

Parent perceptions: How disparate early childhood care and education centres in South Africa foster belongingness and well-being in children



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This article explores parents' perceptions of their children's belongingness in early childhood care and education (ECCE) centres. It stems from the unexpected findings of a transformative ECCE pedagogy research project, which was characterised by multicultural, multiracial and varied economic conditions. As such, the authors expected controversial parental perceptions of the quality of the care and education their children experienced in these centres. However, this was not the case. Drawing on the theory of salutogenesis and its key concept, namely a sense of coherence, parents' responses about their children's early learning and well-being across diverse ECCE contexts were overwhelmingly positive. This prompted the question: what was it in these centres that allowed parents to experience a strong sense of belonging and such positive sentiments concerning their children's sense of well-being? This phenomenological study was informed by the narratives of 19 parents, collected through the transformative pedagogy project, set in rural and urban situations, and at well-resourced and under-resourced centres. Findings reflected four identifiable themes. Firstly, parents favoured the diversity of influences at the centres, viewing these as rich opportunities for their children's development and learning. Secondly, parents felt a strong conviction that the ECCE teachers were genuinely concerned about and sensitive towards their children. Thirdly, parents believed that their children were learning playfully in safe, loving spaces, and fourthly, parents were confident that their children were happy in the centres. These findings are particularly welcomed in the ECCE space, which is often demoralised and marginalised within the broader schooling system.

Transdisciplinarity Contribution: The article shows that quality early childhood learning and teaching can take place across disparate contexts, be they urban or rural, well-resourced or under-resourced. This study identified factors that led to parents perceiving that their children experienced happiness and a sense of belonging in different centres.

Keywords: early childhood care and education (ECCE); belonging and belongingness; salutogenesis; sense of coherence (SOC); well-being.

Introduction

This article emanates from an unexpected finding that emerged when reading data from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and European Union-funded transformative pedagogy project in early childhood care and education (ECCE). The aforementioned project investigated parents' understandings of culture and their cultural aspirations for their young children who attended culturally diverse ECCE centres.¹ Given that the ECCE environments in South Africa have long been problematic spaces,¹ the authors were expecting parents' opinions of diversity and equity in ECCE centres to be controversial. Yet the consistent thread from all parents was that they and their children were happy and felt welcomed in their educational environments, regardless of the racial and cultural contexts of teachers, children and parents. In fact, the parents expressed a strong feeling that their children experienced belongingness at their centres. The authors therefore wondered what the factors were that promoted such a sense of belonging and well-being, despite the diversity that existed among teachers, children and parents. The authors deemed such a surprisingly positive finding worth exploring.

Also contributing to the interest in this finding is the fact that historically and politically, service provisioning in the South African ECCE sector has been deeply unequal,² compounded by racial

1. Findings from this study were published in the TDJ in 2020 in an article entitled 'Through the eyes of parents: Culture of young children in diverse early learning spaces'.

prejudices under apartheid. '[D]ifference' was construed in 'hierarchical terms and colour-coded within a carefully crafted, politically legitimated pigmentocracy'.³ Despite a progressive Constitution which foregrounds equity, equality and historical redress,⁴ as well as the *South African Schools Act*,⁵ which formalised the process of desegregation of schools in South Africa, racial inequities continue to exist.⁴ This is also the case in ECCE centres, where racial, cultural and socio-economic factors continue to negatively influence both access to centres and teaching and learning programmes offered at these centres.⁶

In addition to the above-mentioned historical and political factors influencing the overall quality of ECCE service provisioning in the country, parental perception and participation have also contributed to the disparity in the quality of ECCE offerings.⁷ Parental participation can be hindered by racial, cultural and socio-economic factors,⁸ which may lead to parents feeling marginalised, disrespected and even unwelcomed in the centre. In these instances, they might not closely identify with or experience a sense of belongingness in the ECCE centre their children attend. This can negatively influence their children's learning outcomes and so negate the quality of ECCE experiences.

According to Britto et al.,⁹ quality ECCE has the potential to drive redress and equity in early learning spaces. Quality 'contours itself across cultures [and] settings'. This affirms the importance of implementing culturally responsive teaching in multicultural spaces. Pahrek¹⁰ stated that multiculturalism is not simply about difference and identity, but it is about those differences 'that are embedded in and sustained by culture [and therefore] ... embedded in a shared and historically inherited system of meaning and significance'. In such a system, teachers should appropriately respond to the diverse ethnicities, home languages, religions, socio-economic status and cultural traditions¹¹ represented in their multicultural classes. Responding appropriately has become a significant challenge that teachers face.¹²

Siraj-Blatchford and Woodhead¹³ maintain that in both developed and developing countries, it is difficult to meet multicultural goals when elements within the programme are uniformly interpreted, as if it were a monocultural learning space. This negates aspects related to cultural appropriateness in multicultural contexts.

Real quality improvement happens when all stakeholders feel included in the educational endeavour and have a shared understanding of the ECCE centres' goals.^{14,15} These goals include ensuring that (1) children are in a child-friendly environment which is healthy, safe, well-maintained and well-resourced, and (2) the teachers are receptive to both children and their families. Sammons et al.¹⁶ maintain that sensitive and responsive teachers guide all children's learning to ensure overall growth and development, irrespective of their cultural affiliations. The authors argue that meeting these conditions could facilitate a greater sense of belongingness in the centre for both parents and children.

In psychology, belongingness² is recognised as a deep emotional need in human beings.^{17,18,19,20} It is a dynamic, social process of daily life,¹⁹ attained through connectedness, and thus belonging is always relational.²¹ Wright noted that belonging is produced through 'the co-constitutive interaction of individuals with other people, things, institutions and specific socio-cultural contexts'. She concludes that this juncture between the self and the social enables individuals to 'configure what it means to belong (and not belong)'.²²

Belongingness denotes being a member of a social group or community. This becomes a complicated process in educational environments characterised by racial, religious, ethnic, cultural and language diversity.²² It is fostered in caring school environments where learners feel accepted, valued, included and encouraged by members of the school community.^{23,24} In such environments, children feel 'at home', where home relates to a 'safe space'.¹⁹ A sense of belongingness leads to positive emotions such as happiness, calmness and contentment.²⁵ This, in turn, builds enduring resources, which include personal, physical, intellectual, social and psychological resources.²⁶

Between birth and age five, the child's recognition of belonging to the family is increasingly broadened to include the early childhood centre.²⁷ During these years, the impact of the home life and the early learning centre are intertwined.²⁸ Belongingness in the ECCE centre is achieved when children feel that they are part of a loving group, that their teachers care about them, that they are helped by both teachers and friends.²⁹ Belongingness is reinforced when centres respect, welcome and positively respond to parents.²⁸ The stronger that parents perceive their own belongingness, the more secure the children will be in their connectedness to the centre. Children's participation and commitment to their schooling depends on their belongingness in their educational space. This is an area of inquiry that is receiving increasing attention.²⁴

Halse²³ noted that belongingness theories have failed to capture the lived experience of belonging – how people understand belongingness, how it is achieved, how it affects individuals and groups – but also how belongingness is damaged or undone. For this reason, Yuval-Davis¹⁹ stressed the imperative for case study-based research to help fill this gap in the literature. Based on the lived experience of parents, this phenomenological case study investigated how they perceived their children's belongingness, how they believed it was achieved and how it affected their children in multicultural ECCE centres.

Theoretical framework

Perceptions are powerful and influential agents in determining how people live, experience their lives, define themselves and others and make meaning of life.³⁰ The term *salutogenesis* was coined by Antonovsky, a medical sociologist and the father of

²The terms *belonging*, *belongingness*, *sense of belonging*, and *to belong* are used interchangeably in literature.²²

this theory. It was derived from the Latin *salūt* or *salūs* (safety, well-being and health) and the Greek *genesis* (beginning or creation) and focuses on factors that support human well-being.³¹ Antonovsky³² claimed that the way people view their lives has a positive or negative influence on their physical and emotional well-being. Salutogenesis thus explains the process of how individuals, groups or societies improve and increase control over their physical, social, mental and spiritual well-being.^{33,34} The salutogenic framework 'supports descriptions of how people stay well when encountering periods of stress'.³³ Because parental perceptions are the focus of this article, the theory of salutogenesis that substantiates the significance of perceptions in the lives of people was chosen as framework for the study.

The key concept of this theory is a sense of coherence (SOC), a way to perceive the world. It is applicable across all cultures at individual and group level and describes the extent to which one has a 'pervasive, enduring though dynamic, feeling of confidence that one's environment is predictable and that things will work out as well as can reasonably be expected'.³³ Sense of coherence comprises three main key factors, namely *comprehensibility*, *manageability* and *meaningfulness*.

Comprehensibility refers to a person's understanding of their world and the challenges it presents. It involves the ability to discern reality rather than merely focusing on emotions about the situation. *Manageability* is an individual's ability to identify resources (which can be one's own or those of trustworthy others) at their disposal and the ability to use and reuse these resources to manage challenges. *Meaningfulness* focuses on experiencing the world as meaningful, to see purpose in overcoming challenges and regard the time invested to do so as worthwhile. As Cockrell aptly described, the SOC is 'in essence, a combination of optimism and control', the capacity to 'muster, believe in and value resources to support resilience'.³⁵

Resilience is associated with coping in the face of challenges. It is often related to well-being and also considered a set of qualities or processes that enable a person to make use of internal and external resources.^{36,37} In this study, the authors link resilience to the three salutary factors of SOC. For example, *comprehensibility* refers to the parents' perceptions of how they and their children make sense of life in the early childhood centre. *Manageability* refers to recognising parents' and children's personal resources as well as resources available through the interpersonal relationships with other stakeholders in the centre. *Meaningfulness* relates to perceptions of parents that challenges that may arise in the centre are worthy of their and their children's time and effort. Thus, the SOC outlined in the theory of salutogenesis is an appropriate lens through which to view reasons why parents in this study expressed a strong sense of their children's belongingness in the multicultural ECCE centres.

The aim of this article is to explore what factors were present in these disparate ECCE contexts that led to parents' positive perceptions about their child's centre and why they

experienced this strong sense of belongingness to the centre. The authors deemed this to be very important in the context of a marginalised, underfunded ECCE sector in South Africa. Thus, the question to be answered was as follows: what was it in these centres that allowed parents to experience this strong sense of belongingness and to express positive sentiments in relation to their child's sense of well-being?

Methodology

This phenomenological case study formed part of a collaborative research project between nine South African universities, coordinated by the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT).

The Cambridge Dictionary defines research as 'the detailed study of a subject (i.e. an individual, groups of individuals, societies, or objects) to discover information or to achieve a new understanding of the subject'. Utilising a phenomenological case study approach in this investigation allowed the researchers to engage fully with the participating parents' individual experiences.³⁸ Understanding these experiences enabled the authors to 'glean new insights' about the 'particular phenomenon',³⁹ namely the parents' perceptions of their children's belongingness in disparate ECCE centres.

The sample was purposeful and parents from multiracial, multicultural, under-resourced and well-resourced ECCE centres in both urban and rural settings were invited to participate. Participants were drawn from four different provinces, namely the Western Cape, Free State, Gauteng and North West. An important criterion was the willingness and availability of parents of children in the age group of birth to 5 years who attended multicultural ECCE centres to participate in the research project. Creswell⁴⁰ noted that a suitable sample size for a phenomenological study could range from 2 to 25 participants. This article was informed by the narratives of 19 parents: 18 mothers and one father. Participants included all official racial groupings acknowledged in South Africa today.

Research tools included individual and semistructured interviews. Parents could choose to be interviewed in their mother tongue, and the languages chosen by parents for their interviews included English, isiZulu, Afrikaans and isiXhosa. Free State and North West participants chose to be interviewed in English, even though this was not necessarily their home language. Interviews took place at the ECCE centre that the parent's child or children attended. The recorded interviews were transcribed. Interviews conducted in isiXhosa, isiZulu and Afrikaans were translated into English.

To safeguard the interpretation and analysis of the data from bias, the researchers implemented *bracketing* – a process of setting aside (bracketing off) past understandings and assumptions of the phenomenon. This includes scientific theories and explanations, as well as the personal views and experiences of the researchers.⁴⁰ Through continuous engagement with the interview data, reading, rereading and

using ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software, the authors became familiar with the data. Initially, 11 codes to label units of meaning were identified. Through further scrutinising – looking for patterns, themes, relationships and differences⁴¹ – four themes were identified to capture why parents perceived their children as experiencing belongingness in the centres they attended. These themes were as follows: (1) *diversity: dilemma or opportunity*; (2) *happy children, proud children*; (3) *playing: learning in loving spaces* and (4) *teachers: a more sensitive approach*.

Ethical considerations

All accepted ethical guidelines were strictly followed, and priority was given to treating participants thoughtfully and respectfully. 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 granted by CPUT (reference number EFEC 4-6/2017) and was issued by the Faculty of Education and Social Sciences Ethics Committee on 21 June 2017. Letters of approval were obtained from all provincial government authorities, early learning directors and governing body members of ECCE centres in all the provinces represented in this article, as well as principals of the centres. Parents were subsequently invited to participate. Confidentiality and anonymity of participating parents, their children and the centres their children attended were safeguarded throughout the process.

Findings

Parents described facets of their children’s lives in the multicultural centres and shared their views on the nature and quality of the care their children received in the rural or urban, well-resourced or under-resourced centres they attended. The way teachers treated their children and their children’s responses to the centres formed an important part of parents’ views of the centre as learning spaces. They reminisced and shared stories about teachers’ interactions with their children and about the physical and organisational characteristics of their children’s centres as places wherein their young children experienced caring, as well as caring education. They pondered their children’s learning, the development of their children and the teachers’ roles therein.

Ultimately, they deliberated upon and gauged the significance (or insignificance) of all of the above on their young children’s emotional, social, physical, spiritual and cognitive well-being. These factors are what determined their sense of their children’s belongingness in the multicultural, multiracial ECCE centres they attended.

Theme one – Diversity: Dilemma or opportunity?

All participants expressed an appreciation for the diversity found within the ECCE centre. In the words of Parent 14, diversity was a prerequisite for placing their child in the centre.

‘This was ... the kind of school that loves a child ... that’s open to diversity and that she will be exposed to diverse, you know ... different ethnic backgrounds, different economic backgrounds; that was important to me.’

According to Parent 13: ‘Absolutely, yes, yes, yes, this is why we are at this school where there is much difference, diversity ...’

Many parents found the diversity of the centre to be beneficial for both themselves and their children. A diverse environment presented opportunities for the family to interact and engage with people from all walks of life. Parent 7 expressed this feeling as follows:

‘Look, that’s part of what I enjoy about this school is because it is so multicultural, diverse; there’s almost no two family setups that are the same here, you know; you have gay parents, you have single parents, you have mixed-race parents, you have very diverse families in this school and I really actually enjoy that about this school.’

For some participants, exposure to diverse groups of people was an essential part of growing up in a South African context – it was, in fact, part of the child’s preparation for life:

‘I think it’s very good for my child getting to interact with kids from all kinds of, sorts of lives, and from all cultures and from all races ... and I know that that the school accommodates everyone.’ (Parent 17)

Parent 14 agreed. For her, the multicultural environment provided a way to fulfil her hopes for her child’s future.

‘I like that she is going to meet the kind of people that she’ll meet when she leaves here and goes to high school and varsity and the workplace ... so she is already learning how to interact with people who believe very differently to her ... We value difference.’

Another worthwhile benefit was that children had the opportunity to play with children from many different contexts. According to Parent 1,

‘Here at the school currently, there are other culture children, so I said to him that he must play nicely with the children as they are all [*including her son*] people, and they are all children.’

This mother saw play as that ‘what children do’,⁴² and that the diverse context of the centre enabled her child to engage (play, doing what children do) with children from different cultural, religious and ethnic groups. Children’s social engagement can foster friendships, which strengthens one’s sense of belonging.⁴³ The playful engagements in the centres allowed children to build cross-cultural social connections, which allowed them to form social bonds. This strengthened the children’s sense of belonging:

‘They are all friends with everybody; everybody is friends with everybody. So they don’t clique according to race or religion or, “my parents are rich, and your parents are not.”’ (Parent 4)

Some parents identified additional benefits of attending a diverse, multiracial, multilingual centre. Parent 1 viewed this exposure as an opportunity for her child to learn another official South African language: ‘[And] so he can actually learn better from the children because he is small; he can learn the language quickly’.

All parents believed that the staff had adopted an accepting attitude towards diversity and that everyone’s cultural heritage was valued and affirmed. Parent 3 stated: ‘The school values our cultures and allow children from different cultures to wear cultural dress to school’. Parent 5 noted that the centre valued their Setswana culture: ‘Yes, I don’t think there’s a problem here. I’m very happy. My child, my child and I we have no complaints, no, we’re like, OK’. Parents were in agreement that these centres ‘accommodated everyone’ (Parent 17) and that the centres valued their culture and cultural practices. ‘Yes, yes, yes, it is cool – that is how we roll. This is how it should be, very diverse, and everyone must be inclusive’ (Parent 13).

There was unanimous agreement that no matter what culture the children came from, each culture was acknowledged and respected. Parent 5, who regularly volunteered at her child’s centre, observed that no child was given special treatment at the centre: ‘I think they are all, they’re treating the children all equally’.

Theme two – Proud children, happy children

‘I think pride comes from being happy in a space.’ (Parent 8)

Parents reported how their children enthusiastically participated in and responded to the loving care and education in the multicultural ECCE centres. According to Krieger et al.,⁴⁴ meaningful participation and involvement generally take place where elements of motivation, engagement and social connection are present in the environment. All the participating parents were confident that their children were happy in the centres they attended. Their children’s eagerness to go to school in the mornings was a strong indicator of happiness in the centre:

‘She’s happy, because when I wake her up early in the morning, I give her food, then after that, she just say to me, “Mama, wash me, I want to go to crèche,” you see?’ (Parent 4)

Parent 8 confirmed: ‘He’s happy to come to school; he’s happy to be here; he’s very excited to go to school every day’. This mother related an incident that took place after her 2-year-old had been off sick for a week:

‘On the Sunday, he saw his suitcase and he took his suitcase, went outside, was adamant about climbing in the car, and he sat in the car for at least 2 h wanting to go to school.’

In the same way, children’s reluctance to leave in the afternoons assured parents that their children were happy:

‘Oh, yes, very happy! He cries when I take him home, [then] an hour later than they should have been leaving ... I come back and then he is crying [again] – he wants to stay there. Both my children, always.’ (Parent 8)

Furthermore, the enthusiastic ways in which children shared what they had learned during the day assured parents that their children were receiving meaningful education. Parents said learning activities included stories, songs and rhymes, theme discussions and exploring number sense. As Parent 5 said: ‘[h]e sings, he talks ... he do everything’. Parent 15 reported about her daughter’s learning: ‘She’s learning about her surroundings; she’s learning about herself’.

According to Capps,⁴⁵ one of the indicators of a child’s sense of belongingness is their pride as a member of that centre. This is illustrated by Parent 3’s statement, ‘Even on Saturday when we pass by here: “Mamma, here’s my school!” He’s proud’.

The children’s happiness, the authors argue, reaffirmed for parents that they had made wise decisions in their choices of ECCE centre for their children. This happiness was facilitated by teachers’ loving care and thoughtful, responsive approach to playful teaching and learning. In the words of Parent 6, ‘When I see he is happy, so I think that his is the best place for him’.

Theme three – Playing: Learning in loving spaces

Parents acknowledged that in their respective ECCE centres, their children were making good progress. This was evident in the child’s sense of well-being, as well as in their overall growth and development and learning. Parent 9 was confident of her child’s learning ‘because my child is making progress and she tells what she did in class’. Parent 11 concurred: ‘She will say Mummy, Daddy, I did this at school, so I will say that one [her daughter’s progress], I will give it [the centre] a 100%’.

The centres’ focus on playful approaches to teaching and learning was appreciated by the parents. Parent 8 commented: ‘Look, I encourage all kinds of play because that is the best learning that he can get at this stage’. She particularly appreciated the value of outdoor play at the centre: ‘I think the jungle gym is key for them because it’s particularly for their age, it’s age-appropriate, so that is the big deal’. Parents agreed on the value of outdoor play opportunities because they made their children happy: ‘He loves the jungles’ (Parent 5), ‘She likes a lot of play, she likes to play’ (Parent 4) and ‘She likes playing ... Her favourite thing I see is to play outside; she likes to play with her friends, but she loves to be outside, yes’ (Parent 11).

Teachers were committed to children’s enjoyable and meaningful learning. Parent 17 told how a teacher, when the children were learning about the ocean, brought ‘an actual fish, a dead fish, but an actual fish’ for the children to touch and smell the scales and different parts of the fish, ‘That is not something I would have necessarily done at home’. Parent 14 reflected on how her child’s teacher convinced a local dentist

to come to her class and examine each of the 3 to 4-year-old children's teeth when they were learning about oral hygiene.

The parents believed that teachers were sensitive to the multicultural nature of their children's classes. They reported how the teachers would, as far as possible, make an effort to explain things to their children in their home language. The parents clearly appreciated that the importance of mother tongue education was recognised by the teachers. 'The teachers teach them in their own language and the other people's languages. They are multicultural' (Parent 6). Children even seemed to model this behaviour. Parent 13 said that her child would attempt to speak English to the English-speaking teachers, even though they (the teachers) were speaking to him in Afrikaans. She admits that his English was really poor: 'Very broken, *ja* ... but so cute, *ja*'.

Endeavours to increase happiness and well-being 'have become increasingly more popular in educational settings'.⁴⁶ Parent 11 and Parent 14 described how their children's centres employed therapists to support to children who struggle. Parent 14 observed:

'I have never been in a school environment where we talk about not only what's happening with the child's academics ... [*but here they ask*] what's happening with them? Is that person happy right now? What can we do to get the person happy? Who must be involved? ... It's very, it's very much interested in the, the well-being of each child, which is important.'

Theme four – Teachers: A more sensitive approach

In their deliberations on their children's lives in the centres, most parents referred in some way to their children's sense of belonging in the centres they attended. The welcoming gestures from teachers observed by the parents when bringing their children to the centres convinced them that their children were valued. Parents associated belongingness with the friendly, loving reception given to their children by their teachers. Parent 1 expressed how she loved seeing how the teachers 'receive one's child'. Parent 4 said, '[w]hen I come here ... I don't see a long faces; there are all so happy ... we are welcome, we feel welcome'. Parent 3 agreed that this was the norm: 'Every time you come here, you see them smiling; they just welcome you with warm hands'.

The parents agreed that the centres provided a safe, happy and relaxed learning environment. Parent 5 expressed that she was 'very proud' of this safety: 'Very clean, the teachers are on point, everything is on point, actually'. Parent 14 agreed, particularly appreciating the importance that her child's centre placed on the emotional well-being of the young children in their care. 'I like what's important to the school, I like that what's important to the school is not the child's performance. That it's the child's happiness'. She concluded: 'So that's what I, why I choose it'. Parent 18 agreed, saying, 'they are very safe ... and we have very loving caregivers in the preprimary school. That is for definite sure'.

The parents who participated in this study recognised and appreciated teachers' ability to be there for their child – to interact empathetically, smiling and showing affection by hugging and cuddling – as expressions of love for the child. In the words of Parent 10:

'Even the way they treat the kids, it is with so much love that the kids have a sense of belonging in the crèche. ... The big part about, about why I like it here is because I like the kind of teachers that teach here ... they are a caring bunch. ... They really, really love children; it's not just a job to them. Like I am not sure that I love children as much as they love children.'

The parents appreciated how the centres unconditionally accepted their children, welcoming each child for exactly who they were. Parent 12 noted that the teacher was very aware of her child's specific interests and this, she said, made her feel that:

'...*my* child has his place there and she acknowledge him for the person that he is. So I do believe in ... that they make me and my child belong.'

Parent 14 told how her 3-year-old daughter, who was blind in one eye, used to 'go ballistic' around any stranger before she came to the centre. She expressed emotively: 'I think she learns here to trust her friends, to trust her teachers. It is almost like it is a safe haven'.

Love is the 'essence and driving force of parental and child-raising relationships'.⁴⁶ The importance parents ascribe to the teacher's love for their children cannot be overstated. Parent 14, a teacher and the only dad who agreed to be interviewed, articulated:

'There's a culture at this school, you can't put your finger on it ... but it's – I would not say accepting, but it's, it's loving. So accepting would be the wrong word, but it's, it's loving, it's a more careful approach ... and that's important in this school. I know that my child is, is loved.'

Uusiautti and Määttä⁴⁷ noted that love in early education acts as a 'means to create a learning environment where children can ... eventually reach the fullest expression of their abilities'.

Discussion of findings

Despite the different cultural, linguistic and racial mix of parents and children, all participants expressed a strong feeling that their children were loved and cared for in the centre and that they were also growing, developing and learning. Parents perceived that their children had a strong SOC, which enabled meaningful and happy lives in the multicultural ECCE centres. Parents seemed to have a strong and clear understanding of their children's experiences in the centre. They were able to comprehend, appreciate and identify with the warm, accepting, responsive environments into which they had knowingly sent their children. They believed that regardless of their race, culture and socio-economic status their children all received equal, quality care. In fact, it seemed as if the parents viewed the centre as a 'home away from

home', confirming the educational principle that the educational space serves as an extension of the home during the early years.²⁸ This confirmed that for the parents, the diversity within the centres created opportunities for their children to develop and learn in culturally appropriate ways in a society characterised by rich diversity.

Parents were confident that their children were receiving appropriate and culturally responsive early learning experiences, and this in turn fostered within parents a sense that their children were part of and belonged to the centre. Parents therefore were able to develop a relationship of trust with the teachers and centre. Trusting relationships enabled parents to identify the many positive interactions between their children and their teachers, as illustrated in Parent 14's comment, 'she learns here to trust her friends, to trust her teachers'. These kinds of interactions encouraged children to express their own voice and agency and to actively participate in the centre's programme.

Parents affirmed that the centre's programmes were, in their view, developmentally appropriate, and through this type of programme, children's own inner resources were being developed. More importantly, parents recognised that the children were able to draw on these resources to successfully navigate their day at the centre. In this way, parents viewed the centre as giving children tools and resources to manage their individual needs and challenges, thus enabling their children to develop increasing confidence and independence in a happy environment. Children's expressions of joy and happiness enabled parents to identify with their children's contentment. Thus, they viewed challenges that might arise as manageable for themselves, as well as their children.

Parents had confidence in their children's sense of belongingness in the centres. As such, they viewed the time their children spent in the centre as being meaningful and were sure that their children were engaging in worthwhile early learning experiences. However, parents were neither naïve nor gullible. They were able to discuss potential problematic or challenging issues with the teachers. However, based on trust, these were meaningful interactions where both parties were able to negotiate a way forward in a respectful manner. Parents were also aware that their experiences of belongingness, of a warm, respectful, collaborative engagement between the teachers, the children and themselves were not necessarily the norm. Parent 7 commented that as a teacher, he was aware that this loving approach was not the norm in all educational environments. He concluded: 'I have worked at a few schools, and I have seen, I have heard stories'.

Given the fragmented and often chaotic contexts in which ECCE centres operate,² the authors would argue that what they found at these centres was indeed not the norm. Much of the literature still attests to many ECCE centres being no more than places of basic care, where often the essential

elements of quality such as safety and adequate nutrition are barely met. In other centres little, if any, attention is given to issues such as cultural and linguistic differences and there is no clear sense of belonging by parents and their children. The teachers' sensitivity and sincere care for the well-being as well as the learning of the children in this study also created a strong SOC in the parents.

Conclusion

This article was written in an attempt to negate the frequent reports of deficit that are received about ECCE centres in South Africa. It has shown that quality early childhood learning and teaching can take place across disparate contexts, be they urban or rural, well-resourced or under-resourced. This study identified factors that led to parents perceiving that their children experienced happiness and a sense of belonging in different centres. These determining factors were not socio-economic in nature. The acknowledgement that all racial groups were equally important and that different cultural practices were recognised was fundamental. Furthermore, a child-centred programme that encourages interactive, playful learning was evident in all the participating centres.

The authors propose that parents' perceptions of their children's satisfactory happiness, growth and development in their ECCE centres call for stakeholders to re-emphasise the significance of affection, acceptance and respect in ECCE contexts. The authors also call for a need to place greater significance on the immeasurable value of loving teachers who have the welfare of their children at heart and can facilitate child-friendly teaching and learning based on these qualities.

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Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed equally to this work.

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Disclaimer

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