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Corrigendum: Through the eyes of parents: Culture of young children in diverse early learning spaces

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This correction does not alter the study's findings of significance or overall interpretation of the study results. The authors apologises for any inconvenience caused.

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Through the eyes of parents: Culture of young children in diverse early learning spaces

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There is a growing emphasis for early education to be both contextually appropriate and culturally responsive. In post-apartheid South Africa, early childhood care and education (ECCE) centres have become 'melting pots' of different cultures, reinforcing the call to become culturally relevant. Affirming each family's cultural norms and values is pivotal in shaping the child's identity – especially in a multicultural society. However, there exists an absence of research investigating how parents of young children view their families' cultural norms and values. This phenomenologically qualitative study investigated parents' understandings of culture and their cultural aspirations for their young children attending culturally diverse ECCE centres. One-on-one interviews were conducted to explore parents' cultural narratives of how they view the cultural identities of their young children. Participants comprised 19 parents who were purposefully selected from five South African provinces. Findings revealed that parents were initially hesitant to articulate what culture in a democratic South Africa would look like. However, when they reflected on culture as enacted in the lives of their families they responded with conviction, revealing a range of views about the topic. They described how they experienced their culture through artefacts, language, family, religion and place. Parents recognised the valuable opportunities that the language-diverse ECCE spaces offered for mixing languages and developing bilingualism and multilingualism. The parents' intuitive understandings of their children's culture confirm that there are meaningful levels of cultural knowledge to be found at the grassroots level.

Keywords: culture; culturally responsive pedagogy; early childhood care and education; early childhood development; young children.

> Cultural feelings are an undertheorised area of the human experience. (Schorch 2014:22)

Introduction

The notion of culture has become more and more important in scholarly discourse, and in the lives of ordinary people as a core aspect of explaining their social reality (Baldwin et al. 2006). The call to become culturally relevant is particularly echoed in early childhood care and education (ECCE) where there is a growing emphasis for early education to be both contextually appropriate and culturally responsive (Gordon & Browne 2017). This call is highly significant in the South African ECCE context where early learning centres (ELCs) have become increasingly diverse since the introduction of the democratic government in 1994. Prior to 1994, relatively few children had access to centre-based early learning and these children were predominately white. The recognition of the right of every child to education, including early childhood education (Republic of South Africa [RSA] 1996), caused an influx of young children from all cultural backgrounds to ELCs. The shift to accommodate children from different racial, religious, ethnic, language and cultural groups has not only resulted in many more children accessing ECCE centres but also in these centres becoming 'melting pots' of different cultures. At the same time, the realisation of the value of quality early learning has been increasingly recognised (e.g. Bruce 2015; Heckman 2013; Moyles 2010). In 2013, responding to this realisation, ECCE became a priority government focus in South Africa (National Planning Commission 2012).

Quality ECCE acknowledges the parents or guardian (primary caregivers) as the child's first educator and thus, ideally, the centre should affirm the family's cultural norms and values, as these are pivotal in forming the child's identity especially in a multicultural society (Woods, Boyle & Hubbard 1999). Reflecting on and verbalising their experience of culture as personalised in their daily lives could also support parents in nurturing their young children's cultural identities. But how does this happen if there is no or little understanding of the different cultural perspectives

that form the foundation of individual children's lives? Despite the emphasis on culturally responsive teaching and learning there has been little research on what constitutes parents' understandings of culture in diverse ELCs.

The investigation of parents' views on their young children's culture formed part of a transformative pedagogy research collaboration between nine universities. Funded by the DHET and EU, the purpose of the research project was to explore the beliefs and knowledge of teacher educators, practitioners, centre managers and parents to develop a transformative pedagogy for ECCE in South Africa. The key objective was to activate stronger social cohesion and respectful dialogues within centres to strengthen a transformative pedagogy in South Africa.

This article that will only focus on the parents' views and was framed by the following research questions namely, (1) what are parents' understandings of culture and (2) what are their cultural aspirations for their young children? For the purposes of this paper, the children were aged between birth and 5 years and attended an intercultural ECCE centre. The term 'intercultural' refers to interaction between people from two or more different 'cultural' groups (Oatey 2000, cited in Spencer-Oatey 2012).

This phenomenological study first investigates Funds of Knowledge (FoK) theory as a conceptual framework for exploring parents' understandings of culture. Second, we examine the relationship between culture and the young child's identity. Third, we then explore the multifaceted and complex concept of culture. Fourth, we present the methodology that is followed by the findings and discussion of parents' views. Finally, the paper proposes a way forward by further researching parents' beliefs and attitudes towards diversity in South Africa.

Conceptual framework

Funds of knowledge theory, developed by Moll, González and colleagues from the University of Arizona (González, Moll & Amanti 2005; Moll & Greenberg 1990) offers a conceptual framework for exploring knowledge, skills, as well as attitudes and values arising from life experiences, rather than schooling (Hogg 2011). By extension FoK theory provides a framework to explore how, within a global environment, people take up, or resist aspects of culture drawn from various sources (González 2005). Applying FoK theory involves focusing on people's strengths and skills, and emphasising engagement with individuals and evidence, rather than with assumptions (Hogg 2016). Having a deep knowledge about parents' FoK in relation to the cultural aspirations they have for their children, enables teachers to better implement a culturally relevant and contextually appropriate ECCE programme. Knowledge of a culturally relevant curriculum is especially pertinent in ECCE as it is a well-recognised and accepted early-learning principle that content should be drawn from the child's life world (Gordon & Browne 2017). Attending to the dynamic complexities of human lives becomes therefore an important aspect of applying FoK theory to practice.

Funds of Knowledge theory should also impact the teachers' pedagogical practices. By drawing on appropriate play-based strategies, including song, dance and story, the teacher reinforces the role of the parent as the primary educator and addresses both the cognitive and affective components of development and learning. Cognitively, because teachers are able to draw on FoK to ensure a culturally relevant curriculum; and affectively because teachers offer a responsive and caring relational pedagogy (Camangian 2010) which is a hallmark of quality ECCE practice.

International studies have consistently demonstrated that when teachers learned about the rich and diverse FoK held by parents, children and their families, especially the more vulnerable families, greater respect for families as legitimate sites of knowledge ensued, and improvements in teacher-child-family relationships and engagement occur (González et al. 2005).

Culture, development and learning of young children

The development of children's understanding of their first culture starts at a very young age and is usually established by age 5 (Abdullah 2009). If parents do not nurture the cultural identity of their young children who attend multicultural centres, it may hamper the children's social and personal development (Jones 2010; Woods et al. 1999). Young children in multicultural settings need to be secure in their own cultural identity to feel secure with their peers, and develop personal self-esteem (Woods et al. 1999). In order to optimise the holistic wellbeing and development of children, teachers should have a sound insight into culturally relevant knowledge and pedagogies based on the realisation that young children have to learn to navigate the different worlds between home and school (Aronson 2016). Thus, teachers ought to draw upon the cultural knowledge and skills that young children bring with them from home (Durden, Excalante & Blithc 2014). Yet many teachers seem stuck in very limited and superficial notions of culture. Consequently, 'the fluidity and variety within cultural groups' has often been lost in implementing culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings 2014:77). However, for teachers to implement culturally relevant pedagogies they need to have some insight into the complexities of the concept of culture.

Towards an understanding of culture

The word *culture* is regarded as 'one of the 2, or 3 most complicated words in the English language' (Williams 1976). It has a long history from Cicero's first mention (circa 45 BCE) of *cultura animi* – 'cultivation of the soul' (Leonard 2018) – to contemporary postmodern interpretations. In medieval times, much of what is understood by 'culture' today was carried in the term 'custom' (Thomas 1993:2). In the late 19th

century, British anthropologist Sir Edward Tylor provided a description of culture which became its foundational definition in anthropology: 'That complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society' (Tylor 1871:1). He pioneered this view of culture as learned and not a biological trait – the multifaceted sum of our social interactions, which are a qualification for being part of a society (Spillman 2002). Sapir disputes society as locus of culture since society itself is also a cultural construct. He identifies the true locality of culture in the interactions of individuals and 'in the world of meanings' which each individual abstracts from participating in these interactions (Sapir 1949:515–516 cited in Sarangi 2009).

Over time, culture has infiltrated the academic inquiry of a wide range of disciplines beyond anthropology and history (Sarangi 2009), bringing an abundance of understandings and interpretations to the concept. In 1952, American anthropologists Kroebel and Kluckhorn provided a taxonomy of 164 existing definitions of culture. Literature has been flooded by scores of definitions and interpretations of the concept. In sociology, culture is about meaning-making: how meaning-making happens, why meanings vary, how meanings influence human action and the role of meaning-making in social cohesion, domination and resistance (Spillman 2002). In archaeology, culture is dynamic and evolving, a socially constructed reality that exists in the minds of members of a group. It acts as 'normative glue' that accommodates feasible communication and collaboration within the group (Hudelson 2004).

In the early 1950s, Kroeber wrote 'The most significant accomplishment of anthropology in the first half of the twentieth century has been the extension and clarification of the concept of culture' (Kroeber & Kluckhohn 1952:139 cited in Darnell 2001). Apte (1994) disagrees 'Despite a century of efforts to define culture adequately, there was in the early 1990s no agreement among anthropologists regarding its nature'. To date, common connotations to the term by scholars of dissimilar fields are often overlapping, but can also be contradictory. The following illustrates how easily overlapping and contradiction occur: Culture is a 'collective programming of the mind' that encourage certain ways of life which distinguish members of one group from members of another (Hofstede 1994:5), compared to Culture is 'that fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs' shared by a group which influences, but does *not* programme or determine the individual's behaviour (Spencer-Oatey 2008: 3 cited in Spencer-Oatey 2012). Notions of 'high culture' (superior education facilitating superior arts, literature, knowledge) which were passed on from the 19th century has further confused contemporary usage of culture. The idea of high culture is not found as a prominent feature in current social scientific definitions (Avruch 1998). An important contributing factor to the ambiguous nature of the concept is the frequent interchangeable use of the terms *culture, ethnicity* and *race* (Spencer-Oatey 2012). Like culture, race and ethnicity are socially constructed categories that have an effect on cultural and social interactions. The construct of race draws on superficial physical differences between groups of people, like skin colour (but not eye colour), whereas ethnic groups are defined by a shared language, religion, nationality, history or some other attribute (Brown 2014). Ethnicity is about difference. Culture is often employed to compose and maintain boundaries between ethnic groups, where 'the actual cultural content matters less than its ability to differentiate one group from another' (Avruch 2003:358).

Whilst language is not explicitly mentioned in most definitions of culture, the interrelationship between language and culture has been 'passionately debated since the beginning of the 19th century' (Sarangi 2009:95). A person's native language influences his/her habitual ways of thinking (Whorff 1956 cited in Whorf & Caroll 1984). The shared meanings in a culture are communicated through language (Morris 2014). Language plays an important role in other elements of culture such as religion and family. Religion, a close relative to culture, holds a prevailing influence on the attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviour of its members (Beyers 2017). It has a collective dimension which can be a powerful cohesion agent amongst its members (UNESCO 2009). Family, another powerful cohesive agent, provides the main context in which to view the young child who inhabits that context (Tudge et al. 2000).

Hofstede (1994) emphasises that whilst cultural norms may be shared by a group of people, the interpretation thereof differs for each individual. In his dimensions of culture, he describes the collectivism of group culture as the tendency to foreground sociability and group orientation. Individualism is defined as an inclination within a culture to focus more on the individual than on the group. This individualism-collectivism dimension of culture distinguishes between cultures that value individual endeavour versus cultures with collective group endeavours (Kruger & Roodt 2003). Grounded in Hofstede's work, the individual/interpersonal level of culture recognises that 'if groups are the nexus, individuals are the vectors of culture' (TMC 2010). The individual can choose to reinforce, or alter and adjust cultural norms, including spoken or unspoken rules. This does not translate to disrupting coherence or obstructing group interest; in fact, increasing interaction between individuals can boost intercultural dialogue, and the plasticity of identities can generate 'innovations of all kinds and at every level' (UNESCO 2009:244).

For Schein (1984, 1990, 2004), culture manifests on three fundamental levels of increasing depths, namely: (1) artefacts, (2) values and (3) basic assumptions. Artefacts would include for instance the way people dress, but also the way people interact with others. Whilst easy to discern, artefacts are much more difficult to understand. Beneath the

artefacts lie values, which are conscious approaches, aspirations and beliefs and judgements of what is good and bad. Schein explains 'Culture operates at many levels; the "how we do things around here" is [*certainly*] the surface level' (Schein 1984). Culture should not be over-simplified. Schein compares culture to a lily pond where the plant's leaves and flowers are very visible for any visitor to see:

> That's the 'how we do things around here [*or in my culture*]'. To gain understanding of why things are done in certain ways, one needs to look at the root system: what is feeding it, and the history: who planted what. (p. 7)

Without investigating the reasons why people are doing things the way they do things, understanding of their culture is superficial (Kupler 2015). The roots are the basic assumptions. They include our deepest and most comprehensive explanation of reality; perceptions of fundamental truths about people and the world (Schein 1984, 1990). The underlying shared meaning within a cultural group functions as 'ideas represented in the minds of its people, enacted in their practices, and inscribed in its institutions and artifacts' (Morris 2014:20). All these cultural actions and interactions take place in a geographical setting (Varnum & Grossman 2017).

This article investigated the views that parents of young children have about their children's culture and cultural roots in a specific context/setting: the multicultural ELC. As a multicultural place and space (context) for learning the ELCs were of interest to the study. De Botton explains that '"the culture of place" occurs within a particular spatial context' (2013:11). As culturally diverse spaces, it was important to examine how the concept of culture is perceived by parents from different cultural background who enrolled their children at the culturally diverse centres.

In 1992, Schwartz updated Tylor's definition (Schwartz 1992 cited in Avruch 1998):

> Culture consists of the derivative of experience, more or less organised, learned or created by the individuals of a population, including those images...and their interpretations (meanings) transmitted from past generations, from contemporaries, or formed by individuals themselves. (p. 17)

Avruch identifies several virtues of this definition. The following specific virtues are significant to this article: it conceptually connects culture to experience, it locates culture simultaneously 'outside' and 'inside' individuals and it addresses agency by indicating that individuals do not only inherit or learn images of culture, but can create new images (Avruch 1998:18). Thus, culture clearly is neither timeless nor changeless.

It is vital for ECCE teachers/care givers to obtain an adequate understanding of the role of culture in the lives of the young children in their care. Culture is an 'all-encompassing force', which is often employed to describe behaviours and shortcomings of people or groups (Varnum & Grossmann 2017:2). Without an adequate understanding of culture and the role it plays in the lives of children, an adequate understanding of the mind of the child is hardly possible (Henrich et al. 2010; Wang 2016 cited in Varnum & Grossmann 2017). Adequate understanding and mindfulness of the different cultural values and ways of acting could remove unintended barriers to children's success in ECCE spaces (Zion & Kozleski 2005). Unfortunately, few researchers have examined young children's understandings of their culture (Ramsey 2004). Even fewer researchers have examined how the parents of young children view the culture of their children, and experience the effect of their children's intercultural interactions in diverse ELCs. This is what makes the study significant at the current juncture.

Methodology

Young children in multicultural settings who are confused about their own cultural identity have a more difficult time feeling secure with their peers and developing personal self-esteem (Woods et al. 1999). Within the familial cultural setting, parents need to nurture their young children's cultural identity to help them to 'believe themselves to belong', be comfortable with themselves and experience acceptance by their peers and significant others (Jones 2010:2). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to articulate parents' understandings of culture as it manifests in the lives of their young children who attend multicultural ECCE centres. The basis of the phenomenological approach is to 'illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation' (Lester 1999); its intention is to 'understand the phenomena...as it is experienced by the person herself' (Bentz & Shapiro 1998:98). Quality ECCE teaching and learning embraces pedagogies that are culturally relevant. Thus, the authors deliberately avoided prescribing or even suggesting a definition of culture to underpin or inform the study. Sarangi (2009) observes that the term 'culture' usually brings to mind images of the 'other' being described from the viewpoint of the observer. He refers to these descriptions of culture as 'unequal narratives' (Sarangi 2009:88). The culture narratives of the parents provided a fresh lens for investigating the cultural identities of their young children. Being dominant participants in their children's daily lives, the parents are 'insiders' and the only ones qualified to inform the outside world of their thoughts and feelings about their children's cultural lives (Mapp 2013).

As discussed in the Introduction, this phenomenological culture study formed part of a collaborative research project between nine South African universities and Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). In phenomenological research, the phenomenon always 'dictates the method and even the type of participants' (Hycner 1999:156). The sample was purposeful and depended on the willingness and availability of parents (of children in the age-group birth to 5 years who attend multicultural ECCE centres) to participate in the research project. Creswell (1998) recommends a sample

size of 5 to 25 participants for phenomenological research. This article was informed by the cultural narratives of 19 parents drawn from both under-resourced and one well-resourced ECCE centres. These centres were drawn, one of each, from five South African provinces, namely the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Free State, Gauteng and Northwest.

The main research tool comprised of individual, semi-structured interviews. Participants from all official South African racial/cultural/ethnic groups were invited to be interviewed. Parents who were willing and available had the choice of being interviewed in their mother tongue and the languages chosen by parents for their interviews were English, isiZulu, Afrikaans and isiXhosa. Free State and North West participants chose to be interviewed in English, even though this was not necessarily their parent language. Participants were drawn from all four official racial groupings still acknowledged in South Africa today. Interviews took place at the ECCE centre the parent's child/children attended.

The recorded interviews with 18 mothers and one father were transcribed. Interviews conducted in isiXhosa and isiZulu and Afrikaans were translated into English. According to Wertz (2005:172), phenomenological research requires 'an attitude of wonder that is highly compassionate'. To cultivate such a compassionate attitude of wonder, the authors (who come from different cultural, ethnic and racial backgrounds) implemented bracketing/epoche: the deliberate suspension of their own 'assumptions, meanings and interpretations' to allow them to 'enter the unique world of the participant' (Groenewald 2004:48). Through continuous engagement with the interview data, reading, rereading and assisted by the use of ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software, we became familiar with the data. Initially, 18 codes to label units of meaning were identified. Through further scrutinising – looking for patterns, themes, relationships and difference (De Hoyos & Barnes 2012), triangulated by ATLAS.ti analysis, whilst intentionally bracketing our own assumptions to avoid inappropriate subjective judgements (Groenewald 2004:49), four themes were identified to describe parents' views of their children's culture:

> … the operative word in phenomenological research is 'describe'. The aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts. (Groenewald 2004:44)

The themes and the description thereof are presented below. 'All direct quotations were obtained during the interviews with parents of young children in diverse ECCE centres in 2019'.

Ethical consideration

Ethical clearance for the project was granted by CPUT [EFEC 4-6/2017]. All relevant authorities and all participants understood that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the research at any time. Participants completed consent forms, confirming their willingness to be interviewed and audio-taped as well as their right to confidentiality and anonymity. The ethical clearance for the national 'Transforming Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education, birth to four' TPEC research project was obtained by the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). The certificate was issued by the Faculty of Education and Social Sciences Ethics Committee on 21 June 2017. All accepted ethical guidelines were strictly followed. Letters of approval were obtained from all provincial government authorities, early learning directors and governing body members in all the provinces represented in this article. Parents were invited to participate. Confidentiality and anonymity of participating parents, their children as well as the centres their children attended were safeguarded throughout the process.

Findings and discussion

In this section, extracts from data collected in this study serve to show how parents viewed and experienced their culture and the implications thereof for their young children. The authors first explored how parents understood culture, and then investigated how they linked culture to particular cultural artefacts, language, religion and place.

Understanding, thinking and feeling culture

Discussions on ethnicity, culture and the nation are 'a national obsession at this crucial time when South Africa is still struggling to negotiate its identity' (Tinker 2010:v). It can thus be expected that parents bringing up their young children in a developing democracy will be struggling to define what culture means to and for them. As one parent observed:

> 'We are very much just South Africans, which is hard to define these days to what that is.' (Parent 13, Gauteng)

In the interviews, parents struggled to answer a question about supporting their children in developing a sense of pride in their cultural roots:

> 'Shoo, identity …?' (Parent 4, Free State)
>
> 'That one is kinda like difficult.' (Parent 3, North West)
>
> '… that one is hard.' (Parent 12, Gauteng)

They seemed to interrogate and make meaning of their own understanding of their culture as they spoke. This was evident in a notable increase of mutterings like 'err', 'um', 'ar' and 'ur' in the transcripts. According to one of the parents:

> 'We don't, we don't [*instil cultural pride in our child*]. I, I, I don't take any notice of that at all because um as soon as we do that then it's err, there's too much focus on, on, on that I, I don't want her to have any sense of there's pride in this, in this culture, it's not.' (Parent 15, Western Cape).

For parents from bicultural or multicultural families, this struggle to define culture was more pronounced. However, parents found it easier to define and discuss cultural artefacts, an observation supported by Schein (2004) who says that cultural artefacts are easy to discern.

Observing culture through artefacts

Parents enthusiastically discussed cultural dress (Parents 1, 3, 8, 9, 10), songs (Parents 5, 6), dance (Parents 3, 9) and drums (mentioned five times by Parent 10).

But, Schein (2004) points out the *values and assumptions underpinning the artefacts* are more difficult to understand. In the parents' narratives, it became clear that these cultural artefacts they had identified contained symbolism that held powerful meanings to the members of their cultural groups. Parent 8 explained that when her little girl wears her cultural dress, she 'wears the symbols of my culture'; Parent 10 described that how, when her son wears his cultural clothes, it brings him pride and it is 'like knowing himself'. Artefacts could be dynamic, functional entities 'entangled in historical and cross-cultural webs of sociality and significance' (Chua & Salmond 2011:3). Cultural dance was experienced as 'dancing for our culture'. As stated by Parent 10, a Zulu mother of a family with Sesotho as home language explained how dance revealed different cultural reference points for her son, who was aged four: 'It is difficult but he knows how to do ndlamo.[1] Like this cultural things of the Zulu's. Yes, ndlamo. He knows how to do ndlamo, he knows when maybe we play music of Sotho, he knows how to move the shoulders [*like Basotho people do*] and he can differentiate this one is for Sotho, this one is for Zulu'. It seems that observing, or participating through the use of these artefacts evoked a connection to, and/or recognition of values and beliefs that eluded non-members of the cultural group. Avruch explains that the more 'deeply internalised and affectively loaded' images of culture are, the more these imagery 'are able to motivate action' (1998:19). He concludes: 'This is the proper sense in which culture is causal' (1998:20).

It is noteworthy that not one parent included notions of 'high culture' in their cultural narratives.

Talking culture through language

Language is rooted in culture and serves as an anchor for family cohesion (Rhoades 2008). In parents' narratives, language was a dominant reference point for discussion in relation to culture. The languages mentioned specifically were Sesotho, isiZulu, isiXhosa, Tsonga, Setswana, English and Afrikaans as well as 'many African languages'. The term 'many African languages' was used by one parent to emphasise the language diversity found throughout South Africa. Strong links were made between language, culture and ethnic identity:

> '… she definitely got the English and Afrikaans cultural background.' (Parent 14, Gauteng)

> '… she knows that she's a Sotho, and she is proud of it.' (Parent 11, North West)

> 'My husband is Greek, I am an Afrikaner.' (Parent 16, Gauteng)

> 'They come as Tswana or as Xhosa.' (Parent 7, Free State)

1.Zulu dance for men and boys.

Parent 12 identified her family as 'Coloured', and explained that English is her first language, whilst her husband's first language is Afrikaans. She then expressed that this complicates the culture of her children – she viewed 'Afrikaans Coloured culture' as more traditional and conservative than 'English Coloured culture'. This illustrates how 'language could influence intra-cultural variation at individual and group level' (Avruch 1998:15). Parent 10 reflects on developing her young son's cultural identity in a conflicting home language setting:

> 'We are Zulus, but we speak Sotho at home. Ja, it's difficult for me to make him focus on that culture. We are being a Zulu and then we speak Sotho and then we do Sotho cultures mixing Zulu.' (Parent 10, North West)

According to Rhoades (2008), bilingualism is a prized asset for child, family and society. Parents' responses illustrated the validity of this view through their encouragement of bilingualism in both their family and school settings.

In the family context, parents from bicultural and multicultural families in the study described how social interaction was intentionally adapted, with family members being assigned particular roles to maximise their children's language acquisition. For example, Parent 12, a mother in an English home language household, told how she asked her father (the children's grandfather, 'fluent in many African languages') to speak only Zulu to the children, whilst she asked her (Afrikaans first language speaking) husband to speak only Afrikaans to them. Another participant (Parent10), a mother of a Zulu family where Sesotho was spoken as home language, explained how the family purposefully spoke isiZulu to enhance wider family interaction:

> 'So sometimes we have to speak Zulu with him because when we go to the relatives in the Free State, they speak Zulu and it's going to be difficult for him …' (Parent 10, North West)

In the school context, parents recognised the valuable opportunities that the language-diverse ECCE spaces offered for mixing languages and developing bilingualism. Many parents, irrespective of their home language (Parents 1, 2, 4, 6, 7 and 12) were delighted that their children had the opportunity of learning either another African language and/or English when playing with children from other language groups in the centres. More specifically, English and Afrikaans speaking parents were delighted that their children had the opportunity to learn an African language from children who spoke black languages:

> '*So hy kan eintlik beter by hulle leer ... hy kan by hulle die taal leer.* [So he can actually learn better from them ... he can learn the language from them].' (Parent 1, Western Cape [author's own translation])

The parents of children speaking an African language were equally delighted at the opportunity to learn another African language:

> '... now and then I hear, like other words she picks up of Sotho words, like "shapa" or what, what, she pick up all that words …' (Parent 6, Free State)

> 'So they used to play together and you know sometimes she can raise the, the maybe a word that say "umuhle", and when I ask her how do you know about umuhle,[2] she said, no I know**.** It's a Zulu [*word*] ….' (Parent 5, Free State)

There has never in the past been a language spoken more widely in the world than English is spoken today (Melitz 2014: 2). Given this hegemonic dominance of English, parents, particularly those speaking an African language as a home language, enthusiastically expressed their approval at their children's acquisition of English:

> '…so to me it makes me feel good inside because I know she mix with all the languages then if she's finished with school then she's going out with English, Sotho and maybe [*more*].' (Parent 6, Free State)

> 'Because here where we are staying in the location she's attending that English medium school, especially that in the school they are speaking English... you know last time we were attending the party there at Divalt, there was Fred Ndaba who's child, they are speaking Tsonga, you rather speak English.' (Parent 7, Free State)

The children of the parents interviewed were between birth and 5 years old. Birth to 7 years is widely recognised as a critical period for language acquisition (Kuhl 2010); the time when the brain 'is exquisitely poised to "crack the speech code"', allowing children to acquire one or multiple languages by eye or by ear (Kuhl 2010:716). Parents in this study show how they made efforts to encourage their young children to acquire language through reciprocal interrelations in both the family and school contexts, where they were both the products and producers of culture (Rhoades 2008:264). Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) note that the immediate cause of cultural phenomena are other cultural phenomena. This is evident in how the social interactions in bicultural and multicultural families and between children from differing cultural backgrounds in the centres created opportunities for effective language learning in young children from birth to 5 years.

Believing culture through religion and faith

Religion and culture are integrally connected and woven into both family and social narratives. The excerpts from parents' narratives in this theme illustrate the centrality of religion to many families' culture. They show how religion provides the moral codes that guide how they live, even when they do not regard the traditional beliefs of their parents and communities as relevant to their everyday lives (UNESCO 2009). For several participants (Parents 1, 2, 12, 15, 17, 18), religion was linked to family identity; they drew their values from, and based their ways of doing things, on their religion. Parent 2 for example, describes her family as:

> 'a Christian family practicing Christian values.' (Parent 2, Western Cape)

Parent 17 describes how, not only religion but also her ethnic identity as an Afrikaner has shaped her family's values and ways of being:

> 'We are Christian based…Afrikaans speaking humans.' (Parent 17, Gauteng)

These are values that she would like her children to embrace:

> 'It is important for [*them*] to be good citizens … humans, to know they have good qualities and are intrinsically good.' (Parent 17, Gauteng)

Parent 10, who highly valued her cultural artefacts and their meanings reflected on her son's ability to discern when music is 'gospel' and to dance appropriately to the music. Yet she made no other mention of religious influence in her family's lives. Parent 16 described her family as '*not religious*', but still willing to participate in important religious functions, like baptisms, out of respect for their Greek and Afrikaans grandparents. Clearly, their parents' traditional religious beliefs still were present in their children's cultural roots. This finding resonates with UNESCO's (2009) statement that even when people have disassociated with family and/or religious ties they adhere to specific traditions associated with these. Another participant describes how religion creates the overarching glue for their racially 'super diverse' family:

> 'Look so, racially we kind of a mixture of a whole bunch of stuff on, on my side we've got Indian, Scottish, Zulu, on their father's side they've also got white and black and on top of that they've got some Chinese going on. So, father's side I ... there is white and black and then there's Chinese, also their great grandfather, great-great grandfather was Chinese and then on my side is Scottish, um … Zulu and Indian ... mmm, it's a little bit of everything, they are really my rainbow children because they've got a little bit of everything. We are Coloured, … there is no coloured culture, we don't have our own traditions...We are Christian, so that's um … common to both sides of the family, my husband was, we are and actually from the beginning there is ... nothing in my extended family that is anything but Christian. So we are all Christian.' (Parent 12, Gauteng)

This participant confirms the cohesive possibilities that religion can provide in such a racially and culturally diverse context. She also observed that 'there is no coloured culture, we don't have our own traditions'. Whilst some 'Coloured' people may agree, others feel strongly about their artefacts (such as songs), language, dialect and cultural ways of being and doing (Crouch 2015). However, Parent 12 seems content to find her family's cultural roots in religion.

Only 6 of the 19 parents commented on religion in their reflections. All six spoke about Christianity. This singular view of faith constitutes a weakness in the data.

Finding cultural meaning in place

In discourses on cultural roots in South Africa, 'place' could be loaded with various meanings stemming from our history of segregation during the Apartheid era. A variety of theories and views aim to explain how spaces become 'places'. In thinking about what leads to a place becoming meaningful, Smaldone, Harris and Sanyal (2008:397) put

2.'Umuhle' means beautiful.

forward the idea that '… a place is a complex concept, given life by people attaching meaning to a physical setting in a variety of ways'.

Parent 16 highlights this point well in the extract below.

Parent 16, a Johannesburg mother of 3-year-old 'Loreah' and her baby brother, surfaced the idea of place and space in her reflections on how she helps her children develop pride in their cultural roots:

> 'Okay, look I think pride comes from being happy in a space.' (Parent 16, Gauteng)

As her story unfolded, it became clear how the notion of family and space/place were intertwined in relation to Loreah's own world of meaning, and her views of her family and their interactions within a particular place. She poignantly described how, the year before the interview, her husband had to work in Cape Town for several months. She reflected on this as a difficult time when she, pregnant with their son, and Loreah had to live alone in the house and 'find our feet as a family of two'. During this time, Loreah desperately missed her daddy, and told her: 'Mommy, this house is broken'. The mother remembers, tears welling up in her eyes, how it pained her to hear that. Some weeks after Loreah's dad returned and her brother was born, Loreah's mom noted that: 'She's been telling me "Mamma I love our home, I never want to leave this house"'. Parent 16 wrapped up her reflection by saying that: 'I think my children are happy in our home and I think they are proud of who they are.' Loreah's narrative illustrates the complexity of the concept of place, and how it is assigned meanings, cultural and otherwise, in different ways at different times (Smaldone et al. 2008). Loreah's narrative also applies to ECCE spaces and places of learning. We argue if a child is to engage in meaningful interactions, their home culture needs to be acknowledged and incorporated within the ECCE centre.

Conclusion

The 'culture narratives' of the parents of young children learning and playing in culturally diverse ECCE centres revealed the parents' authentic thoughts and feelings about their cultures – based on their lived experience of their life worlds. In their narratives, they interrogate, reflect on and give voice to their perceptions of their young children's culture and cultural roots. As a whole, these narratives carry specks of the multiple overlapping and contrasting understandings and definitions of culture across time and disciplines. It was interesting to find that no notion of 'high culture' (superior education facilitating superior arts, literature, knowledge) was present in any parent's culture narrative.

By having greater insight into parents' understandings of their cultures and their cultural aspirations for their children, the ECCE teacher will be better able to promote social cohesion, respectful dialogues and culturally responsive teaching and learning within culturally diverse post-apartheid ECCE centres. Furthermore, we argue that by inviting and embracing parents' views of their culture, teachers could support dialogue between parents to enhance cross cultural interaction and the entire ECCE community.

The authors recognise that this study is not without limitations and that the participants' views do not necessarily represent the views of other parents. Further research (which includes a wider parent population) could strengthen ECCE communities. Dialogue between parents from differing cultural backgrounds in centres could strengthen social capital and norms of reciprocity between parents and within centre communities. We trust that this article will contribute to discourses on cultural feelings, which are 'an undertheorised area of the human experience' (Schorch 2014:22). We propose to extend the contribution by investigating parents' thoughts and feelings about the cultural diversity within the ECCE centres their children attend. This could further inform and strengthen respectful dialogue and so promote meaningful, anti-bias ECCE teaching and learning in South Africa.

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Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Authors' contributions

A.v.A. was one of the Gauteng interviewers for data collection, main contributor to culture literature review research and writing, coordinated and directed group writing retreats, data analysis, responsible for pulling together the first draft; coordinating authors-input, revising submitted drafts and co-written the final draft.

L.E. is an early childhood development specialist ensuring ECCE ethos is appropriately represented throughout the process, bringing to bear her insight and astute understandings of a range of practical perspectives based on grounded experience in the field. She was responsible for all ECD- related research and writing, contributed to refining final themes and acted as co-writer. N.M. was co-responsible for collecting data in the Eastern Cape. She contributed to capturing data and conceptualising the focus of the article.

N.M. also contributed to identifying the initial 18 codes in the data analysis process and assisted with the research on culture and provided specific insights into cultural understandings in the South African context and was co-responsible for reviewing and correcting reference list.

N.G. acted as novice researcher introduced to data collection and analyses through a developmental approach to collaborative research. Co-responsible for Eastern Cape data collection and capturing. N.G. contributed to identifying the initial 18 codes in data analysis and also contributed to reviewing and updating references, in-text and reference list. She enriched the work with her specific insights in to cultural understandings in the SA context.

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Data availability statement

Original data are discussed and analysed in this article.

Disclaimer

The views and interpretations articulated are solely based on the views of the parents of young children who participated in this study.

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