning environment, it's actually stuff that we did in high school.' (Parent 2)

'I have learned another side of my child's life because children are different at home then [sic] at school.' (Parent 3)

The teachers are eager to educate parents with a focus on parents needing to understand the approach of the setting towards the children for parents to continue the approach at home:

'It's obviously like, they're doing it differently in any other ECD's. But they don't understand really, you know, the core of it like you know, if they only come, so I think they should be able to have access to come and explore the classroom in terms of different areas.' (Teacher 3)

'I don't think a lot of parents actually understand what is happening in the class, especially from a Montessori point of view.' (Teacher 2)

Educating parents on the pedagogical approach of the setting may create an 'us and them' approach and teachers need to be open to learning from the families in their settings. The intention for learning how the setting operates is intended to help parents use the same approach to their children at home (Okagbue et al. 2022:3). A universal approach to interacting with the children is beneficial in creating a level of consistency

for the children as well as supporting the success of the setting (Mokibelo 2022:48). Learning the skills and knowledge parents bring into the setting helps foster the community and empowers everyone as value is attributed to knowledge.

Reflections on participation

To ensure participation occurs, reflection on levels of participation is required. These reflections provide the opportunity to contemplate both the *benefits* and *challenges* of parent participation. Reflections support what is working well and where improvements or changes should occur for ongoing parent participation. Reflecting provides the opportunity to consider historical aspects of parent participation and how it impacts the community (Freire 2005:60). Employing an appreciative inquiry approach when reflecting on how participation is being encouraged and maintained is an opportunity to bring the community together on a regular basis. Reflections on participation include developing an awareness of how personal experiences influence current actions to avoid perpetuating past experiences. It is also an opportunity to explore what levels of participation are taken for granted and how decisions made include the voices of all in the setting (Dewey 1916:23).

Reflecting on parent participation develops a sense of the reality of the lives of parents and families and how they can be best supported (Baxter & Kilderry 2021; Bayat & Madyibi 2022). In turn this helps develop a supportive community that is cohesive. Dialogue is created where individual contributions are valued and encouraged to support the ECCE community:

'Parent participation for me would be certain things that parents collectively or as individual can take over the responsibility of and take ownership.' (Teacher 4)

Open communication and reflecting on participation benefit the children as links between home and the setting are developed and supported:

Supports a diverse community in which our children encounter and learn to respect ethnic, cultural, economic and other differences to identify common ground.' (School documents)

Parents and teachers value the input each has in the lives of the children and the setting, and this encourages further participation (Harrison & Madingoaneng 2022:468). Parents know that their participation in the setting helps their children and them:

'I actually want to be better [than my parents], be more involved in my children's lives.' (Parent 7)

Reflecting on levels of parent participation help the community to change beliefs and experiences of participation supporting agency and community building:

'Because sometimes for a young girl like me to grow up here in this place and not achieve your goal it's hard to survive.' (Parent 3)

The teachers know that parent participation also benefits the setting as it strengthens the links between the setting and the home. As they learn how to support their children and participate within the setting daily breaking down barriers to communication and building a community that relies on each other:

'We teachers will benefit actually a lot if parents know what is happening in the classroom.' (Teacher 3)

'It will allow them to take more ownership of the space ... that will ignite them so they can make their house conducive for the child as well. The main benefit is that the child will benefit ... because the education that he receives at school would initially be the same thing that he would receive at home.' (Teacher 4)

The benefits of parent participation are evident in the approach the parents and teachers have towards each other (Kustiani & Fauziyah 2019:14). This does not negate the potential challenges faced in the ECCE centre around parent participation.

Because of the social and economic challenges in Lavender Hill, parents may struggle to participate in the setting. The practicalities of participation are described as a challenge and can frustrate the teachers, especially as they want parents to participate:

'Weather, [*when it is raining*] they don't want to come out. I think it is just the mindset of the community.' (Teacher 1)

'They are not helping [*with the schoolwork at home*]. They will only get involved if we maybe tell them or maybe ask, that's the only way they get involved.' (Teacher 2)

'Punctuality, unemployment, and there is no one to look after the child whilst [*the parent*] needs to be here or participate in the school.' (Teacher 3)

'I was heavily in drugs, so I didn't have time to interact [*with my child*]. I don't have time; I am busy the whole day [*trying to find food*] that actually don't give me time to be at school when there is activities.' (Parent 1)

Reflecting on potential challenges to parent participation helps provide the opportunity to be supportive within the ECCE community. Being aware of, and sensitive to, the daily challenges may provide the opportunity for support and community building within the setting. Acknowledging the challenges that occur within parent participation occurs when open and honest dialogue provides opportunities to reflect on how to be supportive and encourage participation (Bayat & Madyibi 2022; Formosinho & Formosinho 2012). Reflecting on the practical challenges to participation creates an opportunity to consider how these challenges can be diminished. Dialogue allows parents and teachers to reflect on the community and how participation and community building can reduce frustrations and create practical support.

Strengths and limitations

A strength of parent participation is the joint ownership in building and strengthening the ECCE community. Participation provides opportunities for dialogue that moves

the community forward, making changes as required. This has a ripple effect into the wider community as parents take participatory experiences into their personal spaces (Modise 2022:297). Valuing personal contributions to the ECCE setting encourages a connected community that takes shared responsibility for the children by providing opportunities for connection and support. Parent participation provides an opportunity to strengthen the community through meaningful interactions that give voice to all (Atmore 2012; Boyle et al. 2018).

A challenge of parental participation is ensuring that the focus shifts from mandated involvement to co-constructed participation through interactions and dialogue. Parents may not perceive themselves as skilled or knowledgeable enough to contribute effectively (Jacobs & Daniels 2020; Munje & Mncube 2018). Unspoken barriers may exist, and reflecting on experiences and knowledge of contributing to the community is an important aspect of encouraging meaningful participation.

Implications and recommendations

Creating opportunities for parent participation includes developing an awareness of the influences on parents' and teachers' understanding of giving agency and voice to create a supportive community within the ECCE centre. Personal experiences influence expectations of participation and may limit or encourage further participation (Keyes 2002:180).

Developing a shared identity and communicating effectively creates a sense of belonging through relationship building (Seitsinger 2019:167). Shared decision making and parent participation support the children, families and the setting through dialogical relations (Freire 2005:18). Social practices are developed within the community and all contributions to the life of the ECCE centre are valued.

A further implication is to understand experiences of parent participation through open dialogue and learning from each other. Communication and shared experiences are used to provide the opportunity to co-construct a parent model that is relevant to this specific ECCE centre.

Conclusion

The three key themes provide insight into parents' and teachers' approaches to and value of parent participation in an ECCE centre. *Participation as connection* focusses on building supportive relationships as part of collaboration and community development within the setting. *Participation as empowerment* explores the importance of how beliefs and perceptions contribute to personal agency providing tangible opportunities to participate. To ensure successful, ongoing participation, *reflection on participation* provides the community the opportunity to consider what aspects of participation are working and what needs to be developed. Reflection is an ongoing process, and it is important that the ECCE community creates opportunities for this to occur, to avoid being comfortable with a status quo.

One participant in the research described the ECCE centre as a 'lighthouse' in the community. The initial reaction may be that this is a lot to live up to and can put pressure on the teachers and the principal. However, it also speaks to how appreciated the ECCE centre is within the community. Parents know that their participation is valued and appreciated and that they have a voice and are heard by the principal and teachers. Although the setting is not without its challenges, there is an overall sense of a community of practice who know where they can support and be supported, especially through the connections they make in the setting.

The connection can continue long after the children have moved into formal schooling and parents take their experience of being an active participant into the primary school and continue this level of meaningful dialogue and participation.

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Authors' contributions

A.S.C. is the primary author while N.S. and A.C. served as her supervisors.

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Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available within this article.

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